

“Normally a cock”: Embodiment, Gender and Violence in Mixed Martial Arts

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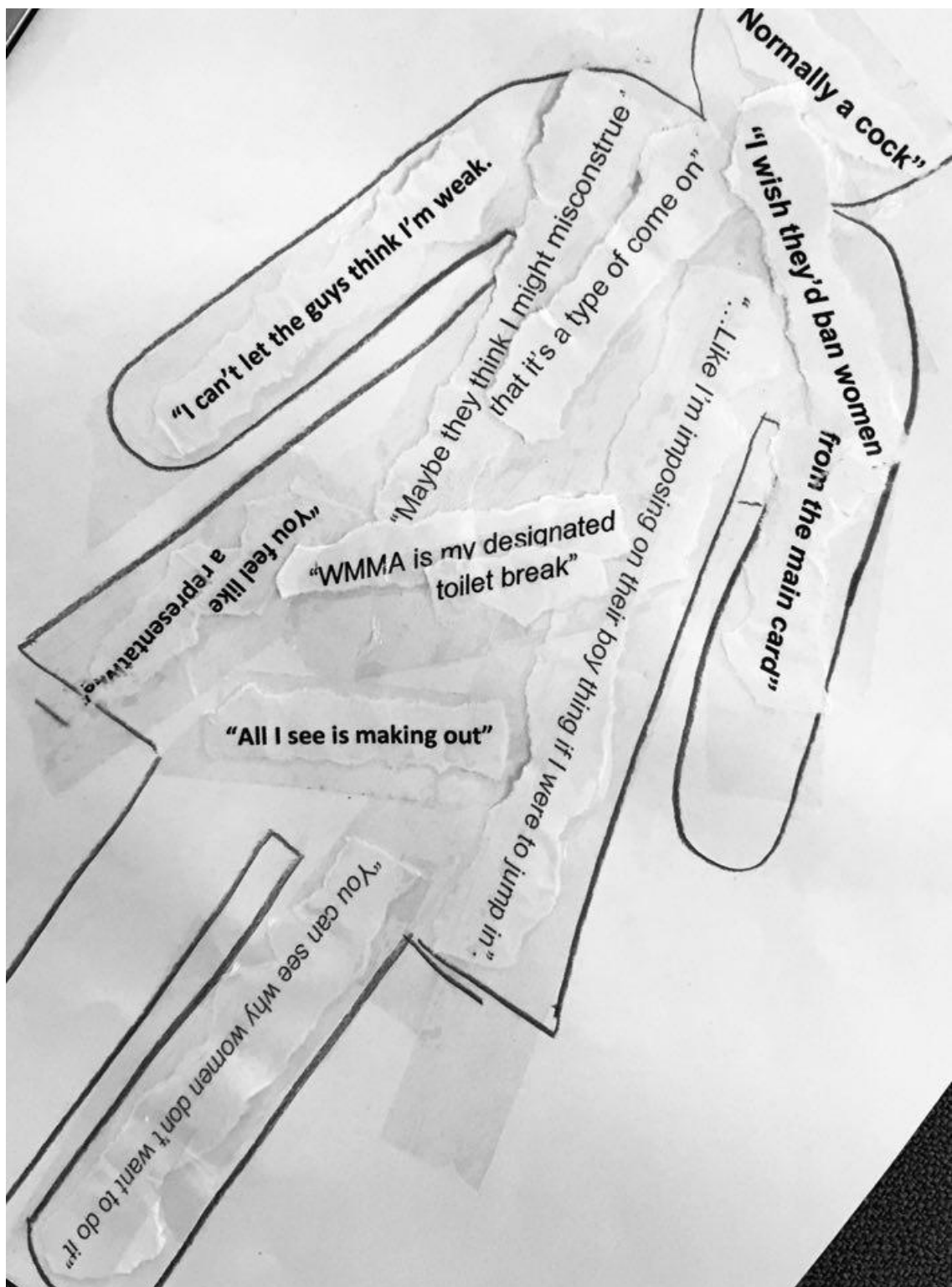


Figure 1: Creating new beginnings

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of embodiment, violence and gender which draws from mixed martial arts (MMA) as a case for analysis. Fieldwork took place in two ethnographic sites, Fight or Flight MMA club and Blood Bath Royal (BBR) fighting events, between May and September 2018, and includes observational and interview data, as well as a heavily reflexive ethnographic component. These reflexive elements stem from my flexible researcher role, where my own participation in Fight or Flight MMA classes provided an insight limited by previous research on these topics: that is, of women as researcher and as participant in MMA. The analysis takes the reader through experiences of fieldwork, which at first intended to explore the frame (Goffman 1974) of MMA fighting and the interpretations of violence within the sport. That is still part of the analysis, where MMA is presented in ways a “controlled violence”, embodied in intersubjective (Crossley 2004b; Crossley 2005) ways. As the analysis continues however, a critical and gendered account of violence and embodiment is presented, where women’s bodies experienced differential treatment in both training and fighting; ignored, avoided, or sexualised. The gendering possibilities of violent action are then explored, where the embodying of skills was reiterated through toxic gendered norms, operating as ‘just’ humour (Kelly 1987) instead of more interpersonal forms of violence. Drawing from disciplines of feminist research and perspective (e.g., Butler 2004; Butler 2011) and the sociology of everyday life (Goffman 1966; Goffman 1974), this thesis brings focus to how these situated understandings of action are observed but also managed. My experiences in the field, which including being subject to sexual hustling (Gurney 1985) and harassment, required a re-viewing of my initial interests of violence and embodiment in the research. As a result, this thesis is highly reflexive, and I present these discussions across the chapters.

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In memory of Lee

Chapter 1: The introduction

The phenomenon of violence is a historical scholarly debate, including themes of how violence happens, why violence happens, and who does said violence. This PhD contributes to these debates in ethnographic research in an analysis of situated understanding of action (Goffman 1974), and how violence is framed and experienced within and between gendered bodies. The research draws from mixed martial arts (MMA) as a case for the analysis, with the thesis inspired and located within two arguably broad discipline areas of the sociology of everyday life and feminist theory (Butler 2004; Butler 2011). In doing so, the thesis adds to needed ethnographic data and micro-interactional detail of how 'violence' is situated, from MMA embodiment to the interpersonal forms of violence observed and experienced as a participant and researcher in the field. This ethnography is also a journey of coming to feel and observe this violence in different ways and is highly reflexive in the progression and order of writing, as outlined in this chapter.

I begin with a brief background to MMA as a sport to provide a useful definition for the reader while also situating MMA as a valuable case to explore themes of violence, embodiment, and gender in section 1.1. I then provide details of my journey between MMA practitioner and researcher in section 1.2, my background in MMA, and how my research interests have developed over time. The chapter then outlines the contents of the thesis. Across each chapter summary, I bring to attention the reflexive and rhizomatic nature of this thesis (Honan and Sellers 2006) and the forms of violence that had an effect on its writing and re-writing. The non-linear progression of this thesis is traced between the 'lines' and moments of research, including the inseparable aspects of research positionality. Firstly, however, I provide the context of MMA as a phenomenon and research interest.

1.1 A background of mixed martial arts

As mentioned, this thesis centralises its analysis on violence, embodiment, and gender through an ethnographic study of training and fighting in mixed martial arts (MMA). MMA is a competitive fight-sport in which two fighters use a range of martial art techniques in order to knock out or submit their opponent, drawing from a range of martial arts and combat-sports, such as Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing), Greco Roman

wrestling, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), and Judo. Although there is uncertainty as to when MMA developed (see Bolelli 2016; Downey 2007), the sport arguably saw its initial growth under an organisation, The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), in the early 1990s.

The UFC invited martial artists (with only men allowed until 2016) from a range of martial arts backgrounds, pitting each martial artist against the other to find out which martial art was more powerful (see Hirose and Pih 2010). Over time however, fighters adapted to the various martial art skills they were facing in 'the cage'¹. Focus began to draw away from assessing the superiority of individual martial arts and instead toward the skills and entertainment of individual fighters. Nevertheless, the nature of the extreme fighting styles was a heavily debated topic, particularly in the apparent lack of rules and organisation involved (Downey 2007, 2014). There were no weight classes, little protective gear, and almost no limits to the techniques used, with elbows to the head, chokes, submissions, spinning back kicks, and 'ground and pound'². The UFC was promoted on the basis that fans could see a fight "As real as it gets" (UFC 1994 [2005]) to an actual street fight, with the sport also referred to as a form of hyperviolence (see Downey 2014) too, with fighters dubbed as "crazy guys who did crazy shit" (Ortiz 2008, p.201 in Bolelli 2016, p.7).

The political and public unrest around MMA was substantial, comparing the sport to terrorism and child pornography (Bolelli 2016, p.7-8), as well as a blood sport and human cockfighting (Spencer 2012, p.7). Across the late end of the 1990's and 2000's however, MMA had undergone significant organisational changes with the establishment of unified rules (see UFC 2022). Despite these changes, MMA can still be regarded as a sport that stretches the limits of what the body thought possible and what forms of violence are legitimised or framed (Goffman 1974) as sporting practice. MMA, therefore, lends itself as a unique case to explore violence alongside matters of embodiment and gender. I situate my own experiences with MMA and research leading to this PhD thesis next.

¹ A fenced arena that allows for the movement and experience of these numerous martial arts skills

² Striking an opponent while they lay on the floor

1.2 Previous research

During my time as an undergraduate student in 2014, we were given the task of conducting a small ethnographic study on a topic area of our choosing. To do research, observe, and discuss something in everyday life which interests us? I knew just the thing: my own MMA club, The Welsh Warriors. I had been a part of The Welsh Warriors for just under a year. It was also a time when MMA was still growing in popularity in general media and academic literature, with MMA almost unknown in research with only one to two examples even on the subject matter (Spencer 2012 being one of them). I was keen to start this journey of my own and decided to explore the typical day in the life of a fighter, participating in the classes, writing about the classes, and doing the things fighters did (including a 24-hour water cut³). It was a well-received essay reviewing rituals and cultural norms (e.g., Turner 1969), and the essay would become a starting journey in my master's thesis between 2015-2016.

The master's research (John 2016) was an ethnography interested in the becoming of an MMA fighter and presented an analysis primarily around themes of embodiment and gender, but also of character (Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Chandler 1988; Goffman 1959). The ethnography is explored in more detail in section 2.1.5 of the literature chapter. From the undergraduate essay, the master's was also led by undertaking a flexible research role. That is not to say I was an expert on MMA. Despite my attendance at The Welsh Warriors for several years, I had never fought; however, I had competencies as an 'insider', which presented an opportunity to participate in flexible ways. The flexible role was also inspired by the likes of reading Wacquant's (2004) research at the boxing gym but also that of Spencer (2012) and Abramson and Modzelewski's (2010) research on MMA. Academic research around my sport? It was exciting! Equally, the researcher role felt like a necessary step to challenge a significant gap: most of the literature I had access to were about men and was all researched by men. I wondered how women's bodies impacted training, arising from my experiences of MMA training prior to research, where I noticed men in the club did not want to touch or hit me or even engage me in their jokes. I wanted to ask why this was so and if these were conscious decisions that MMA club members (all men) made.

³ A water cut is purposeful dehydration of the body. For 24 hours, we did not drink, and we also spent an hour in the sauna (4x15 minutes intervals) covered in bin bags and winter clothes!

I had attended The Welsh Warriors club for several years at that point, yet I only encountered around 2 maybe 3 other women there, and rarely at the same time. I decided to attend another MMA club (Dragon MMA) for the master's research, too, hoping to meet more women. Unfortunately, the gender disparity was similar in both MMA clubs, with fighters mentioning that women had attended in the past but not for some time. Having a flexible researcher role was invaluable to exploring mixed-gender sparring and feeling and observing the anxieties presented by some of the men in the MMA clubs through the research (John 2016, p.50-56). Mixed-gender sparring was something I was keen to explore further through the PhD, and to include other women's experiences of MMA training and fighting.

Another theme evident from the master's research was the discussion of violence by MMA fighters and how all fighters actively distanced themselves from the term 'violence'. Instead, fighters described MMA as an organised and momentary act (John 2016, p.47-48), and situated their fighting character and 'self' away from a violent identity (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1974). When discussing mixed-gender training and fighting, domestic violence became a popular topic, rooted in anxieties around women in training and the gender-bound categories in fighting events. The situated understanding of violence was a small aspect of the master's research, and on completion, I wondered more about 'violence' as a research topic. I wished to explore distinctions of violence from fighters' perspectives and how the embodiment of MMA skills is challenged by those definitions when interacting with differently gendered bodies.

Despite these positive influences from the master's into the PhD, there were some changes. I had left The Welsh Warriors in 2016 as a practitioner to pursue a very different sport: American football. Despite being in the MMA club for several years, I was the only woman and felt excluded in ways (traced through the upcoming chapters). While training at The Welsh Warriors, I also developed an eating disorder trying to fit into a weight category for a fight⁴. There were lingering memories in that space, further complicated by having an abusive relationship with a Muay Thai fighter who attended the same gym from 2013-2014. Nevertheless, I soon saw myself back in a different MMA club for my interests in the PhD, and I was excited to be there. There would be new people, routines, and new spaces that I would encounter. Although, I would soon

⁴ Weight categories are extremely limited for women even today, but more so in 2016

experience new moments which were not so exciting, moments that led to the re-working of 'violence' I was initially interested in. I present a summary of each chapter next, also mapping the pathways (Honan and Sellers 2006) of this ethnography, connecting the questions and thoughts raised across the thesis. I will shape the research locale and themes of the research and some of the key points of its written structure.

1.3 Summary and structure of the thesis

In total, the thesis is written into 8 chapters (inclusive of this chapter), each relevant in various ways to themes of embodiment, gender, and violence. Each chapter from this point also opens with a poem (which I discuss momentarily), reflecting the upcoming themes.

As indicated in section 1.2, my experiences with MMA (as a practitioner and academically) have ranged since 2014. I knew that I had an interest in the gendered dynamics of MMA training and fighting and the potential ideas of exploring violence as a topic. I already had some experience with the literature prior to this PhD, which was a helpful reference point to the literature review structure in chapter 2. Chapter 2 critically engages with a range of the empirical research, some of which are ethnographic while others are not, but all situate my interests and decisions in this research. I review earlier ethnographies of MMA (e.g., Spencer 2012; Vacarro and Swauger 2016) which inspired my initial interests in research, leading into the broader ethnographic context of research on MMA and its uses and limitations (e.g., Green 2016; Stenius 2011). The relationships between violence, embodiment, and gender are quite specific in some of these texts, namely that of men and men's bodies. Research inclusive of women's experiences in MMA is then introduced (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Teeter 2014). Additional literature highlights differences between men's and women's MMA experiences (e.g., Weaving 2014; Weaving 2015) before moving the literature review to mixed-gender training in martial art and combat sport (MACS) (e.g., Channon 2013a; Channon 2013b; Maclean 2015; Maclean 2019). However, some of these more inclusive pieces are not specifically ethnographic and are decontextualised, which is an area this thesis contributes directly.

Chapter 2 will also consider how previous research explored and defined embodiment, violence, and gender as concepts, and I make relevant the definitions

that I find useful through this thesis. Phenomenology, habit/us, and reflexive body techniques (e.g., Crossley 2004b; Crossley 2005) are concepts I find useful in the understanding embodiment, and I also draw upon the feminist phenomenology of Iris Young (2005). These theories situate the findings in chapter 4 primarily but are also relevant to chapter 5 and the contrast of gendered experiences and differences in training and embodiment. Gender is theorised as heteronormative and performative, taking from Judith Butler's notions of the heterosexual matrix and gender performativity (Butler 2004; Butler 2011). Butler's work stands as a focal point throughout the analytical chapters, navigating how situated understandings of violence are relative to gender norms. Chapter 2 then considers how violence has been theorised not only in the MMA literature but in broader theoretical considerations. These considerations include violence through the civilizing process (Elias 1994; Elias and Dunning 1986), risk and edgework (Channon 2020; Lang 1990), but also violence as emotional (Collins 2008) and interpersonal (Kelly 1987, 1988).

The literature inspires me in chapter 2; however, I also draw upon their critiques, given that some exclude women as participants or are impartial to discussions of gender entirely. Impartiality is challenged in this ethnography, and the moments in research that have often been taken for granted by some researchers are centralised in this thesis, particularly in research questions 2 and 3 (outlined in chapter 2). The research questions stemmed from previous research and personal experiences (as noted in section 1.1), given that I had an existing interest in topics of gender and violence, including interpretations of violence from 'insiders' of MMA. However, I had not anticipated how forms of violence might be experienced (e.g., verbal, emotional), including in my own experiences of that violence. I contextualise this point as the section continues.

My previous research experiences (discussed in more detail in the literature review) also provided various levels of insight which guided the methodological considerations of this thesis discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 3 grapples with the issues raised in the literature chapter, noting the importance of observing everyday interaction and how interaction is problematised through gendered bodies and assumptions around what violence might be. Beginning with my interests in the sociology of everyday life, I outline the significance of interpretivism and of social organisation and the occasioned ways in which action is framed (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963 Goffman 1974). I then introduce Fight or Flight MMA club and some of the primary participants

observed and interviewed across the chapters. The ethnographic research design's outline follows and clarifies the justifications and description of the flexible participatory-researcher role taken. Certain feminist dynamics of this ethnography are brought to the reader's attention, where my experiences as a woman (both as a participant and as a researcher) contribute to needed conversations around the researcher role, and the implications of what it means to be insider, outsider, and objective, particularly when you don't have the option to be. Details of participant observation and interviews follow this, giving information and context to the time spent in the field and the types of data generated from these methods.

In chapter 3, I reflect on the challenges and data analysis process, which, after some time, eventually took place through mapping (Clarke 2003, 2021). With the analysis came new problems; a problem of realising why some of the interactions in the field felt so uncomfortable or not describable at the time (the reader will come to see an example of these feelings in the opening poem of chapter 2). The creation of data-based poetry helped alleviate some of those emotions and tensions but equally aided in the processual analysis across the multi-sited ethnography, which felt strange and confusing. The poems represent key points of discussion in each chapter, sometimes an analysis that managed the emotional and embodied reflections, but also of interview transcripts and field notes. Information regarding the poems is also provided in chapter 3, which discusses the data and analytic content in more detail.

The analysis is then presented across four chapters. In chapter 4, we hear from the primary participants in this ethnography for the first time: Fight or Flight MMA club. In two parts, the chapter firstly analyses participants' situated understandings of 'violence'. Those definitions are applied and framed (Goffman 1974) relative to the practice of MMA, which is interpreted as a "controlled violence". The latter half of the chapter then introduces observational data around how this "controlled violence" is embodied through intersubjective, bodily interaction. However, as raised across the literature review, bodies are also gendered, with embodiment and intersubjectivity being problematic in training and explored in chapter 5.

Indeed, chapter 5 is a critical account of embodiment where some of the problems and contradictions around "control" and violence emerge. The space of the dojo is primarily separated by gender, with women's bodies often perceived as dangerous to touch: bodies that are also avoided through interactional strategies in mixed-gender sparring. Members of the club draw from the perceived moral order of

gender and violence to make sense of fighting bodies, with women's bodies disruptive to the intersubjectivity within training and skill embodiment. Chapter 5 also hears from Fight or Flight MMA members through interviews, with their reflections of training reaffirming the difficulties observed. Notably, across chapter 5, as well as embodying MMA skills the club is also embodying an MMA masculinity specific to gender norms where the fighter is perceived as male, and male masculinity is normalised. This normalisation is also demonstrated in chapter 6, where gender norms are reiterated and disciplined through humour, broadening the possibilities of how violence is situated and experienced.

Primarily through observational data, chapter 6 exemplifies the interlinked relationship between gender and the embodiment of MMA skills, in which humour played a specific role. The chapter begins by discussing humour as a form of disciplinary practice that disciplines the physical body and in performing MMA(sculinity); the particularities of the normative gender matrix (Butler 2004; Butler 2011), which was heterosexist and homophobic. The chapter then presents the possibilities of humour as a form of homosocial bonding, which was still relative to the normative boundaries of sex/sexuality/gender. The possibilities of bonding are questioned, however, where women (and women's bodies) were specifically *the* joke. My embodied reflections around this 'humour' furthers the analysis, where sexist hustling (Gurney 1985) and sexualising derogatory treatment was inseparable from my position as a researcher, as a woman, and as a participant.

Chapter 7 is the last analytical chapter, drawing together the themes from chapters 4-6. In the chapter, the reader steps away from Fight or Flight MMA into a different ethnographic site: Blood Bath Royal (BBR) fighting events. I begin by presenting MMA fighting as a display of organised violence and draw from observational data on audience work and the 'frame' of MMA fighting at BBR events. The second element of chapter 7 then brings forward the women's fights to the analysis, where there is a substantial comparison between men and women's fighting in the treatment by the audience. The usual reactions that help frame the fighting event were not present during the women's fights, and where audience members *did* engaged this was through explicit sexualising, objectifying and infantilising narratives shouted to the fighters. Although set in a different location to Fight or Flight MMA, we are still witnessing the ordering of what violence is and who fighters are through

interactive work that displays patriarchal notions of fighters, of gendered bodies, and equally of normalised displays of violence.

Drawing the thesis to a close, chapter 8 discusses the findings across the overall thesis. I re-trace the arguments raised from the literature review and methods chapter through to the analysis in this multi-sited ethnography. Chapter 8 will also provide the reader with consideration for the potential limitations and extends to my future research intentions. The final element of the discussion chapter is the listing and engagement with several recommendations from the findings, which includes the proper regulation of training and coaching contexts in MMA. For the reader's information, footnotes are provided across the thesis to define and expand on definitions and concepts specific to MMA. A glossary of key terms is also provided in Appendix A. Some closing remarks for this introductory chapter will now be made.

1.4 Conclusion

Across the chapter, I have outlined the details of this ethnographic research, inspired by both interactionism and the sociology of everyday life (Goffman 1959, 1974) and feminist theory (e.g., Butler 2004; Butler 2011; Young 2005). Included in this outline was a provision of the context of MMA as a sport and why it is a useful case for exploring the research themes of embodiment, gender, and violence. The history of my participation and research in MMA was reflected upon, including research from my undergraduate degree to my master's degree. The chapter then provided a general overview of what is to come through chapters 2-8, setting out the literature (chapter 2) and methodology (chapter 3), alongside the analysis (chapters 4-7).

The topics of violence, embodiment, and gender are central to the research, as well as the situated action and understanding by which those themes are made relevant in interaction. Consequently, there are several fields in which this thesis could locate itself as a result. I locate myself and this research within the qualitative field of 'sporting' ethnographies and across research fields, including the sociology of the body/embodiment and gender. There is also a contribution to feminist research and analysis, particularly through the development of poetry as a form of analysis and reflection in research.

It is worth noting that throughout the thesis, I raise questions that are sometimes answered and addressed in sections further in other chapters. However, some of these questions are for the reader to consider, to where I was simply lost for words. I hope the reader enjoys the exploration and analysis of this ethnography and of my journey. Chapter 2 – the literature review – is introduced next.

The _____ Gap

Fighting “battles among men”, a “hybrid masculinity”

“Fathers, husbands, boyfriends...brothers”

But still it does seem strange to me,

Sure, “they are males (for the most part)”

Yet still the notes are put away,

For certain types of bodies both new and old to MMA.

“Women can, and do, participate”

But “I focus on the...men”;

Gender narrative is concrete, from their eyes into the pen.

Are we all “almost non-existent”?

Even as “a small percentage”?

Do we matter? Don’t we shape you? Do we ruin the ‘male’ vintage?

Is (men’s) masculinity “quintessential”,

Or are we just ignored,

In these “displays of one man’s power” both in field notes and the floor?

“Gender, specifically masculinities

will be given considerable attention”;

But is also limitation on ‘body’ experience and skill retention.

Whether “forty-three men, two women”

or no women at all,

There is a sense of obsolete, insignificant, ignored.

Doesn't 'female masculinity' count as field notes?

Consolidate who's in and who's out?

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter has evolved into a reflexive account of my ethnographic journey with the literature; a journey found to be somewhat problematic. The chapter was initially written as a straightforward account of MMA and sporting research, but it did not seem complete or representative of my experiences. It is now written with realisation of my own experiences of violence as a researcher and MMA participant. These realisations were part of the struggle of writing (and re-writing) this and other chapters and the literature incorporated for review. How should such a journey relate to the literature where women's experiences are often overlooked or excluded, as reflected in "The _____ Gap"? The chapter situates how the ethnographies of MMA and interlinking research in the sociology of sport, the body, and of gender define and explore embodiment, gender, and violence.

I first account for the main MMA ethnographies which have influenced my interest in the study (e.g., Spencer 2012; Vacarro and Swauger 2016). This is followed by additional ethnographic work on MMA research that includes women as participants (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski; Teeter 2014). Literature around mixed-gender training in other martial arts is then provided, highlighting how assumptions of embodiment and training are problematised when differently gendered bodies touch, hit, and feel (e.g., Channon 2013a; Maclean 2015; Maclean 2019). The latter part of the chapter then introduces how concepts of embodiment, gender, and violence are theorised and how I situate my own inclusions of the term as explored through the analyses. I write of my interests in Crossley's (2004, 2005) work of embodiment alongside the feminist awareness of Young (2005). A critical theorising of 'gender' follows (Butler 2004; Butler 2011) before including how the literature has drawn upon and defined violence. Violence in the sporting context has been legitimised and civilised (Elias and Dunning 1986), with some writing in terms of edgework and risk (Channon 2020; Lang 1990). These ideas are presented, broadening how violence in sporting practice might be understood or valuable in analysing the data. However, alongside these more sports-based considerations, the chapter discusses the observability and emotional dynamics of violence (Collins 2008) and more inter-personal forms (Kelly 1987; Kelly 1988) such as harassment and abuse.

Across these theorising sections, I provide a critical discussion of previous research in MMA (with interest in men and by men), which might limit how violence has

been observed and defined previously. I bring attention to the use of humour which can mask more emotional and interpersonal forms of violence (and is mentioned across most of the literature too). Who has the ability to situate definitions of action in gendered or violent ways is a central feature of this thesis. My contributions to how I explore these issues are accounted for throughout this chapter, but first, I begin with ethnographies of MMA.

2.1 Ethnographies of MMA

As noted in the introductory chapter, MMA is a relatively new fight sport that continues to gain traction academically across various fields. Some of the literature include fewer research-based accounts, focusing more on MMA's history and technical development (e.g., Downey 2007, 2014; Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; García and Malcolm 2010). I do not focus on such literature here, but rather, I focus on the ethnographic accounts. There are two ethnographic books that have influenced my interest in researching MMA's spaces. These are presented in this section: Dale Spencer's (2012) "Ultimate fighting and embodiment: violence, gender and mixed martial arts", and Vacarro and Swauger's (2016) "Unleashing manhood in the cage: masculinity and mixed martial arts". I do not review Spencer (2012) and Vacarro and Swauger (2016) in their entirety but draw upon the relevant theoretical moments applicable to my substantive interests in embodiment, gender, and violence.

2.1.1 Ultimate fighting and embodiment

Influenced by Waqcuant's (2004) immersive experience in boxing but with a phenomenological focus, Spencer (2012) presents a 4-year ethnography reflecting on his own MMA embodiment, alongside the experiences of various MMA fighters in Canada. Spencer's data is multisensory (Pink 2009), including interviews (43 men and 2 women), autoethnographic 'jottings' from MMA classes (2012, p. 12) as well as photographs and videos. The overall focus for Spencer is the embodiment process of MMA skills and the experiences of MMA fighter identities, particularly in relation to violence and masculinity both within the sport and in the lives of MMA fighters (who are men).

Spencer describes how MMA skills are embodied over time, notably through bodily senses and experiences of rhythm, time, and space in training and fighting (Spencer 2012, p.34; see also Spencer 2014). Equally, Spencer stresses that MMA skills are not accessed easily, emphasising the importance of repetition as "the axiom of learning" (2012, p.91) through repeating technical manoeuvres in various 'drills', or tailoring specific strategies in training for a particular opponent (p. 92-4). This repetitive process of "becoming parrot" (p. 90) encourages not only an embodiment of skill in mere technical terms but a "prereflective" (p. 91) process in fighting. Technical skills are also developed alongside physical changes in a fighters' body, which Spencer calls "body callusing". Drawing on Crossley's (2004) reflexive body techniques and Mauss' (1973) body technique, body callusing refers to the changing MMA habitus and how fighters' bodies are conditioned to give and receive pain (Spencer 2012, p. 86).

While training to take this pain (see also p.105), the toughness and persistence in training and fighting are also discussed concerning the fighter's masculinity (p.106, 109). However, the experiences of bonding and sociability in training can challenge the explanations of men's interest in MMA, which has often been described as hyper-masculine and attributed "to an abstract notion like 'hegemonic masculinity'" (p.52). Hearing from fighters in Spencer (2012), the embodiment experience is described as being filled with pleasures of learning, bonding, and sociability, given that fighters must work together through these sensory and physically intimate moments, too (p.52).

Gender is explicitly noted in chapter 4 through an analysis of "Difference and bodies" (p.52-71), where Spencer draws on Paechter's (2003, 2006a, 2006b) use of Lave and Wenger's (1991) "communities of practice", alongside Connell's (1995[2005]) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Spencer also stresses the phenomenological importance of researching normative masculinity in MMA, discussing the "constructions and policing of appropriate masculine behaviours and identities" (p.57) through several analytical themes. These include the misogyny and exclusion of women in MMA and how the "Ideal masculine embodiment" (p.63) for fighters was specific to perceptions of "Being a man" (p.64). For fighters, 'being a man' is related to "dominating other fighters" (p.64) in training and fighting and being an "alpha male type of guy" (p.64) while still being in control of emotions and gaining confidence through fighting skills (p.65). Spencer discusses how, with the technical knowledge of fighting, fighters "don't have to act like the big tough guy" (p.66) because they *embody* this toughness in MMA skills.

Violence is explored further across the book in that there is "an accepted *normative* level of violence" (p.117) in sport. Spencer continues to explain that typical assumptions of violence are complicated, however, given that "the fighter's body *becomes* a violent weapon" (p.117; see also Messner 1990) through embodying MMA techniques. Consequently, MMA (according to Spencer) often complicates discussions of 'rational' (civilised) and 'affective' (emotional) forms of violence (p.117, taken from Dunning 1986), given that there are various stages of experience, reflection, and participation involved. Instead, MMA is a form of autotelic violence (Schinkel 2004), "in which individuals engage in violence for the sake of violence: as an end in itself" (Spencer 2012, p.117). Violence is also discussed with the overcoming of emotional circumstances and confrontations, drawing from Collins (2008), who theorises "violence as a situational process" (Spencer 2012, p.118). To 'do' the violent act of fighting, fighters must learn to overcome fear and manage emotions in training, gaining confidence, managing frustration, and learning "to decouple anger from aggression" (p.121-44).

Spencer's discussions of fighters and gender are drawn out precisely, however: primarily through men's bodies and interactions with other men. There were limited examples of women's inclusion in field notes and interview data. Interestingly Spencer writes of the exclusion of women in the broader literature (p.59-61), but arguably women are excluded throughout the ethnography. Women's MMA experiences were mentioned briefly (p.66-70), but this was primarily men's perspective around women's fighting, theorised relative to "traditional-based rejection, ability-based rejection, and pro-female affirmation" (p.67). For some of the fighters, women were seen "as having particular feminine qualities that make them unfit to participate" (p. 68) and an "inability to compete alongside male bodies" (p.69). Other fighters even saw women's MMA (WMMA) fighting as immoral (p.68). However, some participants noted egalitarian viewpoints of women's MMA fighting, perceiving that women are "more technical" (p.69) and thus more interesting to watch.

Spencer also discusses the gender dynamics around "everyday" work (often through maintenance and reproduction by women) and "heroic" work (the resistance to everyday work and activities [p.72]). Drawing from Featherstone (1992), Spencer describes MMA as part of the heroic life, often involving taking deliberate risks to health or life (p. 73). MMA as heroic work is based on displaying courage, but also on specific and unique skill and status as a fighter that is special and separate from the 'everyday'

life. Men who fight consider themselves heroic, but it is a heroic status that is fortified by women's everyday (and arguably heroic) work in things like emotional support meal preparations (p.83). My own conceptualisation of 'everyday' draws more micro-interactive accounts as opposed to Spencer's interpretation of Featherstone's (1992) theorising, but how gender has been discussed here is interesting. It seems that there are specific bodies that are expected to be the hero, and it seems women are not it. One WMMA fighter speaks of her experience on fighting skill and identity, but not in response to the heroic life. It is also worth noting that the comment from the WMMA fighter, Samantha (who discussed the sexualising of WMMA fighters), is the only comment from the two women interviewed in the book's entirety.

Spencer's discussion of gender (through men's bodies and masculinity) also extends to homoeroticism and homosociality in MMA and MMA as 'duelling' practice. Duelling enables honour and masculinity to be experienced in intimate ways (p.131), relating to both training and fighting experiences and, according to Spencer, involves "the mixing of primarily male bodies that work to produce bodies capable of participating in MMA" (p.137). There are two forms of duelling, with the first having potential to bond through various trials and tribulations of sparring, pain, and learning MMA masculinity. The second form, by contrast, has the potential to disrupt (negation) through challenging outsiders or other club rivalries (p.140-141). Duelling practices can influence associations to club membership, with participating in a duel (and its intensity) having an impact on their belonging or inferiority within a club (p.132), such as 'core' and 'periphery' members (p.139).

I wonder what happens to theorising duelling in mixed-gender training? Are duelling practices used to protect the MMA space as a specifically masculine one (through men)? The gender disparity is significant across the book in Spencer's book ("Gender, specifically masculinities, will be given considerable attention" [p.55]), which is evident through the analysis of men's bodies and interactions. It would have been interesting to see field notes on mixed training, too, as there is only one example (p.139-140) centered around controlling physical power instead of gendered bodies/gendered norms. I do not draw on the specific duelling concepts as Spencer does, although it raises interesting points around the types of men (and masculinity) allowed within specific MMA spaces and the potential requirements of action to perform masculinity sufficiently. This is a central point to this thesis, particularly in chapters 5-6.

In my previous research (John 2016), Spencer's study provided an exciting and applicable pathway into an academic account of something I had a personal interest in. Spencer still provides useful points around the processual embodiment of MMA skills, men's masculinities, and of situated understandings of violence. My own interests and ethnographic skill have, however, matured since then, hence a more critical account. Another book on MMA and masculinity that I found interesting prior to and during this thesis is Vacarro and Swauger's (2016) "Unleashing manhood in the cage", which I will discuss next.

2.1.2 Manhood in the cage

Christian Vacarro and Melissa Swauger's (2016) ethnographic work also explores MMA violence and (men's) masculinity. Only one of the authors (Vacarro) collected data over 300 hours, including field notes of training and sparring, observations of fighting events, locker rooms, and online blogs (p.10). Primarily set in "Steel Hanger Gym" (though several others were visited [p.9]), the book explores American manhood and 'manhood acts' (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) of MMA. Women are not included in the research despite being present in some of the MMA clubs, which is a point apparently justified in the opening pages ("the development and experiences of this form of fighting is rooted in the practice of masculinity" [p.x]).

The book comments on the significant history between violence and MMA, with early progressions of the sport having to balance the portrayal of fighters as 'barbarians' (p.19). That balance was also significant for Steel Hanger Gym, whose portrayal of risk and danger was uniquely managed in advertising and recruitment (p.16-17). Through "the safety and danger dichotomy" (p.25), managers and coaches could account for the physical (and masculine) challenge of MMA as a violent sport but a sport that is controlled. Fighters also justify their participation in MMA around themes of safety and rationality, stating that MMA is a contest and "not as dangerous as boxing" (p.28) and emphasising the importance of control and layers of organisation (p.29). Alongside safety aspects, the authenticity of violence gave gym members and fighters a more authentic and 'real' experience of fighting than other sports and martial arts (p.22-23).

Emotions also play an essential part in Vacarro and Swauger's (2016) exploration of violence and masculinity. The book seeks to contribute to the lacking

research into men's emotions in social research (p.34). Albeit through the complex notion of "emotion work of men-as-dominants" (p.35), the authors draw from Hochschild's (1979) 'emotion work' to explore fighters' management of shame, pain, and the suppression of fear and other emotions (p.38-48). For example, MMA trainers would help fighters to manage fear by "constructing an invincible self" (p.47), encouraging fighters in their ability to dominate others. Doing so helped prepare fighters "to fight fear and perform the manhood act of fighting" (p.47), as well as enabling self-belief that they could "evoke pain and shame in their competitors" (p.42). Fighters also utilised this emotion work to construct a sense of invincibility (p.46), to save face in experiences of pain or shame after fights. However, this suggests that shaming opponents are a primary reason for competing, which is arguably problematic. Equally, experiences of constructing invincibility are significant regardless of gender but for any fighter.

As well as emotion work, the negotiation of pain and injury was a feature relative to MMA 'manhood acts'. The authors also draw on Messner's (1990) paradoxical masculinity, where fighters who overlooked injury and pain were rewarded with a sense of masculinity and dominance (Vacarro and Swauger 2016, p.82). However, a consequence of these decisions left fighters with long-term injuries, thus leaving them without the ability to fight (and a loss of masculinity). Of particular interest are how learning to take pain and ignore injury was weaved with problematic, sexist, homophobic interactions where fighters "learned not to "punk" or "pussy out" from the pain" (p.73). Such language was also used when injury prevented the fighters from performing, claiming they "cried like a pansy" (p.78) or that their "pussy was hurting" (p.80). The authors wrote previously how fighters "often used jokes and put-downs" (p.44) as a feature of managing fear, too. These sexist and homophobic jokes and narratives of shame are not considered in greater detail in the study, but I am returning to them through my own analysis, albeit in a differently problematic way.

Vacarro and Swauger give further attention to gender, drawing from West and Zimmerman (1987), Messner (1990), and Connell (1995), with gender theorised as 'embodied' generally (p.52). One chapter focuses on 'the gender embodiment cycle' by Williams (2002), with Vacarro and Swauger relating the "multiple phases and contingences" (Williams 2002, p.30) of gender to the "skilling, aggrandizing, specialism, advantaging, and testing and resting" (2016, p.54) of MMA skills. I will not detail each process given the constraints of this chapter. However, the approach seems limited

given that practices listed are less relative to men specifically than the everyday practice of a fighter. For instance, the authors write of boosting confidence through the specialism of skills and the physical and emotional trials of preparations for fighting and weight cutting. These are hardly "the link to elite manhood" (p.63) (a repeated narrative for each skill in the embodiment cycle) and instead are general expectations of MMA fighting. Additionally, given that the chapter on the gendered embodiment cycle is titled "It's every heterosexual guy's dream" (to fight) there is no discussion of gender dynamics or sexuality throughout the chapter.

As for WMMA, the topic was discussed in terms of media coverage of famous WMMA fighters and not from women as participants. Themes include the sexualising of WMMA (p.89, 93) and discussion of famous fighters like Gina Corano and Ronda Rousey and their emphasised femininity (Connell 1987). The "most visible roles" (p.86) of women in MMA were accounted for with the "ring girl" and "merch girls" (p.86), as well as violence and misogyny towards women as reporters (p.87). A conversation about domestic violence and assaults against women by male MMA fighters ended the chapter (p.94), displaying the potentially complex relationship between violence, MMA, and masculinity. Interestingly, men's perspectives in the study were not included in this topic. The authors also write that MMA as an organisation must consider "violent hyper masculine behaviour" (p.103) and its role within the sport, and the contributions to violence against women. However, these forms of violence are arguably quite specific. Could the everyday experiences in training be framed as a form of violent hyper-masculinity, like the mention of 'pussy' above?

Overall, the book brings attention to the importance of emotions and violence for MMA fighters and adds to an analysis of technical skill (and relative to pain) and men's masculinity. Still, considering the authors' claims of "getting in the field and seeing how *people* act and behave" (emphasis added p.104) and the ways that "males and females" (p.69) learn the sport, there are no accounts of women and mixed-gender training. Thus, despite recognising that "gender becomes one-dimensional" (2016, p.xvi) in research and discussions of MMA, the book is also, in some ways, one-dimensional.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Vaccaro and Swauger was one of the initial texts I read about MMA. Their work has informed my analytic focus over time around the experience of MMA fighting, embodiment, and how violence might be explored. Nevertheless, my own research interest and beliefs around gender/ed bodies

extend beyond men as fighters, and my critiques around the gender dynamics of these texts are brought into my analyses in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Next, this section looks at other ethnographic work on MMA in the form of research articles and begins with the work of Kyle Green.

2.1.3 Tales from the mat

In “Tales from the mat: narrating men and meaning making in the mixed martial arts gym” Kyle Green (2016) presents findings from a five-year ethnography of two MMA clubs in Minnesota. Green draws from Bourdieu's concept of habitus, alongside certain gender scholars (e.g., Messner 2002), to discuss narratives of men in MMA gyms, which “reveals complicated, gendered narratives about the broader social lives and struggles” (2016, p.1). Green observed a middle-class group of men as well as trained in the clubs and also attended some local fights (p.7), using storytelling as method to “emphasize the interactional production of stories” (p.6). There are varying themes in the article, but I focus on the aspects of violence and gender.

Despite their middle-class positionalities and reduced likelihood of experiencing violence, participants still accounted for the “potential of violence in everyday life” (p.9), sharing stories around the real (and potential) violent scenarios ‘on the mat’ of the dojo. Through storytelling practice, men in the club stood to both prove their masculinity through talks of bravery (like protecting those weaker than them [women and children]) and stood as an audience for others' stories (p.9). The willingness “to be always ready for and unafraid of potential violence (Messerschmidt 2000)” (p.11-12) reified the expectations of masculinity both as men and as fighters. The physical abilities gained through MMA and the knowledge to fight brought confidence to the men, which was important for a “foundation for freedom and independence” (p.10). Alongside the desire to gain confidence in the face of violence, however, Green writes of how gender was key in explaining participatory interest in MMA, referring to the men's perceived natural desires for violence and (hetero) sexuality and desire to “fight and fuck” (p.14).

For example, participants were often required to illustrate they “get the system” (p.13) through performing violence in MMA alongside the objectification of women and “acting as men should” (p.12), like ‘picking up’ girls at the bar. Sexualised and sexist talk in participants’ storytelling also served to counteract “any perceived erotic bonds between men” (Messner 1992, p.96, cited in Green 2016, p.13), evident in homophobic

narratives within storytelling (2016, p.3). Green does state that these homophobic narratives apparently represented “the shift from derision of gay men to the derision of “weak” or “effeminate” men” (p.13), though who gets to judge this inclusivity is questionable. Would gay men in those spaces agree?

Storytelling can also silence others (Green 2016, p.12), and Green mentions two women who visited the club as an example. Nancy, a Karate and Muay Thai instructor, taught one of the classes, leaving "some of the younger men...clearly uneasy—less jokes are made and the conversation is hushed" (p.14). The other woman was a teenager, with Green mentioning her in "yoga pants and a thin, lowcut tank top" and describes men in the club as "clearly inhibited, going as far as to work on the opposite end of the mat and quietly sneaking looks" (p.15). The note of men 'sneaking looks' was uncomfortable to read and could be intended in a sexual way. Maybe the jokes are about women, which creates these uneasy experiences. My own experiences and analysis saw many jokes around women (and aimed at women), which were usually sexual. Perhaps it was the same in Green's research too.

In Green's article, the women were not seen as MMA fighters but were instead either associated with other 'outsider' spaces of karate or exercises class (p.15). Where women regularly trained in the gym, Green mentioned that "their effect on the men's narrative was not nearly as pronounced" (p.15), but arguably this stands contradictory to claims that the gym was "welcoming to anyone willing to engage in the practice" (p.7). Women may “remain a small percentage of participants” and in ways “almost nonexistent” (p.7), but explicit focus on men arguably gives a limited viewpoint of the gym's functionality and the impact of storytelling. How many women is a “small percentage”? What of the gyms where women did train regularly? I wonder how the storytelling practices would change with more women who regularly attended the gyms. It might not even change at all.

Green's work hints at some of the difficult moments in training where women could be seen as outside the locale of the MMA club and where interactions might be affected by women's bodies. I am drawing from these points in my research, bringing attention to the ethnographic moments between men and women in training in various ways. My research will also give more detail to the moments around jokes and humour and how these jokes may or may not silence those in Fight or Flight MMA. I move on to a discussion of pain and violent performance in MMA next.

2.1.4 Pain and performance

Green (2011) also contributes to ethnographic research on embodiment and pain in his article ““It hurts so it is real”: sensing the seduction of mixed martial arts”. The article “explores the seduction of pain” from a 3-year ethnographic study of MMA clubs in Minnesota and included 15 formal interviews that were not featured in the text. Green's research was “centered on practice and affect” (p.377) in training, drawing from Deleuze-inspired research and the work of Georges Bataille in order “to understand the communal intimacy forged through pain” (p.378). Green suggests that pain serves a purpose through building confidence in training. However, it is a purpose that stands “to encounter the body as a united organism with clear limits and boundaries” (p.378). These boundaries enable “an intimacy between participants, central to formation of community” (p.378). Interestingly, Green also writes that intimacy plays a significant role in giving and receiving pain and suggests that this is a result of the “desire for a physical felt experience not present in the lives of the men” (p.378-379). I wonder how this dynamic would change with the inclusion of women.

MMA was compared to other martial arts, which lack the testing element and experiences of pain, with participants discussing that “you know the technique works” (2011, p.385) due to painful experiences. From the participants' perspective, injury (and the potential of injury) was a source of separation from other forms of physical performance, such as games or professional wrestling (p.384-5). These painful practices were important “to get at the feeling of the experience itself” (p.380), with “pushing, testing and expanding their physical limits” (p.384) a regular feat of the MMA lifestyle. However, a temporal aspect of pain was also identified, and the positive impact this might have on MMA fighters. Green uses bruising as an example which stands “as a reminder that something ‘real’ happened, before eventually disappearing” (p.385). I do not approach pain regarding the sense of ‘realness’ mentioned here, but pain was an important point of MMA training that managed meanings of ‘real’ violence and of embodying skills. I develop this point later in section 2.4.

Another article that focused on aspects of ‘real’ violence and pain was Magnus Stenius’ (2011) article “Actors of violence: staging the arena in mixed martial arts”. Stenius explores MMA fighting as holding a meta-theatrical character (p.94) and writes of the theatrics of violence in MMA fighting, including the dramatizing of MMA bodies and the audience. Methods included participant observation of 20 MMA sessions, 5

different MMA competitions, and 10 interviews with fighters in Sweden. Those interviewed were all men, though there may have been women who participated in the clubs. It is uncertain from the article due to the focus on interview extracts instead of field notes. Stenius draws from Sauter's (2000) 'theatrical event' and Turner's (1982) performance theory. These theories are not used for my own research, but the article still presents issues around violence that relate to interactional details in which violence might come to be framed and performed (Goffman 1974).

According to Stenius, the stage (the cage) and the audience come together to create a meta-violent space (p.88). Stenius draws away from debates of decivilisation and the "obsession with masculine process" (p.89), hearing instead from fighters about the excitement of participation in MMA. Like Spencer (2012) and Vacarro and Swuager (2016), fighters interviewed by Stenius mention self-control in fighting and how this departs from 'real' forms of violence (p.90), with control being a large factor in how violence is understood as 'real' or unreal. Stenius also writes of the fictive fighting characters created in MMA, which contribute to the audience's investment in the fight as a spectacle (p.90). This investment is important, given that there is a double consciousness for fighters while fighting who feed off audience energy (p.90) and have an almost out-of-body experience.

In addition to these points, violence in MMA fighting is discussed as only partly artificial, given that pain is still experienced too. Fears and anxieties of fighting elevate the sensations and pleasures of fighting, however (p.93), with one fighter describing MMA as almost therapeutic and a challenge and escape from everyday life (p.94). Despite such rhetoric of escape and risk, fighters still distinguished themselves from street fighting by describing MMA fighting as controlled violence (p.94), notably in the organisational aspects of an event. Equally, there are talks of fighting character and self-presentation at various points of a fight (p.93), with some fighters even describing MMA fighting as a show or a circus (p.91). It is worth noting that Stenius (2011) draws more from interview extracts as opposed to ethnographic data here. It would be interesting to see an analysis of how the audience interacts and engage with the fight, for example, and I take this forward in chapter 7 of this thesis.

In "“Just be natural With your body”: an autoethnography of violence and pain in mixed martial arts”, Stenius and Ronald Dziwenka (2015) draw further on Stenius' autoethnographic fieldwork as an MMA student across 18 months of observation and interviews with 18 participants. These participants included fighters, 2 MMA instructors,

and 2 professional MMA fighters with the article discussing the feelings of anger, risk-taking, and violence related to MMA. The gender dynamics of the research are unknown, but from the names in the article, it is assumed participants are all men. The article aims to raise the issue of defining violence through "semantic words" (p.15), but the authors' definitions of violence vary somewhat. The article is phenomenologically inspired by the experiences and sensations of the body and abject and emotion, drawing on various theoretical aspects, including Julia Kristeva's horror and abject, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Turners' (1969) rites de passage. The article also draws from Mary Douglas' (2002) work on dirt and pollution and develops the concept of "stained-violence" alongside Minge's (2007) "embodied fusion" (p.4).

The physical actions required in MMA are embodied through a metamorphic changing of the body's skills through repetitions and progression of techniques, developing an autopilot relationship between body and mind (p.17-19). Crossley's (1996) work on corporeal intersubjectivity is explored by the authors relating to this, with intersubjective engagements with bodies in training and the "rehearsed violence" (p.6) that takes place. Compared to rehearsed violence in training which was an "ordinary situation" (p.20), Stenius and Dziwenka write of 'the ring' as the space where "real" action took place, with the fight itself as a form of "uncontrolled" action. It is interesting to compare this to other research where fighting is generally seen as controlled, too. The potential variance in conceptualising and framing an MMA fight (and forms of violence) will first be given attention in the thesis.

Findings in Stenius and Dziwenka (2015) also relate to how participants vary in their experience and perception of what violence is and how one might feel after performing in a fight. Violence is discussed as something of a "border between our inner abject and the outside world" (p.15); having the potential to disrupt or disturb a sense of identity. This includes a sense of "unnaturalness" in fighting with the internalising of guilt and shame in "finishing their opponents" (p.15). Might moments of unnaturalness be experienced in Fight or Flight MMA? Do women's bodies impact what sorts of violence is 'unnatural'? On this note, there can be a critique of autopilot in the article, too (p.17), where analysis is arguably limited when women's bodies and mixed-gender training are not included.

For Stenius and Dziwenka the body is both an object and subject of experience, which includes the training and channelling pain through intersubjective ways (p.14-5). Like Spencer's (2012) body callousing and becoming parrot, the authors write of a

"somatic understanding" (p.14) in being able to give and receive pain through the repetitive conditioning of their bodies (see also Downey 2007). Interestingly, training experiences and violence are discussed as something to be 'possessed', with the authors mentioning "stained-violence" as something capable of sliding "from one body onto the opponents (p.17) and filling up the "fighters' bodies with power and force" (p.10). I found the concept of stained violence interesting yet complicated for my own approach to interaction and embodiment, as I understand 'violence' and the act of defining something as 'violent' (or not) to be situated.

The authors did include some field notes and autoethnographic experiences (p.4), however, it still lacks the interactive and observed focus of training, which I am interested in. It would be helpful to see more field notes, particularly as the article does not show or discuss training situations. It is also uncertain how the authors situate their analysis with theories of gender. However, they seem to purposefully step away from discussions of masculinity in the article, noting it is "fruitful to widen the debate on MMA and its complexity" (p.5). However, Stenius and Dziwenka do briefly mention "various masculine aspects" and experience of "masculine norms" in MMA research and training (p.5), which they find it 'fruitful' to depart from. The article is interesting in relation to how violence in MMA might be understood and embodied in training and fighting, particularly in the use of Crossley's work which I take up later in the chapter. The participation of Stenius is also helpful given my flexible researcher role. However, I approach these topics with a more critical gendered analysis, not only hearing from women's experiences but also observing the interactions *between* men and women. My previous master's research touched upon some of these interactional issues too and make a note of that research below.

2.1.5 "Take your tampon out and let's get moving!"

As briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter, I had previously researched the gendered dynamics of becoming an MMA fighter in 2016 as part of my master's degree. The research, entitled "'Take your tampon out and let's get moving!': gender, character, and skill in mixed martial arts", was an ethnography of two MMA clubs in South Wales (Welsh Warriors and Dragon MMA) and drew from a feminist and interactionist framework to research the body and the materialising of gender (Butler 1988) and the 'character' (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1967) of MMA fighters. Methods

were primarily participant observation via a flexible researcher role in which I participated in both MMA clubs and included 5 in-depth semi-structured interviews. I conducted around 40 hours of observation across both clubs, of which I participated in approximately 11.5 hours of training. I was the only woman to attend in Welsh Warriors and Dragon MMA, and so my flexible research role proved to be vital in experiencing the awkwardness of mixed gender training. There were 5 areas of analysis in the thesis: “Embodiment and masculinity” (pp.34-37); “Character and masculinity” (pp.38-46); “Character and the fighting frame” (pp.46-50); “When gender matters” (pp.50-58), and “When bodies matter” (pp.58-64).

“Embodiment and masculinity” firstly situated the everyday context of the MMA clubs and the expectations of MMA training. Included in these expectations was the embodiment of a situated masculinity, where the body of club members was re-shaped from other gym spaces that had a particular focus on biceps and muscles. Compared to “gym bros” (p.37), the relevance of the hips, flexibility, and movement were made – with functionality and skill ability overpowering the desire to be aesthetic and muscularity.

As for “Character and masculinity”, the analysis traced the elements of character – courage, gameness, integrity, and composure – to different experiences and perspectives of fighting and fighters in the clubs. Fighters expressed how both courage and risk are involved in MMA fighting, which one participant described fighting “like diving with sharks” (p.38). There was also a unique sense of mental toughness involved with fighting, associating this gameness with pride in the difficulties, with a frequently spoken quote from one of the coaches being, “If it was easy, everyone would do it” (p.41). Coming to experience and navigate pain in training was also related to this concept of mental toughness, learning “when to ‘tap out’, to risk injury or give in” (p.42) being central. Within the analysis of gameness, however, there were also themes of belonging (or at least attempting to belong), giving brief mention to how others ‘outside’ of the MMA club might ‘give off’ the impression of being an MMA fighter. These management abilities were often associated with wearing particular brands of clothing, but also the glorification of specific terms that fighters in both clubs drew away from, such as ‘cage fighter’.

Integrity and composure were made relevant through some of the practical issues involved in MMA fighting, such as making weight for a fight and sportsmanship. Ideals of resisting temptation, self-discipline, and engaging in action that does not

depart "momentarily from moral standards" (Goffman 1967, p.222) were central to these factors. There were consequences of character when these feats were breached. For instance, a fighter reflected embarrassingly on an event where he failed to make weight, being "told you're too fat to fight" (p.44) and claimed he would rather fight and lose than experience the shame of failure (and thus integrity). As for sportsmanship, there was repeated importance around the control involved in sparring ("If you knock someone out you will be banned!" [p.45]). The control was also relevant to controlling emotions too, which extended not only to the training situations but to the fights as well ("We'll always shake hands afterwards no matter what state we've left ourselves" [p.46]).

Further relevancy was the analysis of "Character and the fighting frame", where the difficulties of defining situations as violent in MMA were raised (p.47). Fighters spoke of the physical and momentarily acts of violence within the rules of the sport and emphasised and made relevant the 'backstage' (Goffman 1959) of fighting (p.47) – including the training, the development, and comradery experiences in MMA clubs.

Moving from themes of embodiment and fighting character, the analysis discussed themes of gender and gendered bodies. "When gender matters" provided data around interactions in sparring and training, discussing both the ideas of meritocracy within training and some of the anxieties of touching women's bodies in 'dangerous' ways in grappling. Within that section of the analysis, humour was also drawn upon by the coach in potentially awkward interactions of close body contact, primarily analysed as a potential mechanism for 'saving face' (Goffman 1959). Said humour was only given between men in the club, however. It was never directed towards me. Adding to this issue of banter and bodies was the perception of club members being equal, given that the narratives underpinning that humour were homophobic and feminising. Due to the normative dynamics of the gendered order and assumptions of bodies, I thought it would be interesting to question these norms further as I do in this thesis.

The normative gendered dynamics of fighting categories in sport were also explored in "When bodies matter", where some fighters expressed rigid beliefs around bodies, particularly regarding transgender fighters (p.62-64). For some fighters, however, they were open and encouraging of fighters who did not so easily fit within cis-gendered categories, respecting their right and admiration to take part in the sport that should be enjoyed and explored. Perceived issues of (heteronormative) domestic

violence of men against women were evident for fighters who did not support or agree with mixed-gender fights. This was based in strong, moral principles against men hitting women, extending to the discussion of cis women fighting trans men; that “there’s a woman under there” (p.62).

2.1.6 Section conclusion

The ethnographic research has so far demonstrated an interest in inter/subjective experiences of MMA fighting and its fighters. Included in these books and articles were how pain, emotions, and violence are closely interlinked across experiences of training and fighting, but equally how gender is understood as linked to these embodiment processes. Examples given in the chapter section included the gender embodiment cycle (Vacarro and Swauger 2016), storytelling practices (Green 2016), and even duelling (Spencer 2012). This analysis of gender is limited in theorising primarily to men in research and researched by men, too (an issue raised by some of the authors themselves (Spencer 2012; Green 2011, p.383; Green 2016, p.7). Due to this fact, I have discussed each section with critical insight and that there is little/no inclusion of women. The analytical chapters of my research re-view these contributions to embodiment, gender, and violence through a lens of how gendered bodies and sexuality come to matter (Butler 2004) and are accomplished through interaction. These gaps and problems need to be brought forward, but I also take forward the situational aspects of how violence is framed within MMA (Goffman 1974). Next, I discuss some of the research on MMA, which included women as participants, and those which provided more in-depth experiences of WMMA in training and fighting generally.

2.2 Some discussion of women in MMA

Most research on gender and sport has a prolific focus on men's 'natural' abilities to perform violence, and consequently, masculinity (through men) has been associated as a quintessential factor in martial arts and violent sports performance (e.g., Connell, 1987; Messner 1988, 2002; Messner and Sabo 1990). Features of violent sport such as aggression, strength, and dominance thus become associated with men's bodies,

exacerbating the binary of women (as feminine) as belonging outside of sporting practice. The previous section repeats some of these problems, and so this section presents some of the research on MMA, which features a more substantial discussion of WMMA fighters. This section will also include research on mixed-gender training, demonstrating the potential problems of embodiment and experience I include in the thesis.

2.2.1 Caged morality

Abramson and Modzelewski's (2010) "Caged morality: moral worlds, subculture, and stratification among middle-class cage-fighters" present findings from a 2-year ethnographic observation of 5 different MMA gyms across the west and east coasts of the United States. The article examines how middle-class MMA fighters legitimise their participation in MMA and construct concepts of morality within the MMA subculture (p.145-6). The research included Abramson and Modzelewski's participation in MMA fighting and 25 interviews with competitive middle-class fighters (5 women, 20 men). The article applies Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) concept of habitus to fighters in training while also seeking to critique theories of 'subculture'. Defining subculture is not in my research interest, nor is the focus on injuries or training-life balance (p.153-4). Instead, I focus on gender and violence below.

The authors contribute to what they call "incomplete explanations" (p.155) for MMA's appeal, which often relate to *a priori* discussions of "males attempting to exert gender dominance" (p.155), or a subculture made of "exceptionally violent individuals" (p.155). We hear from fighters who disassociate themselves and the sport from violence and instead account for the skill, competition, and strategy involved in fighting, "often referring to it as a game of chess" (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, p.158). Consequently, club rituals were essential to indicate fighters belonging to the moral community (p.160), such as shaking hands and congratulating each other in training. The MMA club created "a social space where they feel known and valued" (p.162), which also encouraged ideals of American morality ("meritocracy, authenticity, and voluntary community" [p.162]). The voluntary community of the MMA gym still held exclusionary dynamics, however, with fighters and gym members regarded as "special" compared to the distinctions of other personnel around the gym's spaces (p.167).

Like Spencer (2012) and Stenius (2011), associations with MMA as a form of hyper-masculinity are challenged by the authors, given that caring was of high value and over-aggressiveness was stigmatised (p.156). Unlike other research, however, beliefs of meritocracy seemed to overshadow the status hierarchy in the MMA gym as opposed to gender (p.156). Gender was discussed as an equalising experience, and mixed-gender training was encouraged. Most men in the club "supported, and actively trained with women" (p.156), although newer men in the club did tend to have more anxieties (p.157). Nevertheless, women were seen and treated equally in the club, provided they "participated in the same activities and accepted and lauded similar sportive virtues such as gameness, heart, courage, and aestheticism" (p.156). Interestingly, one of the men in the research commented that "someone who has a sarcastic sense of humor" (p.157) can be part of their MMA moral community. I wonder what these forms of humour are.

Despite meritocratic accounts, there were still anxieties among women who fought. Anxieties included having "something to prove" (p.157) to the audience; a dual role in fighting both as individual women but also as a representative for *all* women (p.157). I found this interesting, and Abramson and Modzelewski (2010) note that they attended fights as spectators. It would be interesting to read about these experiences, given that spectators appear to be problematic in WMMA experiences (p.157). This is part of my contributions, particularly in chapter 7. Additionally, I would be interested to see field notes of mixed-gender sparring, as Abramson and Modzelewski (2010) write that gender is not necessarily "absent in the cage-fighting subculture, or even at the level of the local gym where discourse on meritocracy is the organizing principle" (p.157). My research also troubles the perceived equality between men and women in training in chapter 5.

2.2.2 Gender and spartinization

Alison Teeter's (2014) PhD research in MMA is another ethnographic contribution. Extending her interest in MMA training, Teeter's thesis explores her own concept, the "spartinization process", which theorises body work, emotion work, and identity work relative to MMA fighting. The spartinization process refers to the form of Spartan socialization in ancient Greece (p.89). Teeter's aim was primarily to explore whether "individuals experience the spartanization process differently" (p.2), including the

gendered, classed, and racial experience of becoming a fighter. The research includes various forms of participant observation from 6 gyms in Kansas, Miami, and Missouri (p.33-37) and other locations. However, most data derives from interviews with 45 MMA fighters/gym owners (including 16 female fighters). I do not use the term 'spartanization', but Teeter's work is useful in the discussion of MMA embodiment and women's experiences in MMA training and fighting.

On the theme of body work, Teeter hears from fighters in their physical preparations for fights (p.56-7), including feats such as diet (p.58-60) and social sacrifices (p.61). As previous authors mentioned (e.g., Spencer 2012), the experiences of becoming a fighter are complex, with responses from participants reflecting on technique, discipline, mental toughness, work ethic, and self-control (p.63-4). Of particular interest here, however, is Teeter's discussion of gender. Teeter "truly believed MMA to be a progressive sport in terms of gender equality" (p.73), and it was this which drove her to explore women's experiences, noting (rightly) that the literature on WMMA fighters is "completely ignored" (p.6). Teeter refers to sport as a gendered organization (p.26) and draws from Messner (1992), West and Zimmerman (1987) (p.16), also mentioning Butler at points. However, the chapter that focuses on gender does not seem to theorise gender at all (noted below).

Teeter hears various perspectives of women's fighting from the men interviewed, with some encouraging WMMA as it is more technical (due to women's apparent limited capacity for knock-outs [p.74]). Some also acknowledged structural barriers to women's participation, like lacking representation of women in training to encourage other women to attend (p.75). Others insisted that women were seen equally as "one of the guys" (p.79), but I wonder what being 'one of the guys' actually includes. Still, there were numerous claims of discomfort around women's training and fighting by some of the men, for instance, talking of discomfort if a girlfriend wanted to fight or the belief that "women should be women and mothers to their children" (p.76-7). It was also mentioned that women should not fight because "girls are too pretty to bleed" (p.77), and another even laughed at Teeter when she asked questions about women's technical capability (p.76).

Some of the men admit they were hesitant to strike women in training (p.81-2) due to naturally wanting "to be soft" (p.81) with them too. Despite Teeter writing that women are "treated equally by their male coaches and teammates" (p.73), the very opposite of this claim could be argued based on her analysis. Claims of equality

arguably depend on whether this equality is understood beyond equal participation (especially when equal participation involves being sexually harassed). Troubling accounts were expressed by the WMMA fighters, too, from not being taken seriously to coaches ignoring some women for long periods (p.82), with other women expected to "roll with the punches" (p.83) in hazing periods and "shenanigans" (p.83). One WMMA fighter mentioned harassment explicitly, but it is not discussed in detail (p.83). The humour raised by WMMA fighters in Teeter's analysis nevertheless sounds concerning, with one fighter claiming, "the guys in California [at another gym] managed to shock me" (p.82). Difficulties for women were also experienced by others questioning their sexuality; more masculine women were belittled, while others were sexualised by spectators (p.85).

Teeter does bring needed attention to women's MMA experiences. However, she writes that "women are neither being discouraged nor excluded from participating" in MMA (p.88), but I would disagree. My particular disagreement stems from some of the responses from men in the MMA clubs in Teeter and hints around humour and harassment experienced by WMMA fighters. Equally debatable, Teeter writes, "participation in the spartanization process leads not only to sense of belonging, but also to a sense of community" (p.100). Who gets to belong and what community is being formed is debatable. Would women or those who received jokes feel a sense of belonging? Is the community always inclusive, or are some also excluded? It would also be interesting and valuable to see some notes from the 8 field notes books (p.101), as there are no examples. Attention to field notes and ethnographic observations is something that I draw upon in this thesis across the analytical chapters. The following section discusses women's experiences and the relevancy of gender in women's access to MMA in more detail.

2.2.3 WMMA and sexualisation

Several articles focus explicitly on WMMA fighters (and fighting), which often consist of objectification and sexualisation. These articles were primarily an assessment of women in the UFC. L. A Jennings (2015) reviewed the framing of the first women's only series of "The Ultimate Fighter" (TUF 20), a reality television series that seeks to find the new contenders for the UFC. The series, advertised as the "Beauty and Strength" campaign, presented the professional fighters as "easy on the eyes" and "hard on the

face” (2015, p.73), focusing on the fighters' desirability and sexuality more so than their skills (2015, p.83). For fighters featured in TUF 20, "these women may be fighters, but they were women, beautiful women, first" (2015, p.73). Jennings argued that "if women were going to be part of mixed martial arts and the UFC, they must, as their first function, serve the male gaze" (2015, p.73). Screen time and opportunities to fight on TUF (and sponsorships and endorsements generally) were limited for stereotypically attractive women (Jennings 2015, p.84), with more masculine fighters being overlooked.

Similar discussions were in Channon et al.'s (2018) article, "Sexualisation of the fighter's body: some reflections on women's mixed martial arts". The article presents reflections on the history of women's access to MMA fighting and the navigations and negations that take place. Channon et al. (2018) write that WMMA fighters who exacerbate hetero-sexualised performances often receive branding more than masculine-presenting women, with women's fighting generally promoted by 'selling sex'. The authors also write of how the achievements of WMMA fighters have been overly dismissed, and instead, a large component of WMMA advertising was the normative sexual/ised bodies of the fighters themselves. A similar discussion of the TUF campaign was also included in Spencer (2012) and Vacarro and Swauger (2016, p.92).

Quinney's (2016) analysis of how female fighters are framed on Twitter and other media sites further demonstrates how easily marketable WMMA fighters are those pleasing to the hetero-sexist male gaze (p.40). Quinney reviewed 301 tweets across 3 years, using #feminism and #UFC as a search protocol. The sexual sporting body (and its intelligible sexuality [Follo 2007]) was a significant discussion point, with comments on women's skills equally levelled to comments on their attractiveness (or unattractiveness). The 'glass ceiling' (p.39) of MMA was mentioned and included people's reactions to different bodies in-line with hetero-sexist narratives and the disinterest in WMMA relating to the virtue of women's 'nature' to be feminine and non-violent. Despite this, the article also presented a more optimistic account of women's involvement in the UFC as "a frame that legitimizes female fighters as athletes" (p.54), given the new platforms and contracts available for fighters. Although, despite these positive aspects, Quinney also concludes that WMMA fighters are "framed in static and narrow ways" (p.55).

The narrow pathways for WMMA fighters are also evident in Charlene Weaving's (2014; 2015) research. Drawing on the feminist phenomenology of Young (2005), Weaving alludes to women's experiences in the UFC, contextualising the changing embodiment of women's lived-in-experiences in MMA from body-object to the body-subject (2014, p.130-131). Weaving focuses on Ronda Rousey (the first woman signed to the UFC), noting Rousey's varying masculine and feminine practices, which contributed to Rousey's interest as a fighter and to the UFC fans. Weaving writes of how Rousey challenged assumptions of gender through demonstrating risk and danger by fighting and participating in trash-talking (2015, p.69), including gendered humiliations towards more masculine fighters and transphobic comments towards fighter Fallon Fox (2015, p.69-70). Notably, Rousey's trash-talking as a masculine practice is equally balanced with Rousey's sexual appeal and femininity (2015, p.69).

Even in situations where women are embraced for their fighting skills, Weaving describes the tensions around women's (perceived) capabilities as fighters and their bodies as sexualised and gendered. For instance, the semi-acceptance of women in the UFC is still constructed in traditional standards of beauty, with pressures to present hyperfeminine behaviours and appearances (2015, p.64-8) alongside the masculine ability to be violent through the sport (Weaving 2014, p.137). Equally, despite professional commentary by the UFC generally not undermining women's skills (like portraying movements as 'girly' [2014, p.132]), other forms of media often include sexualised images and comments. Thus, despite the UFC enabling woman to embrace lived-in-experiences, they are still framed as body-objects in many ways (2014, p.139).

Although I do not research the UFC context specifically, the literature above is useful to build upon the analysis of sexualising experiences of WMMA training and fighting in this thesis. The observations of WMMA fighting in chapter 7, and the experiences of training across chapters 5 and 6, show themes of infantilising, sexualising, and objectifying women and women positioned as body-objects (Weaving 2014; Weaving 2015). Mixed-gender sparring also played a significant role in the divisions of body-subject/body-object. I give attention to the literature on mixed-gender training next to situate the current research on the topic.

2.2.4 Mixed gender sparring

Gender segregation is so pertinent to sport that assumptions of men's and women's capabilities are often exacerbated and left unquestioned (Channon and Jennings 2014). However, when our bodies are involved in mixed-gender training, the assumptions and expectations are brought to the forefront of interaction. Channon and Jennings's (2013) "The rules of engagement: negotiating painful and "intimate" touch in mixed-sex martial arts" presents data from interviews with 49 fighters (27 men and 22 women) from a range of martial arts backgrounds across England. Gender is theorised from Bordo (1993[2003]), Butler (1990), and Grosz (1994), highlighting 'touch' as problematic (Channon and Jennings 2013, p.490) between gendered bodies. Anxieties arose from the intimacy of bodies, potential sexual relationships within the clubs, and touch having the potential to be viewed in sexual ways (Channon and Jennings 2013, p.494-4). Alongside touch, the experience of pain (particularly from men to women) was notable, for, despite hurting each other being "almost always accepted as a routine, normalised element of training" (2013, p.491), stereotypes of violence against women impact how this pain could be interpreted. Pain and touch, therefore, posed an issue in mixed-gender training, as men often held back from training properly with women or expressed discomfort. Women in the research noted ways of overcoming these boundaries, for instance, the notion of "hit or be hit" (2013, p.495) or "teaching men a lesson" (p.498; see also McNaughton 2012).

Issues of "men hitting women" (Channon and Jennings 2013, p.493) were developed in other publications by Channon(2013a) in "Enter the discourse: exploring the discursive roots of inclusivity in mixed-sex martial arts" and "'Do You Hit Girls?': Some Striking Moments in the Career of a Male Martial Artist" (Channon 2013b). Both the article (Channon 2013a) and the book chapter (Channon 2013b) are from Channon's research across Kung Fu clubs and other martial arts clubs in England. In total, 37 interviewees were included in both studies (17 men and 20 women), and the analysis draws from queer feminist theory to highlight the problems of training which involved hitting. Autoethnographic in nature, Channon (2013b) discusses his experiences of mixed-gender training, field notes, and interview extracts from men and women in the clubs. He discusses the changing habitus (Bourdieu 1986) and "subjective transformations experienced by male martial artists as they train with and alongside women" (2013b, p.100).

These changes came through challenging the "moral importance of not hitting girls" (2013b, p.101) often socialized into boys and men; a point still accounted for by many men in training. Men (including Channon) were often 'holding back', describing "a deep-seated discomfort" (2013b, p.101) in hitting women at a physical level, particularly for men younger or new to the clubs (2013b, p.102). The lack of interest and "men's habitual unwillingness" (2013b, p.103) to strike and spar with women was described as "unhelpful patronizing and frustrating" (2013b, p.103), hindering women's development and skills. Especially as "training with men as a practical necessity" (2013b, p.103) due to low numbers of high-performance female fighters within the clubs, men's 'holding back' often limited "the 'authenticity' of one's training experiences" (2013b, p.104; see also Paradis 2012). Women in the research described how they "pushed forward" (2013b, p.105) in sparring, often instructed to strike their male sparring partners until reactions improved. According to Channon (2013b), chivalry and patriarchal understandings of strength can be challenged through "treating women as 'the same' as male opponents" (p.101), but this arguably easier to say in ways than do. For instance, would treating women through sexualising humour advance a sense of equality?

Channon's (2014) other article, "Towards the "Undoing" of Gender in Mixed-Sex Martial Arts and Combat Sports", provides further analysis and reflection on his research. The article discusses findings of the various ways in which martial artists 'do' and 'un-do' gender, with this 'doing' theorised by West and Zimmerman (1978) and Butler (1990). The doing of gender included the gendering of techniques (e.g., "girl press-ups" [Channon 2014, p.594]), and men's chivalrous anxieties around hurting women, which was a deeply significant and "sometimes viscerally-felt problem" (Channon 2014, p.594). As a result, beliefs of 'natural' female weakness still influenced the various segregations that still took place in training (2014, p.597). There were some men, however, who acknowledged their changing viewpoints and "gradually come to ignore sex as a factor" (p.596), noting: "I (no longer) see it as hitting a girl, you see it as hitting another martial artist" (p.596). Channon (2014) also suggests that integrated contexts have the potential to 'un-do' orthodox gender assumptions by having more women in senior and teaching positions, positions often assumed "as the exclusive preserve of men" (p.594). Despite this, some of the women instructing the classes still experienced confrontations relative to a hierarchical gender dynamic ("It's like they're hearing it from a girl" [Channon 2014, p.593]). Similar discussions were found in Kavoura et al.'s (2015) interviews with female Finnish BJJ fighters ("they just didn't

know what to do with me" [2015, p.149]), where men would also challenge female instructors in various ways (Kavoura et al. 2015, p.150).

Mierzwinski and Phipps' (2015) research on women's empowerment in Muay Thai and MMA echoes the potential of mixed-gender training to challenge orthodox understandings of gender. Taking from Elias and Dunning (1986), the authors account for the "exciting significance" (2015, p.241) of martial arts for women, which not only freed emotional tensions of everyday life but also enabled women to hone the experience of the "female warrior" (2015, p.241). Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015) write of how gender-integrated training "provided women the opportunity to disrupt men's expectations of women" (p.247) by engaging with violent practices including physicality, strength, and dominance (see also Alsarve and Tjørndal 2020, p.482; Mierzwinski et al 2014, p.75; Ross and Shinew 2008, p.41). Consequently, according to Mierzwinski and Phipps, the superiority and dominance associated with men's superior prowess is rendered meaningless, as systems of violence are disrupted through women's participation.

Biological and essentialist beliefs about men and women in martial arts were evident in Velija et al.'s research (2013). The article – "‘It made me feel powerful’: women's gendered embodiment and physical empowerment in the martial arts" - explores how 'empowerment' is experienced and conceptualised by women in martial arts and sports, influenced by physical feminist theory (e.g., Roth and Basow 2004). Hearing from 11 female fighters through one-to-one interviews, the authors describe how women felt empowered through experiencing physical liberations, though concepts of empowerment did not question problematic gender dichotomies. For instance, narratives of men's biological superiority in martial arts remained, with many women believing "men find it easier to hit others" (p.532) and "are biologically supposed to aggression" (p.532). Additionally, women were "reluctance to embody dominance" (p.532) in sparring, often apologising for hurting others. For women who sparred with men, opportunities to challenge gendered stereotypes varied. For example, some men enjoy sparring with women, but this enjoyment was seen as a chance "to take it easier than with other men" (p.534). So, though mixed training challenges perceptions of women as weak, women are "still are positioned within the club as *weaker* than male fighters" (p.534). Equally, although women transformed their body and became physically stronger through sporting experiences, numerous

discussions were had on women still being victims of violence "in the eyes of others" (p.533) from bruising in training and fighting (see also Mierzewski et al. 2014).

Chloe Maclean's (2015) ethnographic and interview research on mixed-gender training in Scottish karate shows similarities, with the potential and limitations of gender dynamics in training. The chapter ("Beautifully violent: the gender dynamic of scottish karate") illustrates that despite the general format of training divided relative to body weight, height, and belt hierarchy (p.163), several features stressed patriarchal accounts of men and women's 'natural' abilities. Like Channon (2014), techniques were gendered as feminine and masculine, also situated within gendered fighting styles (p.165). Interestingly, "joking banter" was mentioned briefly, which was used "to hold men more tightly to taking and giving hard hits" (p.168), but details of the banter were not detailed. Maclean's (2019) other ethnographic research across 3 karate clubs details the gendered differences between men's and women's occupation of space in training. In the article ("Knowing your place and commanding space: de/constructions of gendered embodiment in mixed-sex karate") Maclean writes that women often avoided pairing with others in the clubs with higher grades and "position themselves beside the lower grades when standing lined up" (p.823). Equally, men's general confidence in training outshone that of women, where "women rarely confronted men who crossed into their training space" (p.823). Interestingly, for those who learned karate from a young age, there was a significant difference in how they projected their bodies and experienced the embodied practices (p.824; like Lafferty and McKay's [2005] research in boxing).

Guérandel and Mennesson's (2007) "Gender construction in Judo interactions" echoes the discussions so far, highlighting how bodies are expected to perform Judo in gendered ways. The articles present findings from 32 hours of observation (p.170) of (and interviews with) boys and girls who are high-level judokas aged 5-17. The research took place in one club in France, drawing from Goffman (1974) to analyse how fighters managed 'gender' and 'judo' frameworks in training. In the article, positioning and more technical forms of Judo were understood as feminine, while more aggressive forms of attack masculine. These distinctions usually segregated the classes by gender, thus reiterating stereotypical and biological beliefs. The authors present 3 moments in which gender was reaffirmed not only in judo skills: before, during and after the fights in training take place.

In mixed training, girls and boys would be "performing and interacting in conformity with sexual stereotypes" (p.172), managing appearances before and in-between training where the importance of displaying femininity (for the girls) and masculinity (for the boys) was raised (p.180-183; see also Mennesson 2005). There was a separation of boys and girls in different locker rooms (p.173). The article talks of the 'stages' in which these young athletes perform, with boys comfortably taking off their jackets on the gym floor and "affirm their masculinity through displaying their musculature" (p.173). In contrast, girls would change in the locker rooms. The 'gender display' is also present in the affections shown during training, where girls would "reveal an image of gentleness, in sharp contrast to their image" (p.174) in hugging and kissing their friends. At the same time, boys would tease the girls (also described as affectionate) (p.174). Situations of mixed-gender fighting in the club demonstrated the potential impact on the meanings and approaches to gender and Judo as a framework. For instance, boys can be subject to ridicule in training if they are dominant against a girl (p.176) due to perceptions of boys as stronger, despite girls appreciating the respect given to them as a judoka.

Interestingly, Guérandel and Mennesson (2007) show differences in interactional treatment in the more intensive form of fighting, 'tates', where "extremely intense fights also tend to cancel out gender differences" (p.179). The focus on winning is superior to the anxieties of gender, as discussed previously. How gender can impact the meanings of action (p.170) is a key interest in my thesis.

2.2.5 Conclusion

I find the various work presented insightful, with themes and discourse of sexualisation (and its heteronormative underpinning), which inform and focus the chapters to come. The sexualising of women's bodies certainly plays a role in the difficulties experienced in mixed-gender training, as well as biological beliefs of men's superiority in strength and skill. What I find does lack in some of this literature, however, is ethnographic detail. I observe how assumptions of women's bodies impact training and fighting in a particularly ethnographic way and a highly reflexive way. Equally, themes of violence against women in mixed-gender training in MMA and other MACS contrast previous themes of controlled violence and bonding, as raised in section 2.1. The normalisation

and simultaneous subversion of violence against women are brought to the surface in the hitting and touching of women's bodies (by men). This is an important theme in chapter 5 of this thesis. Equally, despite a greater focus on women in mixed-gender training in this section, situated and micro-analytic accounts of how interaction takes place is missing, and the complexities of how gender is being made relevant and produced. I take up these points in chapters 5, 6, and 7, and in research questions 2 and 3.

Given the many different variations in theorising embodiment, gender, and violence across the sections, it is important that I outline my own understanding of the concepts and how they will be drawn upon in the thesis. Section 2.3 begins this outline with a discussion of embodiment and 'the body'.

2.3 Theorising embodiment and the body

The literature so far has included a range of themes around the body and embodiment, including MMA skills and gender (primarily of men and men's masculinity). As hinted by the varying philosophers and research mentioned across the literature in this review, the embodiment literature itself is extensive, with varying theories of action that could be drawn upon. For this thesis, however, I firstly provide a premise of habit through Wacquant's (2004) contributions, particularly in the context of fighting scholars (García and Spencer 2013]). Doing so situates the work of Nick Crossley (1996, 2004, 2005) and the more phenomenological⁵ I discuss the theorising of embodiment as reflexive, and intercorporeal. Concepts around embodiment through intersubjectivity can be critiqued, however, given that corporeal experiences are primarily researched from men's bodies as both participant and researcher in the research so far. The work of Iris Young (2005) presents a critical discussion of how embodiment takes place differently between gendered bodies, followed by a discussion of how gender itself is scrutinised in the work of Judith Butler (2004, 2011).

⁵ It should be noted here that although the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty inspire Crossley, I do not outline those underpinnings here.

2.3.1 Embodiment, habit, and reflexive bodily techniques

Loïc Wacquant's (2004) "Body & Soul" was one of the first ethnographic studies of combat sport that I was struck by as an undergraduate and is a useful reference point for theories of embodiment. Wacquant (2004), drawing on Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, studies, and experiences the lives of members of a boxing gym and their "pugilistic habitus" (Wacquant 2004, 98-9). Spending time within the gym observing and participating in training and fighting, Wacquant comes to know the rules of habit and expectation, and the processes by which the pugilists (or 'pugs') of boxing develop the habitual skills of fighting. However, these habitual skills are not limited to the mere biological, mechanical movements of the body. The body and mind (or 'soul' as reflected in the title) materialise in "schema of perception, appreciation and action" (Bourdieu 1990, p.14; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Wacquant presents habitus and embodiment as a particular tool for research and investigations, with himself even fighting (see Wacquant 2014 – discussed in chapter 3). Wacquant's contributions to theorising and researching embodiment have been highly influential in the MMA literature but in the context of many other fighting scholars and sports, too (e.g., Downey 2005; Delamont and Stephens 2008, 2013; García and Spencer 2013; Stephens and Delamont 2014). Such research alludes to the "suffering beings" (Wacquant 2014, p.3) who interact and share collective habits. However, habitus in a directly Bourdieusian sense is not a position I have taken up in my own research (see García and Spencer 2013, p.186). Instead, I draw on Crossley's phenomenological concepts.

Like Wacquant, Crossley's phenomenological discussions of the body and embodiment challenge Cartesian dualisms of knowledge and "cease to understand the mind and body as separate" (Crossley 2004a, p.67). Instead, knowledge is developed through our 'being-in-the-world' as 'body-subjects' (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [2000]). Through the development between the mental and corporeal, "the body understands"; the body not merely an empty vessel but the means by which we are oriented and communicate with the world. For Crossley (1996, 2004), the skills and bodily knowledge (or habit) are also flexible through reflexive body techniques, making it possible to transform the body according to the purpose and goals of the individual. This is illustrated in Crossley's work on circuit training (2004a), reflexive bodies and modification (Crossley 2005), and the moral careers of those in the gym (Crossley

2006). Crossley's influence (and of phenomenology more broadly) in the MMA literature is evident in Spencer (2012, 2009) and Stenius and Dziwenka (2015), with broader ethnographic research on embodiment and sport demonstrating the uses of Crossley's work. In Bryan Hogeveen's (2013) ethnographic research, for instance, we see the training and "forging" the fighting body in BJJ and the necessary intimate knowledge of bodies to training and fight. Similar points are brought into focus too in Elizabeth Graham's (2013) phenomenologically focused analysis of Taekwondo, discussing the body as pre-reflective and "knowing without knowing" (Crossley 2001, p.122 in Graham 2013, p.72).

In my research, observing and feeling the interactive and intersubjective moments in training is of interest. However, the body is also corporeal: coming to know through interactions with *others*. This is something that the research brings forward into the analysis chapters in observational data of MMA training and the interests of question 1, and it is why I find Crossley's discussions useful. I am also interested in how participants work out gender and violence through embodiment, which is an important point to raise here. The "dependence on the body of the other" (Hogeveen 2013, p.89) is troubled by gender, which has been made relevant in section 2.2 - important for this thesis and questions 2 and 3.

The feminist phenomenology of Iris Young (2005) is valuable considering the issues of gender and embodiment, which explores ways in which women's and men's embodiment experiences are treated and experienced differently. Young's (2005) "Throwing Like a Girl" (drawn upon in Weaving's [2014, 2015] research) brings to light the differential beliefs and treatment of how gendered bodies are expected to move and take up space. The gendered impact on embodiment is something that we see in chapter 5 of this thesis, where normative expectations of gender (and violence) lead to differential treatment of women, including a separation of bodies to different spaces in the gym, but also how women's bodies are avoided in training. Perhaps to re-phrase Hogeveen's quote, I make relevant the dependence on the body of the Other as a point of analysis. Next, a theorising of gender is accounted for, where I outline the uses of approaches in this research.

2.3.2 Gendered bodies and gender performativity

Across the chapter, previous research has drawn on West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender', Messner's (1992, 2002) paradoxical masculinity, and Connell's (1987, 2002) hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. Texts also theorised gender in binary ways, focusing on men and men's masculinity specifically or discussing gender but mostly in interview-based analysis. One of the ways in which my research troubles these generalised accounts is critiquing with Butler's (1988, 1993) performative concepts of gender.

Although some theories recognise the social construction of 'gender' (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987), for Butler, there remains a level of essentialism that fails to consider the constitution of gender and 'sex'. According to Butler, the relationality of sex/gender/sexuality works through each other to materialise a 'normative' understanding of gender (and sex and sexuality), conceptualised through a hegemonic heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990). Drawing from Wittig's (1992) 'social contract' and Rich's (2003) compulsory heterosexuality, the heterosexual matrix is defined as a "cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized...a stable sex expressed through a stable gender...appositionally hierarchical defined through the practice of heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, p. 151). The heterosexual matrix thus stands as a powerful resource through which gender norms (and binaries and practice) are policed and controlled.

Gender is also constituted in everyday, mundane acts in line with this heterosexual matrix through 'performativity'. This performativity is not in the Goffmanian (1959) sense of 'performance' in which one has "donned that gender for the day" (Butler 1993, p.x). Gender performativity is instead theorised "as the reiterative and citational practice" (Butler 2011, p.xii), consistently enacted and produced, from matters of address to material arrangements of the body. The apparent stability of gender and gender norms is reiterated as a consequence of the fabrications of gender ideality: "the reinstituted effect of those very practices" (Butler 2004, p.48). Through such performative 'scripts' of masculinity and femininity (as expressed through the categories of 'men' and 'women'), the illusion of gender as 'natural' is achieved. Indeed, gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler 1988, p.527).

In the sporting context where beliefs of men's natural superiority are so prevalent, Butler's work can 'trouble' (1990) and 'undo' (2005) these understandings of

both normative gender and sexuality. When 'sex' (designated female physicality/anatomy) is out of place (as it is in an MMA gym), the body that challenges those norms (like being a woman or a gay man) are often 'homosexualised' (Butler 1990) through bullying, exclusion, and stigmatisation (e.g., Blinde and Taub 1992; Kauer and Krane 2006; Pascoe 2007). Homosexualising men and sexualising women are evident in chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis where gender was policed through heterosexist humour. In this way, it is important to consider the dynamics of bodies through various gendered practices, not just the dualism that "masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female" (Butler 1990, p.151).

If interpreting gender (and sex) as a norm that "requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime" (Butler 2004, p.41, 49-50), consequently 'the body' cannot be observed in un-gendered ways (which much the MMA literature appears to do). Therefore, troubling the MMA experience is not only about paying attention to gender and sexual 'norms' (and how norms become norms) but noticing when these norms are (always already) exceeded, challenged, or subverted. In mixed-gender training, for instance, the power of the sex/gender dichotomy is so welded that differently gendered bodies cause major disruption in terms of gender intelligibility, evidenced in issues of "men hitting women" (Channon and Jennings 2013, p. 493; Channon 2013a; Maclean 2015; Maclean 2019), and whether women are seen as even capable of training or fighting. The thesis draws from Butler with an understanding of gender as constructed, performative, and regulatory (Butler 2004; Butler 2011), and I explore the interconnectedness of sex/gender/sexuality relative to the heterosexual matrix. There are also normalised experiences of violence relative to gender relations, and this matrix is also considered in this research. Equally, there are points to be made about the forms of violence within MMA as a sport. To clarify how 'violence' is referenced in this thesis and how it is studied, I outline the relevant theories next.

2.4 Theorising violence

Drawing definitional clarity between sports-based fighting and violence is arguably important, as raised in various articles and campaigns (Channon and Matthews 2018; Matthews and Channon 2016). As shown in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, the relativity of violence in MMA is often raised, with themes of 'controlled violence' and the separation of emotions being key (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Alsarve and Tjørndal

2020; Stenius 2015). Others also distinguish MMA violence from the interpersonal forms as found "in bars, homes, and on the street", proceeding "from a necessary for being-together" (Spencer 2012, p. 155). However, much of the literature shows varied realities on "being-together" which I critique in this thesis. For some, it is not possible to 'be together' for various reasons, such as sexualised abuse or harassment, bullying, or exclusionary humour. Despite the frequency of humour mentioned in the MMA and sporting literature, the treatment of those words and actions is often left unfocused in the analyses around violence. In this section, I consider some definitions of violence that are useful and not so useful for my research, drawing on some MMA literature and literature beyond the sport. Firstly, I discuss ideas of physical violence and risk, a theme that often comes to mind when discussing MMA and popular literature around sporting experiences (Elias and Dunning 1986; Lang 1990). I then account for the role of emotions in violence (Collins 2008) and more inter-personal forms of violence, with a particular focus on gender and humour (Kelly 1987, 1988). Doing so complicates notions of violence going into the analysis chapters and presents a standpoint for how violence can be observed empirically and equally, hinting at my relationships in the field that were involved and impacted by that violence.

2.4.1 Violence, sportization, and edgework

The work of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1986) is prevalent in the sociology of sport, often mentioned in research on sport, MMA, and violence. Their work explores the legitimacy of violence within the sporting context. This context is often exempt from restraint and self-control and instead offers a "liberating excitement" (Elias and Dunning 1986, p.165) where boundaries of violence are blurred. Boundaries are challenged through activities and competition where physical harm and aggression are often experienced, with participation in forms of violence legitimised through sporting prowess and athleticism. This display of legitimating action transforms meanings of violence through routinised and ritualised means, marked in distinct ways from other forms of violence in social contexts (e.g., street fighting). The routinisation and contextualised violence allow individuals to 'dip in' and out of civil and uncivil behaviours, and a "controlled-decontrolling of emotional controls" (Elias and Dunning 1971, p.31) away from frustrations experienced in life. Sport also offers opportunity of a

"moral holiday" from mundane routines, contributing to a sense of identity lost as a result of contemporary, globalised life or "leisure starvation" (Dunning 1990, p.29), a discussion often presented around men's masculinity and identity (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Green 2016).

Some of the MMA literature has presented the case for challenging MMA's status in sportization narratives (and *de*-sportization) (see Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006; check García and Malcolm 2010). However, others have stressed the significance of the rules and context of MMA fighting, highlighting MMA's re-structuring as a legitimising sport instead of being a mere 'spectacle' of violence (see Downey 2007). Similar narratives were present in sections 2.1 and 2.2, stressing the importance of controlled violence in MMA clubs and communities. Despite my own research could centre around these themes and only these things, the interest in MMA as 'sportized' is not the focus of this thesis, nor why members of Fight or Flight MMA participate in fighting relative to 'leisure starvation' or quests for excitement (as in Green 2016; Mierzwinski and Phipps 2015). However, I ask members of Fight or Flight MMA club how they define and perceive violence, which is found in chapter 4 (particularly relevant to question 1), to explore the following chapters.

2.4.2 Edgework and risk

Stephen Lang's (1990) concept of edgework can further the exploration of violence and MMA. Edgework is based on the experiences of various high-risk situations and experiences in which the threats of injury and/or death are a consistent feature (Lyng 1990, p.857). Edgework also usually involves specific and difficult skills, enabling a unique sense of embodied pleasures of participation as almost an out-of-body experience, euphoria, or hyperreality (p.860-1). The 'edge' itself is experienced in various dichotomies, "life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity" (p.857), and MMA could certainly be applicable to explore these moments, given that physical threats are very much real in both training and fighting (like broken bones, concussions). Edgework as "negotiating the boundary between chaos and order" (p.845) is arguably reflected in sportization narratives too, with edgework providing authenticity from an 'over-socialised' life.

Channon (2020) draws across the "paradoxical problem of 'violence'" (p.6) in MMA and considers the sport as a form of edgework. According to Channon (2020),

this paradox is woven between people willingly participating in highly dangerous and physical activities while also being part of MMA communities with feelings of respect, joint enterprise, and routines present. The article presents interesting questions about how individuals learn 'the edge' in training and fighting situations where boundaries are pushed (p.7). Physical pain, weight cutting, and the emotional toll of these experiences (p.9) are all 'the right stuff' (Lyng 1990, p.859), which contribute to exploring 'the edge'. However, control is also important in edgework, from controlling emotions to the control of the physical body and knowledge around risk in rehearsing skills in training (Channon 2020 p.8).

Channon suggests that sports-based fighting could be presented as mutually constructed and voluntary risk as opposed to 'violence' or "collaborative edgework" (Channon 2020, p.15). Others raise similar points (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Spencer 2012) in that MMA is not a 'true violence' (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011, p.160) and should be reviewed accordingly. As with Andreasson and Johansson's (2019) interview research with professional UFC fighters, "violence is often re-defined as something good and productive, a part of the show" (Andreasson and Johansson's 2019, p.1195). To be involved in physical acts (which could be perceived as violence) is, therefore, just one element of the MMA experience, and the definitions of violence are arguably relative to matters of force and consent involved by the parties participating (Channon 2020, p.9,15). Matters of consent and participation are similarly seen in Roth and Basow (2004). They suggest the term 'physical power' instead of violence in sporting contexts, accommodating definitions to more than just physical elements of sport but the dynamics of relationships, coercion, control, and consent (Roth and Basow 2004, p.259).

Although this section familiarises with theorising violence (in the context of sport and MMA violence), there are limits in situating these understandings within a feminist and gendered focus. My research takes discussions of violence within MMA away from these structural aspects, which also specifically relate to the sporting practice. I discuss some of the ways violence has been theorised concerning emotions next.

2.4.3 Emotions and violence

Much of the literature on MMA mentions emotional aspects of violence, from fighters emphasising the separation of emotions in fighting to the role emotions play in the dominance of others (e.g., Green 2016; Vacarro and Swauger 2016). Randall Collins' (2008) work on emotions extends theories of violence in this thesis, inspiring thoughts for the analysis in the coming chapters. Drawing from various forms of data (including video footage, photographs, observations, and interviews) to interpret the interactional chains of violence, Collins stresses the analytical importance to "put the interaction in the center of the analysis" (p.1) as opposed to individual accounts. Discussing a range of violent incidents, from bank robberies to street fights, Collins focuses on often overlooked micro-interactional features of violence (like eye contact, body language), how a situation "actually come to violence" (p. 337) and "what keeps the interaction stuck there" (p.338).

Furthermore, for Collins, violence is actually more difficult to achieve than one might assume, being "disappointingly undramatic" (p.416) and often taking longer than expected to take place. Punches are missed, speech is slurred, and awkward moments are frequent, especially in instances of a "tunnel of violence" or "forward panic" (p. 406). These 'hot' forms of violence are often in the form of a frenzy, usually uncontrolled, unplanned, and overwhelming. On the other hand, 'cool' violence is carefully planned, slowing down the situation and being able to respond or act "in the zone" (p.404). Reasoning for such 'messy' accounts is that violent occasions are usually heavily emotive, with anxieties and tensions at "the heart of the situation where violence is carried out". The interactive exchange is thus a battle for emotional dominance, with the control of the situation involving 'front' work and "face contests" (Goffman 1959) in interaction ritual, with few people wishing to partake in 'actual' violence. In this way, it is not about performing violent acts itself but achieving emotional dominance and an impression of being *capable* to 'do' violence.

There is a range of examples to which Collins' accounts can be applied in this thesis, from impression management in 'the cage', to the management of emotions in a fight (like other research explores [e.g., Vacarro and Swauger 2016]). It is also useful to consider the ranging forms of violence Collins addresses, such as bullying (p.156-174), which I critique and draw upon in chapter 6. However, similarly to discussions of violence throughout this chapter Collins appears to overlook women (albeit when

discussing domestic violence). Situating these understandings within a feminist focus is important, given that emotions in the MMA literature relate to a highly specific gendered discourse and forms of gendered and sexual violence. There is also substantial power relations present within interaction taking place, and situations of action can be highly inter-personal, dependent on the reiteration of power relations and gender norms: evident in my experiences as a participant-researcher. A gendered analysis of violence might also suggest how different forms of violence (still routinised and ritualised) are experienced through action, and the use of humour is a great example. I consider these points next.

2.4.4 Humour and emotional violence

It has been discussed how much of the literature on MMA had excluded women's experiences and interactions, with discussions of violence primarily to physical forms directly related to MMA skills. Humour, however, remained a constant feature of this literature and was often left untreated analytically. Even the more popular discussions around sport and violence (e.g., Elias and Dunning 1986) could limit how violence is theorised in these respects:

“the border of what is socially permissible and sometimes transgressing it...probably adds spice to these gatherings’ (Elias and Dunning, 1986: 121ff.). The sorts of things we had in mind were flirting at parties and such primarily male activities as telling risqué jokes, singing ‘dirty’ songs and playing at drinking games...we recognized that in this sort of context people sometimes go too far and do serious social, psychological and even physical damage to themselves, to others and to their relationships” (Dunning 1996, p.192-3).

The consideration of these "risqué jokes" alongside the power dynamics of adding 'spice' (acknowledged as "male activities") demonstrates a need to explore how it is that actions are framed as violence or not. On this note, the shaping of this section is partly from my own realisations of inter-personal violence while researching. Arguably, jokes and who has the authority and legitimacy to frame them as *just* jokes, depend on the positionality of the researcher in the field and their analysis. As most accounts of humour in the MMA literature are written by men, many of whom are MMA fighters, how

is 'humour' perceived differently to my own accounts - especially when it is gendered and sexualising? I am considering humour from a gendered perspective, where the analysis will show the depth and concerns of humour through ethnographic observation, including my own experiences.

Bringing attention to the role of humour also highlights how the boundaries between humour and violence often become blurred (McCann et al. 2010). A few examples are the contradictions raised in the voices of the #metoo movement, where experiences of (primarily women) illustrate the toxic undercurrent of much 'humour'. Although this thesis does not explicitly focus on the topic (but it could interlink), 'lad culture' (e.g., Dynel 2008; Nichols 2016) is embedded in these issues, too, with humour playing a large role in the homosocial aspects of sports clubs, societies and more (McCann et al. 2010; Muir and Seitz 2004). The role of humour in homosociability is, however, included in chapter 6.

Humour can therefore be understood as a tool in the organisation of subordinate and hierarchical groups (Kehily and Nayak 2010). Humour can be hostile and benevolent (Glick and Fiske 1996; Glick and Fiske 1997; Ford, Wentzel and Lorion 2001): a way to sustain the submission of women and specific gendered practices which do not 'fit' the cultural specifics of that group. For example, in Watts' (2007) study of humour in the workplace, there was exclusion through humour and humour as punishment. However, humour was also understood as an escape (Watts 2007, p.262) which provided an opportunity for socialising for some, while those same situations were threatening or 'othering' (Watts 2007, p.263) for others (similarities with Green's [2016] storytelling). In sports, too, humour often engages with forms of sexism and homophobia through various gendered discourse – a point that I have raised through this literature review.

For some humour *may* be seen as a bonding mechanism or a form of affiliation (Haugh 2010; Robles 2019, p.85). However, the distinctions of how humour is experienced and mutually interactive must be considered (and is in this thesis), given the multiple and frequent ways humour was used. Liz Kelly's (1987, 1988) theorising of violence as a continuum presents useful considerations here, accounting for dynamics of violence at a physical, emotional, and sexual levels. For Kelly, the continuum seeks "to describe the extent and range of sexual violence in women's lives" (1987, p.48) and is helpful in reflections on both the writing of others and my own experiences. The 'continuum' relates to the continuum of incidence (with the most common forms of

violence being sexual harassment) to the continuum of experience, including coercion of force, alongside more altruistic methods. For Kelly, the realisation of this violence is often over time, given that definitions of violence are sometimes subjective, "for example seeing sexual harassment as 'only a joke'" (Kelly 1987). The frequency of 'jokes' is evident in the literature too, noted as "shenanigans" (Teeter 2014, p.83), in men's storytelling (Green 2016), or "jokes and put-downs" (Vacarro and Swauger 2016, p.44) Even Collins gives brief mention to "naughty" violence, as "carousing that gets out of hand" (2008, p.2).

I will draw from some of the different and connected conceptualisations of violence above and from participants' definitions of violence in talk and embodied action. Participants do discuss the physical nature of skills and the controlled aspects of violence in MMA (as other research has). However, my research also considers situated ways in which frames of action challenge definitions of 'violence' or 'humour', problematised through and (in relation to) gender and gendered bodies. This thesis also makes the impossibility of disentangling the researcher from what is being researched and how my own body comes to matter (Butler 2004) - a pressing issue I discuss in the methods chapter next.

2.5 Conclusion and research questions

This chapter has outlined several key areas of literature relative to this thesis, discussing empirical work around MMA and MACS. The approaches of theorising of embodiment, gender, and violence were also provided, prompting particular questions about how 'violence' is taken forward in the upcoming analytical chapters. Section 2.1 presented some of the primary ethnographic texts on MMA, which in many ways discussed the three pre-listed themes throughout. However, those texts (while being exciting and valuable in some ways) were often restricted to an analysis of men. As the poem denotes at the beginning of this chapter, research on MMA that excludes women poses problematic notions for how embodiment, gender, and violence are researched. Section 2.2 accounts for some of those issues with a broader spectrum of gender in MACS. This involves research that includes women as participants and details of mixed-gender sparring (e.g., Channon 2013a, 2013b) and themes of sexualisation (e.g., Weaving 2014, 2015). However, these discussions in the literature also lacked ethnographic detail and observational notes of mixed-gender training.

The significance of gendered bodies and gendered beliefs in training and fighting were expanded upon in sections 2.3 and 2.4, which considered theories of embodiment and 'the body'. Embodiment, which is approached through a focus on habitual interaction but also one that is intersubjective and intercorporeal (Crossley 1996, 2014), is what I take forward into the thesis. From the literature, gendered bodies clearly have an influence on the experiences of habit (Young 2005), and I consider this, particularly in chapter 5. As for understanding what 'gender' is, gender is theorised as performative and heteronormative (Butler 2004, 2011): inseparable from the relationships between sex and sexuality. This performativity is relevant across chapters 5-7 but is also relevant to the discussions of violence in this thesis. Violence has been considered in various forms, including the construction of legitimate sporting practice (Elias and Dunning 1986), physical aspects of risk and embodiment (Channon 2020), the role of emotions in the interactional achievement of violence (Collins 2008), and more interpersonal forms (Kelly 1987).

In MMA, where the liminality of 'real and 'controlled' violence is arguably complex, what follows is a layered analysis in which I hear from individuals, observe, and feel interactions, and reflect on how embodiment and gender are taking place and influence those complexities. Leading from this, there are 3 research questions, each addressing variations around the relevant themes:

1. How is action defined and framed as violent from participants perspectives within MMA training and fighting?
2. How is action embodied and gendered in relation to these definitions?
3. What are the gendering possibilities of (violent) action in MMA?

The questions presented broaden how violence is situated and experienced as a phenomenon and contribute to what seems like a much-needed gap in the experiences of women in MMA at the ethnographic and observational level. The next chapter will outline the methodological considerations to explore these questions.

Zoe is a Cunt

“What kind of things can you be learning from sitting on your bum scribbling notes?”

The coach always wondering, asking questions, making jokes.

I’ve almost lost count of his questions to my call,

As a researcher; fighter; woman; when doing nothing at all.

“Hey Anne Frank!” he yelled over to me.

“Getting your diary out again?” he quoted regularly.

But also asks a favour of “Zo, you jumping in?”

And on declines of invite there’s mimics of penis sucking.

“Nobody cares” – he confirms with delight,

As I sit to write my notes rather than fight.

“We’re one short if you wanna join in?”

A fighter smirks next to me “You’re missing out. That could be you vomiting”

Even when standing awaiting instruction,

“Zoe is a cunt” often filled introduction

Whether he mentioned “Dear diary” or “You havin’ a roll?”

Coach always watching, asking, laughing: in control.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The first two chapters have introduced the case of MMA, the interest in this research over time, and the scope of the literature relative to empirical and theoretical contributions. Contributions include themes of embodying violent skills (Crossley 1996, 2004), gender as heteronormative and performative (Butler 2004, 2011), but also how gendered bodies affect embodiment in sporting spaces (e.g., Channon 2013a). Despite some sources discussing gender and MMA, women's experiences were often overlooked - lacking women as participants, data on mixed-gender training, and particularly data that was ethnographic. To be "a researcher; fighter; woman" is arguably the biggest empirical gap in the literature, and the methodological journey of this research contributes to these gaps in various ways. I draw from two disciplines in this ethnography to do so, the first being the sociology of everyday life and the second being informed by feminist research methodologies. These positions helped to guide the theoretical and empirical interests of the research but also the difficulties of being a woman in the field, working alone, being a participant, and being sexually objectified. This chapter considers the design and methods to answer the research questions and is structured into 8 sections.

Section 3.1 outlines the interest in observing social phenomena and the interpretivist inspirations in studying the 'everyday life' of the MMA club. Goffman's interactionism and frame analysis (Goffman 1974) then references the observability of gender and violence in interaction and embodiment. I then move on to the ethnographic research design (section 3.2), situating the participants of this ethnography and of the methods chosen (section 3.3), outlining the interests and ways in which experiences in MMA are observed and heard. Included across sections 3.2 and 3.3 are some of the problematic and unanticipated moments which troubled the notions insider/outsider, researcher roles, and the implications of this research as ethnographic and feminist-based. I then consider issues of access and leaving the field in section 3.4 and extend to the various ethical considerations taken in the field (section 3.5). The considerations extend to experiences that resulted from feelings of being lost: lost in words and lost *for* words. Section 3.6 presents the analysis of these feelings and the data in which they were realised, including mapping (Clarke 2003) and my use of data-based poetry.

3.1 Exploring social phenomena

"As soon as the fight was over, boos from the audience filled up the arena. The happy-sounding football chants turned into a menacing roar. Lighters and rubbish were thrown in at the opponent, and [their friend who was fighting] signalling them to stop: looking rather frustrated and embarrassed. The fighter applauds his victorious opponent, holding him in a hugging embrace. Violence, I think, came in many forms that night, and it wasn't necessarily from those in the ring" Field notes, written but not included in my master's thesis.

Over the years I've been researching and participating in MMA, there has been debate and discussion around the meaning of 'violence' in the sport. These academic and personal moments helped to form the questions presented in the previous chapter of how violence is interpreted and defined, how those meanings are embodied in skill, and how gender may influence these experiences. Consequently, the purpose of this research is not to understand cause-effect relationships or universal laws in a more positivistic sense. Rather, it seeks to understand experiences and observe and describe ethnographically situated knowledge-in-action. I begin this section with a discussion of interpretivism and how this paradigm influenced the interest in subjective accounts and experiences. I then address the observability of social order and the interpretation of situations in Goffman's (1974) work.

3.1.1 Interpretivist inquiry

Interpretivism stems from a range of disciplinary features, from hermeneutics to phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism with the idea of a singular social 'reality' critiqued (Blumer 1986; Lincoln and Guba 1985). That is, 'reality' has a multiplicity of meaning depending on who is observing and participating within those realities, relative to multiple truths, and is difficult to measure objectively. Interpretivist inquiry is thus inapplicable to cause and effect principles (Berger and Luckman 1966; Atkinson and Hammersley 2007; Sullivan and Rabinow 1979) and instead emphasises social phenomena as complex, typically of interest in the subjective and individual experiences of participants.

Usually associated with qualitative inquiry, interpretivism is concerned with meanings and understanding participants' perspectives as the point of analysis (Schultz 1967). Although, the interest in perspectives is not only based on individualised accounts or understandings but also in the shared experience and ritualised and/or symbolic systems. Data generated from interpretivist research is primarily through participatory methodologies (though not exclusively) and includes interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and case studies, with interpretivism lending itself to ethnographic research and design (discussed in sections 3.3 and 3.4). In this thesis, interpretivism bases my interest on the subjective experiences of Fight or Flight MMA club, but equally, it inferring to broader understandings of social organisation and gender and violence.

However, there is an important point to address regarding debates between interpretivism and positivism, and how best to assess the quality of qualitative research more broadly (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Hammersley 2007). Such debates are usually within the topic of generalisability, and whether research and data can be (or should) always be generalisable – particularly for ethnography (Atkinson 2015). These debates extend to what parallel criteria in assessing research quality should be put forward (e.g., Sparkes and Smith 2014, p. 179), with contrasting divides on alternative judgment criteria. Some argue that generalisation is impossible in interpretivist research (Denzin 2000; Guba and Lincoln 1982; Guba and Lincoln 1994), with others expanding notions of generalisability (see Smith 2018). These expanded notions are applicable here, and I consider several points.

Firstly, the assumption that qualitative research, ethnographic research, does not have any generalisability is contestable (Shaw and Hoeber 2016). Of course, the purpose of qualitative and ethnographic research is not to trace statistical probabilities – the questions of this thesis would not be answerable if so. Rather, confirmability, analytical generalisability, and recognisability are prioritised (Smith 2018). As Lewis et al. (2014) write, "the value of qualitative research is in revealing the breadth and nature of the phenomena under study" (p.351) and in this thesis there is layered and descriptive detail which reveals the lived social order of MMA. Whether observing social interactions, description of my felt practices, or across spaces and places in MMA, the chapters draw out theoretical concepts through observing everyday life that brings about said value.

Therefore, in this thesis, there is confirmability (Sparkes and Smith 2014, p.181) throughout my field notes, research diaries, and the narratives and notes that allow traceability of claims and experiences. The reader can arguably make generalisations through their own reading of the thesis and their experiences in what Stake (1995) refers to as 'naturalistic generalisations' too. That is, data presented can be realised as experienced or at least recognisable by the reader (Delmar 2010; Smith 2018, p.140), thereby contributing to its generalisability see also Sparkes and Smith 2014, p.185). Similarly, there is 'transferability' to broader issues surrounding coach-athlete relationships, power dynamics within the research encounter, and the use of humour in the #Metoo movement (see Tracey 2010). The findings are therefore transferable to wider issues not only in the social sciences but also in the experiences of many social groups.

Of course, the analysis in this thesis is not intended to be generalisable to all aspects of MMA clubs, sporting clubs, or fighting experiences. There is an appreciation of Fight or Flight MMA as a unique social space. Similarly, I take from Williams' discussions and the "generalisations of everyday life" (Williams 2000, p.215) in *moderatum* generalisations. As will be presented in the analysis chapters, data and some of the experiences are verifiable at other fighting events, in other clubs, and broader social milieu of gender and violence not only inferred from my previous experiences and as researcher but in the research of others. This point does, however, raise an interesting question on reader positionality. Will some individuals reading these field notes and data as 'just' jokes too? In fact, how people may interpret situations differently is a central aspect to this research, leading well into the discussion of interaction and frame analysis.

3.1.2 Interactionism and frame analysis

In addition to hearing the experiences and understandings of participants, this research is interested in the everyday, ordinary aspects of social life and social organisation, which are observed and felt in interaction. To observe and analyse interaction can be approached in various ways, but I am drawing from Erving Goffman's (1959; Goffman 1967; Goffman 1983) interactionism and frame analysis (Goffman 1974) in this thesis.

Throughout Goffman's work, there is an interest in everyday interactions "as a substantive domain in its own right" (Goffman 1983, p.2), and from queuing, to

gambling, to playing games, there are various moral and practical expectations for how to present one's 'self' and interact (Goffman 1959). The most mundane of social situations are ritualised and accomplished encounters, and they are moments that rely on the understanding and 'performance' of those rules or 'roles' (Goffman 1959). The obligation to act correctly (thus morally) in these situations is referred to by Goffman as the "interaction order" (Goffman 1983), where social organisation is maintained through everyday interactions as an ongoing accomplishment. Such is relevant to the concept of 'face' and presentation of self (discussed in Goffman's [1959] early work) but also of frame analysis (Goffman 1974).

For Goffman, the rules and analysis around 'frames' tell how situations of action or 'strips of interaction' are mutually understood and conceptually achieved. To have an understanding of situations and situational conventions - to know "what is it that's going on here" (1974, p134) - 'frames' or 'frameworks' are relied upon by those in a social setting. It is through these frameworks where conventions or 'schema' are drawn, from written rules to those more implicit. Indeed, "social frameworks involve rules, but differently" (p.24), with normative behaviours encouraged through "guided doings" (p.22-23). The interpretation of schemata into a particular frame of interaction is influenced by 'keys' or 'keying' (p.45), with materials, spatial arrangements, and timings as just a few examples of keying used to direct the 'audience' in 'bracketing' frames of activity. Keys thus bring a sense of definitional clarity to actions taking place but can also have radically different statuses as parts of the real world. This would include how we understand we are watching a play-fight rather than 'real' fight (see p.45-6), or in the way that we know that sparring is not MMA fighting, and MMA fighting is not a brawl. Of course, situations and strips of activity can go wrong, and rules can be misinterpreted, breached, or even fabricated (p.83). When this happens, the stability of the frame is sometimes challenged, with sanctions for when breaching or fabrications are found out, be this through social embarrassment or legal retaliation (p.22).

Goffman's work on interaction and frame analysis has been useful for exploring the situated understanding and experiences of embodiment, gender, and violence. Some of the literature draws upon the concept of frame directly and indirectly, from the framing of 'real' violence in MMA (e.g., Andreasson and Johansson 2019) or in mixed-gender training where women's bodies challenge the frame of martial art interactions (e.g., Guérandel and Mennesson 2007). The thesis brings focus on moments in training and fighting where the interactional frame is challenged in observable ways,

where rules of interaction are challenged by gendered bodies (chapter 5, 7). Equally, the interpretation and framing of 'violence' is navigated and situated not just in physical skills relating to the sport (explored in chapter 4) but in emotional and interpersonal forms disguised as humour (chapter 6).

The interest (and importance of) the observability of interaction is evident in my analysis, through which social organisation is sustained. The specifics of the research design are presented next.

3.2 Research design

This thesis is interested in observing Fight or Flight MMA club and BBR fighting events (discussed momentarily) and hearing some of the personal experiences of Fight or Flight MMA club members. Consequently, this thesis is of qualitative design and is an ethnography informed by interactionism and the sociology of everyday life (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1974; Goffman 1983), with research methods of participant observation, ethnographic interviews in the field, and organised semi-structured interviews included. This research has no hypothesis, but the research questions and analytical themes were led through inductive awareness and guided action from previous experience and literature. The inductive nature is also partly due to unanticipated experiences in the field, which are explored in the chapter. Part of the ethnographic design also includes my own participation in the research using a flexible researcher role, and I will clarify my positioning within the context of the primary ethnographic site: Fight or Flight MMA club. This follows with the broader discussions of ethnography and feminist ethnography, leading to the highly reflexive nature of this research.

3.2.1 Defining ethnography

Ethnography itself is a continuously growing field, with the intentions, methods, and spaces developing and expanding. Traditionally, ethnography is that which primarily engages and observes "first hand" (Hammersley 2006, p.4) with a particular group of people over a period of time, often with a researcher/s immersing themselves within 'native' environments of those being studied (Fetterman 1989; Dobbert 1982, p.39;

Marcus and Fisher 1986, p.18; Sperber 1985, p.34). During the time of immersion, researchers will often observe and report phenomena, coming to understand the social group and their practices over time. Ethnography is not only about providing reflections on social experience, however. It is also about observing *how* they do said phenomena, where they do it, and why: relating to the significant as well as mundane language, rituals, and different activities being sometimes (but not always) unique to those studied (Glasser 2010; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Spradley 1980).

However, despite these seemingly shared features, conceptualising the term 'ethnography' varies between purpose and discipline. New forms of ethnography are developing, such as digital or online ethnographies (Pink et al. 2015), and there are also blurred boundaries of ethnography as a discipline or method-specific approach (Atkinson et al. 2008; Hammersley 2006). These boundaries include the time spent in the field, and whether that implicates a research design as ethnographic (or not). Some may debate the length of time needed in the field for research to be an ethnography and whether some research consequently fits the title of a short or "focused ethnography" (Knoblauch 2005) or short ethnography (Pink and Morgan 2013) instead.

For my own research, the time limits reflect the constraints placed upon the limits of PhD fieldwork and that the primary field site - Fight or Flight MMA club - had its own limited schedules and routines, too (discussed momentarily). Nevertheless, the time spent within the field and the inference in this thesis are layered through observation, conversation, description, and experience, which produce a 'thick' analysis (Geertz 1973). One can spend years in 'the field' yet lack the analytical saturation and quality. Arguably my experiences contribute to tensions in the changing landscape of what is considered ethnography, given that this thesis is positioned within contrasting ethnographic moments, from classical approaches (Atkinson et al. 2008; Delamont 2007) to feminist ethnography (Sparkes 2002). Indeed, there are various choices to be made around "what to tell and how to tell it" (Van Maanen 2011, p.25) and a wide variety of 'crossovers' between disciplines of writing and analysis. This is particularly so in the development of creative analytic practices (CAP) (Richardson and St Pierre 2005, p.961; Richardson 2000), which I discuss in this chapter. Before I develop the discussion on these developments regarding my research and its analysis, however, I firstly provide details to the participants, introducing the MMA club in which this ethnography is based.

3.2.2 Introducing Fight or Flight MMA

Participants are from one MMA club in South Wales in the UK, given the pseudonym Fight or Flight MMA. The club was located in a developing industrial estate, part of a private, non-commercial gym, located on the second floor of the multi-storied building. Potential participatory MMA clubs were contacted via email using my university email address, accessed on each MMA club's website. I discussed the research aims in the email and introduced myself, attaching an information sheet about the study. Only one of the MMA clubs responded: Fight or Flight MMA. On showing interest, myself and the coach emailed several more times, and with the approval of Steve (the coach), I then visited the club. That initial visit was to participate in the class and not part of the research, but I stayed behind to introduce myself and the research and answer any potential questions. Information sheets were given to each person present, and Steve was asked to forward the sheets to their group MMA Facebook page for those who could not make it. Doing so allowed those in the club to become more familiar with me as both a researcher and MMA participant.

It should be noted that the fame of Fight or Flight MMA preceded my intention to research it, however. In previous years, I had heard of the club at various inter-club events, and I even watched Fight or Flight fighters in organised MMA fights before. The club was particularly known for its 'rough around the edges' aesthetic, as commented by other fighters I knew at the time. I had also heard of some women fighting in Fight or Flight MMA, which was a particular interest. The only required steps to attend the fighting events observed were buying tickets online and traveling there. I did not attend the fighting events with anyone from the club, nor did I enter 'backstage' areas at the fight.

Compared to previous clubs I've attended both as a practitioner and researcher, Fight or Flight MMA seemed like a haven of martial arts. There were no broken windows or leaks, with fully stocked fridges of drinks, protein bars, and snacks on entry. As I climbed the stairs to the second-floor dojo where the club resides, the space was fitted with soft padded floors, stools, and benches around the floor. This space was also fitted with top-of-the-range features, including a full MMA cage, numerous boxing bags, body dummies, hanging mirrors, and other fenced areas. The dojo was not only the home of Fight or Flight MMA, however, with boxing and kickboxing classes, wrestling classes, and other martial art clubs sharing the space at

different times. The club itself was not always located in this high-tech gym, having moved across numerous locations in the last 5 years alone. They often had experiences of a bad building structure and lack of space, and for long-term members, this resonated with a sense of being true to the club for its members - through the good times and bad.

The pseudonym Fight or Flight MMA was inspired by a few different places and moments. In thinking of names for the club, I thought back to my previous MMA classes at the Welsh Warriors, where the coach would often shout quotes about mental toughness. These quotes included things like, "If it was easy, everyone would do it" (John 2016, p.41), "I can't teach you how to fight" (John 2016, p.41), and "If you want to give up, there's the door!". Fight or Flight MMA is then firstly a rephrase from that MMA club and coach, but equally from the term 'fight or flight', which relates to an embodied sense of experience in reactions to stressful events. I could often relate this term to my presence at Fight or Flight MMA club and wanting to take flight but staying and fighting through the months of research.

As for participant demographics, none of the women at the time of the research were fighters, but having women train in the club was an invaluable experience. The club demographics of Fight or Flight MMA were primarily men (24), with only 3 women regularly attending the classes (including myself). The difference in numbers is not dissimilar to other MMA clubs from my own experiences and is evident in the literature, too (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Green 2016; Spencer 2012). Club members were primarily white British and working class, with the age of participants ranging from 17 to 46. Some members attended the club for social or fitness purposes, while others were training for a fight or had plans to fight in the future. Regardless of their status as 'MMA fighter' or 'MMA club participant', all in the club were welcome to participate in the research.

Due to the nature of observation in a semi-public space, it was difficult to get a sense of the 'actual' total number of participants. Some came for just 1 or 2 classes (women included), while others even came for just half an hour and then left. I have defined the 'regular attendants' of the MMA club as those who attended on average 1-2 times per week for more than 8 weeks. Where interesting moments happened while observing those who were not necessarily regular attendees, those moments were still written in field notes. However, throughout the chapters, there are what I would note as primary members in Fight or Flight MMA who play a central role in interviews and field

notes. The brief descriptions will stand as useful reflections while reading, where the friendships, awkward moments, and relationships between myself (as researcher and participant) and these individuals come to light. The roles in which people take, the power dynamics between them, and equally the impact of those roles and dynamics will be critical in the analysis:

STEVE: Steve is the head coach of Fight or Flight MMA. Like many who coach MMA, Steve has no official certification in MMA coaching itself but draws from his years of fighting experiences in martial art and combat sports, including boxing and judo. Steve's fighting experiences range from officially organised events to underground fighting organisations, and fighting while in the armed forces. A substantial amount of data and analysis are based on my observations and interactions with Steve.

PHIL: Phil is a seasoned fighter with over 15 fights in various competition forms, including grappling events and MMA at a range of amateur and semi-professional levels. He has been part of Fight or Flight MMA for several years, following the club as they moved between locations.

SARAH: Sarah was the first woman I saw in Fight or Flight MMA and had been training with the club for around two years. Through her friendship and association with Steve, Sarah joined though she is not a fighter herself. Physically strong and of a similar build to myself, I was excited to see Sarah and the potential fun sparring sessions we might have! Sarah also trains in another gym for additional strength and fitness and has a background in Taekwondo.

LILY: Lily joined Fight or Flight MMA at a similar time to me, having only a week or so of experience in the club at the time of my arrival. Lily had experience in other martial arts with a Taekwondo and Krav Maga background and was also active in other gyms and sports for fitness.

TOM: Like Phil, Tom had been with Fight or Flight for several years. Tom had a highly successful background in judo, competing since he was in his primary school years. Tom has developed his skills in MMA over the last eight years and is regularly competing at a semi-professional level.

RHYS: Rhys had been with the club for two years after moving to the area for a new job. Before joining Fight or Flight MMA, Rhys fought in other MMA clubs and fought in Karate from a very young age. At the time of data collection, Rhys was looking to progress into semi-professional fighting.

WILL: Will has far less experience in MMA fighting but had some experience with organised sporting events. He has a background in boxing but attended the club for around 6 months, aiming to build up his repertoire to fight at the amateur MMA level.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, there is interest in both observing Fight or Flight MMA club and hearing personal experiences and reflections of club members. The methods through which this takes place are central to the definitions of ethnographic work. However, firstly, I must bring attention to the varying aspects of researcher roles in this ethnography.

3.2.3 Researcher role

There were various ways to ethnographically experience and explore the themes and Fight or Flight MMA club, with researcher roles in ethnography ranging (e.g., Adler and Adler 1987). Nevertheless, these roles are typically "one that allows her/him to observe intimately the everyday life of the insiders (Baker 2006, p.174; see also Chatman 1984). The 'everyday life' of Fight or Flight MMA involved physically training and skill embodiment, and I wanted to feel those moments, too, in the hitting, the thinking, the moving. Indeed "performing the phenomenon" (Wacquant 2014, p.1) and the sensorial phenomena of being there (Sparkes 2009; Sparkes and Smith 2012). A flexible researcher role was therefore chosen in which I actively participated in some of the MMA classes, engaging face-to-face and body-on-body with participants, with my competencies as an insider-of-sorts as an ex-MMA practitioner allowing me to engage with MMA's physicality. I was less skilled in ground-based martial arts, though somewhat advanced in stand-up striking, pad work, and stand-up sparring (enough to not feel like a complete and utter novice anyway). In previous research (John 2016), this flexible role was invaluable, given that I was the only woman in those MMA clubs. If not for a flexible role, I would have little understanding of how differently gendered

bodies interact in MMA classes. With the potential to be the only woman in Fight or Flight MMA, my flexible role was of continued importance.

Roles extending to 'participant-as-observer' or the 'complete participant' would have been inappropriate, given that the 'core' phenomenon would be to have an MMA fight (see Adler and Alder 1987, p.36 quoted in Baker 2006, p.176). To have an organised fight was theoretically possible (like Wacquant 2004), but I did not participate in the flexible role to 'convert' to fighting (Adler and Alder 1987, p.70). I was not a fighter beforehand, nor did I not enjoy MMA enough to dedicate the time and effort required to do so! In some ways, this research could be seen as an experiential ethnography (Sands 1999), but I did not immerse myself completely into the MMA club either. Even moderate participation would not grant full insight or mastery of MMA or the MMA club's "universes of discourse" (Gold 1958, p.221). This point extends to what was a highly gendered experience of training in the club, too. Even if I were to train more, for longer, or even fight, I do not think I would ever truly be an insider as "one of the guys" (Green 2016) or part of the "family" (Spencer 2012, p.150).

The use of flexible researcher roles was well documented in the literature chapter, too, with the body used as a tool of inquiry and useful in "intensely physical" (Stephens and Delamont 2006, p.328) settings (e.g., Channon 2013a, 2013b; Green 2011; Jennings 2016; Wacquant 2004). Regardless of the type of role intended, however, my positionality as a researcher was also situationally occasioned by Steve (the coach) as reflected in the poem, making visible the difficulties of defining the roles undertaken. Even if I were to only observe, I do not believe an 'objective' or "ostrich-like" (Van Maanen 2011, p.64) position would be possible. Therefore, the distinctions between observer/observed, objective/subjective, rational/gone native are complex. Am I still a participant even when just observing, given that the coach often directed questions and communications with me? Steve often asked for my participation on days when I wanted just to observe (for example).

Interestingly, in the first drafts of this chapter, I had written how I side with Wacquant as he writes, "Go native, but come back a sociologist" (Wacquant 2009, p.119). Arguably, these distinctions are difficult now. What else do people 'come back' as when they are marked by experiences of the field? This is a point that also extends to the fighting events where my role could be characterised as a 'complete' or 'unobtrusive observer' in ways, but that does not mean I averted participation. I arguably still participated in the setting just being there, or in my cheers, or my looking

around. For many of these reasons, this ethnography is reflexive to the embodied moments faced and inspired in feminist moments of ethnography. I will discuss these issues next.

3.2.4 Feminist ethnography

As the previous sections discussed, the forms of fieldwork involved in ethnographic research are often lengthy and detailed and are typically led through the researcher observing (or, in some cases, like my own, participating). In addition to more practical fieldwork elements, however, an important point is raised: While embedded within the field, we are also embodied. Fieldwork is gendered, raced, and sexualised (Bell et al. 1993; Crenshaw 1991; Ingold 2014), and considering these complex realities, traditional and more realist forms of writing have been challenged. The ethnographic genre, in general, has found itself "blurred, enlarged and altered" through various forms of (and for various forms of audiences (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005, p. 962). Such includes more feminist-orientated forms of research and ethnography, although the meanings of what a 'feminist ethnography' is can be challenging and varied.

At the beginning of my PhD journey, I had not expected to include so much of 'me' in the ways I have. They are moments of being subject to unanticipated experiences of violence and accounting for these experiences not only for reflexive methodological practice but also as a participant (who is a woman) in MMA. They were experiences that, if not discussed, would likely present this research as another unproblematic account of MMA, embodiment, gender, and violence. The embodied experiences I have as researcher and participant, as a peripheral member: this *is* knowledge, and this *is* data whether or not it was intended initially.

The quality *is in* interlinked moments in this multi-sited and multi-sensory ethnography, with felt and haptic knowledge (Sparkes 2009, p.29) important in interactive moments from feeling each other's bodies (chapter 4), and the implications of gendered bodies in these moments (chapter 5) (see also Classen 1997, 2005; Sparkes 2009). It is impossible to overlook how these research experiences are affected by my own embodiment (Ellingson 2017, p.5). As a woman and as a researcher, I am always contributing to the thoughts and experiences of Fight or Flight members, whether I wished to or not. However, I do not see this thesis as superficial in any way (see Wacquant 2013, p.29). I had brought my experiences and bodily

knowledge to the field, as many other 'fighting scholars' have done. Yet, when the very "instruments" (Wacquant 2013, p.29) of research (that is, my body) are excluded, averted, or abused, the questions of experience are rightly troubled.

Consequently, there are feminist components to this research. Qualitative work (and ethnography) has been said to aligns with feminist intention of understanding and individual experiences (particularly that of women [e.g., Lather 1988; Oakley 1998; Mies 1983]). These reasons, however, were not why I chose to do an ethnography or even how the ethnography became engaged with feminist discussion. For me, ethnography was an exciting experience since my initial 'taster' of research in my undergraduate degree. My flexible researcher role in my master's research continued to play a part in that excitement. Throughout this thesis, however, the experiences of this ethnography became more feminist-led than initially expected.

Stacey (1988) talks about whether ethnography can be wholly feminist, or even partly feminist. There are dangers around the perceived mutuality and intimacy between the researcher/researched (Stacey 1988, p.24). Given the extended time and connections made in the field, relationships that form can be emotionally burdensome, labouring, but also abusive and exploitative - particularly as a young woman researching in that space. This ethnography is arguably emancipatory in some ways, though it was never meant to be. To look at only women in this research would be limited too (another feat of some feminist research), given that gender norms are embodied through interaction between men *and* women. To just research women or men, I feel, would restrict the aims of this research and the analysis, almost as an opposite of my critiques of other literature. Equally, feminist methodology is not simply about "'adding" women to male knowledge" (Westmarland 2001 para 2) or generalising findings of men to women's experiences (Stanley and Wise 1990; Stanley and Wise 1993) – which I feel had been done in some of the literature on MMA. I would argue that feminist methods are dependent on how those methods and data are used by the researcher instead (Ramazanoglu 1992). As Kelly et al. (1992) write, "what makes feminist research feminist is less the method used, and more how it is used and what it is used for" (p.150). I will discuss the methods of this research next.

3.3 Methods

Having outlined the research design and the primary participants, this section sets out the details of the ethnographic methods used in this thesis. The methods in line with 'the ethnographic' include participant observation which, as mentioned, contains a flexible researcher role. Participant observation is specific to the interests of observing social experiences and organisation (Goffman 1974) and experiences of embodiment in MMA training. There is also interest in the felt practices of MMA training and women's experiences, particularly of mixed-gender training - hence my participation in Fight or Flight MMA classes as MMA practitioner. Various forms of interviews were also used, including informal interviews in the field and organised semi-structured interviews. Interviews encouraged the interpretation and understanding of fighting and training experiences for Fight or Flight MMA participants, hearing about their experiences and definitions of violence. The duration of time spent in the field, the types of data generated, and background information about these methods are reviewed in detail, beginning with participant observation.

3.3.1 Participant observation

Although methods of 'ethnography' are changing (such as the study of online spaces [Hine 2008]), this thesis arguably reflects the more traditionalistic sense of participant observation. Participant observation is an important aspect of classical approaches to ethnography (Delamont 2007, p.206; Dobbett 1982, p.102), where a researcher may observe a group or 'field' over a significant period of time. There were two sites observed, with a total of 54 hours of ethnographic observation: Fight or Flight MMA club and Blood Bath Royal (BBR) fighting events. Fight or Flight MMA club was the main ethnographic site, with the second ethnographic site being the BBR events. Before providing information on the hours spent observing these spaces, however, I situate my own embodiment experiences for the reader. Doing so will provide familiarity with my sporting skills and sporting history, assist in the background of my bodily development, and assist later in the analysis where my sporting skills interrupt my MMA practices. Offering this background will also help the reader contextualise my treatment from certain participants (primarily the coach, Steve) towards my actions and body in training.

3.3.1.a Situating my sporting embodiment

As I mentioned in the introduction, I have some history in MMA as a practitioner which shaped my entry into MMA as a research site. This history began outside of the academic context, initially beginning with Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing) classes in 2012. After a year or so of being an avid attendee of these Muay Thai classes, I wanted to develop my skills further and begin sparring: putting skills into practice on an actual body! However, the only place sparring happened within the gym was in the MMA club – The Welsh Warriors. From that point and into 2013, I was a regular attendee of MMA club, training every Tuesday and Thursday without fail (but still practicing Muay Thai pad work on a Monday and Friday whenever I could).

I had a few years within the MMA club, trying my best to develop more and more. After an unfortunate turn of events with an eating disorder trying to make weight for a fight (and a range of other personal circumstances), as of 2016, I branched away from the Welsh Warriors. My sporting embodiment then took a very different turn, although still within the realms of somewhat random contact sports. I had found American Football by a friend setting up a local women's team. I had no idea of the game's rules (or what the game was in general), but I was encouraged to attend. It was a strange move from Welsh Warriors. Suddenly I was surrounded by women, and I realised what other members of the MMA club probably felt while training: a sense of companionship, friendship, and comradery. Things like meeting after training for social occasions, supporting each other - it felt good to be part of this but mostly to be celebrated for my body. I did not need to lose weight to compete, and it turned out that I was, in fact, very good at contact sports! I had never considered myself tactically skilled or physically strong until that point (and to be honest, it took a few years to realise that I could perform at a high level).

My primary role in American football was playing on the defence as a line-backer: a loud, aggressive, and communicative player who often directs the rest of the defense. I did play both offensive and defensive positions in numerous seasons, but wherever I played, I certainly made the most of my ability for contact! I took my skills further and played with the Cardiff University American football team and was the only woman on the team. I had captained inter-national women's tournaments, captained the local team across several seasons, and received numerous awards for Overall

MVP, Defensive MVP, and Players' Player. I loved the experience – the techniques, the aggression, the chess-like strategies of play. I did not need to think about how my body might look. Instead, I simply existed - leading through my confidence and my embodied strength and skills.

I did not scare from physical contact easily (I should hope not given my years in MMA), and one niche contact sport was not enough. In 2016 I joined the local Australian rules football (AFL) league and helped to establish the local women's team. AFL is probably the most confusing sport I have ever played; it is cardio intense, being a 360-degree sport, utilising hand passes (by punching the ball out of the hand), kicks, bouncing the ball while running – all over an oval pitch.

In both American football and AFL, I successfully represented Wales (in AFL) and in training squads for Great Britain in both sports, even captaining the Welsh Wyverns AFL team in the European championship. I am also competent in the gym, having years of experience in strength training. I had not participated in MMA for some time at the time of the research, but my physicality across these sports was certainly transferable in ways. Equally, my body posed various problems around embodiment during my time in the field. These problems included the anxiety of touching or hitting my body by the men in the club and the sexualising and humiliating treatment I received from Steve, the coach of Fight or Flight MMA. Even my research skills and experience seem to bring about problems for Steve, with these issues central in the analysis throughout the chapters. I will provide details of the 'field' and its participants next.

3.3.1.b Fight or Flight MMA club

A total of 42 hours were observed in Fight or Flight MMA club, with fieldwork taking place between May and September 2018, ranging from one to two days a week, every week. The club's training schedule spread over three days a week, and there were two MMA classes on each of those days: a beginner's class and an advanced class. Both classes usually began with a warm-up, stand-up-based fighting techniques (e.g., boxing, Muay Thai), followed by more ground-based martial arts like Brazilian jiu jitsu or wrestling. The beginner's class aimed to introduce the fundamental techniques of martial arts skills, usually slower in discussion and pace. The advanced class covered the initial techniques as performed in the beginner class but also included skill

progression and engaged with heavier sparring and grappling for more extended periods (a typical example illustrated below). There was also a sparring centred class on Saturday, which was by invite only. I did not approach the coach about attending or observing those classes due to the discomfort I experienced in the field (indicated in the poem and in this chapter). I was also not invited to join.

Beginners class 6:00-7:00pm	Advanced class 7:30-9:00pm
6:00-6:10 warm up	-
6:10-6:45 drills	-
6:45-7:00 'live' rolling or sparring	-
-	7:30-7:45 warm-up
-	7:45-8:15 advanced technical drills/combinations
-	8:15-8:45 grappling
-	8:45-9:00 sparring

Approximately 20 hours were spent participating in the club, though it is difficult to reach a specific total given some of the practical and physical issues. For instance, sometimes I began training and stopped due to injury or discomfort, or the coach asked me to join in halfway through a class. On most occasions, I participated in the beginner's MMA class. I also participated in the advanced class, but often I only observed the advanced class from the sides of the dojo.

The training was observed with an aim to experience the everyday understandings of MMA violence – observing interactions between coaches and fighters, between old and new members, and the general embodiment of MMA skills. Watching how skills were experienced and directed and how differently gendered bodies might impact interactions in training were also important features. Despite these initial aims from the outset of the thesis, however, attempts were made to make the familiar “anthropologically strange” (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007, p. 10). Given that

I had experience in MMA clubs beforehand, it was easy to take for granted meanings and techniques and why bodies may be doing (or not doing) certain things. Like Silverwood's (2015) study of ice hockey players, I too found the use of acting like "a horse's ass" (Goffman 1989, p.128 – see Silverwood 2015, p.111) helpful, asking obvious questions and stripping back to the basics with a manner of acceptable incompetence. The sensory element of observation was of importance, too, given that MMA is an incredibly technical sport that requires the touch and sensation of other bodies. How did it *feel* to learn techniques? Did my body, as a woman, affect these experiences?

Similar to my masters' thesis, there were some foreshadowed problems with observation while participating and of observation more generally (Atkinson and Hammerlsey 1995). Writing field notes about the physical practices in MMA was also analytically demanding, having to think about describing actions taking place, how to write about body language, and writing about my own embodied feelings, which were not so easily transferable into written word. There was also a sense of obligation to sometimes join in the classes, which left me sometimes unprepared, particularly for note-taking. Moving away from my notepad to help in a drill and rushing back to write and reflect was incredibly difficult. Even when I did intend to participate, trying to get back in time for my partner's drills after writing something down, or being interrupted with questions while writing, made for some difficult field notes (Appendix B). There were further practical issues to contend with, including sweating over my notes, ensuring enough food had been eaten within the right time (to prevent stitches), and drinking enough water to prepare myself for both sparring and writing (I still wonder how scholars like Wacquant managed to write such in-depth field notes about his fight). Nevertheless, I tried to write and re-read points as much as I could.

In a way, these field notebooks also served "garbage-can function" (Jackson 1990, p.11), sometimes acting as a way to save face when I did not want to train or indeed giving myself a sense of purpose when I felt lost in earlier stages of the research. These fieldnote books were also kept alongside a separate diary, which served as a more personal account and analytical reflection and 'memoing' (Clarke 2003).

2.3.1.c BBR fighting events

As the field note extract at the beginning of section 3.1 reflects, my interest in violence in MMA began when I attended an MMA event for previous research. Looking at the broader context in which violence is organised and experienced, two MMA fighting events were attended - 'Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping' and 'Blood Bath Royal: Retribution' - with 12 hours observed between them. BBR is one of the growing MMA organisations, putting on over 150 events since the early 2000s across 13 different countries. Both BBR events were held in the South West of England and were overwhelmingly attended and performed by men, with only one women's fight at each BBR event. BBR events were observed with interest in the organisational experience of violence but also of gender in those spaces. In particular, the focus was on interactions between audience members who work through and frame (Goffman 1974) violence and gender. At these events, I brought a much smaller fieldnote book to write in, and wrote notes on my phone when the opportunity arose.

Chapter 7 includes photographs of the BBR events. The photographs taken are both visual and 'cosmetic' materials and visual data expressing moments of observation. These photographs do not display progressions of interactions or necessarily photo essays in the sense of visual sociology (e.g., Hockey and Allen Collinson 2006), though I appreciate these interests. Photographs include the scenes of the fighting arena, examples of activities the audience participates in between men's and women's fighting, and illustrate examples of what happens at a fighting event (e.g., techniques). These photographs correspond to field notes and discussions written verbatim from observation. Equally, these photos do not capture a 'truth' to the ethnographic space but are moments in time that reflect a mere snapshot of the time and space of BBR events.

Video footage of the fights (of which I took screenshots for photographs) is from my video recordings on my mobile phone. Recording on a video camera would arguably be intrusive (see Love and Perry 2004, p.1196), given that very few people use video cameras specifically. The recordings enabled the replaying of phenomenon and some of the details taking place at specific moments in time (Mondada 2006, p.54). Being able to review those recordings alongside the field notes was important to producing a detailed setting that was overwhelming at the time and allowed for

reviewing audience interactions with visual, sometimes audible, and written data (Emmison and Smith 2000, p.9).

Despite those hours feeling incredibly long experience at the time, compared to more traditional ethnographies, which may last over years or many more months, my own time in the field may seem limited. There may be concerns around the validity of the data, of the routines and experiences analysed – perhaps with concerns of variability and the temporality of data. However, despite observations lasting between 2-3 hours per day when attending Fight or Flight MMA club, these short observations were so saturated and intense. My participation in the MMA classes also contextualises the debates of what being 'in the field' means and the types of data that can be produced from relatively short-term ethnographic moments.

3.3.2 Interviews

Organised open-ended and semi-structured interviews and interviews 'in the field' were included in this ethnography. The importance of semi-structured and in-field interviews was chosen for a range of reasons. Firstly, following the conversational nature of interviews Becker (1976), I did not want interview schedules to be entirely to a script. The needed open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences. Participants may want to draw from wider experiences or equally form experiences they observed in the MMA club, of which I had not thought. This flexibility gave more opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences, and I often repeated that "we can always go back to that one [question] if needed".

The flexible nature of interviewing is said to also be useful when interviewing women (Oakley 1981). Of course, despite some suggesting that open-ended and semi-structured interviews will likely develop rapport, this is not always guaranteed. Nevertheless, particularly for women, I shared some mutual experiences around our gendered experiences in training. The power dynamics between men and women in research is well-documented (e.g., Arendell 1997; Cotterill 1992; Pini 2005), and I admit I did feel more comfortable talking about my previous experiences with Lily and Sarah, given our in-person interactions and the numerous eye-roles we exchanged in mixed-gender sparring. The interviews with Sarah and Lily were also arguably emancipatory, as I cannot imagine they openly shared their experiences with the

coaches, or other members of Fight or Flight MMA club. Like Finch comments, "It's great to have someone to talk to" (Finch 1984) about some of these experiences.

As for the content of the semi-structured interviews, they reflected the key thematic interests of the thesis - namely fighting, violence and gender - but there was also room for flexible conversation if needed. Interviews enabled a specific space to hear from fighters and Fight or Flight members, reflect on moments in training, and hear about their experiences. Four Fight or Flight MMA members agreed to one semi-structured interview each, two men (Phil and Rhys) and two women (Sarah and Lily). Three of the interviews were face-to-face, ranging from 50 to 90 minutes, in a booked library room at Cardiff University for both practicality and researcher safety. As training took place in the evening and many travelled straight from work, to interview after training would simply be exhausting. Given that I was also using public transport, to hold interviews after training furthered risk as a lone researcher; plus, due to the physicality, I would likely be too exhausted even to contemplate interviewing after training!

Initial interview questions were pre-planned, and interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone. Participants were also given sheets of paper and pen to think about their answers or write any questions for myself if desired. No one used the paper other than Sarah, who interestingly drew her own logo for a women's MMA team when we started speaking of the frustrations around mixed-training scenarios (chapter 5). The drawing is not included for anonymity purposes. At the end of the interview, I asked participants if they had any questions for me. Sarah also asked me questions about my own journey into MMA. We continued the interview for quite some time afterward, sharing our similar histories of abusive relationships and mental health experiences. Data was also gathered through informal interviews with numerous MMA club members (and the coach), which presented more of a "conversation with a purpose" (Burgess 1988) or a "long interview" (McCracken 1988), a series of ethnographic questions over time. These informal interviews in the field were written in field notes when the opportunity arose to write them down. I would ask the person speaking, "Do you mind if I just write this down" as a reminder that I wished to still take notes at that time. Informal talk was important for "checking stuff" (Duneier 2000, p.345) with participants around training and about Steve, with members often whispering to me sitting on the sides of the mats (brought to attention in chapter 6).

As well as face-to-face interviews, Skype was used to conduct an interview with another member, Rhys. Rhys lived far from where the MMA club trained, and finding a suitable location to meet was difficult. It seemed a sensible and convenient option to interview over Skype (Hanna 2012; see also Deakin and Wakefield 2013), and a research Skype account was used, which was closed after the data was transcribed. I informed Rhys when I would start recording and confirmed this again in speaking, "I am going to start recording now". The privacy of the Skype interview holds some risks after initial deletion, with Skype reserving rights to review the content submitted into the software (Skype 2014, Par 5.7). Global technological risks cannot be completely diminished, but all reasonable steps have been taken. The reader might be wondering why I have not yet listed Steve, the coach, as an interviewee. Frankly, I was too anxious, with my reasoning becoming more apparent as the chapters continue (though there are indications in the poem beginning this chapter). Observation and interview details are available in Appendix C.

In some ways, "talk is cheap" (Jerolmack and Khan 2014), and what people say and what people do can vary significantly. Interviews alone may also "remove the 'social' from social action" (Jerolmack and Khan 2014, p.200) or decontextualize discussion around the interactions taking place (Ortner 2003, p.16). Some participants, for example, may also interpret inclusive practice in Fight or Flight MMA, while others offer a different interpretation (as reflected in chapter 5). Nevertheless, the interviews appreciated the stories and experiences of Fight or Flight members, particularly around situations that I may not be able to always observe. It was still important to hear the history and context of previous MMA classes, their journeys into MMA, and their interpretations of violence. These interview methods are not to investigate 'real' or 'true' beliefs, with situations of talk and action being highly situational (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). However, this thesis centers on the social and situated analysis of embodiment, gender, and violence through observation and interviews.

3.4 Reviewing access and leaving the field

Despite the straightforward experience of my initial entry into Fight or Flight MMA, there are points to raise for what 'access' actually means. Simply being within 'the field' over time and gaining forms of access "is no guarantee of acceptance" (Sampson and

Thomas 2003, p.174), and there is a "methodological error" (Duneier 2000, p.338) in assuming rapport and trust. Relating to this, my own bodily dispositions as a previous MMA practitioner strengthened my access to the setting. Yet, unlike researchers such as Abramson and Modzelweski (2010), Green (2016) or Spencer (2012), whose participants were mostly men of the same age and of a similar skill set, I was of only one of three regular women in the MMA classes. My experiences of rapport, discussion, confidence, and experience seemed so different, and this thesis arguably critiques notions of insider/outsider and 'the native', and the peripheral 'insider' abilities of physical access other researchers typically have. There are complications around access and acceptance as a researcher, as a woman, and as someone whose skills are not of high calibre. By no means was access always accessible.

As for leaving the field, the first issue regarding my leave was a very practical one; deciding when enough was enough. There were many "What if this happens next week?" moments during the last few weeks of the research, and there was always a temptation to stay *just* a bit longer, *just* another session, *just* another fighting event. I had numerous anxieties and an "ethnographic hangover" (Delamont 2001, p.166) around what new events would happen if I were not there. With the realistic deadlines of a PhD thesis, however, observations had to be drawn to a point. There was a Facebook group that all fighters could access, which I was added by the coach after a few weeks of attending the classes for ease of communication. This was an area utilised to say my goodbyes to the club, where I made a post in the group explaining that my research had now finished but that if any questions or queries were had, they were welcome to contact me.

No obvious emotional risks were experienced on leaving. To be honest, I doubt most of the club would even notice I was gone! Nevertheless, for myself and Sarah, we had several life experiences in common and did bond in ways over our histories. Having both been in a previous abusive relationship, Sarah and I often shared our experiences with one another (e.g., PTSD), which in turn may have driven feelings of abandonment on my leaving. There are limited ways one could 'check' these feelings of betrayal, though I had briefly walked past Sarah at another fighting event who wondered if I would come back to the MMA class – with a "Bloody come back, ya bitch" said jokingly. With limited women in the class, there was arguably a sense of togetherness (see Sampson et al. 2008). The dispersing of this togetherness may have been emotional in some ways for Sarah, but this can only be speculation. It is still

worth reflecting upon, nevertheless, given the various relationships we make and consequently leave in the field.

The last consideration on leaving the field relates to publication. Although my physical presence would no longer be in the clubs, the aftermath of what is written will arguably be there, with some anxieties around post-publication remaining. The representation and the selective nature of data may affect participants' sense of self (Hammersley 2010) (if they were to read it, of course), but also the process of analyses was in some ways traumatic (explained in the upcoming sections). I wonder, as a result, if leaving is ever possible when you are living and breathing the data or when engaged with certain forms of social media. I believe that I have taken steps to reduce any particular issues interlinked with conversation around the ethics of research and writing outlined below.

3.5 Ethical considerations

There are varying ethical points to consider across stages of research, from prior to fieldwork, during fieldwork, and after (Murphy and Dingwall 2001). I consider these stages here, referring to data protection, safety, practical ethical issues of harm and risk, and discussion of consent and anonymity. Given that I had a flexible researcher role to participate in the MMA classes, there may be obvious physical risks to consider and more social dynamics being a lone female researcher (and my perception of risk in those public spaces). As will be discussed in this section, however, various other forms of harm and ethical issues were experienced - sometimes only realised upon leaving the field (and not realised for some time). Some points of discussion across this chapter so far have hinted at what some of these other ethical moments could be. They also have a significant impact role in the analysis of the data (discussed in the later sections). To begin with, however, I start with a discussion of consent and the issues of 'just signing' forms. Anonymity and data protection are then considered, and lastly, issues of safety and risk.

3.5.1 Consent

Those attending the MMA club were given information sheets with an attached consent form to read and sign. The information included in the forms reflected the aims of the study and the methods to be used (see Appendix D for template). In the process of giving out information sheets, however, the coach would often instruct people to "Just sign it". I quickly rebutted, mentioning that they may want time to read the sheets or take them away before signing or to ask any questions. Additionally, just signing consent forms serves as a more bureaucratic form of acknowledgement, rather than an actual understanding of the ethical procedures and of research aims (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). For instance, participants on several occasions signed the forms or confirmed verbally that "It's fine" to participate, only to ask later in the week, "What is it you're actually doing, then?" (similarly to Thorne 1980). In light of this, details of research questions and articles of similar interest were offered to participants to better understand what the research is interested in and how the data would be used - showing how themes are explored academically (e.g., Abramson and Modzelewski 2010).

When questions were asked about the research in informal discussions in the gym and in interviews, I emphasised that the thesis is not about judging the MMA club for their actions or experiences but analysing them sociologically. Posters were also put up in the MMA club whenever I attended, with a picture of myself and an outline of the research topics (Appendix E), aiming to make my presence known to those in the club and bring awareness to observation and my participation. The posters opened a platform for discussion and for those who might not give their permission if asked directly. Other points to consider were whether I should wear a form of identification while observing. Wearing a student card could have brought a sense of authority into the dojo, but equally, it was an affirmation of the research taking place. On the occasions I attended only observe, I did wear my student card.

In addition to the MMA club, the BBR fighting events were very much public events, with tickets on sale for the public and televised live. All fighters would have given their consent to be video recorded on behalf of the event organiser, and so the recording itself was not so much an ethical issue as compared to the treatment of the footage. I use photographic and video footage taken by myself at the event to analyse moments of data - to relate to patterns of behaviour and exchanges during the fight, as

opposed to focusing on any individual athlete. Alongside considerations of the fighters, it would have been impractical to ask every person in the venue or those seated around me for their consent. In fact, to do so would be to increase the risks to myself as a researcher in that space, with audience members likely to be intoxicated and draw attention to me as a female researcher. It seemed sensible not to give myself a presence beyond 'audience member' in this instance.

3.5.2 Anonymity

The name of the MMA club and all participants were given pseudonyms to help protect identities, but this does not, of course, ensure total anonymity. In a small MMA club like Fight or Flight MMA, participants may have talked to one another about their own interviews or about my presence with each other while in the club. Although it is unlikely that participants stumble upon or read this PhD, there is the potential for readers to remember a particular event discussed in later publication. With this in mind, I have made attempts to alter the details of those discussed, for example, making 'altered truths' of those observed - changing body tattoos or clothing styles being an example. One particular concern, however, regarded Lily. Lily was the only black woman (and black person) in the MMA club. In describing her as a black woman, this would undoubtedly make her easily identifiable. I asked Lily how she would like to be represented while writing about her in the data, and she expressed that she was happy for me to describe her as a black woman. I did not want to erase what were significant factors of her 'self' that may affect her accounts within the MMA club and outside of it.

As for the fighting events, all fighters and locations provided were given pseudonyms and alternative dates and locations. I also took preventative measures to not compromise anyone's identity in describing them, but not so much to compromise the ethnographic nature of the thesis. Where photos are used, the bodies of fighters and anyone in the audience were blurred, enabling me to still illustrate moments in the setting, but limiting recognisable features of specific persons. All logos of the event are hidden. I did not change the process or outcome of any fights observed or what the audience was doing or saying in field notes.

3.5.3 Data Protection

This thesis was approved on review by the ethics committee at Cardiff University's school of social sciences. During writing prior to March 2021, all data was stored on a personal, password-protected Cardiff University computer. All field notes and other relevant papers (i.e., signed consent forms) were also stored in a locked desk and locked cupboards provided by Cardiff University. Any additional data used or unused, and any additional copies of this thesis were also transcribed and uploaded onto a password-protected Cardiff University computer. In the transition to working from home after March 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all information and data were transferred onto a portable USB device. Physical copies of signed consent forms were also brought home. Digital copies of the original data will be destroyed five years past the submission date.

3.5.4 Safety

Various guidelines were followed in this thesis, set by Cardiff University's ethics board and influenced by guidelines of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the American Anthropological Association, and the British Sociological Association. However, the ethical principles of this thesis do not solely reflect the bureaucratic nature of paperwork regarding consent forms. There are various dangers and ethical issues involved in fieldwork, not only for the physical risks one might face but the emotional ones (Ferdinand et al. 2007). Throughout this research, there were not necessarily any physical dangers per se. Having experience in MMA sparring for many years prior, I was aware of basic techniques. I knew how to control my power to strike and protect myself (these points were taught in the MMA classes, too). Still, there were potential risks.

As with any in-depth ethnographic work, the process is often highly tiring, and especially when participating in the MMA classes, there were physical matters to consider. Given that I had travelled to the MMA club via train, it was appropriate to plan my routes to and from home in case any injury occurred (for instance, having taxi numbers available and emergency contacts on my phone). Another point of preparation was ensuring I had enough food, water, and painkillers before and after training to recover and help me stay alert while traveling. Other physical risks were present at the fighting events, though these were similar risks faced by other

attendees: robbery, accidents, and harassment. Particularly as a lone female researcher, the latter was a greater concern as a highly situational risk (Sampson and Thomas 2003). Additional concerns of physical risk reflect putting the research before researcher safety. With overheard conversation and interactions inside and outside of the fighting arena, it was difficult to fight the desire to stay 'just for 10 more minutes' to observe discussions around the 'fit birds' in the arena or the 'stupid cunt' in the cage. Despite the desire to stay, I stayed strictly to my plans and times of travel.

As for emotional dangers or risks, these are arguably underestimated and, unfortunately, more difficult to predict, both for the researcher and the researched. There is always the potential to stumble upon sensitive issues during interviews or observations. As participants were asked to talk about topics of violence, the seriousness of potential 'stumbles' was not overlooked. Being emotionally prepared to hear potentially upsetting stories and having appropriate contacts for relative charity groups was one method of preparation. Having my own support networks to talk about potentially upsetting moments was also an apt routine. In hindsight, I was confident that I had 'done' my ethical virtues by acknowledging that things could happen. However, there was further difficulty in coming to realise these things were, in fact, happening *to me* during research. Only when talking over the data with supervisors, the reality of emotional risks was realised. At that point, I was out of the field, but I was left with numerous feelings of confusion and admission: I felt I was a bad researcher for wanting to leave, for not wanting to ask more of participants, for not interviewing the coach. Overtime and perhaps coming full circle, these feelings seemed to make more sense given that sexual harassment and bullying are not uncommon in research or women in sport (e.g., Arendell 1997; Barbour, Barnard and Kitzinger 1993; Fasting et al. 2014; Gailey and Prohaska 2011; Gurney 1985; Haddow 2021; Krauchek and Ranson 1999; Lumsden 2009; Sharp and Kremer 2006). Experiences of harassment, however, are not always realised when experienced, especially when harassment is masked as humour. These experiences played a large part in the difficulties in analysis when translating embodied feeling into writing and analytic prose, particularly when the boundaries between experiences, emotions, and language are blurred (Maclure 2013, p.172). I explain these moments below.

3.6 Analysis

This research is an ethnography with an interest in the sociology of everyday life, analysing how participants embody violence and gender in the context of Fight or Flight MMA. Several interests of analysis can be listed here, primarily: how people interact with one another, what they are doing at different points in time and with whom, and how they reflect upon it in certain contexts. Various theories and literature were used to guide the research (noted in chapter 2) and the analysis via sensitising concepts and general reference points (Bulmer 1979), but by no means did this restrict research questions or ideas. The flexibility of this inductive approach was useful, especially with adjustments needed for practical and theoretical developments between data generation and analysis (Bohannon 1981). As the reader will see momentarily, the development of this analysis was more unexpected than initially thought. The pre-conceived ideas and research questions were re-thought and re-phrased, and the analysis was consequently reviewed and disturbed. I outline these points below and the affordances of the different data and the moments that started to 'take back' the analysis in mapping (Clarke 2003) and writing poetry.

3.6.1 Mapping: observation, fieldnotes, and interviews

As mentioned, I had several fieldnote books that I brought to each MMA class I attended and participated in. Like many researchers, I found my field notes exciting yet isolating and overwhelming (Jackson 1990, p.10-11). There were so many notes, quotes, Word documents, photos, and diaries. It seemed I had no problem writing things down, but writing them down coherently, and analysing them seemed so difficult. Indeed, "Having notes...is one thing...using notes is quite another" (Lederman 1990, p.90), with analyses extending over time rather than any precise moment. It took me many, many months to come to grips with the work required and the various approaches one might have to them (e.g., Wolfinger 2002).

All field notes were transcribed and saved as Word documents, and to provide a more detailed account of interactions and my reflection on those moments, the field notes were extended into a longer, written narrative. After each MMA class observed, these longer narratives or a "making of a neat record" (Clifford 1990, p.63) were written in chronological order. In these extensions, the various 'facts' were "selected, focused, initially interpreted, cleaned up" (Clifford 1990, p.63), with the descriptions

also situating myself and the speaker of various quotes within the notes and the happenings at that moment. Equally, some of the field notes written during the classes would be unreadable and nonsensical if left to stand alone. The sense-making of random sentences or transcribed quotes was important. Without the longer narrative, many field notes would be decontextualised and would struggle to be of use without context (see Appendix F). Like Lederman (1990), my personal diary was also something that aided the descriptions and the analysis, but something that was also of privacy (Lederman 1990, p.75). The personal notebook linked to memorable aspects of the literature, cross-referencing with other observations, and bringing together non-field-related discussion, supervisory meetings, and reflections (Appendix G).

Interviews were also transcribed and saved as Word documents within three weeks of recording to keep up with initial analytical moments, with printed notes and 'workings out' attached. Transcripts were re-read several times, developing the existing analytical narrative, which supplemented the field notes. Thematic notes were developed to sustain a form of theoretical organisation over time, but this by no means represents an 'easy' way to analyse data. The analysis of qualitative materials is not simply highlighting and describing or just providing a segment of an interview to stand alone as analysis (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). Interviews themselves are significant interactive moments, with active listening and thinking about analytic questions to the themes and categories used in discussion (Holstein and Gubrium 1997; Sankar and Gubrium 1994). A running analytical narrative was also created from the early stages of the research and through the organisation and writing up based on field books and personal diaries.

The analysis began with what was initially intended to be a form of grounded theory. Preconceived concepts were drawn upon to form ideas around methods and data – ideas informed through theory and experience over time (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Individual files were created on a computer into three respective themes of 'gender', 'violence', and 'learning' (when my research questions were initially about 'learning' as opposed to embodiment). Each file included field notes from observations and interview transcripts, arguably used to 'sort out' the data, but an analysis had not actually happened. I also printed these out when I struggled with working with the screen and placing them into various files (Appendix H). I was

shocked on reviewing my personal notebook, too, that I had even started analysis before I had even attended Fight or Flight MMA (Appendix I)⁶!

Even after having the data from Fight or Flight MMA observations and interviews, the initial experience was a juvenile perspective on analysis, “to simply “write up” what I had “discovered” in the field” (Van Maanen 2011, p. xvi). However, it felt quick and easy, and it still did not make sense. I felt utterly lost in the pages of words like I was at a wall (see Appendix J), and I knew that this ‘analysis’ was not right. With interview transcripts, field notes, reflections, different spaces and places, and feelings that had not reached the surface: mapping became a physical way to overcome this mess on my computer files, in front of me, and within my own mind.

Mapping (Clarke 2003) was suggested to me by one of my supervisors during a rather emotional and what felt like a burdensome supervisory session (Appendix K). I mentioned how lost I felt and my disappointment that all my ‘sorting’ of the data into the initial Word documents wasn’t analysis. Thus, upon reading Clarke’s work, I found myself attracted to situational analysis (Clarke 2003), using situational maps in particular. Maps were drawn and reviewed as a form of “analytic exercises” (Clarke 2003, p.554) and began through a basic means of writing out different spaces, different moments, and different questions. Initial themes were created from previous experience in the field, with preliminary concepts included as a starting point for analysis. From there, mind maps were drawn, re-written, and grouped to advance themes. Themes did change throughout, but at the beginning, analysis reflected several basic questions: What stood out? What was interesting? Who was doing those interesting things? Are there similarities between Fight or Flight MMA and the BBR events? A concept/analysis booklet was made to develop these questions around the data through the initial analysis stages and to contain the base of the situational mapping analysis (examples available in Appendix L).

Various situational maps and webs were created, bringing focus to complex moments and key points for analytic contention (Clarke 2003, p.554). Drawing out themes, listing similarities, writing concerns, and dividing the pages into different ethnographic spaces – this felt like a practical way of “opening up” the data (Clarke 2003, p.560). It was a helpful way to organise the various concepts and experiences, especially in moments of “analytic paralysis” (Clarke 2003, p.560) between field notes,

⁶ I had at the time been observing video footage of MMA forums and YouTube videos, but it was still premature, of course, knowing that fieldwork at the club was my primary interest

interviews, observations, and photos, but also my own comments and reflections as a participant and researcher. Physically working with words, drawing, sticking notes on this booklet, and ripping paper apart: these were an active progression in the initial moments of senselessness and helped "to decide which stories to tell" (Clarke 2003, p.569). Analytic categories included spatial elements, gender, experiencing pain, violence, embodiment, humour, with the relational qualities of these categories, marked developed over time alongside analytic saturation between different spaces and experiences (Clarke 2003, p.569-570; Clarke 2021). Mapping also enabled the "collapsing and expanding...adding and deleting" (Clarke 2003, p.563) of words, thoughts, and examples. Mapping also inspired the illustration of the MMA club in chapter 5 (Appendix M). Alongside the running narrative of the analysis booklet, my personal notebook and various margins of Word documents also served a function of "memoing" (Clarke 2003), giving space to leave reflections and thoughts over time, building a gradual analysis in writing and in review.

The multi-sited nature of this ethnography and the various "implicated actors" (Clarke 2021, p.204) and methodological issues benefited from mapping as an analytical approach. Some of the visual maps created and inspired by the booklet are also provided in chapter 5 (Clarke 2021), illustrating the activities of gendered bodies within Fight or Flight MMA. The ability to progress this ethnography through creative ways is not only relevant to mapping, however. Writing poetry was also another way of analysing (and managing) the different experiences and data in research. In some ways, "I am a fieldnote" (Jackson 1990, p.21), and numerous observations were vivid but unable to write in text. This is where the writing of poetry became a useful practice.

3.6.2 Poetry as data analysis

My explanation of how I came to use poetry in the thesis is based on two moments that I address here: my first interactive experiences with writing poetry at a conference (Figure 2) and in a discussion and reflection of poetry in a supervision (Figure 3 and Figure 4). These images show the thought processes around my use of poetry, but interestingly I had no interest in poetry prior to the conference. Like Sparkes' (2021) reflections on schooling and poems, I remember wanting to jump out of the classroom when analysing John Donne's "The Flea" for my A-Levels. I cannot recall much of Christina Rossetti, nor the other poets and poems central to our examinations

(admittedly, I had to search online for the authors to write section this as their names immediately left my mind upon finishing college). As much as I had an interest in Sylvia Plath's biography, I was not 'in to' poetry (try as I might as a 15-year-old to seem 'deep' and emotionally intellectual). However, I remember feeling rejuvenated in my first interactive experience with poetry at the 'Ethnography with a Twist' conference at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland in February 2019. Below (Figure 2) is an example of one of the activities in the conference workshop. Our task was to select a card that we were intrigued by and to write themes or words about what we saw. For some reason, I saw a pint of Guinness and a bridge and the symmetrical and balanced nature of the image.

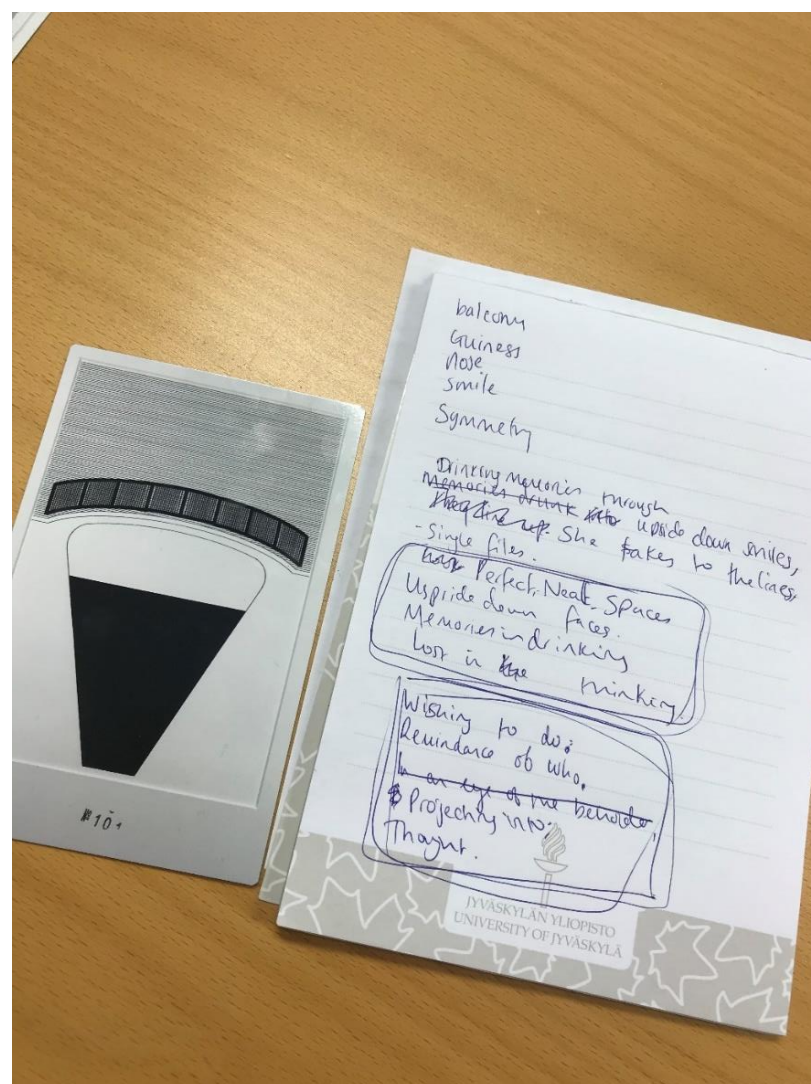


Figure 2: My first experience with writing poetry at a conference

Although this workshop inspired me, I did not immediately start to write poetry or work in poetic ways until a supervisory meeting some months later. I sat feeling stuck with the analysis in that supervision, and my supervisors suggested working more creatively with the data. Remembering the experience of poetry in the conference workshop, I then decided to try and write a poem for my next supervision. Now, the actual process of writing my first poem was somewhat happenstance. I took certain lines from field notes of similar themes and noticed that the last words of my sentences happened to rhyme. I then considered the choice to pair them, and from that point, I started to build the poem stanzas - telling a story across the data and writing in my own voice filling in the lines. The first poem I wrote and presented to my supervisors was "The Women's Fight", which features in chapter 7. The poem was well-received, and I was encouraged to continue the practice (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

At the beginning of my experiences of writing poetry, I felt like I was just trying to make sense of the amount of data and my overwhelming feelings. I did not quite realise it at the time, but there were suddenly numerous pathways and opportunities for the data and its analysis to develop through these creative methods and CAP. Richardson (2000) makes a strong case for writing as "*a method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic" (p. 923, original emphasis). That is, writing is a way of knowing – a practical and powerful method for analysing social worlds. I soon grew confident in this form of analysis. It came naturally to me, and over time, I experimented with different types of poetry, using not only the words and content to craft the poetry but the power of illustration and shaping these words to develop the themes of the chapters further. Seeing these moments 'crystallizing' (Richardson and St Pierre 2005, p.963) my writing and analysis was an exhilarating feeling.

In my initial experimenting phases, various other poems were written, such as the form of haiku and non-data-based poetry. However, these poems did not seem suitable for the aims of analysis, nor the building up of the content of each chapter (see Appendix N). Over time more poems were written, which were equally central to my writing development, but these were with different purposes and created in different ways. Dealing with a sense of distress of my vulnerabilities in the field, these more emotional poems centred around my feelings alone. There was an embodied sense of my hand simply pouring out words - writing before I really knew what text was left behind. Writing sometimes felt like an unconscious decision or an 'unbeknown

knowledge' (Uotinen 2011) which seeped through my pen onto paper. I also felt this embodied sense of 'unbeknown' when writing "Fighting Phallus" and "Zoe is a cunt".

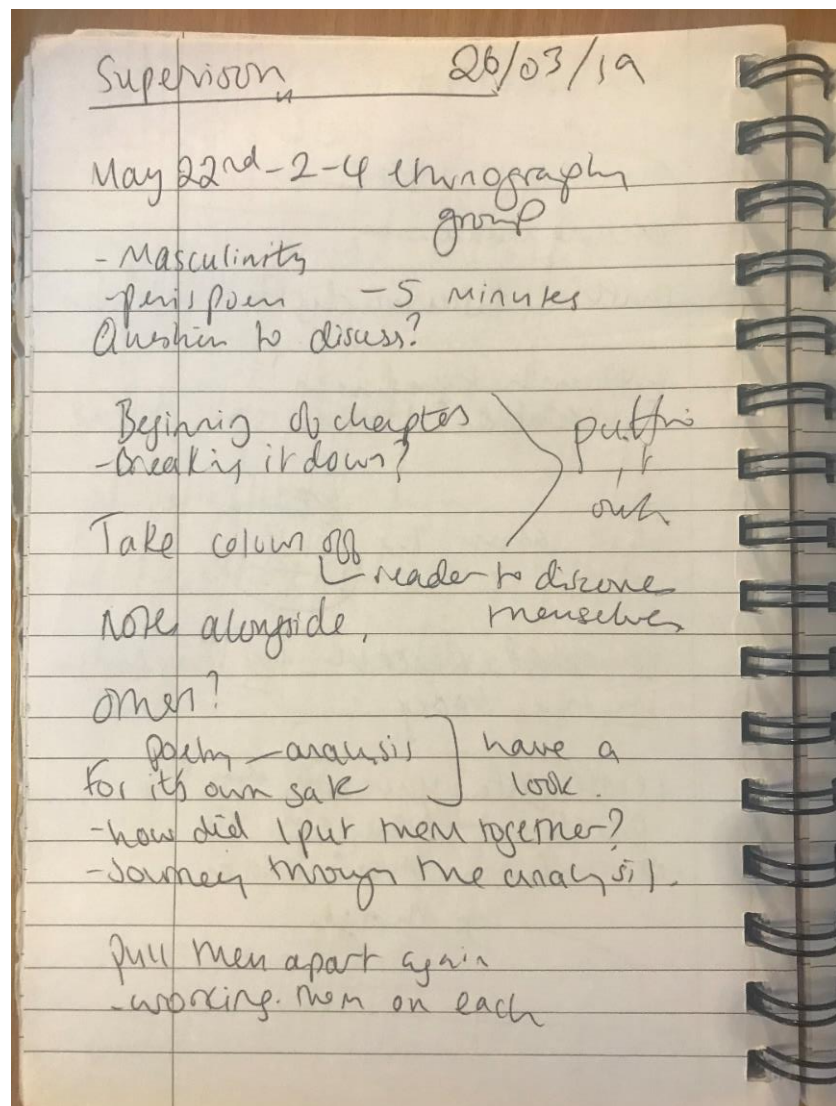


Figure 3: A reflection in my research diary after a supervision discussing my first data-based poem

Through my engagement with poetry, I certainly found out more about myself and my emotions than I originally thought. In piecing and taking different words together, the alternative configurations of data helped me to come to terms with some moments, to "feel the [Fight or Flight] world in new dimensions" (Richardson 2000, p. 933). These dimensions changed the analysis in the practical steps I took to a sense of analysis and illuminated a stark contrast to my previous analytical notes, which I

thought were so concise. The poems enabled a different perspective or 'look' to the ethnographic experience - a "different lens through which to view the same scenery" (Sparkes and Smith 2014, p.162) - whether in contrasting my view to the young men at MMA fights ("The women's fight"), or of 'humour' that erected the space in Fight or Flight MMA club ("Fighting Phallusy"). Equally, the poems are arguably a different 'vehicle' of representation (see Sparkes 2021, p.43) in moments of data analysis and in the field.

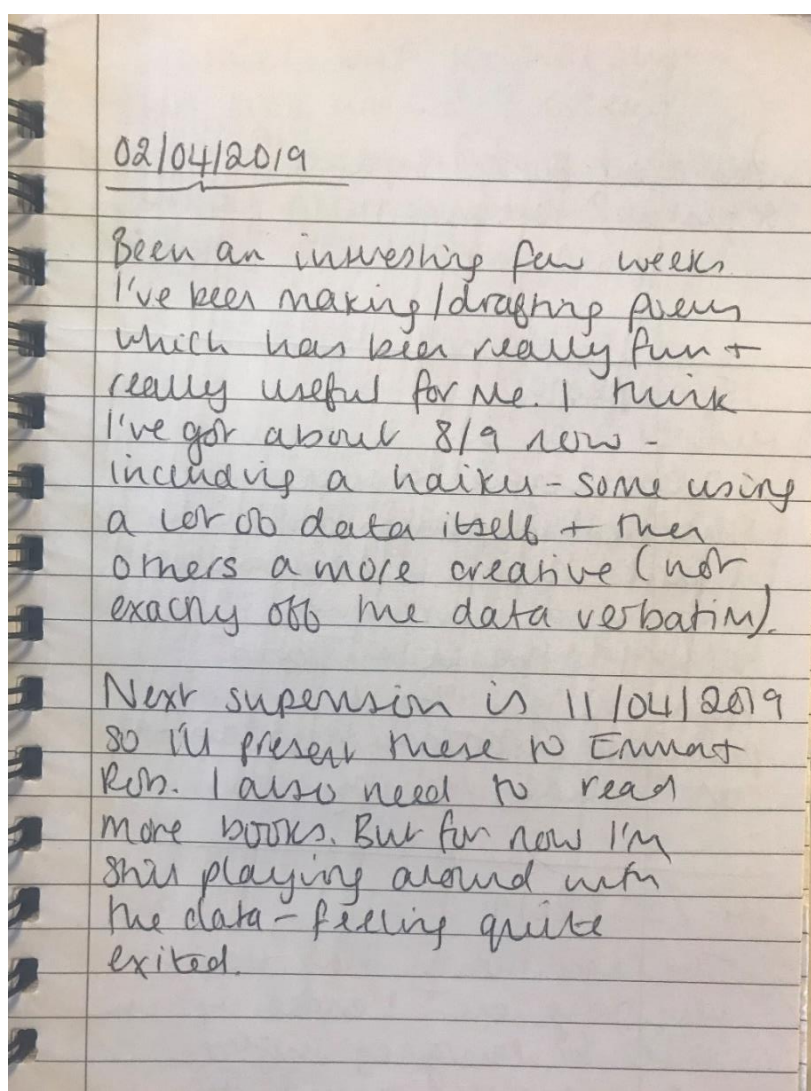


Figure 4: A research diary entry reflecting on my first few weeks of writing further poetry

This research is therefore located within the recent growth of CAP (Richardson 2000) in qualitative research, challenging some of the conventional, more realist forms

of representation. Particularly in relation to my flexible researcher role, this is an important acknowledgment, with the product of my writing (be it in realistic representation or creative form) impossible to “be separated from the producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing” (Richardson and St Pierre 2005, p.962). As for where this poetry is included, each chapter is introduced with a poem with its contents explored in the chapter's thematic sub-sections. Poems are made from various field notes, interview extracts, my thoughts, and participants' words, sometimes linking themes across different data types, sometimes asking questions, and sometimes sharing experiences of the field. In ways, these poems are an “ethnopoetic messy reflexivity” (Denzin 1997 in Chawla 2008 para 31); however, to neatly place or categorise these poems and their analytical intention is not necessarily easy. These poems and their role in the analysis were a creation that happened over a few months.

Poetic writing in ethnographic contexts is not new (Church 1995; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Leggo 2008; Sparkes 2008), though my positionality as research-participant arguably troubles many of the categories of poetic analysis and presentation. Participants did not write the poems, nor did participants have any role in how the poetry was created (e.g., Bishop and Willis 2014; Finley 2003). The poems *sometimes* relate to experiences of conducting research (e.g., Furman et al. 2007; Lapum 2008; Piirto 2002) but not exclusively. In other ways, the poems are different from many of the rules of ‘poetic transcription’ (Glesne 1997 and Carr 2003), given that they include my own words as a researcher but also as a participant (see Carr 2003, p.1325). These poems *could* even be categorised as autoethnographic “poems from the field” (e.g., Lahman et al., 2019; Richardson 1994), but again, not exclusively, and poems were not created necessarily in mind to “give voice” (Poindexter 1998, p.22) to participants nor to create an emotive response, though arguably they do. Indeed, these poems may also make those who read them uncomfortable, whether from my experiences of harassment (chapter 6) or in the treatment of athletes by audience members (chapter 7), but it is not necessarily their aim.

The intention of these poems for the research (and for the reader) arguably varies, conveying and representing various experiences. Many of the poems also problematise moments that are usually presented in unproblematic ways in the literature. The first analytic chapter presents the subjective experiences of violence in MMA in “What runs through violence”. There is then a poem of mixed-gender sparring and in “Belonging” in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 opens with “Fighting Phallusy”, a poem

reflecting humour, and sexual violence (hence the phallus) – it is perhaps the most personal of all the poems. "The Women's Fight" in Chapter 7 then reviews observations of sexism and misogyny from audience members at fighting events, contrasting the contradictions between what I observe in that space and the men situated around me. The literature chapter and this method chapter also begin with a poem. "The_____Gap" reflects in ways a content analysis of the literature on MMA and 'the gap' which is felt when reading about women's experiences in MMA training or fighting. The reader would have already digested somewhat the nature of "Zoe is a Cunt", which reflects experiences in the field and the awkward moments as a researcher, woman, and MMA practitioner. The figure below represents the types of data used in each poem.

Chapter number	Poem title	Data used
Chapter 2	The_____Gap	Quotes from the literature and reflections
Chapter 3	Zoe is a cunt	Field notes and reflections
Chapter 4	What runs through violence?	Drawing from field notes, interviews
Chapter 5	Outsider	Field notes, interviews and reflections
Chapter 6	Fighting Phallusy	Field notes and reflections
Chapter 7	The Women's Fight	Field notes of observation of fighting events
Chapter 8	The Finale	Reflections

Figure 5: Poetry content and data type

Needless to say, the research experience and the types of data were not straightforward. The process of analysis took place over some time, and because of this, poems were created at various points even after I thought 'the analysis' was finished. It was only after writing poems that the analysis and research questions were revitalised to their current presentation in this thesis. The poems stand in ways as

written progress of 'figuring out' how to write with the data and why I am writing about them. I found writing the poetry useful to illustrate the contradictions and rawness of the data, with a lot of it (particularly around my experiences) being upsetting (e.g., Furman 2004; Shapiro 2004). These poems are arguably therapeutic, too (Anderson and MacCurdy 2000; Coulehan 1991; Walker and Roffman 1992), with some written as a result of trying to express the emotions and displacement in the field not easily expressed in traditional forms of writing. The poems helped to construct 'the feeling' I could not quite place in the field initially – perhaps "affect" in the Deluzian sense where data is partly the "sense-event" (MacLure 2013, p.643) of being a researcher and the heavily emotive moments which not always realised 'in' the field but afterward. Equally, these poems probably are not of a standard that many 'real' poets would agree with, leading some to possibly judge them as more 'poemish' than 'actual' poems (see Lahman et al. 2019).

Some may question the integrity of analysis which has the inclusion of poetry. The reader may find that 'poetry' and 'data analysis' mentioned together may be oxymoronic "or perhaps even just moronic" (Shapiro 2004, p.172). However, these poems are part of a critique of how we assume to know what we know in an analysis. The poems are based on moments that were so unexpected because there is little to no mention of it elsewhere: where women are not included, where the researcher herself is both inside and out, both welcomed and harassed. These unexpected moments of fear and confusion (not only by myself but arguably others in the club) were central to the research experiences and *the* data. Those moments are an important example of the relevance and requirement of the subjective and ethnographic self-reflection in this thesis and the general ethnographic, observational data. Indeed, the poems present the intangible experiences of being there and across ethnographic spaces and moments – but the poems are also available to be read as short presentations of a broader analysis that are also readable and arguably accessible. It would be interesting to think about where these poems could be given after submitting this PhD.

3.6.3 CEEIT collaboration

Over the last two years, I have been involved with a theory and data analysis group - Cardiff ethnography, ethnomethodology, interaction, and talk (CEEIT). CEEIT involves various forms of collaborative practice and discussion, with sessions varying in topic week by week. CEEIT gave the opportunity for its members to review each other's data alongside research papers and general discussion of ethnomethodological and ethnographic discussion. I found CEEIT a beneficial space to share some of my data, including some of my field notes. For months, my experiences were too close to the specific data discussed (in chapter 6), and some needed distance was taken from it. There was too much emotion, and the data had felt too personal. Consequently, the analytic attention to broader systems of power and organisation within the club (and its members) was arguably lost in those emotions. The discussions in CEEIT encouraged a new way of looking at the data and highlighted inter-analytic consistency in specific observations previously analysed.

3.6.4 Reflexivity and feminist objectivity

Of course, discussions of this analysis and the research design generally raise important considerations around objectivity and value neutrality. Haraway's "feminist objectivity" (1988, p.581) is helpful here in critiquing objectivity as a disembodied attribution of knowledge which she described as "conquering gaze from nowhere": a sense of invisibility for researchers whose bodies estranged them from certain experiences. For Haraway, the concept of objectivity is "*always* a question of the power to see" (Haraway 1988, p.585), and rather than claim a purely objective piece of research, 'objectivity' instead adopts a pluralistic and situated knowledge (Haraway 1991). Some researchers have always had the privilege "to see and not to be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (Haraway 1988, p.581; see also Ellingston 2017), and my research illustrates to others the different experiences of being seen. However, how should you discuss and present that phenomenon when you are arguably made to be part of that data in so many ways? Maybe the emotions 'contaminate' research (Kleinman and Copp 1993, p.2), but those feelings are part of a systemic data analysis that has been reviewed over time.

The chapters (including this one) are not straightforward in their plans and have been revisited, torn apart, and re(produced) time after time. There was always something missing in initial drafts, something that did not feel quite right in the initial 'objective' stances I tried to produce, as reflected in the discussion of the analysis. To the credit of the authors mentioned in the literature, there is an acknowledgment of their privileged positions. However, my contributions show in detail and data what can happen and what does happen when a researcher is a woman and when a participant is a woman. How should you feel when someone licks their lips at you in training? Or suggests you suck a penis? Or calls you a cunt? The reflexive importance of my role, which cannot be separated from the data, is indicated in the poem "Zoe is a cunt", showing but a glimpse of experiences in the field. It would be a disservice to present 'purely' objective field notes and interview extracts, and the subjective and embodied data and varied forms of analysis are ways "to become answerable" (Haraway 1988, p.583).

As for defining 'reflexivity', this can be problematic given the alternative applications of its definitions. Reflexivity may be classed as purely methodological, theoretically driven or feminist-led (Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Olive and Thorpe 2018; Wasserfall 1997). My understanding reflects both feminist and interpretive processes and how my presence impacts the setting and the constitution of "the phenomena under investigation" (Atkinson 2015, p.26; Harding 1993). Reflexivity is also an 'unmasking' of fieldwork (see Van Maanen 2011, p.91), presenting and exposing the realities of research and interactional, embodied moments that might affect data and analysis.

Equally, research is not linear or straightforward, and this ethnography (and ethnographic self) is 'messy' (Coffey 1999; Layder 1998), and critically reflecting on this mess is important. The data is inseparable from my presence as a woman and as a researcher, and I did not see fit to be "telling half-tales" (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001, p.300). I am honest in showing the experiences of this research and its analysis, linking to the discussion of feminist objectivity too. No doubt, my body and my words impacted phenomena and its analysis (Harding 1993) and is highly contextual. Being an MMA fan, previous MMA practitioner, ethnographer, and woman could all impact the research and analysis of the interactions taking place. There were also arguably numerous 'webs' (Geertz 1973) between myself and the participants, too. Those webs sometimes made me feel stuck, trapped and wrapped up in words and observations,

and I present an honest account of these situations and their impact. A conclusion of this chapter will now be provided.

3.7 Conclusion

This thesis is a feminist approach to ethnography inspired by the sociology of everyday life and frame analysis (Goffman 1974). Two ethnographic spaces of MMA are explored, that of Fight or Flight MMA club (of focus in chapters 4-6) and Blood Bath Royal (BBR) fighting events (chapter 7). The research aims are interested in the accomplishments and situated nature of violence and how individuals work through everyday assumptions of violence, gender, and embodiment to do so. As a result, this research brings attention to the observation of these ethnographic sites, but also through my participation in the MMA classes. In the chapter, I give attention to these elements and made my positioning and reasonings of these decisions clear – challenging previous experiences in the literature and of a critical and gendered perspective of researcher (and participant) experience. In addition to observations, interviews were included in this research to hear about the experiences of Fight or Flight MMA club members.

The difficulties experienced in the research in my flexible role extended to the analysis, with data analysed eventually through situated mapping (Clarke 2003) and poetry. These were both ways of managing the various forms of data collected, but also of the feelings experienced and the moments that, at the time, were highly confusing. Despite these problems initially encountered, however, this research is highly reflexive. It contributes to the experiences of MMA fighters and embodiment, also contributing to the limited research on women and mixed-gender interaction in MMA (and in sport). Not only this, the broader discussions of violence, gender, and the body are raised too, presented within the appreciation of feminist objectivity and positioning (Harding 1993; Haraway 1988). This ethnography was sometimes scary, sometimes fun, and sometimes thrilling, and each chapter explores those moments in various ways. As the next poem title reads, I begin with chapter 4 and thoughts of 'what runs through violence'.

What runs through violence?

How does one start to look at such a thing
The hitting, and choking, and caged wire fencing
And what kind of meanings does **V**iolence bring
To the people within and around its filming?

Fighting and sparring are two different spaces,
From the cages' bright lights and its heart-racing paces.
What it is to be **v**iolent is something that's learnt -
It's skills, with purpose, but not to intentionally hurt.

"If you look at the street where there's two drunks havin' a scrap,"
Phil says **tO** me while we talk and recap-
"that's violence because there's no sense in it.
There's no goal, there's no reason, there's no direction for it"

And rules still apply whether written or expected.
"No gum shield? Set the pace. Don't punish your guy for experimenting".
There's a**L**so something said for the fairness of a fight
When Phil spoke out: "I didn't wanna go and wreck some kids life".

Equal footing and pride affect even the pros,
And "once you're trained in violence, you know how far you can go".
Especially for new members, **E**motions also do real damage.
Because if "You're so damn aggressive. You don't think about what's...happened".

"There's a controlled **violeN**ce in a sense," – Lily replies
And coach reiterates this: "If you don't recognise them...Be nice!
"Don't be a cunt and send 'em through the air"...
If I see anyone doing this in sparring, I'll have ya" – I hear.

Even in Tom's fight coach steps in to help
He "had to throw in the towel for him...he just **C**ouldn't protect himself
"End of the day you gotta look after the people fighting"
"You don't want 'em to get unintentionally hurt" – what an unexpected writing'

Whether the dojo or the cage there are boundaries and limits,
"I guess violence depends on your level of experience".
Its meaning; Subjectiv**E**. Embodied. Repeated.
It's not just about how one fighter's defeated.

Chapter 4: Controlled violence and the embodiment of MMA skills

In the literature review, I considered the working definitions of 'violence' (such as edgework and interpersonal forms). By the end of this opening analytic chapter, the reader will understand how violence is understood and defined conceptually by Fight or Flight MMA members and how physically violent MMA skills are embodied relative to those definitions. I do this in three sections. Beginning with interview data in Section 4.1, participants' definitions of violence are presented (which includes physical and emotional abuse) and considers the extent and frames (Goffman 1974) in which MMA fighting (and its fighters) are 'violent'. Within this, the concept of "controlled violence" is raised, with control of emotions, the significance of context, and power dynamics between individuals fighting highlighted as key features in categorising differences of 'real' violence. Section 4.2 then brings the attention to how this "controlled violence" is embodied by club members in training, analysing field notes from observation and my own felt difficulties as a participant-observer. The physical (and controlled) violent skills of MMA are embodied through various intersubjective, and reflexive (Crossley 1996, 2005) means, with pain being a useful yet fragile aspect of this process. Section 4.3 further explains these fragile aspects where members of the club must work with and through pain while also guided through direction to manage aggression and emotions. The navigation and management between 'being' nice while not 'being nice' (sections 4.2 and 4.3) are complex, and this chapter presents the interactional work, reflection, and direction taking place to maintain the "controlled violence" specific to the MMA (and club) context.

4.1 Defining violence

Definitions of violence in MACS are arguably a difficult task and are subject to ongoing debates (e.g., Matthews and Channon 2016). For instance, violence could be theorised as contextual and sportised (Elias and Dunning 1986), with others suggesting that risk or edgework might be more appropriate (Channon 2020). These debates are not limited to the academic discussion either, with fighters and practitioners of MACS challenging the imagery of violence within their practice (the "Love Fighting Hate Violence" (LFHV) campaign being one example [see Channon and Matthews 2018]). The passion for distinction is arguably heightened in MMA, given its highly contested

past, and issues of violence were even discussed upon my first meeting with Fight or Flight MMA club. After my initial 'hello', members of the club quickly asked me what my research was about and why I was looking at MMA specifically. After giving a short overview, I was quickly met with responses of "Well, it's not violence, not really", or "It's actually safer than boxing, you know". These were thought-provoking responses. What is violence to these fighters? How do they situate their sport and themselves within those definitions? This section explores these points in detail analysing interview data.

4.1.1 MMA as controlled violence

In the organised interviews with Lily, Sara, Phil, and Rhys, I had the opportunity to ask them directly how they define violence. In their initial responses, I could see that this was an unexpected question, with some laughing nervously, pausing, and stuttering. As our discussions continued, however, participants raised interesting points around the complexity of violence as a phenomenon, defining (or at least considering) violence not only physical but also emotional and interpersonal. Equally, however, the intricacy of violence grew further in their considerations of MMA as a form of violence:

Lily: Violence is, to me, intentionally harming somebody. [Long pause] Yeah, harming somebody with intent. I'm trying to decide if that extends...definitely physically. Can you be emotionally violent? Yes? [looks to me] Harming somebody with intent [pauses] I'm trying to decide if I want to narrow that down. Um, yes. Intentionally hurting someone with malicious intent is how I would define violence

Zoe: Would you say MMA is violent?

Lily: [Long pause] It depends at what level, but ultimately yes...I think it comes to the different levels. There's a controlled violence in a sense. Yeah. So yeah, I think it is violence but in a controlled manner...at the end of the day sports is sports, and there are rules, and if you adhere to the rules an' you're in control of yourself then that's just sportsmanship...People have grown up watching boxing an' things like that, it's just an ideology, it's sort of normalised in an extent in society...So you see boxers beating each other up and stuff like that and injuries

and stuff get accepted 'cause it's happened for lots of years and stuff. Whereas cage fighting's quite new... 'cause obviously it's in a controlled environment, and it doesn't escalate beyond that. If they're controlled, and they adhere to the rules, they're sportsmanlike, then go for it.

Lily's long pauses throughout our conversation were often filled with sighs and heavy breaths. It seemed she had to think for some time around her answer however, the overall emphasis appeared to be the word "controlled", repeated several times in reference to rules.⁷ ("sports is sports, and there are rules"), to the general environment ("it's in a controlled environment"), and to the individual fighter ("they're sportsmanlike"). Arguably there are complications around categorising the sport as violent (or not), given that the goal of MMA fighting is (to an extent) to intentionally hurt someone ("Intentionally hurting someone with malicious intent"). The mention of "different levels" of violence is also open to interpretation, given that 'levels' could relate to the different classes and layers of skill embodiment or in reference to the normalised violence across sporting contexts ("it's sort of normalised in an extent in society"). Maybe these levels could even be referencing the continuum of violence (Kelly 1987, 1988).

For Lily, then, MMA can be classified as violent to an extent. However, rules provide a framework of how to do violence 'properly' as a specific performance (Stenius 2011), with indicators of what could be considered as "bad violence" (Andreasson and Johansson 2019, p.1192) within those rules too. However, a point of differentiation is "in control of yourself". This "control" arguably relates to the emotions of a fighter, with fighting (and training) often involved with layers of emotional management (e.g., Spencer 2012; Vacarro and Swauger 2016). I will discuss how this 'control' is observed in interaction later in the chapter. Yet, control is also relative to the rules of behaviour within the fighting context, with the importance of sportsmanship and fighting character highlighted for Lily (see Birrell and Turowetz 1979). Lily does not interpret MMA as inherently different from other sports; therefore, given these rules and guidelines: "sports is sports, and there are rules". Phil raised similar points, reflecting not only on the context of MMA but his job experiences too:

⁷ MMA events in the UK primarily follow those promoted by the UFC and the 'Unified Rules of MMA' (see UFC 2022). There are 17 rule classifications (at the time of writing), ranging from the organisation of the event itself (e.g., round times, weight divisions, equipment) to conventions of general behaviour and fouls (e.g., abusive language), and illegal techniques (e.g., eye-gouging, small joint manipulation).

Phil: Uh, violence [laughs], I think the general public would see violence as a physical act, or an aggressive act towards someone else...So violence isn't necessarily throwing a punch. It can be someone throwing abuse, someone being loud, being pushy, loud, and aggressive. But I don't think many people actually understand what violence is...working the door, like I throw people out and I've had people say, "You were far too aggressive", but they've never had a violent confrontation in their life. They don't understand what violence is...Like me and Tom, tearing chunks out of each other – that's violence. But the entire time me an' him will be havin' a conversation saying, "Can you hit me harder?". Or "You should have thrown this punch instead of this punch while we're sparring". That's violence, but they won't understand that because they don't get the mentality behind it. So, I think violence depends on your level of experience. A guy who's had no violent confrontation in their life won't understand how I enjoy wrestling, how I enjoy competing, how I enjoy – not breaking people's arms – but putting people in positions they shouldn't be able to be put in just because I find it enjoyable. They wouldn't understand the concept.

Like Lily, Phil discusses not just physical violence but emotional violence ("throwing abuse, someone being loud, being pushy, loud and aggressive"). Unlike Lily, however, Phil quickly extends to the limited understandings that 'they' (the general public?) have of violence ("They don't understand what violence is"). Phil might be referring to people who have never had an MMA fight, or he may be referring to those who have never seen fighting or experienced abuse or violence while working on the door. Indeed 'they' are different from fighters like himself and Tom, with the physical violence in MMA highly different "from a spectator point of view" (Wacquant 1995, p.486). In the response, we are also starting to see the necessity of physical forms of violence in training ("Can you hit me harder?"), which (as analysed in section 4.3) is an essential part of MMA training and the embodiment of MMA skills.

If - linking to Lily's response - the perspective of controlled violence is relevant, then to be emotional is arguably engaged in out-of-frame behaviour (Goffman 1974). Phil could be managing his distance from emotions (thus a violent identity) in his interruption of "not breaking people's arms" when discussing what he enjoys about MMA. Maybe he was going to say 'breaking people's arms' but thought that might be

too far, or it might be *too* violent: a boundary breaker in my impressions of him, or equally managing his own thoughts. Instead, Phil enjoys "putting people in positions they shouldn't be able to be put in", bringing forward the complexities and challenges to the sport instead of the outcomes of hurting a body (similarities in John 2016, p.48-50).

Phil's acknowledgment of varied forms of violence also responds to the meanings behind the action – that is, the purpose of why they are there ("mentality behind it"). For example, the potential distinctions would consider the non-emotional aspects of training, such as "havin' a conversation" about throwing punches harder in training. From Phil's perspective, the "general public" simply does not understand the intentions of physical violence, similar to fighters in other research (John 2016, p.47). It may be that Phil does not even think "they" would know what a 'really' violent scenario would look like, given that the general public "wouldn't understand the concept". The varied perspective is also evident in Phil's disagreement that he is "far too aggressive" in situations at work.

There is a fascinating demonstration of the relativity and subjective definitions of violence from Phil, noting that "violence depends on your level of experience" (similarly to Lily's comment). The "level of experience" may be how long someone may be exposed to (or partake in) violence and whether this mediates their framing of violence towards certain acts or actions. It might be the case that, as both fighter and doorman, Phil has become accustomed to a certain level of violence that he finds acceptable. As the chapters continue, this "experience" could also extend to interpersonal forms. We can question whether violence is even recognised when you have a specific exposure to it (like humour, perhaps?).

Another aspect of the definitions of violence was raised around fairness. For Phil, the context of fighting was not just important, but it was also pertinent to the safety of fighters. This point was visited unexpectedly in response to my interest in "what makes a good fight":

Phil: Ooft, uh a fair fight... I don't mind losing a fight to a guy that can beat me. I don't wanna be the guy who gets beaten because I made a mistake. I wanna have a fair fight...a fight's never one sided. It's gotta be back and for, it's got to be an equal battle both sides an' it's a case of that guys' game plan worked better that night. That's a fight...But then, some 30 old guy fights an 18-year-old guy, an' the 18-year-old's never done anything in his life, that's not a fight. That's

just a bullying match...That's why I think when it comes to bullies an' that, they don't wanna fight. They want a victim.

Given that (usually) there is always only one winner in a fight, the fact that Phil mentioned "a fight's never one-sided" stood out to me. It might be my null experience of being a fighter, but I had not considered the idea of MMA fighting as 'fair'. The difference between "a fight" and "a bullying match" are distinct for Phil, with having 'a fight' includes experience and a repository of skills that (together with the other fighter) make an "equal battle". Comparing this to a "bullying match", the acts and MMA skills are challenged if there is an unequal experience ("never done anything"). The severity between this disparity of skill and experience is of significance for Phil, given that he mentioned "bully" but also "a victim", and to win against someone lesser skilled is arguably not sportsmanlike either). There needs to be something worth winning for, and pride in winning based on that criterion of fairness.

Fairness is part of the organisational aspects or "ceremonialized bracketing rules" (Goffman 1974, p.254) of MMA and other MACS. Coming to know and appreciate the importance of these bracketing rules is displayed later in this chapter and chapter 7. However, there was also an example from Rhys' interview where the significance of fairness is accounted for. Talking to Rhys, he mentioned how Steve (the coach) 'threw in the towel', perhaps stopping his fighter from being "a victim" as Phil discussed:

Rhys: Steve [the coach] had to throw in the towel for him [Will] ... in the third round, he just couldn't protect himself...he couldn't keep his hands up, kept getting tagged with like ridiculous shots... to be honest he shouldn't have had the fight at all, but he was adamant that he wanted to fight. And he's no flower. He's strong, but he's not got the technical catalogue to match his strength, but like some people, they wanna get in [the cage] straight away... an' that's fine... but then again, coach give it in [the fight] and said it's not worth the risk... end of the day you, you gotta look after the people fighting. You don't wan' 'em to get unintentionally hurt, even though it is obviously a combat sport.

Will's eagerness to fight was apparent despite the fact that he was apparently not ready ("he shouldn't have had the fight at all, but he was adamant"). According to Rhys, the lacking technical abilities affected Will's fighting performance ("he's not got the technical catalogue"), despite having some strength. It seems that the deciding

factor in the fight was the inability of Will to protect himself ("couldn't keep his hands up"), and as a result, Steve called it to an end. Rhys recognised an irony in the fact that Steve wanted to protect Will from getting "unintentionally hurt", and these ironies are evident through the field notes and reflections across the rest of the chapter. Another theme is in Rhys' comment on Will's apparent strength and perhaps masculinity ("he's no flower"), emphasising the importance of things other than physical strength too. The above extract can equally be interpreted as stigmatising a "win-at-all-costs" mentality" (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, p.156), with the health and safety of Will being a priority.

So far, violence in the broader sense has been considered in physical and emotional forms. Features in defining violence are also relevant to the emotional control of individuals, and in the perspective of MMA as violent, responses included construction of MMA as a "controlled violence". The 'control' related to the control of emotions and the perspective of physical impact simply being the rules and "a part of the show" (Andreasson and Johansson 2019, p.1195; see similarities, for example, in Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, p.160; García 2013, p.158; Wacquant 2004). However, participants also frame violence relative to the setting in which an act or activity occurs. Next, the distinctions and the management of violent acts and violent identities are considered.

4.1.2 Violent acts or violent people?

Responses have shown an understanding of the sport as a form of "controlled violence", with definitions of controlled violence relating to rules and expectations of the sporting context and the goals that orient the action. There is also something to be said for how participants refer to the individuals involved in MMA and how understandings of violence might develop. As this section will show, the concept of violence becomes more complex when the nature of individual fighters and members of the club are considered, reflected in the impression management and role distance involved (Goffman 1959). It seems that to be a fighter is to be part of an enterprise of controlled violence through physical skill, but not so much that one is violent as a person in their entirety:

Zoe: Would you class them as violent people?

Lily: Not violent people. You could be a violent person, or I think there could be violent tendencies, but [pauses] I wouldn't go as far to immediately label someone as a violent person just for the fact they do mixed martial arts. But I think you certainly need to have either some form of competitive or aggressive tendency. But again, it comes down to that controlled violence, that controlled aggression...I would be hesitant to label against somebody a violent person if there's like control...I'd really struggle I mean, if you asked me is Steve's a violent person, I would struggle to answer that... I guess Steve in a ring or fighting is gonna be different to Steve at training. Just jokes around an', it's a different persona. It's the control of being able to switch to what's relevant for the environment.

The concept of "controlled aggression" and controlled violence is present again here. However, beyond the repeating theme, it was interesting how Lily brought attention to the concept of face (Goffman 1959) and how this troubles the categorising of 'a violent person' ("it's a different persona"). For Lily, Steve's different personas are situated to the specific expectations of training or fighting and reflect different intentions of interaction within those contexts. Training in the gym is to be more relaxed and joke than fighting in the ring or cage. Steve's "control of being able to switch" brings an awareness of 'self' presentation, with the expectation of different roles taking place (Goffman 1959). From the above extract, having "some form of competitive or aggressive tendency" are required to fight, but whether these tendencies are perceived as an embodied feature in training or something Lily perceives as something more innate is unknown.

It can be argued (similarly to the previous section) that perceptions of an individual as violent might be down to the intentions of an act rather than the capability to act in specific aggressive or violent ways (when controlled). Lily also recognises the power in categorising or classing an individual based on their actions, mentioning issues of labelling in response to my direct question ("I would be hesitant to label against somebody a violent person if there's like control"). This again is responding to our conversation concerning the "control" involved. When I asked Sarah the same question, there were similarities in her response:

Zoe: Would you consider the people to be violent?

Sarah: No. no, not at all. I mean I'm sure they've got a side to them like everybody does. I'm sure that having knowledge of something like that probably gives you a bit of confidence in those things, but actually, I've found that it's the opposite. I found that people who train in those kinds of things are probably less likely to get involved...and start fights than those who haven't trained ... I think comes from a knowledge of what the punch can actually do to somebody...it also comes from a bit of confidence as well...I think people are less likely to start when they have that confidence in themselves. 'Cause bullies always pick on the vulnerable, don't they? And these people 'cause they train in these things, they don't come across as vulnerable. I mean, it could be, you know, various psycho-analysms that make somebody look vulnerable - so characteristics, closed off arms crossed, just being a bit shy...I've had it myself. People have picked on me because I'm nice...I don't want to go around intimidating people and being mean and using whatever power I have to, yeah, I dunno, make them feel small. And I again, I think that's not confidence, that's arrogance.

There is a lot to unpick in this extract. Again, there is a reflection around presentation and face (Goffman 1959) where Sarah mentions people having "a side to them" and a potential to act violently. There is also a separation of the types of violence outside of MMA ("those things" and "those sorts of things") which help to establish the categories of violence referenced. It is also interesting how Sarah is marking the same violent acts (e.g., punching, physical harm) as something inherently different from what MMA fighters (and herself) do within the club and fighting context. There is little definition of specific acts of violence Sarah refers to, with "something like that" and "in those things" mentioned several times. Does this refer to MMA skills specifically or across the martial arts context and self-defence?

The difference between those skilled and not skilled (and the likelihood of violence taking place) is similar across the literature and my previous research, where fighters "don't need to walk 'round like [they're] billy big balls and act the hard man" (John 2016, p. 48-49). From Sarah's perspective, to have embodied skills necessary for fighting means that there is no need to display a sense of dominance in bodily presentation of being "tough" or "hard". The bodily presentations of those who lack the skill and therefore have to make up for that lack in 'looking' tough (relevant to the

discussions of emotional dominance from Collins 2008) can also be compared to the impression of being vulnerable ("closed off arms crossed"). Confidence that "shows in people" is an observable point of comparison for Sarah, too, with the impressions or "psycho-analysms" raised from her own experiences of being bullied.

The distinctions between controlled violence and bullying seem to be a common theme throughout the chapter sections so far. Like Phil, Sarah stressed the difference between MMA violence as an act instead of necessarily *being* a violent person. Interestingly, however, Phil also actively categorised different people as violent, situating his own management of self within these contexts:

Phil: Some yes, some no. It sounds very daft, but Will's girlfriend, I would say not violent at all. Like I would say, if I could call her a flower, I'd call her a daisy. There's no thought in her at all. Uh, Will, he plays the game an' all the rest of it, an' he's alright for a scrap, but I wouldn't say violent. He's like a child learning to play with a new tool. But someone like me, I'm not a violent person...I have walked away from more fights than I can count, an' I've 'ad no fights on the streets. I've only thrown, in the last four years, 3 people out of my pub by force. I've been challenged 1000s of times by younger kids who I could probably beat in a heartbeat, but let it go because it's not worth doing. So, in that sense I'm not violent. I enjoy violence in the sense that I enjoy all the martial arts movies. I enjoy testing my strength against someone else. I get a buzz off throwing my arms around someone's neck an' choking the crap out of them, but I don't think that makes me violent. Violence is when you wanna impose physical harm on someone because of the sheer fun of it because they can't fight back. That's violence. If someone can't defend themselves, that's violence. But then obviously if you look at the general street where there's two drunks havin' a scrap it's, that's violence because there's no sense in it. There's no, there's no goal, there's no reason, there's no direction for it. Whereas in a club, it's not violence; it's a sport, and that's the difference, I think.

It was curious that Phil's associations with being violent appeared to change between "good" and "bad". These differentiations seem to develop from the perceived boundaries of an activity, which mediates the act taking place and the meanings being that act. For example, "the general street" is not an organised fighting event or an

arena, and there is nothing to prove: "no sense...no goal...no reason...no direction" (see similarities in John 2016; Wacquant 1995, p.498-9). Again, we see that Phil's response is tied to his distinctions around the sport as violent to an extent ("testing my strength...choking the crap out of them"). However, a distancing is happening from being violent in his perception of self ("don't think that makes me violent"). The ability to protect and retaliate was another consideration for Phil in his interpretation ("If someone can't defend themselves, that's violence"), as mentioned earlier too.

Perceptions of violence are relative and fragile, with violence arguably negotiated through interaction in a variety of means. An example of those means includes the spatial differences, where Phil differentiated between "fighters" and "others". These are arguably descriptions of good or bad violence (Maclean 2020, p.105) too, but this is not to say he denies being violent himself, but being violent within suitable spaces, with appropriate goals. In fact, Phil seems to navigate away from the MMA as being violent whatsoever at moments, stating, "it's not violence it's a sport". It seems that when the perception of violence is concerning Phil's own identity, he stresses the difference between 'doing' violence and 'being' violent ("I'm not a violent person"). Phil presents evidence for this accountability given that he "walked away" from fights "1000s of times," in fact, despite that he "could probably beat [them] in a heartbeat". These descriptions of his time working on the doors demonstrated control of his emotions ("but let it go") and the control of power or strength against those who may not have any (which would make him a bully).

There was also an interesting transition between discussing Will and "Will's girlfriend", where being violent seemed to be referenced as a form of strength, skill, or admiration for Phil. Will's girlfriend is not even recognised as having the ability to be violent ("There's no thought in her at all") like something is missing: a lack of masculinity, perhaps? Phil also infantilises Will, who is yet to reach the level of violence required ("a child learning a new tool"). His response towards Will 'playing the game' suggests that Will may be trying to give the impression of being skilled (and violent?). However, really, in the embodied sense, he is still developing (evident in section 4.1.1 too and 'throwing in the towel').

Members of Fight or Flight MMA recognise the varying definitions of violence regarding physical and emotional forms but see those forms as distinct from the specific context of MMA and Fight or Flight MMA club, which is "controlled violence". As the chapters continue, these definitions of violence are blurred and critiqued through

the analysis. However, for the remainder of this chapter, I explore how Fight or Flight MMA club came to embody this "controlled violence" in training.

4.2 Embodying “controlled” violence

Through the time spent observing Fight or Flight MMA, it was evident that club members were varied in skill set and experience. From the professional fighters with years of experience to those somewhat skilled and completely new, all members had to become accustomed to performing "controlled violence" in specific movements and progressions. Embodying the MMA skills underpinning this violence took work (and hours of it), with a particular and routinised process involved in training. This section reflects on some of those moments, which included making the body 'automatic' and the requirements of 'un-programming' the body in various ways. At the end of this section, the reader will be aware of the sorts of interactive and reflexive interactions taking place and how members of Fight or Flight MMA come to embody these skills with and *through* the body – a point I critique further in section 4.3.

4.1.1 “Make it automatic”: Building skills through repetition

As mentioned in the preliminary discussions of the club's structure, there are two different classes in the Fight or Flight MMA: one for beginners and the other for (mostly) advanced members. Although these groups are not exclusive (beginners are encouraged to stay for the advanced class, for instance), each group was centred upon techniques repeated over time through various drills⁸. Many of these drills were not thought-provoking necessarily, but simple and ongoing:

Steve uses the space of the dojo and tells everyone to circle around him. He calls to someone to demonstrate the arm-bar, breaking down the details of the movement. It takes some moments for the coach to discuss the technique, looking around the room to see a sea of nods or silent faces. “If you can’t see what I’m doing, move so you can see”. He repeats the arm-bar but now on the right arm. “Alright, have a mess around with that”. We separate into our pairs, spending around ten minutes focused on this process. Things were slow, finding

⁸ a repetition of movements

a rhythm to get as many reps as possible. He calls back out to the class, "Okay, just get that movement done before we move on to the next". Fieldnotes 27/06/2018.

After spending some time on the pads, we put them down and move on to striking the body in our pairs. "Three strikes and a kick. We want regular rhythm, so everyone gets used to it. Keep your eyes open". Fieldnotes 13/06/2018.

Coach walks around the room. His face is blank, just watching. He interrupts, shouting over the music. "Guys, with your fucking ears on! You're reading your guy. Don't be lazy with the pads, hold the pads appropriately. Do the same shit. Make it automatic". Fieldnotes 30/07/201.

Each time Steve displayed techniques, there was also direction to view him and listen ("move so you can see"/"with your fucking ears on"). Members of the club are watching Steve, all while being instructed through a specific gaze with nods and the mirroring of his gestures while standing, watching, and imitating (see Crossley 2007, p.59). For those more experienced, some movements or techniques in this participation framework may seem natural or are arguably taken for granted. When doing these techniques for the first time, however, "it often has to be made explicit or at least more explicit" (Crossley 2007, p.88).

In the field notes above, there is a pattern to the demonstration of technique in a specific instructional way: Steve (the coach) calls for attention, demonstrates the technique on a body, and the club repeats the actions in their pairs for several minutes. Techniques are also sequential (Crossley 2004a, p.44), where there is then an additional demonstration to advance the technique in some way, then repetition again. In this basic progression, there is significant work by Steve and the ordering of the club in the training context. The aim is to gradually build the technique into one fluid motion through additional layers of movement, the key point being repetition. These repetitions involved a "regular rhythm" to "repeat until you get it right". Despite the apparent simplicity of some movements ("same shit"), these are essential to progression, alongside the repetitive component to "Make it automatic". Like Spencer's work, these were moments of "becoming parrot", which "does not involve thought, but the

performance of an act over and over again" (Spencer 2012, p.90-91). This repetition is also essential to the building of muscular memory for pre-reflexive action and is well versed in other research on MACS (Graham 2013; Stenius and Dziwenka 2015, p.17-8; Wacquant 2004, p.60). Fighters "have no time to think or plan" (Crossley 2004, p.45), and to 'drill' these techniques to a capability of automatic response are to produce bodies "capable of efficient and pre-reflexive action" (Hogeveen 2013, p.85) for fighting.

The field notes demonstrate how skill progression is layered, moving from hitting the pads onto actual bodies in our pairs. Indeed, bodies *do* something to the techniques that we as members are expected to perform: they fight back. The application of techniques to those varied bodies in practice must be developed (and this also becomes highly gendered, as presented in chapter 5). Steve's call for us not to "be lazy with the pads" arguably reflects this in recognition of the difference between striking on pads and striking on an actual body. Steve often reminded us of this in training, shouting across to us all regarding our hand placement ("Keep those hands up!"), to our footing ("On the balls of your feet, people!") and in demonstrating the importance of other simple yet taken-for-granted movements ("Okay guys, this is simple but important"). To be 'automatic' is more complicated than one might think, particularly with the incorporation and layering of techniques ("Power, plus the acceleration, plus the hip"). These varied (and admittedly easily forgotten details) were instructed in an almost scientific fashion:

Coach is demonstrating a variation of the striking combination on Phil, showing the importance of footwork to move the body closer or further on an opponent. He holds his leg to Phil's torso, then moves his feet slightly to bring his shin to Phil's back leg: "Coming from an angle, I can get the back leg if I wanted it". Steve takes his leg back to the initial movement: "Cut 'im in half". We carry on the drill, swapping kick for kick between us. Coach comes to one of the pairs: "Go in at a 45 [degree angle]. You had it too wide there". Fieldnotes 25/07/2018.

"Guys, eyes on me...Hit that angle. Get right on that angle. Get on the side. Get the ass and the cheekbone and the delt on the floor". I think he's showing the importance of slighter difference. "Alright, have a fuck around with it. GO!" He

watches Tom and Ryan once more. "There we are - hell of a difference".
Fieldnotes 27/06/2018.

Even the simple-sounding techniques of 'doing a kick' or 'doing an arm bar' is extraordinarily detailed, with precision in form, direction, pressure, and angles (see Downey 2007). For instance, Tom was unsuccessful at getting them to 'tap' because of the slight change in angles when trying to submit via an arm bar ("You had it too wide there"). Equally, these angle changes can bring more force or impact or even change the desired area of the body that a fighter may want to strike ("You had it too wide there"/"I can get the back leg if I wanted it"). The specific areas of the body that need to be moved or rearranged (e.g., "cheekbone and the delt on the floor") bring attention to the body as a complex instrument to experience these skills and how they are successfully performed. Members are also encouraged to *feel* these differences for themselves with others ("Alright, have a fuck around with it"), with the importance of each other's bodies and corporeal intersubjectivity recognisable (Crossley 1996). Perhaps these technical competencies and details are what Phil is referring to in his interviews. Nevertheless, there are moments in training where the remains of other embodied knowledge make training difficult, with training not just about embodying skills through repetition but also about "un-programming" the body.

4.2.2 "You need to un-programme yourself": Challenging expectations of controlled violence

Reflecting on my own experiences for a moment, over the last few years, I changed sports from MMA to play American football instead. On returning to MMA for this research, however, I had to re-establish some skills which felt completely foreign (an example: placing my chin low for MMA to protect my jaw after learning to keep my head up as a safety protocol in American football!). With pad work and sparring, I realised that my feet were usually positioned in a mutual square stance (a staple for the line-backer⁹) rather than a staggered orthodox position¹⁰ And I would only ever drive forward in sparring rather than being light on my feet, moving around the room.

⁹ A defensive position in American football

¹⁰ Left foot forward, right foot back

Although, I should say that my hefty movement was not necessarily an American football thing. It seems I am heavy-footed in all of my sports when I should not be). Equally, I had less awareness of my hands in the MMA context. There were several moments where my eyes focused on the hips of my sparring partner (a standard practice in defensive American football drills), which resulted in me experiencing some quite distinct blows! I forgot about the distance and the rhythm, and even though I had some knowledge of what to do in MMA, my physical capability of doing those skills was far from reality. My frustrations were readable while training in the club, and when sparring with Steve, my bodily competencies (or lack of) were felt by him too:

I'm paired with Steve. The class starts with a simple enough combination: jab, cross, then a right hook into the body, followed by a hook to the head. I begin, and I hit with what I thought were rather good strikes. That was until I saw Steve's face. I couldn't quite tell if I did it well or not. "No. NOPE. No. Stop using your bicep! You're coming out so wide with your arm. If you do that, I can still get you with a straight no problem. You need to un-programme yourself – anything you've ever learned". Try as I might, despite changing angles, lowering my body, I couldn't quite do what Steve wanted of me. He called me out once more, "Stop using your bicep!" Fieldnotes 10/09/2018.

"You've got really bad shoulder mobility, haven't you?". I stare at Steve, somewhat embarrassed at my quickness to tap out. I reply in jest, "Yeah, it's because I mostly just do arms [in relation to weight training]", and laugh. "Don't worry, it'll come back", he says. Fieldnotes 10/09/2018.

It seems that to "un-programme" and to forget "anything" I had ever learned would ideally be to start over again from scratch. These repetitive drilling and training scenarios are ways of doing that and modifying my body. Steve could quickly highlight specific areas of the body that needed to be "un-programmed". In the instance above, my body was using too much muscle/strength, which limited the technique, and the limited mobility in my shoulder meant that I was quick to tap out of various situations. Strength alone was useless, and perhaps "un-programme yourself" could refer to techniques from my previous MMA club, too. It was fascinating that Steve could also feel the difference. To me, there was no obvious tell in how I was "using my bicep"

either. Was it the sound when I hit the pad? Was it how he felt the pressure through the pad?

Although I am being talked to in specific ways (i.e., to stop "using the bicep"), what does this actually mean? The bicep will always be used to an extent in the very nature of the movement, from holding my arms up to the extension of the wrist into the pad. I had tried to change my posture and my angles, but I was still not performing in the way Steve wanted. Unlike ground-based manoeuvres, Steve could not simply 'hop in' and do it for me to help me feel what it is meant to be like. Another interesting point is that Steve emphasised the ability for my body to change 'back', including in MMA skills and flexibility. However, I was not the only person in the club who had variation in their bodily skill. Lily would often find herself in a defensive mode in sparring instead of offensive from her experience at Krav Maga ("I'll always retreat. It's engrained in me"). Will was another member of the club who had previous skills to adjust to as well. Coming from a competitive boxing background, Will often felt anguish around his striking technique. Having done several Muay Thai classes just a week before joining the club, too, he became flustered with the necessary variations from boxing to Muay Thai, then to MMA. In one session, Steve commented on Will's bodily posture and position several times:

Coach comes over to us [Will and I] and talks to Will: "Your chest is really low. You wanna loosen up a bit. Stand up". Will looks to me and rolls his eyes, laughing. He shakes his head and carries on. Several minutes later, Steve chimes in once again, "Don't hold your body so stiff when you're sparring". Will stops and looks at coach and drops his hands. Will looks a little annoyed. "I've been told like so many things in the last three hours", a smile on his face appears. Fieldnotes, 07/08/2018.

The varying embodied skills across sporting contexts were apparent with contrasting instructions for how Will is meant to move his body. In each club Will attended, it seems there was arguably a very situated and individual practice from stance, to posture, to head position - despite all being a form of martial art or combat sport. With so many potential ways to strike and to hold the body, it is no wonder Will was "told like so many things" within a limited period. This is an example of the body's reflexivity (Crossley 2005), with the potential for various skills worked on and worked through at

any moment. Steve's comment that Will's body is "so stiff" might also refer to Will's individual capacities to move his hips. Will might need to learn to relax and use parts of his body he has not needed to before, like losing a 'hard waist' in capoeira (Stephens and Delamont 2014; and similarities in John 2016, p.35-7).

Another theme around un-programming was also the notion of un-programming strength. Even those with no background in sports held specific assumptions about how they *should* move, with a common occurrence being the use of biceps to generate power (which seemed to include myself!). Steve often made reference to the importance of technique over strength as a source of power ("If you haven't got it with 15 percent power, you're doing it wrong"/ "Power comes as a consequence of good technique"), with the importance of the message so prevalent that he often interrupted pairs sparring or grappling ("No! Don't try to get it off with your bicep, roll it with the shoulders"). Arguably, these demands questioned typical assumptions many have of fighting and physical MMA violence (and of the masculinity expected within that space):

Steve is demonstrating an arm bar. "Sit on your own heels. Don't fall back. It's not a bicep curl. Pinch it with your back muscles. Isolate. Make it vulnerable". Fieldnotes 29/08/2018.

Steve and Dave have been struggling to come out victorious in their grappling, both still challenging the other to put on the arm bar. Coach turns to them, "Don't get in a bicep fight" and walks away. Fieldnotes 01/08/2018.

I'm punching the pads with coach. There's a hook in the combo. "Get your bicep off". I'm using too much power in the combinations. "Lighter!" - I feel flustered, repeating the bloody combination over and over again. Steve is saying nothing, giving no facial expression. "You hit me with your pinky there". My eyes open wide, and I give a big huff. I begin the combination again. "Stop putting your bicep into it". Those – damn – words. Fieldnotes 10/08/2018.

The power of a strike or movement did not equate to who had the biggest muscles or who used their biceps the hardest. Instead, the body needed to be flexible in highly technical ways. In the first field note, for example, the "it" is most likely specific to the arm that is subject to the armbar, but it is interesting that the direction to "Make it

vulnerable" could have been directed to either the person putting on the arm bar or the person receiving it. In the first interpretation, there is an idea of forcing something to become vulnerable through the technical competencies of isolating the arm away from the body and using the leverages of our muscles and angles to draw it away from our grappling partner. Or, Steve could also be telling us that our bodies need to be vulnerable in order for our grappling partners to put on the technique properly, telling the person who will be experiencing the armbar to 'let it' be vulnerable in a specific way. The contrast of "make it vulnerable" to the other demands, which seem to be about control, is interesting, too, given that vulnerability (and control) seems to be another contradictory aspect of fighting. The contrast is also highly gendered, given that these bodies are incompetent bodies (thus feminised) and still learning. There is something about the dehumanisation of violence in relation to this, like when Steve referred to the body as an 'it' rather than "yourself" or "him" or "her". To be nice is to have a relationship with a body, to care about the body in front of you, and of course, the feminisation of care.

We start to see how much members relied on each other's bodies to embody skills through training, repetition, and sensory bodily experiences through these field notes. There is also a carnal transformation between the body and the mind in embodying these MMA skills, grasping the principles of skills in the broader schema of MMA fighting, and becoming pre-reflexive (see Crossley 2004a, p.38). These technical developments are also specific to the norms of controlled violence, with indications of preconceived ideas raised and challenged (the bicep and being vulnerable as two examples). The skill and controlled violence must be experienced together, and members of the club must "make it automatic" with other bodies. Part of this intersubjective element, however, is the exchange of pain, both in accepting pain and the requirement to *give* pain to others. I will discuss this next.

4.3 Painful practice and the control of emotions

Members of Fight or Flight MMA club are "expected to perform any technique in accordance with its norm" (Crossley 2004a, p.60), and these norms are highly relevant to the concept of controlled violence discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2. This section demonstrates how this control is also mediated through experiences of pain, but

equally of emotions (or lack of) expected in training and fighting. I begin with the importance of intersubjective moments and the process of giving and receiving pain, providing field notes alongside interview data where we see the rules of violence worked out and reflected upon by participants, observing the importance (and fragility) of definitions of action in strips of interaction.

4.3.1 Embodiment through pain

Giving and receiving pain was an essential part of embodying controlled violence, using each other's bodies (and referring to each other's pain) to guide each other through movements and techniques. When grappling in particular, partners would be touching bodies while thinking, talking to their partner about the pain, and figuring out the movements to finish the technique. Across observation (and often said by me) there were numerous notes of "It's not working" or "Something's not quite right", with 'working' around pain often encouraged by the coach ("work with your partners"):

Lily and Sarah are on the floor, trying to put on a foot lock. Lily is trying, though Sarah is yet to tap out. Sarah sits up, with a confused look on her face. "Can you feel anything yet?". "I can feel something but not enough to like, tap out". "What about now?". Fieldnotes, 07/08/2018.

"Left hand on her head". "Left. Hand. On. Her. Head" Lily tries to move her body. The coach intervenes again. "Don't be nice!" - Lily was unsuccessful to get the technique. Fieldnotes, 07/08/2018.

In asking whether Lily could "feel anything", arguably that 'thing' is representative of pain or discomfort as opposed to the physical touching of bodies. Pain was a useful tool or indicator when a technique was done correctly, a way the body 'feeds back' ("What about now?"). When a technique is not placed correctly ("Somethings not quite right"), that lack of pain is telling, but from my sparring experiences with Lily, I had a sense that she was anxious about inflicting pain. This was also readable by Steve, who directed her to be more assertive ("Don't be nice!"). The fact that Lily showed a sense of timidity was partly the reason for the technique being unsuccessful, given that Steve repeated the instructions and ended with a comment about her 'niceness'.

In asking Lily about her progressions in the club, she mentions the issues around giving pain that is raised in the field notes:

Lily:...it's a challenge, especially the grappling stuff...You're trying to twist someone's arm, and it's not doing anything, then Steve comes along, and he touches them, and they're like "OWW", and I'm like, how did you do that? And then you try again, and it's still nothing. Obviously, it's going to take time and stuff, but sometimes it's just a bit frustrating when you can't get it straight away. It's just about building it up and doing it bit by bit... It's like, "I want to Kimora you, is it doing anything? Is it doing anything? And they're like giving you tips or something, and it's like, this wouldn't really happen. They're like, "twist my arm a little bit more. That will hurt me".

There is an awareness that time and repetition can assist her progression ("building it up and doing it bit by bit"), reflecting findings in section 4.2. However, Lily understands the role in allowing others to be hurt and for others to hurt her to progress ("twist my arm...That will hurt me"). Awareness is also relevant to the training situation as different from a fight, given that advice and patience "wouldn't really happen". Again, there are repeated questions about the placement of the body in relation to others and the significance of communication through pain ("Is it doing anything?") aided by a more advanced sparring partner who verbally directs her ("twist my arm a little bit more"). Pain is a collective enterprise that "recodes the body" (Green 2011, p.381) through which members locate correct techniques, where members "must teach each other how to create pain by enduring it and to recognize effective attacks by suffering from them" (Downey 2007, p.218). Pain was also something that members needed simply 'get used to' in order to condition the body ready to fight:

We went into a punch-kick combination, kicking the front of each other's stomach...During the striking combinations, I was visibly hurting Will's lower leg in some way. He was flinching, and his knee was caving in. I suggested lifting his leg up slightly to 'take' the power of the kick. I also suggested I could change the pace. "I need to get used to it" – he laughs. Field notes, 06/06/2018.

Will was adamant about continuing to experience the pain from my kicks ("I need to get used to it"), despite there being ways to mediate the pain to lower levels (like lifting the leg). Will (who wanted to fight by the end of the year) knew that he had to experience pain to condition his body. Members of the club build the limits and strengthening of the body over time through "body callusing" (Spencer 2012, p.86), where they have "gotta build up that tolerance". For members of Fight or Flight MMA, a person must be capable of performing painful and physically violent skills but also being accepting of it too (like in the sparring example of 'making it vulnerable'). Rhys talks about building a "tolerance" in our interview:

Rhys: If you do something like this, you're gonna experience some form of pain. An' if you wanna compete, you wanna fight, if you go into that fight not knowing what a calf crusher feels like, and the guy gets you with a calf crusher, your gonna tap straight away, 'cause you're not used to it. You've gotta build up that tolerance; otherwise, you're gonna tap at the first submission move. I don't think you can compete without experiencing it...Say if I put you in an arm-bar an' I didn't know what I was doin' an' how it feels, I'm more likely to snap your arm than if I would know what it feels like, an' I know the pressure...you gotta experience both sides...your body can accommodate, and it's a lot more than what people think.

As reflected in this section, the above extract indicates the importance of bodies as instruments of development and advancement, which is socialised through pain (see also García 2013, p.164; Hogeveen 2013, p.88). However, Rhys comments on fighters conditioning the body to take pain to "reduce their own susceptibility" (Downey 2007, p.217; see also Roderick 2006; Wacquant 2004; Wainwright and Turner 2003), where the limits of the body can also be tested ("it's a lot more than what people think").

This section has given attention to embodying skills through careful (and intersubjective) interaction with pain. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, there is also careful management of emotions and actions in training, structured to the specific rules of controlled (physical) violence. I explore this next.

4.3.2 Situating emotions and appropriate violence

Sparring is a key process through which MMA skills are embodied, and there are acceptable behaviours for sparring based on the purpose of the drill, the timing and progression of the class, and the instructions given by the coach. Like other research on MMA and combat sport generally, sparring in Flight or Fight MMA positioned itself as challenging but not intended to hurt one another (see also de Garis 2000, p.95; Wacquant 2004). Sparring was not about strength, power, or aggression but about being controlled and emphasising safety and technique. Steve played a key role in this regulation, as most coaches do (for instance, Wacquant 2004, p.85), with components of sparring etiquette repeated through phrases, from "Go around, be nice", particularly with newer members, and reminders to control the intensity of sparring ("New faces? Destroy 'em haha. Nah. Start slow"/"If you don't recognise them, it's because they're new, be nice!"). Setting the pace was also a frequent point of discussion ("Partner work. Slow the fuck down!"/ "Don't punish your guy for experimenting") and ensuring safe sparring (and the safety of members). Other checks on safety included gum shields ("No gum shield, so you set the pace"), risky techniques ("Okay guys, this is a nasty little technique. Be nice on this!"), and the use of power ("Don't be a cunt and send 'em through the air"). All of these features had their role in the separation of potentially dangerous emotions, such as frustration, anger, and aggressiveness: all of which had the potential for a negative impact in training and fighting, but equally, the meaning of violence within the action taking place:

Coach watches us as Lily takes her turn to escape from guard. She is very defensive – reacting mostly from the strikes I give. Steve stops Lily, "You're so damn aggressive; you don't think about what's already happened". He takes Lily out, and he goes into my guard. He makes a move, and I yelp, and Steve stands up as the guard is separated. He turns to Lily: "You were fine, but you went back in". He repeats the move again and successfully escaped, arms held up. "See? It's easier than you think". Sure enough, on the next round, Lily did get free and stood up. Field notes, 25/07/2018.

In the above vignette, Lily was partly successful at escaping my guard ("You were fine") but continued to strike me while on the floor instead of standing up or at least moving out of my reach. As Steve mentions, she "went back in"; from his observational standpoint, her lack of success was due to her being "so damn aggressive". It seems

strange to think that being aggressive has its limits for a sport like MMA. The contrast between types of violence can be made here with the likes of Collins' (2008) work on "forward panic" (Collins 2008, p.121). Similarly, as raised in Spencer, calmness and composure are ideal requirements in this controlled violence. To be "so damn aggressive" may lead to situations where a fighter is not thinking, take away energy, or interrupt the rhythm and techniques in training. Keeping emotions under control is important even in the fighting context – a point reiterated across the literature (Vacarro and Swauger 2016, p 75; see also John 2016, p.48-9; Spencer 2012, p.123-125). However, what of situations where "controlled violence" is potentially breached?

Steve demonstrates the next drill. Jab, cross, shuffle, shuffle, and stab the inside facing knee of your opponent. It really does look horrible. Several people pull some grimaced faces. Others are commenting, "Oh that's nasty". Coach continued: "Right. Everyone in. If I see anyone doing this in sparring, I'll have ya. This is a career-ender. If that's all you've got then you're shit". Field notes, 23/07/2018.

Despite that all techniques in ways induce forms of pain, the above stands at a particularly "nasty" technique in comparison. There is a distinction between a technique and the wrong type of (violent technique), where "understood limits" (Goffman 1974, p.345) of the 'controlled' definition seem to be established. Steve laid out a difference in appropriate techniques, the first within the context of pad work compared to more sparring scenarios ("If I see anyone doing this in sparring, I'll have ya"), and the second in a fight itself ("If that's all you've got then you're shit"). Steve even troubles the idea of using such a technique when fighting at all. The possibilities of "nice" and "nasty" techniques also seem to be highly situated, however, which is explored below in response to Phil:

Phil: There's always been injuries...I mean, it's not so much they've gone too hard, they've overestimated what the person could do... like when Tom cracked my rib, he tried to not be so brutal. But by doing that, he fucked it up and made the injury happen. Like my lip split because I was just pushing so hard and mistimed an uppercut, an' he split my lip. Accidental knee to the head. So that's why when you have a group of guys who train together regular, know how far they

can push it. Like if Tom tags me with a really hard right hand an' he sees he's wobbled me, that's fine. He knows enough to, not back off, but let me get my wits about me, am I alright. Then reset, and we'll go again...I don't think we've ever had to break up anyone from going like too far, like actually getting pissed an' goin' for it.

The detachment of emotions as a convention of sparring and training appears to mark the difference in intention, with control a well-documented observation across MACS research (e.g., de Garis 2000). It is interesting how Phil draws away from injury as a result of having "gone too hard" but rather the skill level of their sparring partner ("they've overestimated what the person could do"). Despite the numerous physical instances of potential injury, therefore, it is the *emotional* disconnection to these interactions which is important, and the act of hitting, kicking, or choking is framed in the training frame relative to the control of emotions. ("actually getting pissed an' goin' for it"). These distinctions are arguably fragile, and there are club routines and rituals that reaffirm 'what it is that is going on' in training. Resetting to "go again" is one example, but there are also gestures such as hand bumps, head nods, and the timing of the bell, which re-establish control as situational governance (Goffman 1974, p.347). Given the framework tension, these interactional details "make markers of perspective clear" (Goffman 1974, p.255).

In Phil's response, there is an embodied sense of knowing when it is necessary to 'push' the body ("know how far they can push it"), linking to Will's point of getting used to pain. Recognition also extends to realising and understanding that pain and discomfort are necessary, but the boundaries of control for those new to the club are somewhat problematised. In talking with Rhys, he raised issues about boundaries that must be pushed (but also boundaries of violence that must be kept in check):

Rhys: ...we've had guys who train, they're fit, they're in shape. As soon as you get to sparring and they've taken a knock, they get pissed off, an' they've decided to throw their toys out of the pram. Like, what are you on about? That's the whole point of training. "Yeah, but you hit me harder than you should've". But we're sparring; we're meant to hit. That's the whole point. An' I think some people get the wrong concept...like apparently we spar quite hard, and I think some people don't think, don't realise it's a necessary part of the training. I dunno, I think

*sometimes it can go a bit too far but that's why, when you've trained with guys you've trained for years, they know how far to take you. Whereas I think some people they don't understand, they get **why** they're there, but they don't understand **how** they're gonna get to where they need to be to be in the sport.*

Rhys' response could be a matter of saving face (Goffman 1959), given that newcomers might assume they would be successful because "they're fit, they're in shape". As section 4.2 indicates, however, it is not enough to want to fight or just to be strong. It is necessary to be challenged through sensations of pain and arguably shock and embarrassment. Knowing "how far to take" someone seems specific to the trust members have in one another and the importance of intersubjective knowledge. I wonder what going "a bit too far" would look like, given that injury and similar actions are framed as unserious in intention in Phil's reply. Still, the realisation that someone was "pissed off" indicated a difference in action, with loss of control and retaliation to pain that they didn't expect ("you hit me harder than you should've"). Emotion can therefore break frame in the training context and arguably in the fighting context, too – an example of flooding out (Goffman 1974, p.359). Staying calm is also highly gendered (and infantilised) in that getting angry is about emotional excess and territory of the 'feminine' (Vacarro et al. 2011; Vacarro and Swauger 2016). I open the analysis in these more gendered ways in chapter 5, but first, I present a conclusion to this chapter.

4.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was centred around how members of Fight or Flight MMA define action as violent and also interested in their perception of self in relation to those actions (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1974). Section 4.1 was provided explicitly through interview data, where participants considered not just physical violence but emotional forms of violence too (for example, "throwing abuse"). Despite the considerable physical impact on the body in MMA as a sport, those interviewed do not frame those activities as physical violence necessarily, but instead, see it as "controlled violence". Section 4.2 continued this point, presenting the ways in which Fight or Flight MMA members embody 'controlled' violent skills. This process of embodiment included the

repetitive routines and drills which make the body "automatic" and reflexive (Crossley 1996, 2004, 2005). Equally, there was an 'un-programming' of bodies and a necessary disassociation to strength as the primary source of ability. Instead, MMA skill embodiment was all about technique and sensing in an intersubjective capacity through each other's bodies. Feeling, touching, and pain was significant to that experience, where the limits and rules of controlled violence start to form in more detail.

A further contribution to the framing of violence was presented in section 4.3, where controlled violence is consistently worked through in situated ways, evident in elements of safety and 'being nice' (while 'not being nice') regulated by the coach and club members. Demonstrating emotions was a prominent feature in these negotiations of 'controlled violence'. However, as was discussed in the literature chapter, arguably, the framing of 'control' is extensively questioned by gendered bodies. The understanding of who is capable of violence and how physical violence is embodied is interrupted through differently gendered bodies, come to light in chapter 5 next.

Outsider

"We are quite a male-oriented club, for risk of sounding sexist, it's a very male-oriented sport" – and I certainly sensed it. Some claim that apart from that, "I do not see it anymore". Though, what I observed was gender organising the core in organising, sparring, and categories for exercise: "It does kind of piss me off...they put the woman with the new guys".

Men avert their gaze, even faking an injury, "they're doing things more gently... like no, just come on, seriously". "Wanna prove us wrong? Cool... You earn the respect you get there", But achieving that is hard when you can't even stare. Or lean on a body without sexual associations. "they don't think we can handle as much"- the annoyance, frustration.

"Maybe they think I might misconstrue that it's a type of come on". As I grapple with Lily, "All I see is making out", laughs Sean. "If you don't wanna fight and you wanna get fit – cool. But you stay that end of the pool, and we'll stay our end of the pool". But in mixed classes with sparring, grappling, and hitting, "it's a bit of a kick on the teeth...and I find it belittling".

"I don't think the guys like being paired with the girls" As I re-read my field notes, this was so often heard, Between each other, between myself, Despite some offers for guidance and help - "like I'm imposing on their boy thing if I were to jump in". Constant thought of not worthy and not belonging.

"...we're quite close-knit" – I remember correctly, Phil reflecting on questions, to which he replied politely. But who is the 'we' and the women included? Left out of jokes and photos, Sarah felt quite secluded. "It's like when you're in high school, and they're like" team up, there's always one person left," and I think, that's us.

Chapter 5: Gendered bodies and the impact on embodiment

Chapter 4 presented findings of how participants define and situate activities in MMA as a "controlled violence", highlighting the intersubjective and intercorporeal work whereby members embodied these controlled MMA skills. Chapter 5 complicates these previous findings, illustrating data on how gendered bodies and forms - as performative, normative, and regulatory (Butler 2004, 2011) - interrupt the everyday orderliness of embodying "controlled violence". The chapter, therefore, challenges the understanding of skill embodiment, the definitions of violence outlined by participants, and the management of those definitions (Goffman 1974).

Section 5.1 draws on observations as well as interview data to contextualise the observed ways in which members of the club are spatially organised and segregated by gendered bodies. This separation is a recognisable practice by women in the club - with consequences not only for their skill embodiment but the development of confidence to take up space and even interact with others in the club (Young 2005). I extend these points in section 5.2, bringing attention to examples where mixed-gender sparring takes place and the interactional strategies, such as civil inattention (Goffman 1963), adopted by some men to avoid women pairing with women. In the last section (section 5.3), we hear from men in the MMA club and their interpretations and reasoning for why these issues might be taking place. At that point, contradictions around violence are extended, hinting at what other forms of violence might be taking place in Fight or Flight MMA club.

Across the chapter, we see how women are perceived as weak and as something to be protected. Ironically, however, these perceptions leave women to be left out, secluded, and limited in their embodiment. Who gets to do this "controlled" MMA violence is highly regulatory, and the assumptions of *which* bodies can fight and what bodies get to enjoy these violent skills (and arguably enjoy being in the MMA club) are brought to attention.

5.1 Upholding gender norms through separation

MMA and other MACS sports have often been discussed as a "male preserve" (e.g., Matthews 2016; Wacquant 2004), despite women competing within those spaces (see Channon and Jennings 2014). The whole thesis relates to this in different ways, but it

is here that the critical discussions of embodiment and violence raised in chapter 4 start to form. The first element of this section illustrates the separation of gendered bodies experienced in training and their role in the embodiment process. I then present interview data from Sarah and Lily (and my own experiences), which discuss the impact of this separation in various ways.

5.1.1 Mapping the significance of gender

As discussed in chapter 4, there were different skill levels in Fight or Flight MMA, with members of the club attending for various amounts of time. Skills were also not naturally occurring but embodied by 'making it automatic' and 'un-programming' bodies in intersubjective and reflexive ways (Crossley 2004a; Crossley 2004b; Crossley 2005). These experiences were also specific to the physical space of the dojo floor (its diameters approximately 20 meters by 9 meters), with different skills and techniques mapped to three general areas: 'the cage' (approximately 4 meters by 4 meters in diameter), the open mat floor (around 14 meters by 7.5 meters), as well as the striking bags (Figure 6). Steve would direct bodies into these different areas with direct orders ("Experienced guys over here, newbies over there") to more suggestive comments ("Back on the mat, we're probably going to split the class now"). This separation process, however, was also gendered (Figure 7 and 8):

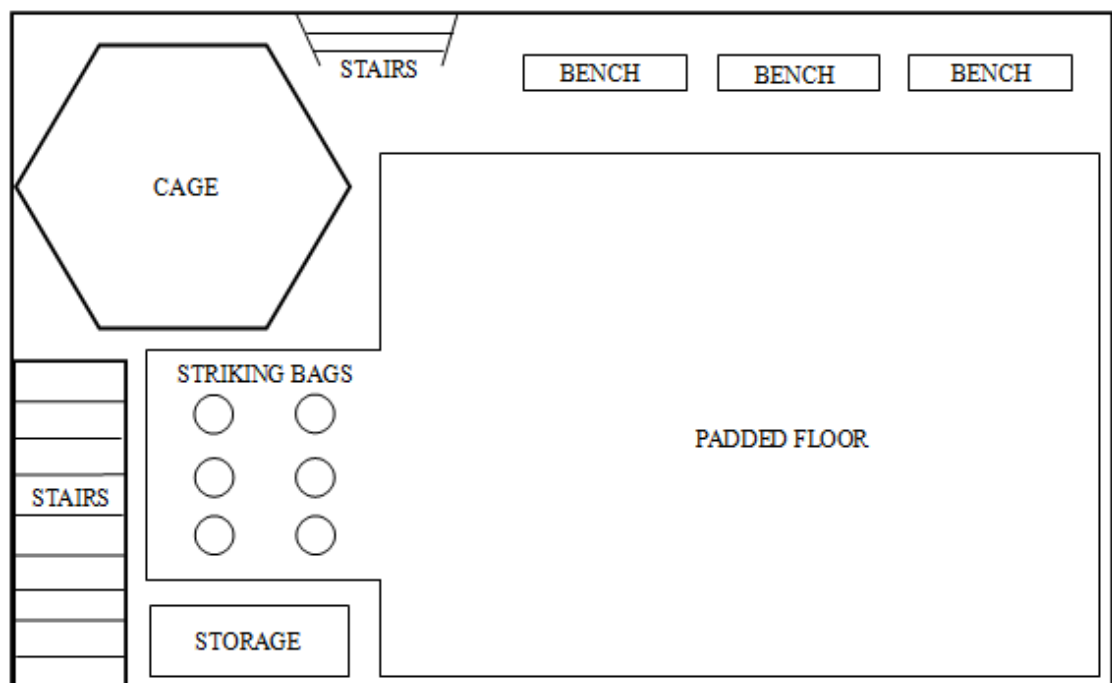


Figure 6: A map of Fight or Flight MMA club

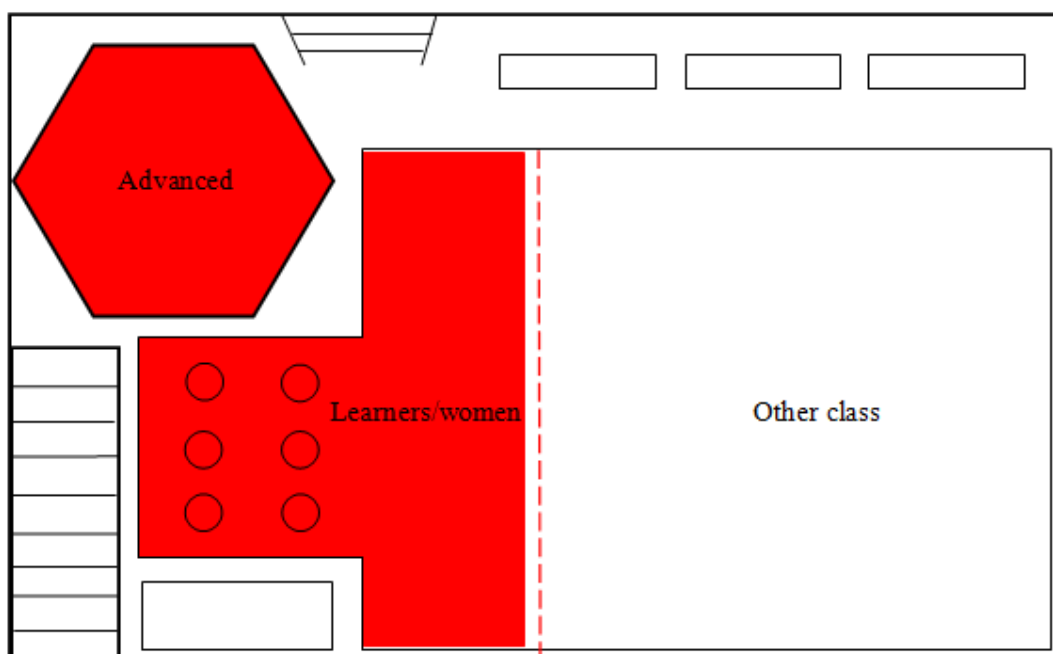


Figure 7: Separation of bodies with another class taking place

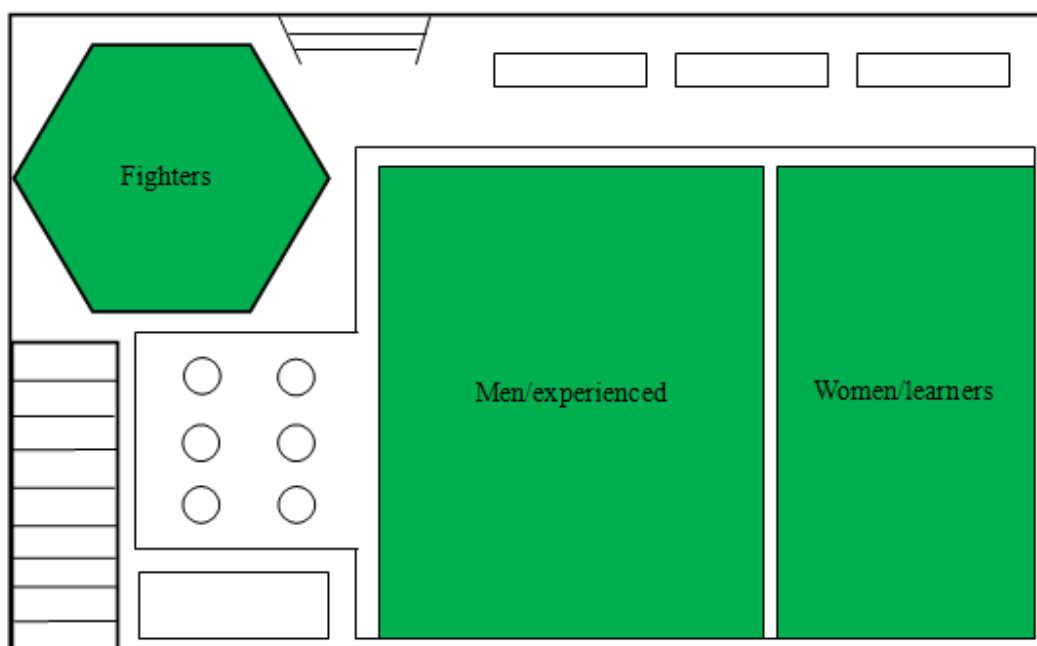


Figure 8: Separation of bodies in Fight or Flight MMA

However, the two maps above were typical of the first class (red) and the second class (green) on each evening where training took place. Usually, women were on their own for the class or paired with the newcomers if numbers were needed. In my previous

experiences of MMA training at the Welsh Warriors and Dragon MMA (John 2016), I had to spar with men, given that I was the only woman; but I also enjoyed it! You can imagine my surprise upon the immediate separation in the club where, rather than generally encouraging mixed-gender sparring, gendered bodies were a key organisational feature that segregated the club. Although I do not analyse the specifics of 'space' here, women in the club seem to be women merely "positioned in space" (Young 2005, p.39) – with the privilege of spatial movements (and bodily engagement) granted to men's bodies. I was interested in these separations, and it was evident upon speaking to Lily and Sarah that they noticed these general separations of gendered bodies but also being paired with the 'new guys':

Zoe: What I've noticed as well, again probably integration and stuff, so if I'm in a pair with two newish guys-

Sarah: [interrupts me] - but that's the other thing though, it does kind of piss me off because they put the woman with the new guys...it's like I struggle with the new guys because, I mean, I can hold the pads for them no problem, but they can't hold the pads for me...when someone holds the pads badly I end up injuring myself... Wednesday, for example...there was a certain number, so everyone else was in pairs, and he [coach] was like "I'll take you on the pads"...and it kind of made me think like okay, I can kind of understand why you're taking an 11-year-old, compared to someone that's nearly thirty and he can't hold the pads for them, but I'm capable of doing that...it's a bit of a kick in the teeth, and it is a bit frustrating, and I find it belittling...I wouldn't expect him to put me with the top-of-the-class people, but I would think at this point that I'm capable of holding my own. If I can hold pads for coach, then I can hold for most in that class, but I think it's more to do with perception than ability, you know?

It seemed that Sarah could not wait to express her experience of being paired with "new guys", interrupting me as I spoke. There is an annoyance and sense of embarrassment ("it does kind of piss me off"/"I find it belittling") of not only being paired with them consistently but also (in the instance above) being paired with an 11-year-old. One of the greater issues in being paired with 'new guys' is that it is limiting her own abilities ("they can't hold the pads for me"). Despite having proven herself

capable of holding pads for Steve (arguably the most advanced person in the club), she seems to be consistently paired with those new to the club. Sarah is also risking injury, given that these new guys are unable to hold the pads for her.¹¹ Perhaps Steve is holding her back as he perceives her as a weaker person (because she is a woman) ("more to do with perception than ability").

I could sympathise with Sarah. I had also experienced the endless pairing with "new guys". For example, during a boxing training segment, I was put in a three with two new guys, while other men in the class (who have less striking skills than myself) were put into pairs. It was a little frustrating, particularly as it was the only MMA skill I had some confidence in! Interestingly, Steve often mentioned to "partner with someone around your own weight", but this was still often overruled for women based on gendered bodies. Lily discussed this issue, noting the dangers of her always pairing with women:

Lily: I'm a big girl...being paired against Steph [who visited the club a few times], I think I'm the bad match because if we were fighting or something, we'd be totally different weight classes. That's where injuries occur. I would have been better off being with one of the guys in the class because they're a similar weight, a similar build, and I think trying to pair women together...doesn't always work because you have to look at physiques and builds and stuff like that ... it's similar in Krav [maga]. I was matched with one of the instructors. She went over on her ankle because I just had more strength than she did... I just think that's more dangerous than "Oh well, they might have different sexes, but we can still put them together". Doesn't matter, like, at the end of the day, you're there to fight. It's not, sex is irrelevant. Doesn't matter if it's male or female; look at the weight classes...

For Lily, her insecurities when grappling with other (lower weight) women are based on previous experiences of hurting others ("I just had more strength than she did"), with Steph injured during that training session due to Lily's strength. The reality of their difference in weight is brought to attention ("totally different weight classes"), and the

¹¹ Unlike sparring, pad work enables the practitioner to hit full force into the padded mitts, which are fitted over the pad holder's hands. When these pads do not 'absorb' the power or are misplaced, the striker often overextends the arm.

safety of their bodies is the concern ("that's where injuries occur"). For Lily, the purpose of the MMA as a practice outweighs gender's relevancy in organising activities of the club ("you're there to fight. It's not, sex is irrelevant"). These frustrations are evident in other literature on mixed-gender training and fighting, too, with fighters commenting that "putting us in [gendered] different divisions is like, well stupid to begin with" (Channon 2013a, p.1296). Segregated training is perceived as dismissive and trivialising (see also Channon 2013b, p.96), and there are substantial issues to the materiality of women's bodies bound to weakness and sexual/ised associations, discussed below.

5.1.2 The problem of touch: Sexualised and weak

It is difficult to imagine sports having no categories at all, given they are so fundamental (and naturalising) in our experiences of gender. This naturalising construction is also taking place in training, where separations (like those in figures 4 and 5) protect the gender dynamics of sport and the normative gender binary. Stereotypes around strength and ability are significantly reinforced in these separations, but equally, the sexualising and objectification of women's bodies seem to play a role in the separations, too. Sarah and Lily's responses show an awareness of these issues:

Lily: I don't think the guys like being paired with the girls. A few reasons: a) Awkward touching, and b) I feel like they don't think we can handle as much...I always feel like they're doing things more gently and stuff and it's like, no, just come on, seriously...the only way I'm gonna learn is if it's done properly...

In Lily's response, there are some indications as to why this separation of gendered bodies might be taking place. I will discuss "Awkward touching" momentarily, but I would like to draw attention to the second point Lily raises first. Stating that "they don't think we can handle as much", there is a perceived weakness given to women in training. Perhaps when Steve decides to separate the club in these ways, it is a chivalrous (albeit chauvinist) way to 'protect' women in the club, given our perceived weaknesses. The occasion of putting the "new guys" with women is more interesting in

this respect. Does it mean these "new guys" are basically 'women' due to their lacking skills? There are also issues to address with the concept of "controlled violence" and training together raised across chapter 4, given Lily's experiences of men performing techniques or sparring "more gently". Embodiment is arguably restricted, given that pain is an essential part of sparring and grappling. In fact, as Rhys mentioned previously, pain and performing techniques properly is a major point of preparation for fighting, putting Lily (and others) at a significant and dangerous disadvantage. As Lily says, "the only way I'm gonna learn is if it's done properly", and women's lived-bodily experiences (Weaving 2015; Young 2005) are arguably limited.

There are also issues of "Awkward touching". Lily does not explain what she means by 'awkward', but from the literature, my own experiences, and other data, this awkwardness seems to develop in particular to grappling-based techniques. When women's bodies confront men in training, techniques are not able to *just* be techniques through *just* a body; they were embodied through a dangerous body to touch (a gendered and a sexual/ised body). When rubbing, grabbing, and hitting, the techniques become something experienced that is not neutral. Sarah speaks of this awkwardness too:

Sarah: Yeah...especially when it comes to grappling. There is an element from a male point of view like, "Oh my god, I'm going to touch a boob or something", or "Oh my god, I'm gonna go north-south and stick my nuts in her face". So, I think there is an element of that. Also, I spoke to Steve about this, and I said you know, why don't the guys go: "You fancy a grapple?", and I think he said something like, "it's out of shyness as well"...Maybe they think I might misconstrue that it's a type of come-on...But yeah, I think I found it quite difficult. Because I used to do Taekwondo which is, there's no floor work or anything like that. I found it quite hard and "Ah, this is a bit terrifying, you know,"...especially when somebody goes, "Right, I'm gonna mount you", or "Can I be in your guard" and you basically have to put your legs missionary style it's kinda like, "Ah this is a bit close and uncomfortable". I did feel like that for quite some time, actually, but then I kind of relaxed into it a bit and realised that's just the way it is. Um, but there was a few blushes and giggly moments. I've got this guy in-between my legs, yeah, haha.

From anxious notions ("oh my god, I'm going to touch a boob"/ "shyness as well maybe") to more aggressive sexual overtones ("stick my nuts in her face"/"I'm gonna mount you"), the closeness of bodies in training was a primary cause for awkwardness and discomfort. Some techniques or actions could also be interpreted as a sexual approach or even harassment ("a type of come on"). I wonder what Sarah is also referring to in being "relaxed into"; perhaps it is the micro-social violence of the heterosexual matrix or even the closeness of bodies. Interestingly, Sarah's response suggests that inattention (Goffman 1963) towards sexual associations around bodies is required when training ("that's just the way it is"/ "I kind of relaxed into it a bit"). Nevertheless, as the next chapter section illustrates, this inattention is not always reciprocated by others.

Sexualising narratives are also materialised in issues around touching women's bodies. A memorable encounter from my own experiences was a grappling scenario with Sean. As Sean was new to the MMA club and friends with Lily, he generally sparred with her in 'the women's area'. There were moments when women's bodies proved to be something of a discomfort in grappling. In one instance, Sean 'tapped out' on my bottom, and I did not realise he touched that area until he raised it (not that I would have a problem with it anyway). Sean simultaneously laughed and seemed to panic, moving away from his position on my body quickly and asked, "Did I just slap you on the arse?". There was a look of horror alongside a hint of humour on his face, with Sean's immediate response to tapping my bottom telling of his anxieties. I was not just a 'sparring partner', but a 'woman' foremost. There was another occasion with Sean where, when watching Lily and I grapple, he said to us that "All I see is making out". It was interesting that jokes about sexualising women's bodies were easily made, but to train with us properly was too awkward or difficult (a point emphasised in chapter 6).

The anxiety of mixed-gender training was so substantial that Steve frequently called upon my positionality as researcher-participant to alleviate those anxieties. On numerous occasions where I intended only to observe, Steve would approach me while I wrote my field notes, questioning my intentions ("We're one short if you wanna join in?") or asking me to participate ("Would you mind stepping into the second class"). On other occasions, more direct points were raised around the gender dynamics of sparring partners:

"Do you mind jumping in for this one, 'cause I think he's [Mike] feeling a bit awkward". I turn to look at the floor and see Lily grappling with Mike. With no warm-up, no bobble¹², and no intention of joining in... I join in. Sarah arrives. Coach looked relieved...We go in a three. Field notes 23/07/2018.

Mike's timidity in approaching Lily's body was apparent, appearing unsure where to place his hands and how to press his groin into her body. Despite putting myself at risk of injury due to not warming up, the adjustments were made for Mike (a 'new guy'), who was 'feeling a little awkward' (or perceived this way by Steve). Interestingly, it was never explained why he was anxious, but it was explained by the coach because of gendered body parts. Equally, this applies to gender norms: that women are weak and vulnerable.

From the interactions and interviews, the "male point of view" is arguably the point of view that matters, with heteronormative presumptions around the sexual/ised awkwardness of bodies arguably embedded in them. The normalised understanding of sex/gender/sexuality is operating in a way that presents discomfort through these sporting practices, and this homonormativity feeds the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. For instance, Sarah shows anxieties around the closeness of bodies between herself and some of the men in the club, but not other women. Equally, would Sean have reacted the same if it were a man's bottom? It would have been interesting to see if any of the men were openly gay, or the women openly lesbians (or 'bi' or 'pan' or nonbinary) and whether the awkwardness around touching would be so frequent.

These are important reflections to consider throughout the chapter, but there is further data on mixed-gender sparring, which I would like to draw attention to next. For, when mixed-gender sparring did occur, there were still interactional methods of avoidance and separation taking place.

5.2 Interactional management and the impact on embodiment

In section 5.1, we have heard from Lily, Sarah, and myself about some of the problems around segregated training. The section also started to present reasonings why this might be, including the sexualising of women's bodies (particularly in grappling) and the

¹² Hair tie

presumed weaknesses of women. Despite the potential for mixed-gender training to disrupt gendered stereotypes (see Channon 2013a, p.1297; Channon and Jennings 2013), in Fight or Flight MMA, mixed-gender sparring revealed significant orders and anxieties around gender, and there were methods of maintaining the separation of bodies as in section 5.1. I give attention to these instances, discussing strategies by club members to avoid women's bodies, taking from Goffman's (1963) civil inattention. I also contribute further to the analysis of frame (Goffman 1974) and the perceived problems of maintaining definitions of the sparring/grappling encounter in mixed-gender sparring. I finish the section by reflecting on my own bodily management and consider the impact of these experiences for women (and their embodiment) in the club (Young 2005).

5.2.1 Interactional management in the sparring encounter

As an important focused interaction, sparring relies heavily on non-verbal forms of communication in the production of a sparring encounter. Very rarely does anyone ask specifically, "Do you want to spar with me?". Rather, head nods, eye engagement, and fist bumps indicate such a question, with club members moving across the dojo floor, positioning themselves closer to the next person to partner with in time for the next round. However, mixed-gender sparring had different interactional strategies to avoid women's bodies, such as civil inattention.

The concept of civil inattention reflects the ability to manage privacy in a public space and the maintenance of public social order through disattending to others' actions (Goffman 1966). Fight or Flight MMA is more semi-public than entirely public, but these are still groups of individuals of varying associations who must manage the training space. Civil inattention is used in a variety of ways in the club, with inattention to bodies in managing space (see similarities Crossley 2004a), and also hinted as a possibility to establish the situation as non-sexual as Sarah mentioned in section 5.1 (see similarities to Scott 2009, p.133). However, women's bodies trouble this inattention and the primary framework of sparring. Instead, the inattention is often displayed in moments of picking a sparring partner. Strategies such as visual notices, intention displays, or 'body glosses' (Goffman 1963) ranged from non-verbal and indirect methods and included many of the men in the club averting their eyes from our glance or turning their backs away from our sight. Some members who were too close,

or perhaps too anxious, to use indirect methods of aversion also spoke directly of decisions not to participate, usually claiming they are "Just gonna sit out for this round", or go to drink, go to the toilet, or to check something in their bag. Discussing sparring with Lily and Sarah in their interviews (and in my own observation), these techniques were well-noted:

Lily: I remember once when it came round to grappling, and there was this one guy just seemed really hesitant, and suddenly his shoulder was really playing up, and he sat out for like two minutes, and by the next round, he had got in with another guy...I think he was just avoiding being paired and grappling too much.

"One of the guys looked around and caught my eye. He looked hesitant and quickly turned his body away. As other members started partnering up, he didn't look back for me as a sparring partner. Instead, he waited, staring at the stairs, rubbing his ankle for a while for a few minutes until one of the other guys came back from the toilet. They joined as a pair. Field notes, 27/06/2018.

Lily's observation of her partner's shoulder "really playing up" and for him to then return to sparring "with another guy" is a good example of a potential fabrication. It *could* be that he was hurting one minute and not the next, but these actions seem to be a way "to manage activity so that... others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on" (Goffman 1974, p.83). To pretend to have an injury is more worthy of saving face than saying, "I am not comfortable sparring with you" (although some men do say so openly, as I discuss later in section 5.3). The individual "rubbing his ankle" looking at the stairs (so he did not have to engage in awkward conversation with me?) is another example.

Faking an injury or avoiding gaze ("he didn't look back") are arguably coping mechanisms for bodies that are not expected to be in this space. Goffman writes that "the human body and the touching of it will figure in the issue of frame maintenance" (Goffman 1974, p.36), and we see (not only in the above example but through the chapter) that the primary framework of 'sparring' is challenged. There is a possibility to disattend to our bodies as sexualised women and instead as training partners (Goffman 1972, p.202-207), but it is not taking place in these examples. Men in the club "cannot

see us as other than females who can be touched for one purpose and one purpose only" (Pascale et al. 1970, p.19 quoted in Goffman 1974, p.36).

In my previous research, anxieties around touching women's bodies were experienced. However, coaches actively encouraged the hitting and touching of my body (John 2016, p.53) - indeed, "hitting them hard enough to make them want to hit back" (McNaughton 2012, p.7; see also Channon and Jennings 2013, p.496-497; McGinnis et al. 2005). I wonder why Steve did not encourage us in the same ways as my other coaches did. It could even be argued in some ways that women "routinely function as nonpersons" (Goffman 1974, p.207), not even "present in a relevant way" (Goffman 1974, p.207). It sometimes felt that we were irrelevant, whether in our training corner of the gym or on the side of the dojo without a training partner. Some women in other MACS contexts see the necessity of being "extremely proactive" (Kavoura et al. 2015, p.141) in choosing a partner in sparring/grappling. Perhaps we should have adapted this strategy too. Although, as in the field notes above, even when paired, there is the possibility of self-management to withdraw from mixed-gender sparring. There is arguably a "mental block for guys to hit girls" (Channon and Jennings 2013, p.492), but decisions to not spar with women might also be due to the potential loss of face. In my experiences in MMA for several years, I have received explicit comments about the loss of face ("I can't believe I'm getting beaten up by a girl" John 2016, p.51]). These strategies might also be a way of upholding notions of male strength and abilities as martial artists (Velija et al. 2013, p.538), given the shame (and emasculation) of potentially being beaten by a woman.

5.2.2 Gender and self-management

If - to borrow from Crossley here - "Embodied self-awareness involved dys-appearance" (Crossley 2007, p.83-4), the fact that women's bodies are constantly 'appearing' and made relevant is a major problem for embodiment. There are consequences from anxiety, low self-esteem (which I experienced), and limiting skill retention and development (referenced by Sarah and Lily in section 5.1). Women's bodies were consistently framed as body-objects (Weaving 2014, 2015; Young 2005), and over time I realised the extent of my anxieties around my body and the attempts to manage them. For instance, I would try to hide areas of the body that could be interpreted as dangerous (my breasts, pubic area). I would wear shorts over my

leggings so the outline of my bottom would not be easily seen. I would wear thick t-shirts to hide any cleavage – despite all these layers often being uncomfortable. I tried to erase traces of anything which could be interpreted as feminine or sexualised entirely (see similarities in Maclean 2019, p.824). These moments are difficult to admit, knowing that we should "stop apologizing for the space [she] take[s] up in the world (Lawler 2002, p.43). I wish I had asked Sarah and Lily about their experiences with their bodies and presentation methods in detail, but this can be an idea for further research discussed in chapter 8. Nevertheless, Sarah and Lily indicated other interactional management that they undertook, often relating to their lacking confidence:

Lily: I kind of wait to see if anyone comes to me before looking like, "Right, let's go", ...because I'm like, just in case. Especially with the pro class, which is why I kind of stopped going to that class as well. I'm not at that level, and I'm probably holding them back, and it's probably just frustrating for them. Whereas the beginning one, I'm happy to do that because that's what we're all there for.

Other research on mixed-gender sparring shows how women may hold themselves back from developing opportunities, avoiding "prestigious positions that reflect the competency of their [combat] skills" (Maclean 2019, p.823). There are self-imposed limitations on bodily movement for Lily as a woman here, too (Young 2005, p.36), with a self-imposition around her confidence in approaching others. Rather than actively choosing a partner, she simply waits ("wait to see if anyone comes to me"), even to the extent of withholding a sense of excitement in her facial expressions ("before looking like "right let's go"). Perhaps this is Lily's own sense of reserving face (Goffman 1959) for what seems like an inevitable sense of being left out. Her discomfort in the advanced class seems based on her inhibiting men's sparring ("probably just frustrating for them"), showing less interest in her progression.

I should say here that all members were encouraged to attend the advanced class. Many "new guys" stayed on, on many occasions. Lily's decision not to continue attending, however, was understandable. I wonder what consequences Lily interprets in her clause of "just in case" - was she potentially anxious about being ignored or declined? In asking Sarah about difficulties with MMA training, I had expected a

discussion of techniques or fitness. But, as in her reply below, the issues experienced through mixed-gender training are powerful:

Sarah: Well, I mean, you can think about this in two different ways. Difficulty in the actual movement, or you can think difficultly in the kind of social sense. Like what you hit upon before, the social sense it's male-dominated. It's how it's perceived by a woman when they're not as willing to work with you as they would with other men. That's hard. [Later]

Zoe: Well, I mean, if you feel like no one wants to spar with you-

*Sarah: -Yeah, like if no one wants to include you in the class, that's it, isn't it?...I know coach would love to have more women come along...but it's the rest of the class. You don't want to feel segregated like you're the only one. Even now, I still feel like that sometimes. It's like when you're in high school, and they're like "Team up", and there's always one person left, and I was that girl, and I kind of feel like that same kind of feeling now when everyone's like pair up and have a grapple, and I'm like *looks around*.*

There was a sense of frustration and almost sadness in Sarah's voice while we spoke. Not just in referencing the ratio of men to women in the club ("it's male-dominated"), but more so regarding the lack of interest ("they're not as willing to work with you"). Arguably, "male-dominated" might not even only refer to the number count of members, but perhaps it extends to the amount of space given to men in the club (illustrated in Section 5.1). Sarah had attended the club for several years, and the fact that she was still experiencing these difficulties was upsetting. Sarah also didn't often attend the advanced class unless Lily or I participated. I could relate to Sarah's agitation with my own experiences of being ignored in sparring ("if you feel like no one wants to spar with you"). A powerful metaphor (or memory?) of Sarah being picked in high school reflects the power of her experiences in the club, not just in being different from others in the club as a woman but being alone ("there's always one person left and I was that girl").

5.3 Embodying a gendered belonging

Section 5.2 gave examples of civil inattention, where some members of Fight or Flight MMA would avoid training with women's bodies in differing ways. These visible interactional constraints interrupt expectations of MMA embodiment, where women's bodies are biologically and discursively presented as problems and making trouble (Butler 2004, 2011). I bring this point to attention once more in section 5.3.1, hearing from Phil, who – as a seasoned fighter for Fight or Flight MMA – provides a brief history of women in the club. While doing so, he situates women's positionality in MMA fighting and the difficulties around hitting and touching women relative to violence against women. The ethical issues of 'how far to go' (García 2013, p.157) in training are raised here, where women's bodies disrupt the gendered scripts of who 'the fighter' is (according to Phil). This disruption is embedded within gendered understandings of power and abuse (section 5.3.2), but we start to see another layer of potential issues around gender in the club in this section. It is not *just* about the awkwardness of touch and potential connotations of abuse that is a problem. It is also in other instances of separation and segregation, discussed in section 5.3.3.

5.3.1 "We don't think you belong there, we'll say you don't belong there": A gendered construction of 'the fighter'.

Phil: ...it's a really family-oriented club. Not in the fact that we're very PC, but in that, we look after people. We don't take any idiots. We don't like dickheads 'cause if they come in, they get backed up till they get humble or they don't last...there's no "I'm a bigger belt than you; therefore you gotta do as you're told". You earn the respect you get there. And it's not a case of you gotta prove yourself day in, day out, but you earnt the respect you get there rather than earning a belt just because it's the next rung in the ladder sort of nonsense... they get what they want out of it, but we don't, you're here to fight. If you don't wanna fight and you just wanna get fit, cool. But you stay that end of the pool, and we'll stay our end of the pool 'cause that's where we need to be to do what we do. An' as long as people understand that we got no problem, people jumping in with us. An' were just quite an honest club like we're not subtle in any way,

shape, or form. We don't think you belong there, we'll say you don't belong there. Wanna prove us wrong? Cool. But we don't write you off; we say, "Well, we wanna do this, and if you're not helping us, you're in the way".

I have intentionally begun this section without an introduction. In my initial re-viewing of the data, the above was a powerful extract that seemed to underpin varying issues of this chapter. It was so blunt and honest, and although Phil is not discussing women directly here, arguably, he is.

Phil recognises different reasons for attending the MMA club ("wanna get fit"); however, the progression of the club as a "family" (and himself as a fighter) was significant for including or excluding ("if you're not helping us you're in the way"/"you stay that end of the pool and we'll stay our end of the pool"). Family is an interesting term for Phil to use, which initially created imagery of togetherness, but on further consideration, there are darker structures at play within that family which could further this analysis. What does it mean to be considered 'family'? Does this refer to the long-standing members of the club or current fighters? Phil disdains structures in general martial arts clubs where belt hierarchy is a more generalised experience ("therefore you gotta do as you're told"). This seems to be an indication of who the "idiots" and "dickheads" may be (people who like or are part of those systems), and who would not fit into the family. The family is also a specific social group with gendered roles and power dynamics, and the contrast between family and "Not in the fact that we're very PC" raises analytic interest. I wonder why it was necessary for Phil to distinguish between the nurturing concept of "looking after people" as juxtaposed with being politically correct. Chapter 6 certainly raises points around this 'non-PC' nature in humour.

The mention of being at risk in the "pool" was also an interesting metaphor, and the 'deep end' is arguably illustrated in figures 4 and 5. To be in "our end of the pool deep" is to be more skilful (and arguably a male space, too) with those "jumping in" simply experiencing in a small way what it is like to train or fight. Phil talks with a sense of aggression in relation to those visiting ("we'll say you don't belong there"), but I also wonder how the united 'we' is configured by Phil. Are 'we' himself and Steve? The older fighters? It also begs the question of how people can prove desires to those in the 'deep end' when they are destined to be "in the way" throughout that journey (as

Lily reflects in section 5.2.2). Phil holds to the idea that "Some people just aren't meant to fight", suggesting that fighting skill is a natural ability rather than an embodied process ("they don't have what it takes") – a contrast in ways to chapter 4. Does he (or other fighters) decide this and act ("we'll say you don't belong there") before "they" might even realise they want to fight? In asking about Phil's experiences and knowledge of women in the club, the powerful links start to emerge:

Phil: Uh, not many [women who have fought]...There's two that I remember... obviously, we've had girls train with us but not many competitive females in the club as such. But then, we are quite a male-oriented club, for risk of sounding sexist, it's a very male-oriented sport. Generically that's the way it looks anyway. Like I was saying to some of the guys last night, some of the best fights on the card last night were the women fighters because they were more technical; they didn't just rely on brute strength. So we've had a few female fighters, and generally, they're quite savage. They're more violent than most of the guys 'cause the way they are...But then the girls that are coming, they're not there to compete; they're there to just get in to shape or to basically train with the lads because that's what their boyfriend does or they wanna or be doing something different rather than run on a treadmill a couple of miles a day...but we've had at least two girls fight competitively...So it's not like they haven't had a good result from it. It's just I don't think it's uh, you gotta have a certain mindset, even for a bloke, but more so for a woman that if you're gonna walk into a place like that, you gotta have a reason to be there. You wanna compete, cool, but I think the majority of the reason is to look good rather than perform any sort of level of expertise – I think anyway.

Despite the club being in existence for approximately 10 years, Phil remembers just two women who have fought (and still see this as a "good result"). This apparent lack is somewhat justified for Phil, noting Fight or Flight MMA is "quite a male-oriented club". Associating MMA as a sport for men ("it's a very male-oriented sport") is not uncommon (e.g., Vacarro and Swauger 2016), especially given that the fighting body, in general, has been constructed as male (Woodward 2008). As Phil goes on, MMA training/fighting is difficult "even for a bloke" ("you gotta have a certain mindset), and

this is required "more so for a woman" – but to say "a place like that" could mean a variety of things. It could be physical or mental toughness, but it could also be the club culture which could be sexist and toxic (discussed in chapter 6). It seems that women must show more effort even to be seen as a worthy sparring partners, a point not uncommon where women 'invade' traditionally male spaces: where women must "be absolutely outstanding" to have even a sense of recognition "rather than just plain good" (Channon 2013b, p. 96; Puwar 2004, p.93).

Women are seen as appropriating the space with an assumed intent to look good as opposed to developing a skill, fight, or even potentially for self-confidence or protection ("the reason is to look good"). Surely getting fit is reason enough, but for Phil, it is not the right reason ("you gotta have a reason to be there"). It is also unlikely that all men and women attending the club have goals to fight, and such a goal is arguably something that develops with time. Nevertheless, a clear distinction was made between the men in the club and women; a man training to look good wasn't even possible. Despite Phil noting, "we don't write you off", it is arguably hard to "earn the respect" when there are few chances given to demonstrate and develop.

The acknowledgement that *some* women can fight may be a justification to potentially protect himself from critique ("some of the best fights...were the women"). It might be that Phil is distinguishing here between "hard" (Mennesson 2000) or "different types" of women (Mierzewski and Phipps 2015, p.243) that might be unusual (Velija et al. 2013, p.534). The category work around 'female fighter' sets out the rule that female fighters are more technical (mentioned in Spencer 2012, p.69), but there have been exceptions. However, the rule stands because those that were 'savage' because of the "way they were" as individuals. Later in the same interview, Phil mentions that "I'm not gonna do the same sort of jokes or the same sort of techniques 'cause it's just not fair". So, despite being happy to watch women's MMA fighting, Phil may still be somewhat uncomfortable training with women. I wonder what sorts of jokes are being said and if that is what Phil is referring to about "a good result from it" ('it' potentially reflecting the 'non-PC nature of the club').

In these interactions, "woman" is more significant than "fighter" (and might even block the applicability of that category), where being a woman and being a good fighter are contradictory or incompatible (see also Kavoura et al. 2015, p.142; Matthews 2014). Rhys also reflects on the 'male orientation' of the club while referring to contradictions of gender norms:

*Rhys: Karate was a massive mix, but in MMA, there's been about 4 or 5 girls in the whole time I've been training there. It's always been more masculine orientated...it's fighting. People perceive it as a man thing to do; it's not a 'girly' thing to do...they were new [women who did attend], they didn't really stick with it. Cause, it's that thing of getting hot and sweaty rolling around with someone. It's awkward positions. It's not what women seem to seem to be comfortable with... it's not socially acceptable for a woman to wanna roll around the floor with a bunch of blokes. It's not seen as what you do, so people feel a social stigma with it. It'd be like me walking around with a dress. I'd look fit as fuck, **but** it wouldn't be socially acceptable.*

It is interesting that Rhys comments, "It's not what women...seem to be comfortable with", given the desires for more mixed-gender training mentioned by Sarah and Lily. The "awkward positions" is again raised as an issue, but I find the theme around what is "socially acceptable" particularly interesting, and that Rhys emphasises this. It is "not socially acceptable" to be "hot and sweaty rolling around with someone" as a woman, but it is not recognised as a problem for men. Rhys says that fighting is "not a 'girly' thing to do", with "masculine orientated" not associated with the possibilities of the female body. I wonder if there are other reasons that women "didn't really stick with it", and chapter 6 gives an insight into the possible reasons. The performative script of the 'fighter' is, in its foundation, a masculine one, but a masculine one enacted by and through men (see also Halberstam 1998).

As well as matters of gendered performance (and the maintenance of intelligibility), there is a final analytical point to present, which explains further issues of training with women. This issue has been briefly mentioned in this chapter and underpins the contradictions across chapter 6, too – that is, violence against women.

5.3.2 Perceptions of gendered violence and decisions in training

The treatment of women in Fight or Flight MMA reflects the various expectations of gender, which are also representative of a highly heteronormative concept around physical inter-personal gendered violence (men not hitting women). When asking Phil directly why there are uncomfortable feelings when training with women, he recognises

and makes relevant gendered dualisms of strength and weakness. Equally, various types of violence might be recognisable from chapter 4 (section 4.2.1) mentioned in the extract:

Phil: I used to be [uncomfortable training with women], but I think that was a personal thing, 'cause I was always raised "don't hit girls". Just don't. And as a boy, you can't hit your sister, you can't do this, that, an' the other. That's generically the way it was... like I always think back like Steve's girlfriend, she's pretty, she probably weighs about 8 stone wet an' if I 'it her I'll probably break her. But I won't try and hit her; I'll try and make her hit me. I won't let her hit me; I'll move around a little bit and become a movement exercise rather than a test of strength or anything...Grappling, obviously, that's a bit different. You obviously have to be a bit wary of where you put your hands but again, I've had a few girls say the same thing, "What happens if you touch me there?". Well, unfortunately, you're in a wrestling sport. So, if we do high crotch takedown, that basically means my arms are gonna go in-between your legs, an' I will end up picking you up by your crotch. If I wanna pin you to the floor, my hand might end up on your chest. Like, obviously, if it lingers there and it becomes something else, then there's a problem. But I don't think, I've never heard of the issue in the club because we're generally, we're not sexist, but we have a very dark sense of humour. Obviously, everyone knows we're not exactly a PC club. But we got girls and young females...and we don't rag doll 'em, but we throw them around. We know they can't beat us, but we let them practise techniques, we throw them around, so they get a bit of a sweat on... like with Ellen, put 'em in submissions, not slammed 'em on or anything. But then it's not, you're not doing it to prove, you're doin' it to show them something, you're using them to experiment on something you wouldn't usually do because you didn't have the opportunity. But I've never had, touch wood, never seen any issue with the clubs I've trained with 'em.

Gendered violence and the protection of women relative to norms about 'not hitting women' ("don't hit girls") are present here. At points, there seems to be transitioning opinions around women's bodies, with Phil noting that he "used to be" uncomfortable and changing when familiar with the women ("once I got friends with them"). Nevertheless, there are still contradictions in noting that he "won't try and hit" Steve's

girlfriend but instead use her (and women's bodies?) as a different form of exercise. It was also interesting that Phil mentions "Steve's girlfriend" was pretty as if that is a factor that makes him less comfortable with sparring with her. During my previous research, similar themes (even phrases) were present around hitting women ("there's sort of unwritten code...you don't hit women or children" [John 2016, p.60]). Arguably, the rule of 'not hitting women' is how the masculinity of the MMA fighter is maintained, and the heteronormative abuse and power relations are presented as an account for issues in mixed-gender training. Perhaps if the women Phil engaged with had more masculine bodies or were gay, he would be more comfortable sparring with them.

Again, "we" sounds inclusive. However, relative to who is outside the category 'we' when referring to things like "a very dark sense of humour", inclusivity is questionable, given that the precursor to the topic is somewhat supported by the fact that "we're not sexist, *but*" there are certainly suggestions that could be interpreted. For one, there is little explanation of what their humor entails from Phil's comments. Noting that "obviously everyone knows" could be a form of justifying why some things *might* happen and even be expected to happen because it is simply common knowledge. Grappling is a significant issue once more related to "where you put your hands", but this does not seem to just relate to the assumption of women's anxiety (like it was for Rhys) but about forms of sexual violence too. Phil notes on the timings of touch ("if it lingers"), confirming that 'issues' have never been raised in the club of touch 'becoming something else'. This point, as well as the term "touch wood", seems to indicate that there could be potential 'issues' (whatever those may be) and reflects the reality and normalisation of harassment and assault in everyday life and that it *could* happen. Why it is 'obviously' an issue for Phil is questionable (and complicated) when referencing sexism and a "dark sense of humour". Noting that "we're not exactly a PC club" seems to indicate that as a club, there is engagement with forms of sexism or worse through their humour. Perhaps when faced with women's physical presence in sparring, Phil (and other men) feel self-conscious based on what they have 'joked' about. I wonder things Phil is reflecting upon here, and what limits does it take *not to* be a 'PC' club.

There are some elements of 'controlled' violence in Phil's response ("you're doin' it to show them something"). However, it seems that Phil negotiates behaviour by "using them to experiment" to manage anxieties around touching or hitting women. Yet, this arguably limits the experience of women's embodiment, and to "get a bit of a sweat on" also demeans women's autonomy in their experiences too, compared to Lily's

discussion in the previous section, for example ("only way I'm gonna learn is if it's done properly"). The confidence that women would be inferior ("they can't beat us") also perceives a biological superiority (and thus a power imbalance) which, from Phil's perspective, might make him a bully. We know from chapter 4 that bullying is not idealised as part of MMA fighting (a form of "controlled violence"). Is this why Phil mentions that he does not need to prove himself? Whether or not these are well-intended decisions, the frustration is felt by Lily and Sarah (and myself). For instance, as Sarah and I continued to talk about our experiences in other MMA clubs, I mentioned my experiences with a man who refused to strike me in sparring:

Zoe: He said, "I can't hit you cuz I have a sister".

Sarah: What the fuck? The thing is, though, you're not hitting each other; it's sparring. You're trying to learn, you know what I mean? You're not trying to beat each other up you're trying to help each other improve...And I think that comes from conceptions that people have of what makes them a good person. And in that scenario, what makes you a good person is to spar with that woman, and if you're better, obviously don't fucking knock her out, you know, just help her improve. Give her a tap here and there and take the punches 'cause you can, 'cause you're just a big man, aren't you? ... there is an element when you're sparring with a bloke, if they're inexperienced, they go too hard because they don't want to be beaten by a woman. If they're more experienced than you, they go too soft, and it's kind of, in a way, a little bit belittling. Get what I mean? So it's hard to kind of have a win-win situation in that.

To spar with women complicates 'intelligible masculinity, with the negotiations on how to perform the 'right' masculinity (i.e., not 'soft') recognised by Sarah. This softness seems intensified in the MMA learner space, as men have to ditch their physical power/force to practice their technique'(making them 'vulnerable' [chapter 4]). Equally, the fact that "they don't want to be beaten by a woman" is telling of the patriarchal expectations of power and skill. Women's bodies are not assumed to be capable of these activities. Even with more chivalrous intentions, this is a frustration for Sarah ("cause you're just a big man, aren't you?"), given that chivalry arguably impacts her development and shows little respect to her as a martial artist (Channon 2013b;

Channon et al. 2016). It is also questionable why being beaten by a woman would be shameful, given that they are also training how to fight.

Controlled violence is occasioned in gendered bodies where the threshold of 'control' is experienced differently, with confusions around "what makes you a good person" present throughout the chapter. Gendered bodies (and gendered norms) influence how the actions of these psychically violence skills are perceived where, for Sarah, what makes a "good" person is to hit her (Channon 2013, p.97 discussed similar issues). There is a clear difference in the assessment of the situation and the means of acting accordingly (see Goffman 1974, p.1-2), where training and performing violence *with* women as a mutual embodied experience is incompatible. Instead, the significance of violence *against* women surfaces through these interactions. The contrast between what Phil thinks was 'serious' issues and what Sarah and Lily perceived as serious (actually training properly) was telling. I could imagine Sarah asking in frustration, "will you fucking hit me, for once?" (Channon and Jennings 2013, p.492).

5.3.3 Beyond training: Social separation

Across section 5.3 so far, attention has been brought to the anxieties that might be experienced in mixed-gender training – mainly, violence against women and women perceived as weak. However, there were also examples of separation in interactions beyond the physical training of MMA skills:

It was the end of the session. I walked off the dojo floor with Sarah. One of the men asked if I could take a photo of them (the rest of the club, who were all men). I obliged...I didn't think anything of it. That was until I saw Sarah. The boys line up. She remains seated. They do not invite her over to join in with them, and she remained sat down, packing away her bag. She still looks at them lined up, arms around each other, some fists in the air, some smiling, some serious: the boys. We walk out together. "Well, don't invite me then", she whispers. "I'm not fussed, but it would be nice to be asked, you know?" Field notes 10/09/2018.

This was upsetting to see. Sarah said that she was "not fussed" (despite whispering this to me), but there was a sense that this really upset her. I decided to talk about this

'photo incident' with Sarah during our interview, and it was evident that the segregation experienced in the club extended to these more social (perhaps more fun) elements too:

Sarah: I mean, I know it's a boy thing. I mean, if there was more women there, I probably would. But I kind of feel like I'm imposing on their boy thing if I were to jump in...I mean, I'm not part of their thing because I'm not training to compete. I'm training for my own, you know, to better myself, for my own confidence, to improve my fitness, learn a few moves and things like that...And I think because I don't wanna do that as well kind of segregates me a little bit. I'm not one of the fighters...but I mean, again, with the photo thing, Steve invited me [to join them]. Nobody else did. So that more than anything, I feel segregated because of that. If one of the lads had gone "Yeah, yeah come in", you know... there's a part of me, the stubborn bitch inside me that goes "Fuck you" and pose in front of the photo anyway...but no, it's their thing. Like I said, if there was more women that came to the class, then yeah, I would, but I don't want to be the sort of person...and coach also did say like he put some caption on it saying something like "Sarah's biggest gang bang" or something haha.

In describing the photograph as the 'boys' as opposed to 'fighters', there is an indication that regardless of skill level, there was a position for "new guys" (arguably in a particular end of 'the pool'). Her lack of confidence to join in with the photo or to interrupt it in a comical manner was directly related to the lack of women within the club ("if there was more women...then yeah, I would"). Referring to Phil's discussion of the MMA club as 'family', this family seems to be exclusive. Sarah even respects this exclusion ("their boy thing"/"it's their thing"), and arguably decisions to separate bodies in training can have a broader impact on the differences of who is seen to be truly part of that space. A reflection of the power of "the boy thing" (what may be training and/or fighting), Sarah describes the potential risk in being in a photograph with 'the boys' which is quite specific ("gang bang"). Her perspective of potential risks immediately notes the hyper-heterosexualising nature of why she cannot be 'family', primarily through immediately being sexualised (and violently so). The 'gang bang' joke (or threat?) by Steve is perhaps a punishment for interrupting what he also sees as a boy thing.

There have been varying reflections and data presented across the three analytical sections of this chapter. Some conclusive points will be made next before moving on to chapter 6, which considers other potential types of violence experienced in the club and furthers the analysis of gender performativity.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to demonstrate the varied experiences and difficulties of embodiment through differently gendered bodies in training and of the contractions of "controlled violence" as a result. Section 5.1 firstly produced various illustrations of the Fight or Flight MMA dojo and how bodies are typically moved or directed to certain spaces. These spaces were primarily constructed by gender but also incorporated women paired with the "new guys". Being with these "new guys", however, was limiting for Sarah and Lily (and myself), given that they lacked the capabilities and competencies (like holding the pads, for example). Rather than being paired with men of a similar skill set, these decisions impacted embodied, lived experiences of women in the club, which is recognised and discussed through the interview data with Sarah and Lily.

The fragility of "controlled violence" (and how violence might be perceived) was also realised when mixed-gender sparring did occur, which was the focus of section 5.2. To alleviate potential anxieties about hitting or touching women in the club, interactional strategies such as civil inattention (Goffman 1963) were observed (not just myself but also by Lily). However, the section also highlights the impact of women's bodies on the 'frame' of training (Goffman 1974). The situational expectations of training become fragile through women's bodies, where men do not want to be seen as potentially beating them or touching them in sexualised ways (or indeed being beaten by a woman). Gender and the materiality of the body were inseparable from these embodiment experiences. In section 5.3, we heard from fighters as to why this might be: the sport and club are "male-orientated", and women's participation was perceived as something outside of the norm. Women were typically associated with not wanting to fight (or perhaps capable of fighting) relative to the physical nature of skill and the sociable elements of MMA as to why they might not want to either. The female body de-stabilises and makes ambivalent the naturalised assumptions about

fighting bodies (Butler 2011), and the rules around touching, hitting, and "controlled violence" are refigured. There have also been hints across the chapter around the 'un-PC' nature of the MMA club and how this might impact women's experiences. Chapter 6 focuses on this next.

Fighting Phallusy

Masculinity?
What is it to be?
Typecasting bodies,
categories – not free?
Is it just observed? Felt?
Discursive? Is it belonging or
'Other' perspective? Masculinity?
Is it invisibility? Or has it
a sense of its own
fragility? "*Keep that for
the bedroom, get on
with the drills*". Can
gendered bodies be
separate from skills?
Masculinity? Brings
my body to the fore,
front of the class he
approached when bored.
"*Zoe is a cunt*": coach says
melodically, while mention
of dicks quoted periodically.
Even when writing, banter's
straight from the belt. "*I was
gonna say gobble, gobble
but that could seem like something else*".
Masculinity? It's even in the pens. Coach
mentioned Sherlock then "*Normally a cock*". Leaning on the cage was
another funny case, where hetero-masculinity was forced upon the face, of fighters in training
or learners on the cusp – "*Watch your baby factories*", or "*Very nice, how much?*". Masculinity?
Can you escape it? "*You jumping in?* coach asks (then pretends to suck a penis). Learning
skills, feeling weak, stopping if hot – so many reasons for penis: "*You need to toss 'im off*".
Masculinity? Why is it there? "*Says another thing about 'dick' which I can't quite hear*". The
definitions aren't sparing, the sense of bodies aren't loose. "*Hop into my guard. Any excuse*".
Masculinity? It revolves around junk, junk between legs "*Oh I get top bunk*". The closeness of
their bodies present a fine line. "*The ol' bollocks in the armpit but I'm sure we'll get on fine*".
Was there even a session without dicks, balls, or cunts?
Harassment was evident. Heteronormativity takes front.

Chapter 6: Embodying MMA(asculinity) through humour

In chapter 5, the relationships between men and women constructed within the club are based on the ideals of men's strength, the weakness of women, and women as sexual objects (and objects related to forms of physical and sexual violence). This chapter focuses on the 'un-PC' nature aforementioned, exploring the role of humour in orienting not only the embodiment of MMA skills but of gender performativity. The chapter travels through moments of observation, presenting further findings from the exchanges in which sex/gender/sexual norms are used, made visible, and woven within expectations of fighting. The wordplay of 'fallacy' in the title 'Fighting Phallucy' is worth mentioning before I present to the reader the contexts of this chapter. The title was inspired by Butler's writings of 'the phallus' as a signifier and symbolism of masculinity. In this chapter, we see how 'members' of the club are trying to maintain the materiality of 'fighter' to sexed bodies that are male and heteronormative. I present an analysis of masculinity's phallic conditions—a masculinity that subjects shame through homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic discourse.

Section 6.1 focuses on how gender is used and accomplished in particular ways through disciplinary humour. That is, how bodies are disciplined according to MMA skills and technique requirements, but equally to the performances of a specific MMA masculinity. The second section (section 6.2) then accounts for humour's role in the homosocial aspects of MMA training and its potential to bond individuals in the club. The differences between this humour when directed as women are given and what those differences say of the management of embodiment and the normative expectations of who fighters can be. Included in section 6.2 is the potential repair work taking place that manages interactions as 'just' humour, which is complicated further when I move to the personal experiences in section 6.3. My experience as a woman and a woman researching contribute to the underlying issues of the chapter: that these instances are also bullying, sexual harassment, and emotional violence masked as humour. The contributions of the analysis demonstrate that these are practices not just *theorised* as hyper-masculine, heteronormative, and hyper-sexualised but observed in interactions by members (and myself) in that space.

6.1 Disciplinary humour

The meaning of 'humour' is not necessarily easy to define. Humour can consist of everything from jokes, irony, embodied suggestions, and wordplay. The notion of 'banter', for instance, encourages thoughts of 'put-down humour' (e.g., Plester and Sayers 2007), or "a practice in which non-serious insults are traded in interactions among friends" (Robles 2019, p.86). However, the humour and banter in Fight or Flight MMA were arguably not 'traded' but more so directed, targeted, and used in disciplinary ways. There were various interactional strategies to direct humour as a regulatory and disciplinary practice, from glance work to public shaming (and relying on others to observe and witness this). Steve, the coach, played a significant role in these moments. Below, I present findings from observations where Steve's disciplinary humour was used to stigmatise, infantilise, and feminise members in embodying MMA skills embodying and performing MMA masculinity.

6.1.1 Disciplining weakness

Accounts of disciplinary humour are found elsewhere in sports and martial arts contexts, with correcting or 'guiding' members through humour or encouraging athlete compliance (Adams 2020, p.463; Aggerholm and Ronglan 2012; Edwards and Jones 2018). Instances of (perceived) humour related to instruction, including members not performing MMA technique correctly ("Look at those spazzes over there!"/"Block *then* counter, fuck face"), to not giving enough effort as a class ("Wake up you bunch of cunts or go home!"). Humour is also publicly available and witnessable in expressions (e.g., shouting, pointing); calling members out to the entire class is necessary for recognition and accountability. There is a reason that these are public, too: it permits assumptions of an individual's masculinity to be made, making gendered binaries relevant through infantilisation, homophobia, and feminisation:

The session is a hot and heavy one. There have been several rounds of rolling, and steam is visibly rising off bodies at this point. Myself and the class sit around breathing heavily - panting after the bell goes for a moment's break. Someone goes off the floor to grab some water from his bag. The coach calls out to the class: "Hah! Anyone else need a drinky?" We look around at each other, no one

moving from the dojo floor, perhaps trying to see who coach is referring to. Steve continues, "Ha! Look at everyone looking to see whose going!" Field notes 30/06/2018.

We were in the middle of grappling when I hear coach call out to the class, "Anyone tap out"? He notices one of the guys having water at the side of the dojo and shouts across: "OH, HE'S HAVIN' HIS POP! HIS MILK OFF 'IS MUM"! Field notes 01/08/2018.

It's been a difficult round, but we hear the bell ring. Steve shouts "Time! Water break!" and continues a second or so after: "If you don't [go to drink] you're a real man haha". We look around. Field notes 04/08/2018.

The work happening in these examples does more than simply instruct others where to look. Steve is calling upon others demonstratively through humour to illustrate what he perceived to be an embarrassing or inappropriate action in training. Arguably, masculinity is worked through here as performing stoicism in a lack of care for the body and what a fighting body might need to sustain itself, given that Steve trivialised something as important as drinking water (and using a childlike and feminised term to do so with "drinky"). Steve even observes other members of the club and their choices and awareness of the gaze work being done ("Look at everyone looking"), almost like a test "to see who's going". The others are complicit in not going to get water (including myself). Who would want to be the focus of this humour? The second example continues with childlike associations, with another infantilised image created both in the term of "pop" (fizzy drink) and newborn links to breastfeeding.

The option to drink water could be a test of masculinity, given that Steve is giving permission to go ("Water break"), but the challenge to a 'real man' by not going so is still a deterrent mediated by Steve's comments. However, there is still power in the actions of others: by not going to get a drink, they are complicit in the humour, and their inaction *gives* the action its power to subordinate others in the room.

It seems there are also significant spatial categories involved in the disciplining of embodying skills (and masculinity) here, with Steve drawing attention to those who are

leaving the dojo floor. Leaving the dojo floor was also problematic, even when going to the toilets:

I'm writing down notes as I see Dave coming back from the toilet. He looked quite rough. The coach called across the room to Dave: "Where you go off to mate"? Dave responds, with a sullen expression on his face, "I've just been sick". Coach immediately laughs and belts "WEEEEYYY, bulimic!" across the dojo. Dave goes to his bag to get some water and sits down. He doesn't look good. Field notes, 14/05/2018.

Firstly, Dave's activities are questioned prior to the call to the rest of the class ("Where you go off to mate"?). Dave was sick and was, therefore, the source of humour, something that the coach immediately responded to. Dave's visit to the toilet could (and perhaps should) be cause for concern, however, especially as bodies are in proximity and he could have an illness (for instance). Considering that eating disorders are common in sports with weight categories, Dave *could* have had an eating disorder for all we know. The term 'bulimic' is an oddly specific insult that could be feminising, but it also indicates weakness in Dave's inability to cope with training to the point that he is physically rejecting something. Steve may have thought that Dave used 'being sick' as an excuse to have a break, to go to the toilet, or take a drink from the fountain downstairs without ridicule (and it could be...). Despite this, Steve still demonstrates Dave's activities as an example of what not to do (be sick, be bulimic, and leave). Weakness is also relative to the showing of emotions, but also self-care:

Adam looked like he was struggling grappling with Jason. I think Jason got him in a tough position, looking like some form of shoulder or arm lock. Adam tried to get out for several seconds, expressing his pain on his face: eyes closed, teeth clenching his gumshield, taking deep breaths. Steve sees them and yells to the rest of the class with a smile: "Look at him [points to Adam], crying like a bitch"! Field notes, 29/08/2018.

There is a direct instruction through the 'yells' to the class to see Adam ("Look at him"), and the projection of Steve's voice incites its importance and almost urgency to capture proof of Adam being "a bitch". Despite Adam not actually crying, the fact that he was

showing signs of discomfort (or being potentially hurt) was still a reasonable excuse for Steve to associate the action of crying with something done by "a bitch". The term arguably relates to Adam's apparent weakness (and femininity) in that he shows his pain visibly, but also perhaps in his general inability to escape techniques. Regardless, being a 'bitch' does not equate to being tough (e.g., showing pain), and arguably 'bitches' (women) do not belong in that space. The form of the fighter is male, heterosexual, heterosexist, not a child, does not cry, and is self-replicating. As discussed in chapter 5, women are not seen as part of fighting culture (or being fighters), yet paradoxically, the very narratives used to shame (often based around men's natural dispositions to strength) are a fallacy – evidenced in these field notes. Masculinity is fragile, and it must be reaffirmed through humour that is observed and embodied.

Steve (as the 'man') is the one that creates the boundaries of masculinity, with the other members positioned as the boys/girls/animals/bitches. In this way, the humour incited a specific social and moral order: to be a fighter that is heterosexual, an adult, and a male. Steve is arguably also creating a culture in which *he* feels comfortable or has potentially inherited and reproducing. It would have been interesting to have conversations with Steve about this, but (as the chapter will show) there are reasons why that was not possible. As well as disciplinary humour specific to the technical and masculine competencies of Fight or Flight members, the role of humour was significant for the homosociability of men in the club. Next, this chapter will present differences between forms of humour provoked by women's bodies.

6.2 Humour and homosocial bonding

This section looks further into humour and what seems to be its reciprocal role in homosocial bonds and masculine performance, beginning with the ways that humour is used when demonstrating techniques and the sexualising references to homoeroticism and homosexuality. At first, these moments of touch and demonstration may seem inclusive, given that Steve is displaying this humour in a different nature to that of section 6.1. However, jokes are frequent with homophobia which is the foundation for much of the stigmatising humour and examples of 'othering'. The section then reflects how humour is targeted and experienced differently by men and women, a difference underpinned by hierarchical and patriarchal notions of intelligible gender and

heterosexuality (Butler 1990, 2004). In these examples, Steve further demonstrates (perceived) proper ways to be an MMA fighter and the proper relationships between men and women and not just re/producing masculinity but maintaining hierarchical relationships and gender binaries.

6.2.1 Demonstrating the norm: Humour in touch and display

Some research on homosociality - the socialising and social bonds of the same sex – talk of an equalising experience where men's friendship groups encourage a sense of togetherness or inclusivity (e.g., Anderson 2009; Channon and Matthews 2015; Thurnell-Read 2012; Hammarén and Johansson 2014). For instance, Spencer (2012) writes how MMA brings a sense of security "insofar as members can engage in homosocial activities without receiving the scrutiny of the outside world" (2012, p.38). This is particularly relevant to matters of trust and the touching bodies necessary in skill embodied (discussed in chapter 4), with touch and trust usually scrutinised in the patriarchal masculine demands of men. In Fight or Flight MMA however, the scrutiny did not come from 'the outside world' necessarily, but from Steve, and moments of touching (primarily in ground-based techniques) were a key source of homosocial humour. Ironically, touch was inherently problematic in mixed-gender sparring (which chapter 5 illustrated), but while Steve demonstrates techniques (on men) to the class, the sexual potential of these bodies was consistently highlighted.

Demonstrating techniques was a regular practice in both the beginner and advanced classes. It had a particular structure: Steve calls out to the class to stop their actions and calls the class in to watch, and then he calls upon an individual (usually a man) to demonstrate the technique. There was rubbing, touching, and choking like any sparring or grappling scenario: all embodied and physical movements required. However, these techniques were often framed as humorous sexual positions, highlighting the humour in (men's) sexual reproductive organs and physical intimacies with other men:

"Okay! Guys, come in". Steve turns to me, "Guys, a generic term". Steve is going through the movements for the next progression of the drill. "So, you need to toss 'im off," he grins, and people chuckle. Field notes, 06/05/2018.

A guy kneels on the floor for Steve to show the technique. He turtles up, tucking in his knees and arms almost like a snail. Steve stands over him to move into the next steps of this very defensive position. Suddenly Steve rushes on top of him with: "Oh, I get top bunk"! Laughs are heard. Field notes, 30/05/2018.

Steve is demonstrating the technique on a new guy. Steve's legs are wrapped around the arm socket. "The ol' bollocks in the armpit, but I'm sure we'll get on fine, heh heh"! Field notes, 30/05/2018.

Jokes and innuendo changed the technical landscape of the movements into a (homoerotic) sexualised act. In "toss 'im off," Steve wanted us to be able to get our partner's body away from ours - to 'toss' them away - but the phrasing and grinning turned "toss 'im off" into a joke about pleasuring your partner. The others also recognised this joke ("people chuckle"). In the second example, being "top bunk" (and Steve making sure that *he* is 'top') possibly reflects the sexualised narratives around winning and losing in MMA (Hirose and Pih 2010) as well as dominant-submissive relationships. Despite discourses of domination being somewhat blurred in MMA as a sport, with "equally advantageous depending on the fighting style" (Hirose and Pih 2010, p.200), the discourse of feminising through submission is still a prevailing one, given that to submit requires a willingness to give in to their opponent.

Being submitted could be interpreted as the "symbolic sexual penetration" too, and thus feminised, like being a 'bitch' in section 6.1. Even if Steve's humor choices do not relate to ways to win or lose in MMA, the homosexuality/eroticism of men's bodies through these positions is still evident and arguably found funny by those in the club, too ("Laughs are heard"). In using homosexual slurs, the individual is turned into an object of homosexual attraction. It *produces* homosexuality as an insult and, at the same time, degrades the (heterosexual) individual/body (hence the laughs. The norms of the fighter (as male and heterosexual) are constantly reiterated, and this "humour" shapes the conditions of possible performance in that space. I cannot speak for the men who were the base of the jokes in these scenarios, but I do not imagine they were always very comfortable (despite the potential attempts to alleviate those anxieties through humour in the first place).

There is also something to be said for the potential embarrassment about bodies being so close, where humour could be used to alleviate tension. These instances

could be forms of “homosexual panic” (Hammarén and Johansson 2014, p.2), where humour is shown while touching men, making jokes of (and therefore distancing away from) the potential of desire. Humour used in demonstrating techniques was also observed in my previous research, with bottoms being slapped in grappling and innuendo (“Just pop your finger up there, will you?”/“Oil-check!”), thrusting groins to faces, and jokes about hygiene (“Errr smelly bottom, phwwarr”)” (John 2016, p.56). These were again all interactions while sparring or grappling between the coach and other men. Still, compared to the field notes in section 6.1.1, there were many more laughs in these situations.

Beyond the example of demonstrating techniques to the club, there were many examples where homosocial (homophobic) humour was used in response to people in their pairs when training. As with any MMA club, crotches were rubbing on faces, legs were wrapped around hips, and groins were behind bottoms. There were men touching men, women touching women, and (where people were open to it) men and women touching each other, too. The reader can imagine from the analyses the numerous and repetitive jokes because of these physically intimate positions, and homosexuality and homoeroticism were easy narratives to target members who were training (particularly when they were not performing correctly). Many (male) partners grappling were met with jokes and insults, for instance, from wrestling and going through the progression of the drill to the closeness of body parts to the face:

I saw Dom and Tom rolling in the corner. They stopped, looking like they were thinking about the following steps, and talking things over. Dom laughed – perhaps they both shared a joke. As they sat there laughing, the coach came over to them: “Keep that in the bedroom, get on with the drills!” (the drill was in the guard). Field notes, 30/05/2018.

Everyone looks like they're going at it really hard. There are two guys I don't really know, but they look quite skilled. One of them slams the other onto the floor and ends up with a crotch in the face, perhaps to progress into an armbar or choke. I hear Steve from the other side of the floor: “HA! Tea-bagging”! Field notes, 13/05/2018.

There are comparisons between the field notes here and in section 6.1, where Steve brings attention to things that happen in a bedroom (even using terms to describe a bed ["top-bunk"]), to that of the shaming involved in "Keep that in the bedroom". Maybe Dom and his grappling partner were making similar jokes to Steve, but Steve is the only joker allowed? Perhaps as Steve is initiating the techniques and jokes when demonstrating, he has the power to suggest if this is just 'funny' or decide whether something should be shameful if members do not perform. Regardless, there are dangers of men being in proximity and arguably having fun here. It seems that the way that men can bond is not inclusive of things like asking each other questions or laughing together. The fact that Steve physically walked over was interesting, too, potentially as a form of intimidation or even an attempt to hear what they were talking about first to assess the situation (and see if it deserved mediation).

The homoerotic banter of "the bedroom" shared by two men is a platform for jokes. In Fair's account of wrestlers, coaches also "mocked the wrestler's passivity by enacting the move with exaggerated affection, caressing his partner's arm and saying softly in his ear: "Do you want to go to the movies?" (Fair 2011, p.498). Like my previous research there were accounts of heteronormative humour ("Oi! Stop whispering that you love him and hurry the fuck up"/"Oh he *loves* a good grapple" [John 2016, p.56]), but Steve also on occasion used more specific homophobic terms:

Dave was showing everyone a photo with his coach holding up Dave's hand up after winning. Dave looked happy, impressed no doubt! Through the midst of questions for Dave - asking how it was, how it felt to win - Steve loudly joined in: "Yeah, you too can get pointed at for no reason while we all ignore Hannah (ring girl) in the background like a bunch of fags". They laugh. Field notes 04/07/2018.

Here, Steve refers to the lack of interest in the 'ring-girls' (and by extension, the sexual objectification of those women) as an expected hetero-masculine practice, where Dave's sexuality (and the sexuality of the others surrounding him in the photo) is called into question. Like in other examples in this chapter, responses in laughter give power to the bonding through jokes and the subordination of gay men (and women) through humour (see also Pascoe 2007). If "gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime" (Butler 2004, p. 41), Steve's humour (alongside members' reactions) reiterates those regimes (see also Probyn 2000). I wonder if

anyone in the club was openly (or not openly gay) and whether that would affect the use and collective laughter of homophobic language. It is arguably so engrained in the construction of MMA masculinity that it may make no difference at all. It is interesting that no terms of dyke were mentioned to the women in the club. What would be the conditions where this would be seen? When she outperforms? When she dominates? When I am not there as a researcher? I look towards the humour used towards women next.

6.2.2 Homosociability and women

So far, this chapter has presented findings on the gender performativity in Fight or Flight MMA relative to the embodiment of MMA skills. We can see the active work in "conforming to the humour sensibilities of the group" (Spencer 2012, p.48) and the homosocial bonds between the men 'on the mats' (Green 2016). How do women's bodies experience this bond, given that gender presents itself as the norm in the context of MMA fighting? How does the sexualising banter change or stay the same with women's bodies? Steve did not usually use women in the club to demonstrate techniques to the class, apart from stand-up techniques where no touching was involved. Given its (hetero) sexualising nature, arguably, touch becomes more problematic (as highlighted in chapter 5); however, humour towards women did still see similarities to 'keeping things in the bedroom':

We've been told to move on to another armbar. As usual, it's Lily, Sarah, and I, and we all sit in a circle – speaking back and forth to each other with "Do you want to go first?" and "I don't mind". Steve overhears us and speaks: "Woah, this ain't a date, and this ain't something else". We laugh and get on with it. Field notes, 30/05/2018.

I'm finding a technique difficult in progressing from the guard position (my body being wrapped in someone else's legs). Steve notices and directs me to him, who was lying down with his legs open: "Hop into my guard, oh any excuse". Steve laughs, raising his eyebrows. I think someone heard and laughed. I feel so awkward. Field notes, 30/03/2018.

In the first example, given that there were three of us, maybe this opens humour to the possibilities of "gang bangs" (noted by Sarah in chapter 5). It is hard to know. What is "something else"? Despite the sexualising account, this moment felt somewhat shared, perhaps given that there was no specific target of the humour. Is this an aspect of bonding between the three of us and with Steve? The second instance was the first time my movements into the guard position (or any position in MMA) have been sexualised. Maybe that is why it felt so "awkward," given that I specifically did not receive any humour in my previous clubs or research (John 2016, p.57). Steve could even be coming across as also (quite badly) managing his own awkwardness around physical contact, given that he engages with humour which is often sexualised towards other men. I was not the only woman in the club to be subject to these strange situations, with a challenging interaction observed below:

Sarah walked into the gym a little bit later than usual. She takes some time to start as she puts on her knee brace. Steve calls out, "Oh she's just putting on her suspenders!" There were a few laughs. Wearing black and white pin-striped leggings, I thought she looked cool! But it seemed that others in the room also noticed her trousers:

Steve: "Nice trousers" - he smiles.

Tom: "Yeah, Beetlejuice!"

The coach re-joins shortly after: "Somebody's juice"

Tom/others: "EEEYYYY"

Steve: It's a family show!"

Tom and a few other guys laugh. Sarah turned to me with an awkward smile on her face: "It's a good thing I don't embarrass easily". Field notes, 06/06/2018.

As Sarah entered, I could tell that something was not quite right. She was late, she was obviously rushing to get started, and the fact that she was wearing a knee brace signified that there was likely to be some form of injury. Turning this injury-related brace into something sexual was the first attempt at humour, but Sarah did not respond to Steve's initial call. Perhaps this caused Steve to re-join with another insult, given that (as section 6.1 notes) Steve's sense of authority in the club is not to

be tested. The initial joke comparing Sarah to the character 'Beetlejuice'¹³ The comparison was insult enough (and initiated by Tom), but the grossly sexualised 'juice' comment changed the associations to her body and a play on sexual fluid. A further issue is that it is someone *e/se's* juice- not her own – in the form of a violation or submissive position? There seems to be a paradox in Steve's retaliation with "it's a family show", which could play on the quote from the movie "It's showtime" (or not). Could his comment be adjusting the derogatory nature of the comment into a more 'family-friendly' atmosphere of the gym? Does he think that might have gone too far?

The exchanges that followed Steve's initial joke about Sarah were from other men in the club, not Sarah herself, or even me, with Steve and some of the men looking at each other in jest. This may have been a bonding experience for the men in the club, but Sarah did not join in with the laughing or retaliate with banter to them. Instead, she turns to me. What does that say about the relationships in the club? It was difficult to tell if Sarah enjoyed the joke. However, as Sarah expresses, she does not "embarrass easily" with some hostility ("it's a good thing") and her lack of engagement after the joke (particularly following the numerous "EYYYY"s), I would say not. I think back to Sarah's comment about being picked last in high school (in chapter 5) and being the odd one out. The whole situation felt like something you would see in a high school corridor, but with the teacher also involved in the bullying. I also wonder why it was actually "a good thing" not to embarrass easy. Would she hit him? Would she leave? Sarah's reference to me (rather than everyone or the coach) indicates it is *me* that she is interested in her awkward look (an outward sign of how Sarah was feeling). Her look to me could be a potential form of trust, support, a needed break from the calls to her body, or the 'juice.'

Despite the awkwardness of these moments in publicly available expression (e.g., aversion, awkward smiles), comments were made about Steve's humour in that "It makes you feel like one of the lads" (Sarah). But what does it mean to *be* one of the lads, and does being a 'lad' let you truly belong? The notion of 'being one' of them is complex, especially as many women researching men's spaces are often made clear that they are 'not one of the guys' (Gurney 1985) or 'one of the boys' (Horn 2010). Is being "one of the guys" (see also Teeter 2014, p.79) worth it or even

¹³ Beetlejuice is a character from the 1988 film *Beetlejuice* and is an annoying and crude ghost (and ironically, for Sarah, a significant womanising character). In the film, he wore a black and white striped suit.

possible? When such hetero-sexual/sexist humour is so prevalent, it can be difficult to distinguish *what* you are a part of. Sarah also noted that Steve is "always full of banter," perhaps defending Steve to protect someone she considers a friend. As Sarah (and most of the women) generally felt excluded, forms of banter may even be seen as a form of inclusion, given that humour is so crucial in men's homosocial experiences. I would argue that the bonds we had (as women) in that club were through our shame and embarrassment in ways. Even in general discussion around training, there were constant reminders that women were not really part of that space or of MMA(ascularity):

Rob was asking the coach about tagging a new woman into the club's online post. Rob doesn't do MMA all the time but is a wrestling coach usually. He sounded sincere and waited for a response with a serious face. Steve, however, replied in jest: "Doubt she'd be able to read that as ONE: she's not a member of the group and TWO: she's a girl! HA!" Some laughs were heard. Field notes, 27/06/2018.

Rob did not seem to react in the way others did; he just seemed confused. Perhaps he interpreted Steve's response as an attack for suggesting she might be interested in the first place: laughing at her intelligence of her as a woman (or specifically 'girl'). Steve's response was generally intriguing, given that Sarah noted Steve's desire to encourage women to join the MMA club in my discussions with her too. The fact that this talk was not 'locker room talk' (Gregory 2009) but available to all to hear is really specific. Members of the club come to embody MMA masculinity as sexualised, homophobic – certainly not inclusive or undoing gender (e.g., Channon 2014; Channon and Matthews 2015). Where can you exist in that space as a woman? As a gay man? A man who cries? The situations being produced is so exclusionary in attempts to stabilise (Butler 1990) what 'being an MMA fighter is' when these bodies are not perceived as male, or when men are failing intelligible practice. It could even be Steve's way of trying to protect members, interpreting a really skewed idea of emotional toughness to prepare them for the cage and the hostilities they might face.

The club's take on violence is also very specific, with a toxic undercurrent in the humour that glosses abuse and the power to abuse others where to be harassed and

to be bullied is normal. We saw that “controlled violence” was a feature of the MMA experience, but these interactions are not raised as troubling in the same way. I develop this point, focusing on my reflexive experiences and the possibilities of interpreting this ‘humour’ further.

6.3 Humour, hustling, and harassment

Humour was an important interactive tool that shaped gendered practice engrained in misogyny and homophobia, reproducing masculine norms by ‘othering’ and disparaging women and gay men in embodying MMA skills. There seemed to be an order or pattern present which was also spatial and temporal; from picking out people who are not training, to those taking too long to complete techniques, to those not performing masculine ideals. Despite this and the frequency that these ‘jokes’ were made, I had not really noticed the moments directed to myself at first. Reviewing my field notes over time, there was a distinction in Steve’s humour towards the club (usually public and demonstrating to an audience) to humour directed to me, which often felt secretive and selective: for me alone. I discuss these experiences through a detailed account, raising questions about what it means to be in such a space as a researcher and as a woman.

6.3.1 Humour and research

Experiencing jokes or humour while researching as a woman (especially in ‘male spaces’) is not uncommon. From Gurney’s (1985) research on office work, Lumsden’s (2009) boy racers, or Haddow’s (2021) work on food insecurity, humour-based harassment can render the researcher in a state of submission or states of anxiety (Arendell 1997; Green et al. 1993; Gailey and Prohaska 2011; Sharp and Kremer 2006). I certainly experienced these feelings: a sense of never truly feeling comfortable, whether on the mat doing drills or on the sides of the dojo writing. Conversations between Steve and me were not always initially inappropriate, however, with what started as potentially innocent remarks often turning sour in sexual, suggestive, and ostracising ways. Especially when writing my field notes, a lot of the ‘humour’ challenged my position as a researcher, with many calls from Steve often interrupting me. From the not so serious “Take a letter Miss Jones” to the more questionable shouts of “Hey, Anne Frank!” the humour usually escalated:

I sit writing my notes when I hear Steve: "Dear diary" (coach likes to do this every session). "Getting your diary out again?", he asks. I reply: "Mood: apathetic," and Steve laughs. I was happy with my quick response. A few seconds later, Steve replied, "Skills: pathetic". He laughs again and leaves to watch the class. Field notes, 04/07/2018.

The above field note is perhaps the least offensive interaction during my time observing, but there is still a lot to say about his role in the space as a coach and my actions writing as a researcher. Trivialising the process of observation with a narrative reminiscent of pre-teen activities (writing in a diary) was a repetitive choice of the term, as indicated in my comment ("coach likes to do this every session"). I gave a quick rebuttal, given that on so many occasions prior, I had just stared at Steve in what was a tedious repetition of interruption and requests to "take a letter" (like if I were his secretary). Steve still managed to add insult to my reply, possibly to finalise the interaction on a 'win' before turning away. Steve often enjoyed 'leaving' the interaction in triumphant ways, and where I responded with my own humour this was usually quickly followed by a toxic response followed by Steve leaving. Fight or Flight MMA was *his* space, not mine as a researcher (or arguably as a woman). Through sexual hustling, in particular, the issues of defining these interactions even as 'humour' can be questioned.

Sexual hustling can be seen as putting up with derogatory behaviour or humour in exchange for access to the space and to participants, but also potential rapport and acceptance within the research encounter (Gurney 1985, p. 43-44; Richards 2015, p. 393). Forms of sexual hustling may include various jokes, flirting, innuendoes, or sexual references "which place a female researcher in an inferior and devalued position" (Gurney 1985, p.12). No doubt, I often felt inferior and devalued, being "the target of sexist slurs and comments" (Richards 2015, p.401) in most sessions:

I was sitting out of the class today. With my ankle not feeling too good from American football training on the weekend, I thought I'd utilise this session to make more detailed notes around techniques. I sat there, looking, watching, with my pen in my mouth, chewing the end of it in thought. Coach came over and

stared at me for a bit. "Alright, Sherlock?". He mimics smoking a pipe with his hands and mouth. I do the same but with my pen. I laughed while he stared at me for several more seconds before continuing, "Heh, normally a cock". I sat there, trying to actually take in what had just been said. He immediately laughs and looks down to sort something out. Tom looks over at me as he stood near coach, looking as though he was waiting for my reaction. Tom replies with a "WEEEEEEYYY" towards me. I give a small laugh, "That's going to be the thesis title". They both turn away. I felt like I lost something there. Field notes, 30/07/2018.

The initial turns between Steve and I on 'doing humour together' felt too good to be true (and it was), with the added "normally a cock" turning the mutual engagement into something different and the humour changing across the exchanges. Maybe Tom's response is an example of repairing the definition of the situation to "make matters regarding perspective clear" (Goffman 1974, p.255). Given the potential tensions around the boundaries of action (Goffman 1974, p.37), Tom's "WEEEEEEYYY" could be an attempted confirmation that I should find it funny, orienting to as a joke as just a joke and a way to frame these actions as humour and nothing else. Alternatively, it could be an instance of joining in. Perhaps Tom was waiting for my response. Was I supposed to show that I found that amusing? I wonder what I refer to here on 'losing something,' perhaps a "loss of emotional energy" (Collins 2008, p.189)? Given what was just said about the connection feeling good, good enough that I started laughing sincerely, what might have been lost is maybe a sense that I had been 'let in', but then Steve quickly took that feeling back. My own rebuttal of putting that instance as my thesis title (which I sincerely meant) was potentially doing repair work too. I just did not want to look away without saying something, not that time. At moments in my initial analysis, I think I underestimated my own strategies of saving face or sticking up for myself, this example being one of them. Something so interesting about me writing exacerbated these situations, and Gurney (1985, p.49) experienced similar issues when writing her notes. Maybe this sexualised humour was a form of punishment for not participating in the class too, but a very selective and personal degradation to try and sway my participation:

I sat down on one of the benches at the side of the dojo with my notebook, preparing to write. The coach comes over to me: "You jumping in"? I reply quickly, "No, got a big game on Saturday". "Got any baddies?" he asked. "Nah just knackered". I sat there with little expression on my face. I was so tired at this point. Not in the mood. Coach ends with, "Nobody cares". A few seconds pass while he continues to stare at me. I don't really react. He then pretends to suck a penis before turning away to carry on with the class. Field notes, 14/05/2018.

Not being injured is not a good enough excuse to sit out, but then again, injuries also incite images of "crying like a bitch" in section 6.1. What are the ways to have an injury where you are also not feminised, or permitted to have an injury without consequence? I wonder how to begin interpreting penis sucking here too. Steve often pretended to suck a penis on numerous occasions, and each time it was bizarre, indeed not an experience I expected to write down. Was it to suggest that I am weak? To feel pressure to join in and prove him wrong? His penis sucking was also of proximity, overlooking me on a physically different level. He could just call me a 'bitch' like he did with the men but decided not to. Would calling me a 'bitch' have the same effect as when it feminises men?

Both are arguably a form of sexual subordination, but in previous sections where humour is directed at men, being a woman *is* the insult. The only option for Steve here is to shame me with something - to express what my mouth is good for. There was a sense of asking with *some* concern whether I was okay, but it was still infantilised ("Got any baddies?") with a dismissal. Steve's reply is also not just a reflection of his own view (apparently) but represents the club in its entirety. He could have said 'I don't care', for instance, but used "Nobody cares" instead. Perhaps Steve thought I was not 'doing' research properly, given he also asked what I could 'learn' from 'scribbling notes' (as discussed in the methods chapter). Equally, it could be precisely because I *am* researching properly that this interrupts Steve's concept of authority and masculinity in the club and how he/the club is being observed. In ways, I am the phallus (or my pen is the phallus), and it is the control (of writing and reporting what is taking place) that must be challenged. These moments of sexual hustling are relatable to other women's research experiences, particularly in sporting spaces (e.g., Haddow 2021; Richards 2015), and there is power in presenting myself as an academic. Still,

even my own initiations of humour, the interactions were turned into sexualising moments:

The class was now split into those who wanted to do striking and those who wanted to grapple. Steve calls out and points to the floor in the areas "Strike. Grapple. Grapple". He came over to me, and I laughed - leading to my joke saying he sounded like a turkey. A few seconds lingered. He mimicked the noises again, then carried on, "I was gonna say gobble, gobble, but that could seem like something else". Field notes, 30/05/2018.

When I attempted to keep up with the jokes and interruptions in previous field notes, my responses felt unnatural and forced. I was not 'having a laugh,' and the jokes seemed to worsen when I did join in or start them. Given that humour was so often used, I wonder why my own humour was overlooked or ignored at points. Was it a way Steve 'controlling the floor' again? Like in other examples, Steve focused on me as a tool for (hetero) sexual pleasure in 'gobbling' penises, but arguably there is a humour of 'gobbling' penises applied to other members, too (in homoerotic ways). Prior to the 'gobble,' our dynamic felt somewhat mutual. However, these responses reaffirmed that as a woman in that space, not doing MMA, she was a woman that should be doing something else, and preferably something sexual.

Although Steve did not physically assault me (unlike Richards' experiences of groping), "I questioned myself as to what had actually happened" (Richards 2015, p. 401). I did not know how to react. I did not know how to feel; given that 'humour' was such a part of the experience in this club it felt 'normal' to an extent. Like other women in research, various tactics were used (whether I was aware of them or not), from being evasive and "laughing them off" (Haddow 2021, p. 6). I still wonder what is being negotiated through these reflections. How much you put up with abuse to be the researcher? I cannot even find the words to begin processing the reasoning or role of some of the other comments. Perhaps the reader can consider suggestions to make sense of this example:

I waved to encourage Lily while training, writing at the end of the dojo floor. The coach walks over to me. I look at him, confused. "Fuck you," he says. He walks away. Field notes, 29/08/2018.

Fuck you?

6.2.2 Humour while training

The previous section accounted for the troubling ways in which Steve uses humour as a focal point for sexual harassment while researching. However, there were also many instances while training in which I received 'humour' unrelated to writing:

Sarah, Lily, and I were on the dojo mat with coach, and I readjust my sports bra before we started. At that moment, Steve is standing beside me and mimics adjusting breasts on himself and laughs. I look around to the other women in confusion. I shout to him, "Hey! They get sweaty and out of place, okay? Let me have my moment to sort it out".

Sarah joins the conversation: "I can confirm: is annoying".

Coach then continues to rub his legs in a creepy manner, licking his lips while doing so. It was just bizarre. Field notes, 04/07/2018.

Adjusting my bra and breasts to make myself comfortable and feel supported is something I do in many other contexts, like the gym or training in other sports. However, it has never been raised as a humorous issue and certainly not met with licking lips and thigh-rubbing. I felt almost 'open' – feeling the presence of my breasts as sexualised things (Young 2005), leading the rest of the session with a sense of anxiety about the potential thoughts around my breasts. Sarah and Lily looked equally confused, with Sarah joining my defence (and solidarity?) in her confirmation. Perhaps there is something humorous because genitals are usually private but made semi-public in my manoeuvring. For instance, there were occasions where men would rearrange their crotch, and comments would be made too (e.g., "Stop touching yourself and join in"), but there is quite a difference in those interactions. Steve did not lick his lips and rub his thighs at the men (though his behaviours are still disturbing nonetheless), reflecting how

the first touching is for the individual (like masturbation). In contrast, the second is treated as "for him".

Something was frustrating about being scared to anger Steve by showing him exactly how I felt. To stand up to Steve (I thought) would put the research and myself at risk, which is arguably a problematic view of the research process. It was strangely comforting having Sarah and Lily in this exchange to feel like I was not alone. I wonder if Steve would serenade us all equally with songs of being 'cunts' together too:

Today I was taking part in the beginner class. Before the class started, I decided to go on the punching bag. I suddenly heard Steve's voice: "Zoe is a cunt, Zoe is a cunt" sung in a very melodic tune. I tried to think of something funny to say in response: "Ha! Yeah, that's not the first time it's been sung to me this week either. I should get a t-shirt". Coach looks at me for another moment with a blank expression, then turns away. I carry on punching the bag, confused. Field notes, 30/07/2018.

Unprovoked and training by myself, I seem to be an easy target. I wonder what the actual purpose of singing is that I am a cunt. Does Steve know how to talk to women without these strange and insulting narratives? I felt a need to retaliate ("I tried to think of something funny to say") which Steve did not necessarily appreciate or expect, given the "blank expression" and dismissal in turning away. I was fed up. On reflection, perhaps interviewing Steve would have been useful (and no doubt an interesting discussion), but there were too many feelings of discomfort. In these interactions, the subject was 'me' as a member of the club but also writing a thesis and as a high-performance athlete in other sports (which Steve knew of). However, I did not expect to experience this either as a researcher or MMA practitioner.

At first, I thought of the humiliations as a tool of inclusion, but my sense of comfort changed as the sessions continued. I am unsure how long I would have stayed if I was not researching. Admittedly, it was not until I spent some time away from the club and through meetings with supervisors that I realised the extent of my discomfort. Sitting through various re-readings of field notes and reflections was overwhelming (there is a poem that reflects my discomforts in Appendix Q). Realising that I felt *scared* – too scared to interview Steve, too scared to hang around in case I was offered a lift home – these are reflections not just of my own experiences but the realities of

dangers of being in the field as a woman (Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Huseby-Darvas 1999; Ross 2015). Despite the intense reflections of this section, most members of the club were subject to forms of insults and inappropriate comments. Why don't others say anything back? Why couldn't I feel confident enough to call him a 'cunt' too? I wonder how it might change (or not change) the dynamics or analysis if we did. What if someone *did* 'out-banter' him one day?

How other members of the club mediate these definitions (though joining in) as 'only a joke' (Kelly 1987) as opposed to harassment, assault, or abuse, is so significant and normalises these experiences in talk (Attenborough 2012; Morrison, Bourke, Kelley 2005; Robles 2019, p.102). When framed as 'just a joke', it can be challenging to bring to the surface that these moments are actually sexism, rape culture, and more (e.g., Herman 1984; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth 1993). I think in ways of Collins' discussions on bullying too, which involve "exclusion; malicious gossip and mockery out of presence of the target ("behind their backs"); rejection to their face; and face insults and jeering" (Collins 2008, p.163). Such actions were so frequent in Fight or Flight MMA club, and arguably Steve's role and privilege as coach legitimises it as humour and nothing else (see Adams 2020, p. 465).

It is difficult to know how the analysis of humour would change in another research context in MMA if women's experiences were included in more specific ways. For instance, some wrote that women are more likely to be welcomed given they "participated in the same activities" (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, p. 156). Do these activities include the expectation to "roll with the punches" (Teeter 2014, p.83) like we did in Fight or Flight MMA? Spencer also wrote that there is "an accepted *normative* level of violence that is specific to the individual MMA club" (2012, p. 118-9). I would argue that this 'normativeness' equally entails emotional and interpersonal forms of violence too. To be there, to fight: it involved putting up with violence in different ways, and the observational and felt data in this chapter has brought those ways to light. These experiences are evidence of the acceptance of the 'non-PC' family described by Phil in chapter 5.

6.4 Conclusion

As the final chapter focus on Fight or Flight MMA club, the chapter calls out and surfaces the central role that humour plays in the everyday gendered/sexualised abuse

and embodiment. Humour (through humiliation and embarrassment) was a resource in performing MMA masculinity, serving as a powerful regulatory function that mitigates certain behaviours. These behaviours constructed situated norms and practices that also displace and discriminate (and is normalised), regulated through an idealised sense of fighting and gendered identity – that is, a masculinity maintained through the problems of intelligible gender, sex, and sexuality (Butler 1990). As queried in the poem 'Fighting Phallusy' at the beginning of this chapter, bodies *were* typecast, categorised, and restricted in observations, in feelings, and in conversation. This chapter has demonstrated the fragility of MMA masculinity, too, where (like the poem) the words and the performativity are the only thing holding up heterosexual men (the phallus) as who fighters are.

Section 6.1 demonstrated examples of disciplinary humour in relation to skill embodiment, which included regulating toughness and stoicisms in the class (for example, not taking a break or leaving to drink water). Humour was then presented as a potential analysis of homosociability and the potential for bonding which was heteronormative/sexist/homophobic. In that section, I also drew distinctions to the types of humour, which was recipient designed, with men as feminised and women sexualised. In section 6.2, the differences in humour's role were questioned, and in section 6.3, direct attention was given to my experiences. Sexist hustling, sexual harassment, bullying, and abuse are all forms of action that Steve and others manage in the club. However, this management relates not only to the space of Fight or Flight MMA club, but also to the experiences of humour in other sporting spaces. I present the observational findings of the Blood Bath Royal fighting events, furthering the importance of "The women's fight" in broader social contexts.

The women's fight

Two fighters make their entrance: composed, with grit.
Coaches take off their shirts. "Have a good pat down, that's it".
They step into the cage: battle-faced, ready.
Their fists bump in the middle: "She'd have good strong babies".

The crowd goes wild for Sarah, the home fighter.
But there's hostility present: "She's fucking Polish love, do 'er"
They fight for the title with strikes, twists and stunts.
Sarah's opponent grazes her: "Cunt. CUNT"

It looks exhausting, they barely stop.
So young, inspiring. "She's fucking hot man. Fucking hot".
It's five, five minute rounds: a professional bout
I'm glad it's not me. "I'd let her choke me the fuck out".

There's a huge cross, hook: A double whammy
Sarah's mouth guard flies out. "Fucking kick her in the fanny!"
The fight goes all the way, fighters ready to hurl.
That was just astounding! "Go on, baby girl."

To the judges' scorecards - what do they have to say?
The fight was pretty even. "Whoever wins is my bae".
Oh wow, Sarah lost! The audience is numb.
What an incredible fight. "To be fair though, I'd still shag both of 'em".

Chapter 7: Organ-ised violence and MMA fighting

From themes of embodying skills to contradictions of controlled violence and violence under the guise of humour, the salience of gender has been a significant point of analysis throughout previous chapters. There was the anxiety about touching women and humour around men touching men, but there was also significant humour in women's bodies as objects of pleasure (and sexual violence). In Fight or Flight MMA, women and gay men (thereby feminine) become a symbol of unwanted behaviour in MMA masculinity: confusing bodies that do not fit desired practices and, arguably, who 'matters' (Butler 2004) as a fighter. These issues are also present in the literature, with claims of women lacking the ability for MMA violence and the sexualisation of women who fight (e.g., Jakubowska, Channon, and Matthews 2016). I'm going to trace these themes and talk about women outside the Fight or Flight MMA club context in this chapter, analysing how audience members make sense of gender and violence. I do this from observational data of two MMA fighting events: 'Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping' and 'Blood Bath Royal: Retribution'.

Section 7.1 discusses general points around audience work at BBR events, referring to observations on the men's fights and the expectations of 'doing' a spectator role. I reflect on moments during the men's fights, where flows of activity are frequent and almost patterned, with noise and reactions corresponding to the events taking place in the cage. However, as Section 7.2 moves to data from the women's fight at 'Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping', audience work that helps define the situation and 'what is going on' (Goffman 1974) is almost non-existent. In fact, there are stark differences between audience engagement and energy (and who is responsible for it). The section sees audience members ignore the fight, judge the fighters' capabilities in significantly different ways, and also refer to women's status as fighters in the sport. Moving then to data from 'Blood Bath Royal: Retribution' in Section 7.3, the data corresponds to "The women's fight" poem and the highly sexualising narratives between audience members. The data is a display of reoccurring themes throughout this thesis: what violence is, the trouble of gendered bodies in embodying the particulars of violence in MMA, and the use of humour that underpins these gender norms. The chapter illustrates how, despite fighting within the same space, the women fighting at these BBR events were treated differently through audience work and

audience interpretations of MMA violence (and MMA fighting) as a highly specific and normative gendered practice.

7.1 Audience work in framing organised violence

No doubt, fights are an exciting experience. They are a legitimised space in which two individuals can (and do) cause harm, and perform unique violent tasks on to and through, each other's bodies. Fighting events can also *actually* be a 'blood bath', with blood often mopped from the floor, where bodies are beaten, and where damage and injuries occur. Audiences also know that the event is not a 'real' fight, with the conventions and bracketing of fighting events helping to "mark the difference" (Goffman 1974, p.138). There is music and lights, and there are physically organising materials which separate and situate roles: features that are routinely checked, instructed, and anchored, but the audience can also demonstrate the issues of frame. The importance and interest of the audience in fighting events were discussed in the literature review (e.g., Ambramson and Modzelewski 2010; Stenius 2011); however, there was lacking observational data on the audience. Here, I illustrate audience work to the framing (and potential breaching) of organised and 'controlled' violence in section 7.2. I then discuss the audience's influence on the phenomenon of 'energy' at fighting events in section 7.2. Both sections are important aspects of comparison to women's fighting later in the chapter.

7.1.1 Framing of a fight

The introductory chapter set out a brief history of MMA, which demonstrated how (particularly in its earlier years) the sport questioned boundaries of sporting violence and 'civilised' sporting practice (Garcia and Malcolm 2010). MMA fights are also where people can legitimately enjoy watching violence (relating to Elias and Dunning 1986), but arguably a situated expectation of violence, made relevant in chapter 4. With "a distinctive ethos, a spirit, and emotional structure, that must be properly created, sustained and laid to rest" (Goffman 1963, p.19), these expectations define a strip of interaction as 'organised MMA fight' and nothing else. From the fights observed, there were varying moments where the framing of a fight (and arguably the forms of violence

involved) are challenged—where the potential ethos or emotional structures are fragmented. These moments were made relevant by the audience through their reactions, with several examples, as demonstrated below:

Joe went to give a high five. Mason did not.

“Ugh, twat” the man in front of me speaks.

“Fuckin knock ‘im out”

“Finish him!” Field notes, BBR: The Reaping

Pawel goes to touch gloves, which Eddie replies but immediately comes out with a back kick as soon as their fingers meet. It seems almost pure luck that Pawel wasn't knocked out, as Eddie misses his nose by almost a hairline. The audience cries out immediately with various "OHHHH", "Boooooo" and "What the fuck was that", "cheap shot!". Field notes, BBR: Retribution

Baz comes out very aggressive, punches swinging from the get-go. It was a first-round submission, a win for Baz. He gets up and runs around, slamming his fist into his chest over his heart. He does this several times before going over to his opponent who is still on the ground in pain, with several medics around him. I assumed he was going over to check if he was okay, but instead he decides to shout something at him and pound his chest again. There are some reactions and 'boos' from the crowd.

“Oh what a prick!”

“Booo!” Field notes BBR: Retribution

The first field note demonstrates the expected characteristics of fighting etiquette. To meet and "give a high five" signifies a mutual beginning point for fighters, with a perceived lack of respect, accounted for by the audience members ("Ugh twat") in Mason's denial (discussed in my previous research [John 2016, p.46-7]). The denial of meeting hands could be a matter of disrespect, playing mind games, or perhaps Mason was simply 'in the zone' and did not notice. Equally, Mason could be being careful,

given the potential for cheap shots and opportunities for deception, as displayed in the second field note.

Although there is no legal requirement for timings of hand bumps or shakes, actions by Eddie could signify some form of foul play. For, despite hands meeting, the immediate movement into a spinning back kick "as soon as their fingers meet" was unsavoury (or, at least, it was seen that way by the audience in their immediate cries). There was no time taken by Eddie to retrace back into some form of mutual space or even a punch combination to 'feel out' or set up the kick. The decision for a kick was arguably meant to be an easy knock-out and a desire for a quick end to the fight—indeed a "cheap shot", leaving those around me angry at Eddie's actions ("What the fuck was that"). There is arguably a form of trust in these small moments of touching hands: tacit agreements that are not only symbolic and ritualistic but also have the potential to cause unexpected harm. Perhaps Eddie felt a flurry of adrenaline and decided to just take the risk, or even thought he had actually taken the time after their hands met. Still, what is demonstrated is the situationally relevant and appropriate behaviours expected, with rules and boundaries of 'the fighting frame' highly protected through rituals tied to expectations of sportsmanship like handshakes, "framing the sport as a contest" (Vacarro and Swauger 2016, p.28).

To succumb to emotion (like shouting something at an opponent) is potentially displayed in the third extract. Arguably, Baz was excited to have won and to have won so quickly, which seemed to be the 'game-plan', given that he was "swinging from the get-go". However, the reaction of screaming into his opponent's face while also lying on the floor (with a potentially broken arm, surrounded by medical staff) was hardly the expectation. The audience's reactions indicate that this was not appropriate in that situation (that he was a "prick" for doing so), and he was booed for quite some time. In chapter 4, being in control of emotion is significant for how fighters navigate concepts of violence and themselves as 'violent people'. We see how fragile these definitions are within the cage itself here too. Notably, the audience did not just react to the excitement of the cage, but they *created* the atmosphere in the arena – discussed below.

7.1.2 The audience's role in energy

The audience plays a powerful role in recognising and maintaining 'cage reality' (Jensen et al. 2013), and the frame of an organised and controlled fight. However, observations of the audience also presented interesting points around atmosphere and 'energy'. Indeed, "a good fight requires a good audience" (Vaccaro and Swauger 2016, p.xii), and at both events, the audience would scream and shout in relation to particular actions taking place, from almost comically obvious advice ("Just keep hitting him") to various uplifting calls ("Come on, David!"/"You got this, boy!"); reflecting the excitement of simply being there. These reactions arguably reflect an effort to inform and influence the fight and/or fighter, with transitions in the fight communicated in verbal and embodied ways around what is happening (and whether the audience approves of this or not). The most obvious example being if there was an impressive takedown, a heavy strike, or what seemed to be a potentially winning position on the ground, the arena would fall into an absolute frenzy. However, the emotional energy in the arena was as easily lost as it was built:

David takes his opponent to the ground. Chants for David are building for around 10 seconds and eventually die off. At this point of silence, David and his opponent are still on the floor, with David on the back of his opponent, who is in a turtle position – David is trying to get the choke on. Suddenly, David manoeuvres into the armbar position; the crowd cheer and stand for a moment before they realise David is unsuccessful and they quickly stop. David takes down his opponent again. The crowd erupts. Field notes, BBR: The Reaping.

Once given the signal from the referee, the fighters run in to the centre of the cage. They touch gloves briefly before rushing their steps back. "Fuckin knock 'im out" one of the audience screams. Another shouts: "Finish him!". Kirk goes to roundhouse kick the head of his opponent but misses it because of a quick duck by Tom. "Ooohhh" the crowd screams. Tom successfully performs a big take down. The crowd cheers wildly and claps. The energy in the room keeps rising and falling. Kirk wins via choke. Crowd goes wild as he jumps onto the cage. Field notes, BBR: The Reaping.

These flows of activity are not necessarily the same as in the context of team sports (e.g., Armstrong and Young 2007; Clark 2006) with histories and emotional attachment to those competing differing (e.g., Cottingham 2012). Still, 'being the crowd' here is a technicality for the sport, but there is also something interesting in "the idea that cheering might affect the outcome" (Kerrison 2018, p.20-21). The collective support for David in the first example was something heard over and over, but what was particularly interesting was how the voices started as small noises and continually progressed to bigger collective work and noises. It was something that I had not really paid attention to during my attendance at other fighting events, and arguably there is a sense of intersubjectivity and synchronisation for the audience, with chants (not specific to David but other fighters too) slowly chiming off until the next strike or potential manoeuvre arose. These moments are a multi-dimensional action and one that is done so naturally, from the transition from the starting of cheering, to dead silence, to a quick and substantial eruption of noise, to standing when a win is expected (Figure 6). Like Reynolds' (2017) 'seeing the lift', these could be examples of 'seeing the win'.



Figure 9 Seeing the win

To be a sufficient audience member is to be part of a choreography in ways: a coordination of noise that is recognisable as certain *things*, such as emotions or atmosphere, which are responses are also demonstrative of *exciting* situations. In the instance which follows, however, the collective performance of the audience can also

imply other emotions. I move to the first example of the women's fight at the BBR events, and the differences observed during their exchanges.

7.2 The women's fight: BBR The Reaping

Section 7.1 discussed how competencies of the audience are expressed in comments and actions (booing, cheering), with the 'flow of events' highlighting the significance of audience work in fulfilling their role. To make noise, react, cheer or boo, or indeed to withdraw these collective activities reflect different happenings within the frame of the fight (Goffman 1974), or arguably relate to the building of emotional energy of the event (Collins 2008). Although there was only one women's fight on the card at 'Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping', the fight was of an exceptionally high calibre, with the fighters competing for the BBR European championship title. As it was a European championship fight, I assumed the audience would be interested at least in some way to partake in the bravado of the arena (as they had been doing with fights up until that point). From the moment the announcer began to introduce the fighters; however, there was a significant change in the atmosphere: there was no more hooting, yelling, or clapping. The whole arena was silent.

7.2.1 The impact of energy in observing women's fighting

There were some quick punches – so fast! Both fighters move themselves around the cage, making numerous takedown attempts. To my knowledge, both women are grapplers by trade: a fight that could go either way, very quickly. Samantha got a big takedown, but there was no noise from spectators. As the rounds went on, there were no calls to "keep going" or even a "kill her!". However, some of the men in front of me did have some comments:

"It's really brought the energy down, this fight". He holds his pint glass with his arms crossed, shaking his head.

"The energy's gone"

"There's not really much happening on the ground".

There is no noise in the ten second warning, but some measly claps.

"I don't mind when they're doing stuff but come on".

There is still no noise, there is no reaction. People don't even seem to be watching at all. The women's fight seems to be the peak moment to have conversation and checking phones. No claps. No yells. Just murmur and conversation. Yet again there are some good takedowns and no response. I can hear the backs and legs of the fighters being thrown to the floor with force. Why is no one interested?

"This is as good as the Tyron Woodly fight". His friend replied with "Ref needs to stand 'em up".

The fight finishes, and there were some measly claps for the end of the fight and some claps for the winner. She puts her hands into her face and cried with happiness, before jumping into the arms of her coach. Field notes, BBR: The Reaping

In the women's fight above, not even a cheer was made when Samantha threw her opponent down or when they made "quick punches", leading to what I expected to be an early finish to the fight. Usually, reactions to events like 'big takedowns' have some response, whether in some vocal "OOOOH"s or in an 'eruption' (as in field notes in Section 7.1). Instead, there was an initial silence that substantially lacked the noise observed in the men's fights. But really, the audience were not actually *that* silent at all, given that the women's fight was a prime opportunity for different discussions: to catch up on day-to-day conversation (Figure 7), for checking phones, for buying food and drinks, and for going to the toilet. So many seats had been emptied, and for the first time at an MMA fight, I witnessed an intervention from the fight announcer, making calls to the audience to "make noise for the fighters". This intervention equally reflects claims made by those in front of me that "The energy's gone". Indeed, there seemed to be a problem with 'energy', but whose role is it to bring energy to an arena? Is it the fighters alone or the audience? Or both? Some male fighters in previous MMA

research openly note how they “don’t have an interest in women’s combat sports” (Spencer 2012, p.68). Are these silences a reflection of the same disinterest expressed through the literature? Arguably ‘bringing the energy’ *relies* on the audience. If they were willing, the audience could start making calls and chants. So why didn’t they?



Figure 10: People talking during the women's fight

Another indicator of this fight having a different audience contribution is in "the ten second warning", usually an instance where a short burst of support or encouragement might be heard for the fighters. Once again, the audience had no reactions to this, and continued to watch with "some measly claps" for the fighters at the end. The reactions could indicate that they did not find the fight impressive, but that women specifically are not impressive and are not "doing stuff". The athleticism of these women was limited compared to their male counterparts, with an 'incompatibility' around the categories of 'fighter' and 'woman'. In this case, the fighters in the ring are literally *doing* fighting but are treated as 'just women'. There is also categorising work around gender in the comment, "I don't mind when they're doing stuff but come on". The use of "they" *could* be fighters from other countries, and it *could* be light-weight category fighters; however, "they" is hearable as a commentary on women's fighting, said by men. The subtle sexism hidden through impersonal pronouns can frame his perspective as not sexist

(see, for example, Speer 2002), but simply an observation of general fighters, which can be difficult to respond to. The use of "they" is highly occasioned by gender, and there is work taking place around denouncing women who fight without explicitly saying so. In this way, we can analyse that sentence as almost an excusing or allowing women in the cage without complaining (usually), given that he "doesn't mind", but only when they are "doing stuff".

The use of "doing stuff" is ambiguous too, yet within that ambiguity arguably lies a powerful comparison: these women are apparently not doing anything at all. What is his idea of "stuff" specifically, given that the fighters *are* indeed "doing stuff" (and earned their right to by doing stuff at a European championship level)? Each takedown, each strike, each moment to reflect on the progression of movement – these are moments in which things *are* happening, but they are not always visible (as discussed throughout chapter 4). The sarcastic tone of "come on" could be drawn from the fight as evidence that they are not doing stuff' but could equally be suggestive of the referee standing up the fighters. Even the term "stuff" (as opposed to 'fighting well') indicates points of inferiority. The non-reactions in the stadium are also problematised by this lonesome but impactful sentence and/or microaggression (Kaskan and Ho 2016; Sue 2010).

Interestingly, his friends did not respond to this sentence with verbal confirmations of "Yeah"s but instead, his (assumed) friend stated that "Ref needs to stand 'em up". This response could be a more general technical point that could equally be directed at a men's MMA fight (as well as "There's not really much happening on the ground"). Referees are more likely to 'stand up' fighters if there is a lack of activity (or *perceived* lack of activity), often responding to audience engagement and the actual fighting exchanges (Downey 2007; Hirose and Pih 2010, p.199). As the reader might remember from chapter 4, too, ground-based techniques are extraordinarily difficult and detailed, with the work being done by fighters not always visible to those lacking in 'insider' competencies. Few comments were made in the men's fights by those around me, however, despite drawing on Tyron Woodley for a comparison¹⁴.

Given that neither fighter had support in the audience from friends or family, perhaps this contributed to the lack of audience energy, too. Nevertheless, some of the other men fighting that night did not seem to have any obvious fans or family screaming

¹⁴ Woodley is a male MMA fighter in the UFC known for particularly boring fights

their names, but the fighting atmosphere was substantially different. Additionally, there were potential situations where male fighters were not 'doing stuff'. The treatment from the audience around me, however, was somewhat different:

The referee stops to allow Huw to get up. "Got less than a minute, pal" is heard from the audience. Huw stumbles again. His opponent indicates for him to get back up. The referee stops again as Huw continues to stay on the floor but eventually gets up. There are big shouts as Huw starts to punch his opponent in a frenzy. A few seconds later, as punches die down, the arena goes quiet again for a moment. Suddenly, they are back on the floor after Danny takes Huw down. There are a few shots here and there. "You got twenty seconds left" someone shouts from the audience once more. "Get up Huw, come on!". Danny holds his hands in the air as he watches Huw still sit on the floor, possibly to get his breath back. Huw's opponent is told to go to his side of the cage in the break by the referee. Once more, Danny paces and comes forward to the middle, arms open, and screams, "COME ON!". The referee sends Danny back to the side of the cage again. Huw has his hands down. He looks tired. Eventually, Huw stands back up, and Danny meets him in the centre of the floor to return to the fight. Danny seems to have the lock on, but Huw escapes...barely. "Huw, come on you've got to work", his corner screams as he hits the table at the start of each word. Shouts of "Finish now, Huw!" are heard from different areas of the crowd. There's a lot of screaming for Huw as the time counts down to the end of the final round. "40 seconds! 30 seconds!". The fight ends. Danny won. There are few claps at Danny, but "Well done, Huw" is heard in an echo before slowly trailing off. Field notes, BBR: The Reaping.

In the extract, there is not much happening in the fight at that moment ("A few shots here and there"), and the referee stands them up several times. Huw's composure indicates that he had given up in some ways ("his hands down. He looks tired"), and the calls from the audience and corners indicate they are aware of this ("Get up Huw, come on/ you've got to work"). They are using directions of time to encourage Huw to continue and fight ("Got less than a minute, pal"/ "40 seconds!"). There is so much that could have been said about Huw from those around me. The same men making remarks about the women's fight could have been comments about Huw use of taking

breaks, a perceived lack of heart in sitting on the floor, or the fact that the referee *did* have to stand him up. There were no calls for the other fighter (away fighter) who arguably dominated this fight, indicative in the field notes and the fact that he won. Although comments were made, there was a lacking narrative evident in the women's fight with comments seeming 'matter of fact' or unbiased – merely observation of fighters being tired instead of claims of 'them' being 'allowed' in the cage. Another example of the very different narrative themes of men's fighting at BBR: The Reaping is provided below:

There's a massive roar of young women screaming, with a range of "Go on!" and "Come on!"s being shouted before the fight even started. There is a big home crowd for the Welsh boy, Aidan. Both fighters meet for a handshake in the middle, and the fight gets off to a quick start. Aidan lands a solid knee into his opponent's (Perry) stomach "Ohhhh!". The crowd reacts to almost the phantom pain we feel watching that blow land. "He's tired mate", someone in front comments to his friend...Screams of "Come on, Aidan", and "Come on, Aidan. Fight!" spill through the seats, and he escapes the clinch! There are a few rounds of applause. Perry landed a successful blow to the nose, and Aidan is bleeding. He looks tired. "Just keep hitting him!" is heard across the sides of the arena. There's a sudden change of advantage, and Aidan managed to get into a dominant position on the floor. The crowd cheers, and there's a "Keep working!" from the VIP area. The bell goes. The final break before the final round. With blood dripping on his stomach, Aidan sits on the stool provided. They meet hands for the final round. Massive shrieks as Perry elbows Aidan and gains advantageous position. "He really is gassed", someone in front of me speaks. The bell goes and a flurry of punches follows. I hear a voice from in front of me: "That's what I'm talking about". Field notes, BBR: The Reaping.

Although observations like "He's tired mate" or "He really is gassed" would indicate lacking elements of excitement during the fight (from their perspective), there is little commentary from those in front of me compared to that of the women's fight. It is interesting that a theme of excitement is concerning punches ("That's what I'm talking about"). Perhaps this reflects the desire for specific techniques used in a fight (as

discussed by Hirose and Pih 2010) – their preferences appear to be that of striking as opposed to ground-based techniques. This might support the idea that a lacking commentary around other forms of martial art skills is due to their lacking competencies to view the fight in a particular way. Nevertheless, they seemed competent (and confident) enough to make claims about the women.



Figure 11: "It's really brought the energy down"

7.2.2 Reflections on gender and 'energy'

The women's European championship fight was apparently "bringing the energy down", but to what standards are the audience holding to these two fighters? Comments by audience members in their assessment of the women's fight are not unique to the event observed but are problematic across accounts of training and women's everyday lived experiences, particularly in sports. There is something to be said for women having to outperform men (and to exceed in their performance) to simply be seen as 'good' (Channon 2013a; Puwar 2004, p.59). How can 'energy' be created when so many of the audience leave as soon as women appear on the screen or prepare for their entrance into the cage? The process of ignoring, and arguably the display of ignorance, is not unique to the context of women's MMA fighting at BBR. Even at the

Olympic level, female boxers are “brushed off” (Tjønndal 2017, p.144), with audiences and even officials packing away as women’s fights begin (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. 2020, p.76).

Comparing these points to the initial vignette, “they” is not amateur fighters or fighters who are not doing so well in a fight – “they” is particular to these fighters as women, and “they” are different from ‘normal’ fighters who apparently upkeep energy at all times (despite the field notes of Huw and Aidan’s performance saying otherwise). In many ways, this point recalls some of the discussions in chapter 5. To remind the reader, here is the segment from the interview which comes to mind:

Phil: “If you don’t wanna fight and you just wanna get fit cool. But you stay that end of the pool and we’ll stay our end of the pool... as long as people understand that we got no problem people jumping in with us”.

Like this audience, Phil is not stating that women cannot fight or are incapable of fighting. However, there is a sense that they are *allowing* and making adjustments for these women in MMA. Men who are fighters are able to have a slower fight without questioning their belonging as a gender. For women, however, they must *at all times* outperform. Equally, suggestions of “we got no problem” by Phil sound similar in ways to the example of “I don’t mind when they’re doing stuff”. The observation of the women’s fight could therefore be another instance of being “at their end of the pool” (that is, MMA fighting - a space which is seen as a space of and for men) despite being literally an MMA fighter and at a high level. I wonder if the fighters noticed these strangely silent experiences. It would be interesting to talk to female fighters about this, as I discuss in chapter 8. The following section extends the discussion and difference of audience work at another women’s fight at BBR. Despite presenting a more engaged audience (perhaps too engaged?), it is a toxic environment where sexism, misogyny, and humour are central to the treatment of the women fighting.

7. 3 The women’s fight: Retribution

Like ‘Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping’, ‘Blood Bath Royal: Retribution’ was another near sold-out stadium that again had only one women’s fight on the card. As with ‘The Reaping’, both fighters were impressively skilled and were fighting just before the

event's main card. Unlike the previous women's fight, however, the 'Retribution' fight was filled with audience engagement and seemed well-received. The fight included a home fighter, Sarah, whose support could be seen and heard with various chanting, banners, and even t-shirts with her face on them. You could really feel the support from the audience - the crowd chanting her name, congregating the doors to the arena for her entrance, recordings on phones, and singing along to the music being played. As for her opponent, Maria, she travelled from Poland to fight. There was less specific support, but the crowd's boos 'against' Maria and general claps still contributed to a sense of excitement. You could almost feel this excitement in the seat through different vibrations of music and motions taking place. I had not been at a women's fight that had such energy before. Rather quickly, however, I came to realise that the treatment of these fighters was not going to be quite the positive environment I expected. From entering the cage through to the final minutes of their bout, the audience around the stadium and the group of young men around me spoke in sexualising, infantilising, and derogatory ways. The section below presents the field notes which reflect these accounts.

7.3.1 Observing the “cunt” and “baby girl”

It was time for the first (and only) women's fight on the card. I've watched the lead up to this fight - both are established fighters with a strong winning streak, with rumours of both having a future in the UFC contender events. You could hear the screams for Sarah (the home fighter) from around the stadium, with mini chants of "SAR-AH, SAR-AH" beginning and trailing off, lasting several seconds before dying out. There's a lot of noise, a lot of lights, and then suddenly, the screens on top of the cage change. They go completely black before two women appear onto the screen, arms crossed to either side. Split down the middle, the screen shows each of their fight records and then transitions into video clips of their individual training and interview footage. There is a huge "WEEEEEEYYYYY" from the crowd as Sarah's video is shown. I can hear chatter happening around me. "GO ON, SARA!" the younger man in front screams.

Being in a lighter-weight class, both women are rather petite fighters. Sarah is also a young fighter, and at just 18 years old, her record is just incredible. She wears a rash guard in her videos and fights, compared to Maria, who wore a two piece. As soon as Maria appears on screen, an increased roar from the stadium is heard, with wolf whistles and yells in various places. "SHE [Maria]. IS. FIT" a young man in front speaks. His friend agrees: "She's fucking hot, man. Fucking hot!"

The video displaying their score cards and training ends, and the lights lower to the floor, an eruption of music fills the stadium. The first fighter, Maria, starts her entrance. The men note her size again;

"She's tiny!"

"Tiny, yeah!"

As the fighter arrives at the front of the cage, she is met by the cut man and coaches. Maria takes her top off for the pat-down, and another eruption of cheers is heard.

"YEEAAAHHH". The men continued their jeering as the official touched the fighter;

"Have a good pat down. That's it".

Maria steps into the cage ready, waiting for her opponent. Everything goes dark once more, and there is a rumble. You could feel the bass through the floor, and suddenly lights are on Sarah in the walkway. The crowd goes wild for Sarah as her entrance music begins. The same routine takes place for Sarah as she reaches the outside of the cage, though there isn't anything said (or at least heard) about her being 'pat down' this time. Sarah then bows before entering the cage and runs the circumference of the cage, and high fives her opponent. The ring girl walks to indicate round 1, with a "Shag me!" shouted from someone behind me. As the fight marks its beginning with the bell, so also began the running commentary from the men surrounding my seat.



Figure 12: An example of a 'pat down'

“She’s [Maria] fucking Polish, love. Do ‘er!”

“I would shag both of ‘em”.

The round develops into a heavy grappling-based scenario, and suddenly Maria attacks Sarah from behind into a rear-naked choke.

“I’d let her choke me the fuck out”.

The referee stands them up, both fighters breathing heavily. You could see they were tired – mouths open gasping for air, their bodies moving rapidly. It’s been a heavy-hitting fight so far, with big slams to the floor consistently. So exciting!

“Keep your fucking guards!”

Sarah brings her opponent to the ground – the crowd goes wild. After both fighters trying for some time to gain an advantageous position, the referee stands them up. The back of forth of heavy strikes begins once more, led by Maria, but another stoppage takes place.

“Looks like a scratch to the eye”, someone comments. It’s Sarah’s eye. Sarah stops, holding her head while the medical team look over her. The crowd boos very loudly at her opponent.

“Booo! CUNT. CUUUUUUUNT”.

“Go on, Sarah!”

“Oh you fucking cunt. Kick her in the fanny!”

“Kill ‘er!”

Sarah continues on, with Maria offering her apologies by way of a fist bump. This is still, however, met with disdain from the crowd. The men continue commenting on the striking exchanges:

“She’s so soft”.

“Show us where you pee from!”.

“Yea she's very flat footed”.

“She’s just reaching. She’s fit though”.

“She’d have good strong babies”.

“She’s got good cage control – whatever the fuck that is!”. He laughs looking towards his friends. It’s uncertain who exactly these men were directing their comments at. Still, Sarah continues to try and maintain a dominant position in the round. The cheers continue.

“Go on, baby girl!”

“They’re both fucked. They’re both knackered”

Both fighters continue to press on, when suddenly there is another stoppage. Sarah’s mouth guard falls out after a stiff jab to the face. This is so exciting - what began as a fight where Sarah seemed to be the dominant fighter, it’s now quite hard to judge who is likely to win. As the time creeps to the final round, the crowd pick up their voices in bursts of support for Sarah.

“Come on. Fuck her up!”

“GO ON, SARAH!”

It was at this point that a man behind me commented to the younger men in front: "You're talking as if you know her", with a humoured look on his face.

"I do mate, she's my sister"

He laughed; "Not the way you were talking about her earlier on".

"Mate, both of 'em are my bae"

A friend chimes in, "Whoever wins is my bae!"

"She got it!" – The crowd reacts quickly as Sarah got a big takedown, but she is unable to put on the submission.

It's now the end of the final round; Maria's corner lifts her onto his shoulders and parades her around the cage for quite some time. Perhaps annoyed at their boastful confidence, Sarah's corner then picks Sarah up for two seconds, the crowd cheers in unison, "SAR-AH, SAR-AH!". Meeting for the announcement in the centre of the cage, both fighters point to the air, in an "I am number one" manner. The winning decision goes to the judges scoring cards... Sarah lost.

"How did that happen?" The crowd doesn't know how to react. Big boos turn into cheers made for Sarah, but there are no cheers for Maria. A young man speaks his final comment of the night: "To be fair though, I'd still shag both of 'em". Field notes. BBR: Retribution

At BBR Retribution, the ceremonial processes of setting up 'the fight' were exact to that of the men. Videos were played on screens demonstrating each fighter's history. The announcer spoke of their achievements instead of their looks, and lights and music were in place as usual - preparing the spectators for the excitement about to begin. Indeed, these were moments not troubled by the gender of the fighters at all. In fact, at both BBR events, the women's fight and the individual athletes were not advertised in sexualised ways - unlike, for instance, The Ultimate Fighter series (TUF) discussed previously (e.g., Channon et al. 2018; Jennings 2015). Contrasting to structural elements of organisation for the fighting event, the data presented is a spectacle of

how the audience are making sense of the fight (and its fighters) in an extremely gendered way. The parameters of gender within the fighting framework are accomplished through audience talk where fighters are young women and conventionally attractive women, and the gender and sexual appeal of these fighters play a role in their treatment by those in the audience.

The sexualising treatment of Maria began from the very basic and essential moment of the 'pat down' ("have a good pat down, that's it" [Figure 9]) but even potentially from the video shown as part of the build-up to their entrances ("WHEEEEEEEY"). Such immediate sexualising could be to degrade her in a more specific way as 'fighter' but through her gender, given that the audience was generally in support of Sarah. In this instance, the categories of 'woman' and 'fighter' are both present but result in the sexualisation of the fighters. Alternatively, perhaps the fighting narrative did not even matter: Maria was attractive and thus had to be objectified. Shouts to Maria are also xenophobic ("She's fucking Polish, love. Do 'er"), presented as another reason or justification for Sarah to win against her, given she is a specific 'outsider' there. Unfortunately, xenophobic calls were not an occurrence specific to Maria, with those around me commenting on another (male) Polish fighter during a fight later in the evening ("Fuck off, you Polish cunt. Go back to building walls!"). Nationality and gender were easy sources for targeting fighters, and arguably the role of negative comments towards the visitor (Maria) and the culture of being 'the home' fighter is significant in dramatizing fighters as characters in MMA as a violent performance (e.g., Andreasson and Johansson 2019; Stenius 2011). Despite this, there were still shouts *for* Maria when she was sexualised in "wolf whistles and yells" while being "pat down" and getting undressed. How women were treated generally in that space was also sexualised, reflected in the shouts made to the ring girl ("shag me"/"Get your baps out"). However, the audience was particularly interested in Sarah, and the various categories at play being called out to her.

7.3.2 The changing status women

For Sarah, at some moments, she was referred to in familial ways ("she's my sister"), in a relationship ("bae"), infantilised ("baby girl!"), and sexualised. These are observable moments in which audience members react to their bodies and the action taking place;

when losing, being dominant, or being submissive. There are various ties to differential gender categories, but these terms are not just descriptive – they are also symbolic. Sarah and Maria are clearly not 'girls' for instance, but in a "girling" of the fighters (Butler 1993, p.232), are changing relationships with the fighters and invoke a sense of smallness and weakness. The term "baby girl" could also be sexualised and is specific as an infantilising term to describe any woman. However, these are two individuals that are also engaging in really violent action. Describing women who are athletes as girls arguably "tempers the symbolic threat posed by successful adult sportswomen" (Wensing and Bruce 2003, p.388). Given that fighting is such a complex enterprise to embody (shown in chapter 4), it is not too inappropriate to guess that these young men are not MMA fighters themselves (also indicated by their comment "whatever the fuck that is"). Being unable to be in the cage, these calls to the fighters is arguably a way of gender performance in accountable ways that are exacerbated and relied upon through jokes and derogatory terms, like in chapter 7.

During these numerous shouts to the fighters, another audience member arguably attempts to set the boundary of expected behaviour – with "You're talking as if you know her" appearing to call them out relative to an 'over the top' engagement with the fight. The 'calling out' could be in two different ways, the first a matter of 'why are you so interested in this woman's bout' and potentially chiding them for being inappropriate about the fighters. After the initial response from the younger man of Sarah being his 'sister', this man repeats the claims or management of appropriate involvement ("Not the way you were talking about her"), mediating the others' actions. I am unsure whether the man interrupting was part of their group, but the choice to react to "Go on, Sarah!" was interestingly specific. Why did it create that particular response? Why not at other moments?

Even if he *did* know Sarah, both fighters' sexual attractiveness was acknowledged ("both of 'em are my bae"), situating the fighters' worth in that fight to their assumed heterosexual desirability ("Whoever wins is my bae"). As Spencer reflects, for many men, women's bodies "are to be the subjects of pleasure, not subjects of strength, power, and technical proficiency in combat" (Spencer 2012, p.70). I feel the ending comments reflect that point, with "To be fair though" reading as a statement that is arguably disinterested in who actually won, despite cheering and supporting Sarah throughout. Equally, the observation of the audience seems less relevant to their support of Sarah as the home fighter. Instead, it uses her status and

their relative position to her hometown as justification to call out verbally throughout the fight. These comments are also asymmetric in recipient design, with the turns presented as super personalised at those fighters and no one else. They are *designed* for Sarah as the home fighter (the "baby girl"); they are *designed* for Maria from Poland (the "cunt"). In these numerous calls from those individuals across the stadium, however, it is just crowd noise, with an almost invisibility and anonymity of these men in the general audience: able to shout these awful comments with little persecution.

Some comments related to the biological aspects of assumed gender categories. For example, shouting "good strong babies" is not part of the fighting narrative and seems to have a different role than other comments, compared to "kick her in the fanny" which still (in some ways) comments on performance. There is a dual interpretation of 'her' (it may be Maria or Sarah) body being tough as a fighter. However, the body also being something he finds sexually attractive and could reproduce with. Equally, these words could be a challenge: could he *handle* her because she is so strong (and thus makes strong babies)?

Another comment that seems to present itself differently in terms of the biological narrative is "show us where you pee from", with "show us" really a direct order and a demand. This comment could be sexualising, given the requirement of being in an exposing position, and potentially fetishising (which extends to the comment "I'd let her choke me the fuck out" too). The comment made towards Sarah and/or Maria around peeing could also be a more direct questioning of their gender and gender assessment - a way for them to demonstrate proof that they are in fact, women, or at least not on any performance-enhancing drugs given that they are taking up a space which is understood as "quintessentially male" (Wacquant 2004), a "manhood act" (Vacarro and Swauger 2016) and "not for women" (see Spencer 2012, p.66). Women fighting (and fighting well) contradicts the MMA space and the deeply gendered meanings attributed to fighting (see Woodward 2008). Even the term 'fighters' has such a "deeply male description" (Jennings 2015, p.79); they are generally described as 'female fighters' as opposed to simply 'fighter'.

I wonder if these men did any form of combat sport or MMA. If "It is every heterosexual guy's dream to be a fucking cage fighter" (Vacarro and Swuager 2016, p.53), then all of these comments could really be an attempt to justify and save face, given that this is a very technical competitive sport, and these young men do not

actually know it. For instance, after the comment about "good cage control".¹⁵ the speaker highlighted the paradox of his lacking knowledge ("whatever the fuck that is"). Considering that as most of these comments were often projected loud enough for others to hear and purposefully, much of the data could be attempts to save face around the perceived competency as an MMA spectator and being masculine men. As part of a group, the vocal spectator is convincing himself and others that they *are*, in fact, still masculine despite not fighting (and still better than the women fighting in their presence). The toxic representations of MMA in media (see Bowman 2020) are so intrinsic to how many see the sport and its fighters. Are these comments also part of showing they get "the method" (Green 2016, p.13) of masculinity and MMA, even at the margins spectating?

Specific comments are recognisable as *specifically* female fighting comments or as *just* fighting comments, with other moments moving between sexualised, objectifying comments alongside those around the fight and technicalities. Comments become more technical in obvious moments in the fight from supporting Sarah ("Go on Sarah"/ Kill 'er!"), to technique ("Yeah she's very flat footed"/"Keep your fucking guards!"). Equally, there are similarities in how the audience reacts to general events taking place ("another eruption of cheers is heard"/"The crowd boos very loudly at her opponent") – a stark contrast of the women's fight at BBR The Reaping. There are also moments where sexualising comments directly follow legitimate technical discussions ("She's just reaching...She's fit though"), whilst other comments could be framed in either discussion or both, given that 'soft' could be interpreted in technical standards (e.g., not striking hard).

The bodies of Sarah and Maria were continually re/constructed through navigations of gender, sexuality, and fighting performance, with often a refusal to adopt the framework of just 'fighter' in the analysis of audience members, re-introducing Sarah and Maria as 'women': sexual, attractive, and essentialist, reproductive. Comparing field notes between Sarah and Maria, and how this audience treated fighters who are men, questions the significance of gender in the humour and treatment of the fight:

It's the start of the next fight. A fighter walks into the arena and makes his way down the designated walking space. The guys in front of me start laughing and

¹⁵ The ability to press the fighter against the cage and be dominant in that space

point: "Those are tiny pants!". The fighter was wearing white shorts which came just below his buttocks. I would agree, yes, 'tiny' seemed like a useful term. A friend replied, "Like has he actually forgotten his gym stuff!". Field notes, BBR: Retribution.

The fighter approaches the cage, has a pat-down from personnel, and the cut-man begins to put Vaseline on his face. "He's enjoying that inni? Face massage". Field notes, BBR: Retribution.

Rather than comment on anything explicit like penis, balls, or buttocks, the audience comments around this comical observation in a way that was still almost matter-of-fact. The suggestion that he forgot his gym stuff also continued to reference the fighter (including his body) into a framework that respects him as a fighter, as opposed to him being sexualised or gendered. I could only imagine the response if Sarah or Maria wore shorts that "tiny". An example is given again in the men's treatment of entering the cage, where discussions of enjoyment are not really sexualised here, but more in terms of relaxation (e.g., a face massage). Really, jokes could still be made which sexualise male fighters in comical ways, but doing so would arguably risk the audience member being perceived as potentially gay – troubling their own gender performance.

The two examples above support the analysis around the work being done around fighters which are so specific to gender, with sources of humour and reactions to the men's fight being so different. The audience draw from the ease and power of gender as a moral category, in which Sarah and Maria's performances and bodies are re-defined not as 'fighter' but as 'women'. Like Jennings' discussions, "these women may be fighters, but they were women, beautiful women, first" (Jennings 2015, p.73; see also Meân and Kassing 2009). Gender is specific to the order of how this fight (and its fighters) should be viewed and of the "principles of organization which govern events" (Goffman 1974, p.11). There are *some* similarities in general audience work where the audience was producing noise in complimenting the dynamic of a fight for Sarah and Maria ("the crowd pick up their voices in bursts of support"/ "Big boos turn into cheers"). There are also moments reflecting the sportsmanship and character of fighters ("Maria offering her apologies by way of a fist bump") where the fighters sort out the potential dangers of inappropriate forms of violence between themselves.

Still, in their continuance to boo after the handshake and in the exacerbated shouts towards Maria, the crowd highlights (again) gender-specific experiences. The frustrations expressed towards Maria for this accident ("You fucking cunt") are heavily gendered and cause serious calls for Sarah to "kill 'er" (a phrase also heard in men's fights). Another specific retaliation was Maria's poke to Sarah's eye, followed by "Kick her in the fanny". It could be that these young men find something humorous around having a reason to shout the word 'fanny' in an audience, but the term also mixes violent imagery with such a childish word. Would shouting 'hick him in the dick' make the same impact in a men's fight? Paradoxically, it seems hardly fair to justify booing Maria for an accidental eye-poke, suggesting Sarah kick her back in the 'fanny'.

Does this audience even know what to do, and how to support a woman who fights? Are they embarrassed that they enjoy this fight and need to make up for it in these sexualising and gendering ways? Research on differences in sports commentary between male and female athletes indicates that although reporting on athlete performance has changed (albeit into 'gender bland ways'), sexualising comments on women's bodies were a large proportion of commentary content (Musto et al. 2017). What would these comments look like if it was not a female fight? Would these comments be more technical? Would they still be feminising for men? Thinking back to the poem 'Fighting Phallusy', gendered bodies do not seem to be separate from skills here, and lines of inclusion and gender performativity are still fragile.

7. 4 Conclusion

At Blood Bath Royal events, the audience's work in their reactions to fights taking place was well heard, with screams thrown across the arena in support or anger and reactions heard in response to events taking place in the fight. Observing the women's fights, however, was telling of several issues as analysed and discussed throughout this thesis – differential gendered treatment, sexualisation, and issues around what constitutes the fighting frame. The data drawn upon are the public representations of how violence is happening, how gender is happening, and how the audience makes sense of bodies in contradictory spaces. To be dominant, physically overpower, cause injury, and be violent: the fighter's bodies as women are sites of resistance to dominant discourses of gender and patriarchal norms. However, the audience work taking place is still re-producing and reiterating gender norms. Women fighting at these events

arguably participate in a trade-off to be there, where women who are fighters are mediated in disinterest and/or sexualised and derogatory treatment.

Section 7.1 brought attention to the general audience work, which helps to establish the organised fighting frame. In noises, movements, and reactions, the audience knew how to engage to action both suited and pleasing to MMA skills, and the rules of controlled violence within the cage. The chapter then moved towards the observation of the first women's fight in section 7.2, from 'Blood Bath Royal: The Reaping'. Unlike the fighters in section 7.1, the women's fight was met with critique and overlooked or ignored. Furthermore, despite the audience holding the capacity to develop the arena's 'energy' and atmosphere, it was (apparently) the WMMA fighters themselves who had "brought the energy down". Presenting the second women's fight at Blood Bath Royal: Retribution in section 7.3, there was almost an opposite level of engagement; however, this engagement was a constant sexualising and infantilising interactions of the WMMA fighters.

The poem at the beginning of the chapter reflects the structure of the fight taking place and the reactions to the fight, which are situationally challenged by audience members, setting up what follows between my own observations as a researcher contrasted with sexist male commentary. These comments are the atmosphere in the arena, too: it is not just the 'young guys' around me that contribute to this, but also others in the wolf whistles and cheers for the pat-down. Indeed, "The Women's Fight" is not necessarily in the physical exchanges of an organised bout. Instead, the fight is in varying moments: fighting to belong, fighting narratives of being a 'baby girl' or a 'cunt', and fighting for the right to feel safe and included. These issues are present not just in BBR fighting events but also in Fight or Flight MMA. The final chapter discusses these interlinking themes next in "The finale".

The finale

And now it comes to a close
Of the data and the prose
Between the training and the fighting
The crying and the writing
Where questions come to meet
The answers that we seek
About gender, skills and violence
Hearing some voices – others silent
From the club and in events
Between the notes and time spent
Being within but also out
Of data, space and doubt
And here is the last review
Of themes both old and new
In this last chapter the words I send
Off the final piece - of the end

Chapter 8: Conclusion and discussion

As the poem is rightly titled, this chapter is "The finale" to the thesis, bringing together the research's findings, feelings, and experiences. I address the 3 research questions presented at the beginning of this thesis and some of the questions raised in reflection (and arguably open to the reader, too) throughout chapters 2-7. The contributions of the thesis are also made evident throughout each section, which involves firstly re-introducing the main points from the literature review and methods in section 8.1. Some concluding notes on my approach's strengths and limitations and why this is an under-researched topic are also made. Section 8.2 then outlines a brief conclusion of the analytical themes of chapters 4-7, which then continues to answer each of the research questions individually. Limitations and further research are then brought into view (section 8.3) before research recommendations (section 8.4). Section 8.5 then draws the chapter to a close. To remind the reader, the 3 research questions are below:

1. How is action defined and framed as violent from participants perspectives within MMA training and fighting?
2. How is action embodied and gendered in relation to these definitions?
3. In what ways are the gendering possibilities of (violent) action experienced?

Overall, this research was ethnographic but also encompassed a feminist and broadly interactionist approach. The significant focus and contributions of the research are based on a critical appraisal of embodiment, gender, and violence which (as I go on to discuss) was a critical aim relating to issues initially raised in "The _____ Gap". Below, I revise how the main themes of this thesis had been taken up in previous research and integrate my contributions.

8.1 Studying MMA embodiment and gender

The series of publications in chapter 2 highlighted the necessary subjective (and intersubjective experiences) of training and fighting. These discussions were sometimes phenomenological (Spencer 2012; Stenius and Dziwenka 2015) but also specifically focused on gender (men's masculinity) with how skills are embodied too (Vacarro and Swauger 2016). The process of embodiment was even linked to

'spartanization' (Teeter 2014), but what was present across various literature was how this embodiment also related to an understanding of violence. The 'violence' referred to in this literature was physical and related to skills of the sport as controlled, but also part of the fighting performance (Stenius 2011). I took up similar points of discussion in chapter 4. Some of the literature also raised interesting findings around pain in training and fighting (Green 2011) and how the control of emotions was important to the processual development of bodies. For some, however, emotions (such as being dominant over other men) were closely interlinked to performing violence and almost inseparable (Vacarro and Swauger 2016). The central point of limitation in that literature, and one of the most significant contributions of this thesis, was that most of this literature included men's experiences. This reflects wider issues of gender blindness in male-dominated sporting spaces and research, often focusing on men and men only (see Richards 2015; Free and Hughson 2003).

Some articles specifically on women in MMA provided a useful entry point to discussions of sexualisation and objectification, but these were primarily based on the history of WMMA fighters in TUF or the UFC (e.g., Channon et al. 2018; Jennings 2015; Weaving 2014, 2015). Literature that did include women as participants in MMA also related to the discussion of sexualising experiences and the judgments experienced by women when fighting in the cage. Interestingly, these articles were also egalitarian in nature and stressed the meritocracy and equality of the gyms in which research took place (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Teeter 2014).

Despite this, there was mention of humor across most of the MMA literature. This humour seemed to be an underlying power in how individuals embodied the sport (and the masculinity within it). I brought focus to the role of 'humour' in this thesis, not only in the aspects of embodying skills but in the power relationships between men and women and between myself and the coach. Mixed-gender training was also an important point of discussion in the literature, highlighting some of the troubles experienced in touching and hitting women (e.g., Channon 2014; Maclean 2015). This literature was helpful, but it was mostly in other MACS and not MMA specifically, and provided findings more so from interview data than ethnographic data and detail. The ethnographic design and flexible researcher role in this thesis contribute to these issues, which is a focus of chapter 5.

Across the literature, the audience at fighting events were mentioned, although there was no provision of data or further development (e.g., Abramson and

Modzelewski 2010; Stenius 2011; Teeter 2014). An analysis of audience involvement (and themes of violence and frame) was a further contribution of this thesis in chapter 7.

The chapter then moved on to the theorising of key concepts of the thesis. Embodiment and 'the body' were considered through the work of Crossley (e.g., 2004, 2005). Crossley's work on reflexive body techniques and intersubjectivity was included in various literature, but it was also complimentary to the interest in interaction and ethnographic design. The understandings of 'the body' were then drawn upon with a particular feminist dynamic, considering the use of Iris Young (2005) in more feminist phenomenological considerations. The theorising of gender, however, was taken up through the work of Butler, with gender researched and analysed in this research as heteronormative and performative (Butler 1990, 2004, 2011). My research had interest in the ways in which MMA masculinity is embodied and performed, but also around what bodies are related to those actions.

Violence in the literature was also generally related to theories of sportization (Elias and Dunning 1986), edgework, and risk (Channon 2020; Lang 1990). I found these considerations useful in the possibilities of how participants might answer question 1. However, I mentioned in this thesis of the non-linear and rhizomatic nature of writing. After I reflected on fieldwork and experience of 'humour', I decided to expand the potential theorising on violence too, linking to the discussion of Collins' (2008) emotional dynamics of violence, but also the interpersonal forms of violence (Kelly 1987, 1988) (including humour) which provides a critical reflection of humour in chapter 6.

Overall, the research consisted of 54 hours of ethnographic observation (42 hours at Fight or Flight MMA and 12 hours at BBR events) with a qualitative, ethnographic research design. Organised semi-structured interviews were held with 4 members of Fight or Flight MMA club: Phil, Rhys, Lily, and Sara. To hear from women was an important part of this research. My flexible researcher role was also chosen to address the lacking experiences of women and ethnographic detail of mixed-gender training in MMA (similarly to John 2016). This is a key point of contribution to women's experiences in the field both as researchers and participants. The analysis equally contributes to the critical perspective of 'humour' which was often overlooked. Moving on to the overview and findings of the research, I answer the 3 questions presented.

8.2 Overview and findings

To give a brief overview of the chapter themes: chapter 4 explored the definitions of violence as understood by Fight or Flight MMA club participants and presented action in MMA as a specific, physical, and "controlled violence". This initial chapter responds to question 1, where we begin to see the analysis of frame by participants through primarily interview data. How participants' understandings were embodied in training and fighting was then of focus, contributing to question 2. Chapter 5 starts to problematise these findings, with gendered bodies often separated in training or with problems in framing action (and experience of embodiment) when mixed-gender training did occur (question 3). Chapter 5 also hinted at the 'non-PC' humour of the club and why that may pose problems for when women are 'in frame'. Humour was given specific attention in chapter 6, and humor played a role in constructing and producing an MMA masculinity that was homophobic, sexualised, and sexist. Across these moments, there is interactional trouble (and trouble in understanding and respecting) women's bodies as training partners and fighters, which shows further relevancy to questions 3 and chapter 7. Chapter 7 corresponded to the observations of the BBR fighting events, and although a different ethnographic site, similar findings were produced on the treatment of women as fighters from audience members. Chapter 7 also contributes to questions 1 and 2, however, where the initial treatment of men's fighting indicates the particularities of 'the fighting frame' taking place. Further detail of this analysis and the findings to the research questions are presented below.

8.2.1 How is action defined and framed as violent from participants perspectives within MMA training and fighting?

This thesis set out to explore violence in the case of mixed martial arts – namely, understanding how situations (and fighters) are framed as violent or not. Violence varied in ways it is defined, enacted, and rarefied as reasonable ways of doing action, and Goffman's (1974) frame analysis was a valuable way to approach this interest. In chapter 4, we heard from Fight or Flight MMA club members on their definitions, and there was recognition of the various types of physical and emotional forms of violence or abuse that exist. This was a particularly difficult question for participants to answer, but across the interviews, the action was generally situated as violent when there is "no

sense in it" (Phil). In contrast to fighting on the street, the rules specific to the sporting context had an important role in the purpose of action and the expected behaviours of both "controlled violence" and "controlled aggression". This confirms the previous literature on MMA and MACS, such as Spencer (2012) and Abramson and Modzelewski (2010), where 'violence' is distanced in various ways (echoing the Love Violence Hate Fighting campaign, too (Channon and Matthews 2018)). Many of those interviewed also raised points around emotional capacities to be violent and some of the power dynamics involved in an interaction that might turn a 'controlled' situation into a bullying situation. Included in these dynamics are the perceived vulnerabilities of individuals (mentioned by Lily and Phil in particular), with fairness also being part of the navigation of action as 'controlled' or not.

The framing of action was also present in chapter 7, where observation of the BBR audience are making judgments of the situation and contributions to the environment and 'what it is what is going on'. Through the vocal calls and shouts, evident also in their embodied movements and gestures towards the cage, the audience's reactions are telling of the fighting frame and its rules. There were several key features to these reactions, but an example to draw upon here are rituals in the bracketing of action and sportsmanship (e.g., not screaming at an opponent and meeting to touch hands). In ways, there are also similarities to Collins' (2008) work on the emotional control in the arena, with the importance of the audience in producing a 'good fight' (Vaccaro and Swauger 2016, p.xii).

There is a point to make here of course, that the sustaining of the sparring frame to that of the fighting frame is arguably different. There is less concern for the health of the other body in the rounds taking place for the fighting frame, but to embody the skills required to fight, the respect and physical intimacy of bodies are essential. Section 8.3.2 discusses this in more detail in answering question 2 and brings to light the concern of the gendering of action (and of the gendering of embodiment).

8.2.2 How is action embodied and gendered in relation to these definitions?

In Fight or Flight MMA, action is occasioned and displayed in the viewing of interactive practices, where the boundaries of "controlled violence" worked through intersubjectively (Crossley 2004b; Crossley 2005). Embodying this specific concept of

control, however, was a challenging task, and this extends to the embodiment of skills generally. Violent (controlled) skills were embodied through repetitive movements and ways of making the body 'automatic' (similarly to Spencer 2012), taking place through observing the coach and intersubjective bodily interactions with others. Another equally important yet challenging task of embodying definitions was managing other violent skills, where mention of 'un-programming' the body was raised: again, highlighting the specificities of progression and development.

Findings show similarities to other research, where embodiment required working together, often through a painful practice of experience (Green 2011; Spencer 2012). In Fight or Flight MMA, bodies had to learn over time to become accustomed and attuned to the experiences of giving and receiving pain, preparing not only for the demands of training but also the requirements of the fight and producing a fighting body (see also Downey 2007). Pain was indeed necessary, but in these painful exchanges, there is a potential to breach the frame of training and of violence that was controlled. This was managed by Steve in his direction to others, with calls for club members to "be nice", and outlining the appropriate practices and techniques expected within the training situation. Whether in verbal direction or physical action by the coach, the 'correct' way to do violence was promoted through not just physical control and technique but emotional control too. The situatedness of 'control' relative to emotions was also raised in interviews, where becoming angry was a highly frowned upon and infantilised reaction.

Despite this focus on 'control', there were significant differences in the gendered experiences of embodiment which illustrated various contradictions. The importance of intersubjectivity was interrupted by gendered norms and gendered bodies, from ideas of men not hitting women to the sexualising of women's bodies (making them dangerous to touch). Similar findings were made by Channon (2013a, 2013b) and Maclean (2015), as well as others (e.g., Channon and Jennings 2013). The differential treatment also extended to the organisation of space, where women were separated into a different area or paired with newer men (or young boys) in the club. There were also interactional strategies experienced in training, including forms of civil inattention (Goffman 1963) in possibly pretending to be injured or deciding to go to the toilet. Arguably these decisions are based on the many anxieties in beliefs around hurting women, but also the potential for touch to be sexualised (like the jokes about 'making out'). Although technique and skill (rather than size or strength) were emphasised in

training, these experiences reinforce normative binaries of gender and violence (men/women, strong/weak, violent/not violent) but also impact women's lived-bodily experienced (Young 2005). I, therefore, reject claims of how 'everyone' learns (Vacarro and Swauger 2016) in MMA.

Violence as controlled (the initial understanding concerning question 1) was suddenly troublesome, and the perception of 'control' is challenged through the boundaries of gender. The findings relevant to question 2 echo other misogynistic beliefs around women in other research, too, whether those interests reflect their beliefs that "it's just not natural" (Quinney 2016) or that "girls are too pretty to bleed" (Teeter 2014, p.77). There was also something to be said for how the idea of 'the fighter' is questioned through these actions, too, with comments from Phil and Rhys (and equally the actions of others) indicating that women in training seem to be merely appropriate space often "to look good".

There is an irony in the findings where, despite anxieties about touching or hitting women's bodies, there was a willingness and/or passivity of misogynistic, homophobic, and sexist jokes. Humour played an important role in the embodiment of skills too, but I incorporate this discussion in relation to question 3. This is done with a particular purpose, given the instances of humour, in fact, a gendering possibility of a violent action that is carefully re-keyed, and re-framed.

8.2.3 What are the gendering possibilities of (violent) action in MMA?

The use of (intended) humour experienced and observed in Fight or Flight MMA club was important to the embodiment of MMA skills and of a masculinity where gender dualisms were a resource in shaping these experiences. Humour was disciplinary in some ways, used by Steve to publicly challenge and shame members of the club for various means (including decisions to go to the toilet or stop training to drink water). Humour was also presented as a mechanism through which homosocial bonding could be taking place. Still, this humour was based around bodies that lacked the perceived substance of MMA masculinity (gay men, women) and equally the ability to perform this controlled violence.

Across the thesis, I have made relevant the challenges and possibilities of this "dark sense of humour" (Phil in chapter 5), where humour could also be a form of

interpersonal or emotional form of violence. Humour was, therefore, a gendering possibility of violent action, with action managed through interactive work that could re-frame or re-key (Goffman 1974) actions as *just* jokes (Kelly 1987, 1988). Doing so situates this normalisation of highly gendered/sexualised violence in Fight or Flight MMA club: a regulatory function that punishes (and potentially castrates? [Butler 2011, p. 65]). The forms of humour are also within the audience's reactions at the BBR fighting events.

There is arguably potential for female fighters to feel empowered through the fighting experience (e.g., Alsarve and Tjørndal 2020; Mierzwinski et al. 2014; Mierzwinski and Phipps 2015; Ross and Shinew 2008; Velija et al. 2013; Weaving 2015). Yet, this thesis demonstrates an analysis of how individuals are making sense of women in MMA, with the gender of fighters an operational aspect of their treatment of the fighting commentary and fighting frame, as illustrated in chapter 7. The gender of these fighters is an attribution of how “doing stuff” is perceived, and “The women’s fight” was a re-construction of this audience work in re/producing and regulating gender performativity (Butler 1990). Also evident in the BBR events was how the fighting frame becomes sexualised or infantilised, with the frame (and fighting body) constructed through gender - also relevant to the material and discursive landscape of Fight or Flight MMA in the disciplining and regulation of embodiment through humour (in question 2). Unlike those like Abramson and Modzelewski (2010), the status of merit and gender equality was not applicable in these findings.

My own experiences complicated these notions of violence, too, with sexist hustling (Gurney 1985) and sexist treatment while researching and participating. Bullying, harassment, and abuse are all possibilities of what these interactions could be. Although some researchers acknowledge their privileged positions as men, it is difficult to know how the analysis of humour would change if women were included. Other instances of abuse, bullying, or violence have arguably been analysed or passed aside as examples of other “risqué jokes” (Dunning 1996, p.192).

8.3 Research development

This research can be expanded in several ways, and I take notes of these potential developments here. Although I am drawing from what some may see as relatively small or specific ethnographic sites and time in the field, the findings are so saturated with

the equality of experience. I am not analysing individuals of Fight or Flight MMA club or those men around me in the BBR fighting events. I am analysing the atmosphere, norms, and phenomena which are not just unique to the sites of this ethnography. Instead, they are significant sociological matters concerning everyday notions of embodiment, gender, violence, and how individuals work through those systems and reproduce them in interaction. These moments are recognisable and transferable (see Smith 2018; Tracey 2010) across other the literature in MMA and MACS. Arguably this is a generalisability that relates to women's lives in these spaces but beyond the context of everyday life and as researchers (see Williams 2006).

Indeed, I have tried to achieve the kinds of generalisability relevant to ethnography in the thesis (see Atkinson 2015), and it has been presented in a variety of ways. This includes the traditional and more realist orientation of ethnographic writing, where the layered and rich descriptions of people and events are provided - allowing for naturalistic generalisation. Equally, this includes CAP practices of data-based poetry; poems that have the potential to connect to the reader as well as other researchers.

Despite these developments around the quality and generalisability of the data, it would have been useful to discuss sexuality with the participants in Fight or Flight MMA club and question the effects of humour relative to their sexuality. As chapter 6 explores, there are significant issues of humour that focus not only on women but also on men's bodies and men's femininities, and of a heteronormative sexuality that runs throughout. There was no indication by Phil or Rhys of the effect this humour had for their own experiences, but that is not to say that that humour did not alienate other men (and their bodies and emotions). Therefore, it would be an incentive to talk to men about their experiences of humour in further research. Furthermore, the dynamics of gender/ed bodies are growing in the sporting environment. My masters research included a discussion of transgender athletes (John 2016) and how the framing of violence through transgender bodies is challenged. It is important to continue empirical research in these areas, to hear about the experiences and implications of the knowledge of embodiment, gender, and violence.

Given the initial interest in hearing experiences of WMMA fighters, in some ways, the thesis is limited in that myself, Sarah nor Lily have fought. It would be interesting to compare and give attention to the fighting experience, as told by the WMMA fighters themselves. I also wished I had asked Sarah and Lily about their experiences with their bodies and presentation methods in more detail, an opportunity for post-doctoral

research, and a more fine-tuned analysis of feminist phenomenology (Young 2005). A further consideration in the potential limitations and opportunities for development related to my relationships with Steve, the coach. I made clear throughout the chapters that I did not interview Steve in an organised setting. There are several questions that I could have asked Steve directly if I were not so anxious. Was this how he was coached himself and is therefore reproducing it? (which links to the upcoming recommendations in section 8.4). There is certainly something to be said about coaching as a practice here (as noted in chapter 6), and interviewing coaches in further research would be useful. Such research could look at coaching sporting contexts and the role 'humour' and abuse plays in those broader sporting contexts and ethnomethodologically informed ways.

For instance, themes of embodiment, gender, and violence could be furthered in the analysis and observation of in-talk interaction in membership categorising analysis (e.g., Hester and Eglin 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald 2009). Liz Stokoe's (2003, 2006) work as an example would develop the categories between 'women' and 'fighter' raised in chapter 7. What I would imagine would further the fascinating analysis around the categories of 'humour' and 'violence' too. An inquiry into embodied membership (like Edward Reynolds' [2017] work on powerlifting) would develop the possibilities of how embodied experiences are observed through interaction – complimentary in situations of training or, equally, furthering research on 'seeing the trouble' (Smith 2020) in action and description of coaching.

As shown across the thesis, writing poetry was a creative way that aided my thoughts and feelings about the data and being overwhelmed. I would be interested in exploring creative practices with participants in future research, potentially researching the exchange of abuse a researcher might take in relation to access. I had experimented in other creative ways too, where the ripping and cutting of harsh words and the visual representation of comments aided analytical themes and my own agitations (Figure 1). Potential participants might like to represent their feelings in these ways too.

There are certainly various ways research could be taken forward; however, there are also several key recommendations from the findings that I wish to bring forward. I move on to these recommendations next.

8.4 Recommendations

The findings of this research could be drawn out and disseminated across a variety of contexts. Still, there are three primary areas for recommendation that I focus on below: sporting contexts and sports coaching, and of teaching in institutional settings.

If I were to make recommendations in the coaching and sporting environment, a key recommendation would be a detailed one around humour. There is something to be said about coaching methods as a practice (as noted in chapter 6), which other research has brought to attention, too (Phipps et al. 2020). The impact of humour and the gendering possibilities of humour as violence would be an important point to raise, including communications with sporting committees and sports. Perhaps coaches might find discussions of 'humour' helpful in their reflections of practice and how we might challenge 'humour' in wider areas of social life.

Related to this point, MMA coaching in the UK is currently unregulated in structural qualifications. The coaching standards are typically based on an entry-level for individuals who have had experience in MMA or martial arts, and potentially a passing Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. The development of MMA Governing bodies in the UK and those linked with national sporting organisations (such as Sports Wales or Sport England) concerns this point. Of course, the limited standard of coaching is not necessarily unique to the MMA context. I, for one, have come to be 'coached' by many individuals who were simply experienced players on a team or someone who cannot play during the season and therefore want to be useful. I understand, of course, that having more formal procedures in place does not remit any possibilities of interpersonal forms of violence. In the broader context, there is growing attention to athletes' voices in experiences of abuse and violence (such as *Athlete A* and the #MeToo movement). These accounts shocked yet resonated with a significant population of athletes, relevant to the many power dynamics within sporting contexts.

The experiences of humour and sexual hustling in this thesis were unexpected. There are recommendations to be made in response to this within educational and institutional settings—the recommendation response to what is still often a bureaucratic acknowledgment of ethics and traditional power dynamics. My own sense of vulnerability and anxiety was not always realised 'in' the field. Still, it certainly impacted my sense of comfort (or safety) and equally impacted who I interviewed or stayed away from. A recommendation would be to develop specific modules or courses within higher

educational settings and degrees and for supervisory teams and leads. These courses or workshops would be relevant to broader places of work and research too. Linking to this would be to host workshops on dealing with emotions in research and practical methods for developing this (a creative workshop, for example). I have a forthcoming chapter focused on vulnerabilities in the field, and I will be considering these moments and possibilities within it.

8.5 Conclusion

Themes of embodiment, gender, and violence connect the four analytical chapters, but equally, my own experiences of these themes have challenged the decisions undertaken in the research. The fieldwork, the writing, and re-writing of the chapters, and the analysis: these principles of ethnographic study were filled with moments of confusion and emotion initiated by my experiences of gendered violence. Such is why the thesis has been so reflexive in the way that it has and was inclusive of autoethnographic and feminist intentions. The impact of this research also extended to the communication of findings which included an alternative method of expressing and analysing data through poetry. The contents of the chapter centralised these moments in the re-viewing of the literature and the methodologies approach in the thesis (section 8.1), with the overview and findings highly critical of previous research.

The findings firstly contribute to the sociological knowledge of embodiment, not only in the carnal description and experiences of and through the body but also in relation to the management of situated understandings of violence. This embodiment, however, was fragile when women's bodies were included, and the needed experiences of women (not only as a participant but also as a researcher) demonstrate these differences so viscerally in the findings. My specific researcher positionality arguably gave me forms of access and experience that other researchers have been excluded from (or perhaps overlooked). These experiences were mostly that of 'humour' and jokes too, but my treatment in Fight of Flight MMA had a profound impact on how I approached themes of 'violence' within the data and research, and of the analysis of frame (Goffman 1974) across the ethnography. How acts of violence might be experienced and defined were made highly relevant across the findings of the 3 research questions.

The thesis also brought analytic and ethnographic attention to audiences of MMA events and their involvement in framing violence. Their involvement not only reflects and works within the boundaries and brackets of 'control' but to the treatment of WMMA fighters and the significance of gendered bodies in how the fighting frame (and atmosphere and energy) are created and perceived. The reiteration of gendered bodies (and hierarchical gender relations) is surfaced in various chapters of this thesis, with performativity and the heterosexual matrix being the foundation of how 'fighter' is configured (Butler 2011, p. 55). However, the analysis not only relates to MMA as a sport and its 'intelligible' fighters but extends too in the analysis of accepted levels of violence experienced through 'humour'.

This ethnography has taught me many things about being a researcher, and at moments I was not sure if I would indeed fight to finish it. Nevertheless, I am eager to research further into the sociology of embodiment, gender, and violence - including the specific experiences of 'humour' and its role. I have given attention to these considerations in my discussion of further research and recommendations (sections 8.3 and 8.4).

As my final, conclusive point to "The finale": I am grateful for these experiences, and I will never forget them, but I am also thankful in ways to meet "the end".

Chapter 9: References

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Chapter 10: Appendices

Appendix A: Key terms and glossary

MMA: Although the acronym stems from Mixed Martial Arts, some write interchangeably between MMA, cage fighting, UFC, blood sports, and bare-knuckle boxing. The definition of MMA, which is referred to in this thesis, is specifically 'mixed martial arts' regulated in the UK according to the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts. The adoption of the rules was agreed through various athletic commissions and further adopted by the Association of Boxing Commissions in 2009 (see UFC 2021).

Dojo: A dojo is a place of learning (usually in a room or hall) and is a term used in various martial arts. The term initially derives from Judo, and is transcribed as "place of the way" in Japanese. The specifics of each dojo vary from club to club and arguably between which martial arts are practiced, and the details of the Fight or Flight MMA dojo are provided in chapter 3.

Sparring: A form of training that enables members to practice techniques without full impact or power. 'Sparring' can represent both standing and ground-based training but tends to be used more for stand-up-based training scenarios/martial arts (e.g., boxing, kickboxing) in the club.

Grappling/Rolling: A form of training that enables members to practice techniques without full impact or power. 'Grappling' or 'rolling' is used more for ground-based martial arts (e.g., Judo, wrestling, Brazilian Jiu Jitsu).

Tap out/tapping out: Physically touching or 'tapping' a person you are grappling/rolling with signals them to stop putting on a technique/movement. 'Taping out' is important for recognising that a technique is being 'done' correctly and for the safety of members 'in' the lock/choke/hold (tapping out before an injury occurs).

Water Cut: The process of losing as much water weight as possible through purposeful dehydration. WHAT often includes not drinking water for 24 hours, limiting food intake, and (in the case of my experiences) wrapping ourselves in bin bags and clothes and sitting in a sauna for the length of an hour (with short breaks in between)

Muay Thai: Known as the art of eight limbs, Muay Thai stems from Thailand. Strikes with the elbow, knee, first, and shins. Muay Thai was the primary form of striking in Fight or Flight MMA club, unlike karate, for example

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu: Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) is a ground-based martial art that differs from Jiu Jitsu, given that most techniques are enacted from the person lying on the ground. The Gracie family created BJJ for bodies that were smaller in stature but could still dominate their opponent.

Strike: To 'strike' is the act of hitting an opponent. In the context of Fight or Flight MMA, strikes usually take place with the shin, knee, or fists (with boxing gloves on).

Appendix B: Being interrupted during fieldwork

Below is an example of one of the interruptions during observation. I even lost the pen I was using, originally the black ink!



→ "were you at the fight this
other week? You know it was
only the first or second fight
and it was really quiet. Then
some guy interrupted. Why an hour
later, yelled "rip his fucking head
off" — talking about other
people's investments in the club
20 minutes ^{as} ~~as~~ ^{as} sparring
"probably split you by ability"
- interpreted again — Tom ^{bring} paper
wanted to know more. ^{for} ^{him}
"The moment it gets personal
is the moment respect goes
out the window."
"Nice one bro. Completely ignored
me"

Appendix C: List of interview and observation details

Ethnographic site	Method	Details
Fight or Flight MMA club	Participant observation: observation only	Approx. 42 hours 154 pages of fieldnotes (A5) – both for observation and participation
	Participant observation: participating in MMA classes	Approx. WHAT hours 154 pages of fieldnotes (A5) – both for observation and participation
	Organised semi-structured interviews	4: 1xSkype, 3xface-to-face
BBR events	12 hours observing	35 pages of fieldnotes (A5)

Appendix D: Information and consent forms

Two versions of the information and consent forms were given out to participants in two different forms: a pamphlet and a sheet. On initially handing out the pamphlets in the club, I sensed that members of the club found them a bit odd. I could see them turning them around in different ways and saw a few laughs. So, a single A4 sheet was given out instead, with one side of the paper displaying two sides of information. For easy reading, I have included the full-size version of the text.

<p style="text-align: center;">Consent Form</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I have read and understood the information leaflet and am happy to take part• I know what the research is about and how I can be involved• I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded and class-based activities will be observed and may be video-recorded in the future• I understand that the recordings and observations will be discussed in a way which will not identify me• I understand that my name and the name of any gym or club will be approved and that the data collected will be retained for at least 5 years• I understand that any data collected may be published in the PhD• I know that I can decide not to continue with the project at any time without giving a reason <p>My name:</p> <p>My signature:</p>	<p>CARDIFF UNIVERSITY Cardiff University PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD School of Social Sciences</p>  <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 20px; width: fit-content; margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"><p>Any questions or thoughts please don't hesitate to email me at: johnze@cardiff.ac.uk</p></div>	<p>CARDIFF UNIVERSITY Cardiff University PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD School of Social Sciences</p> <p>Being a Fighter: The Experiences of Young Men and Women in Mixed Martial Arts</p>  <p>Consent Form and Information</p>
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What is the research about?

The research is interested in mixed martial arts (MMA) and how men and women interact with the sport.

Some of the themes to explore range from fighting, training, friendship, appearance, food and injuries.

As just a few examples of potential questions: I want to understand how fighters feel when they are training. Are they happy, sad, angry?

Are there any particular techniques or fighting styles that they prefer?



Why am I doing it?

I'm an MMA enthusiast and have a great interest in how the sport developed and how the sport will grow over the next few years.

I have already conducted a small piece of research on MMA as part of my Master's thesis. I hope to expand upon this research in the PhD.

I also hope to contribute to a more informed and research-led discussion about MMA. There have been many articles and other writings on MMA that I believe lack in-depth information about the sport and the people involved.

What will the research involve?

I am inviting you to take part in the research. This would include me observing and participating in some of the MMA classes, writing notes about what I see and hear to understand how people interact with each other when learning the sport. You don't need to do anything you wouldn't normally do! I may also ask some of you to have an interview with me to talk about your personal journey with MMA.

With your permission, my observations of the classes will be discussed in notes and the interviews will be audio-recorded. I will change your name in anything I write to protect your identity.



Do I have to take part?

Not at all! Anyone who takes part will be a volunteer and you can change your mind at any time without giving a reason.

Being a Fighter: The Experiences of Men and Women in Mixed Martial Arts

What is the research about?

The research is interested in MMA and how people become MMA fighters. It will explore what fighters enjoy about MMA, what MMA means to them, how they prepare for training and fights, and how men and women feel about training with each other. It will also explore the different ideas around the sport as being violent, or not.

Why am I doing it?

I am a MMA enthusiast and have a great interest in how the sport developed and how the sport will grow over the next few years. I have already conducted a thesis on MMA for my Masters degree. I hope to expand upon this research in the PhD.

I also hope to contribute to a more informed and research-led discussion about MMA. There have been many articles and other writings on MMA that I believe lack in-depth information about the sport and the people involved.

What will the research involve?

I am inviting you to take part in the research. I will be observing MMA classes and conducting one individual interview with each participant. With your permission, my observations of the classes will be discussed in notes and the interviews will be audio-recorded. I will change your name in anything I write to protect their identity.

Some of the topics that may be discussed include: fighting, training, friendship, appearance, food and injuries. For example, I want to understand how fighters feel when they are training; are they happy, sad, angry? Are there any particular techniques or fighting styles that they prefer? Is a strong club friendship important in becoming a good fighter?

Do I have to take part?

Not at all! Anyone who takes part will be a volunteer and you can change your mind at any time without giving a reason. If you are willing to take part, please sign the consent form.

johnze@cardiff.ac.uk

Zoe John

Cardiff University: School of Social Sciences

Consent Form

- I have read and understood the information leaflet and am happy to take part
- I know what the research is about and how I can be involved
- I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded and class-based activities will be observed and may be video-recorded
- I understand that the recordings and observations will be discussed in a way which will not identify me
- I understand that my name and the name of any gym or club will be anonymised and that the data collected will be retained for at least 5 years
- I understand that any data collected may be published in the Masters dissertation
- I know that I can decide not to continue with the project at any time without giving a reason

My name:

.....

My age:

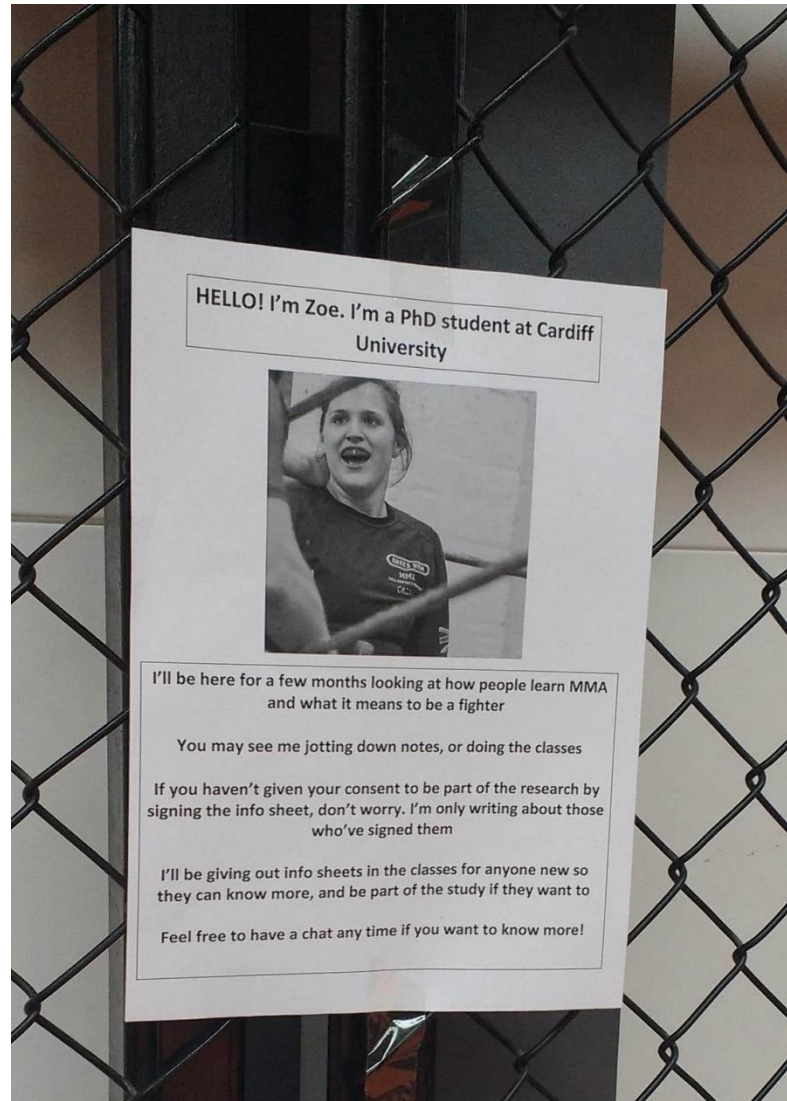
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My signature:

.....

Appendix E: Posters hung up in Fight or Flight MMA club

Several posters containing the same information were put in different places in the dojo and would be taken down at the end of each session.



Appendix F: Some difficult fieldnotes

"Get off your feet! Get off your feet!"
-Grappling

2 pairs start sparring in the cage. Cage door closed. - no instruction to do so.

About 6 women today.

Second class
"Don't kick knife it"

"You two had an argument?"

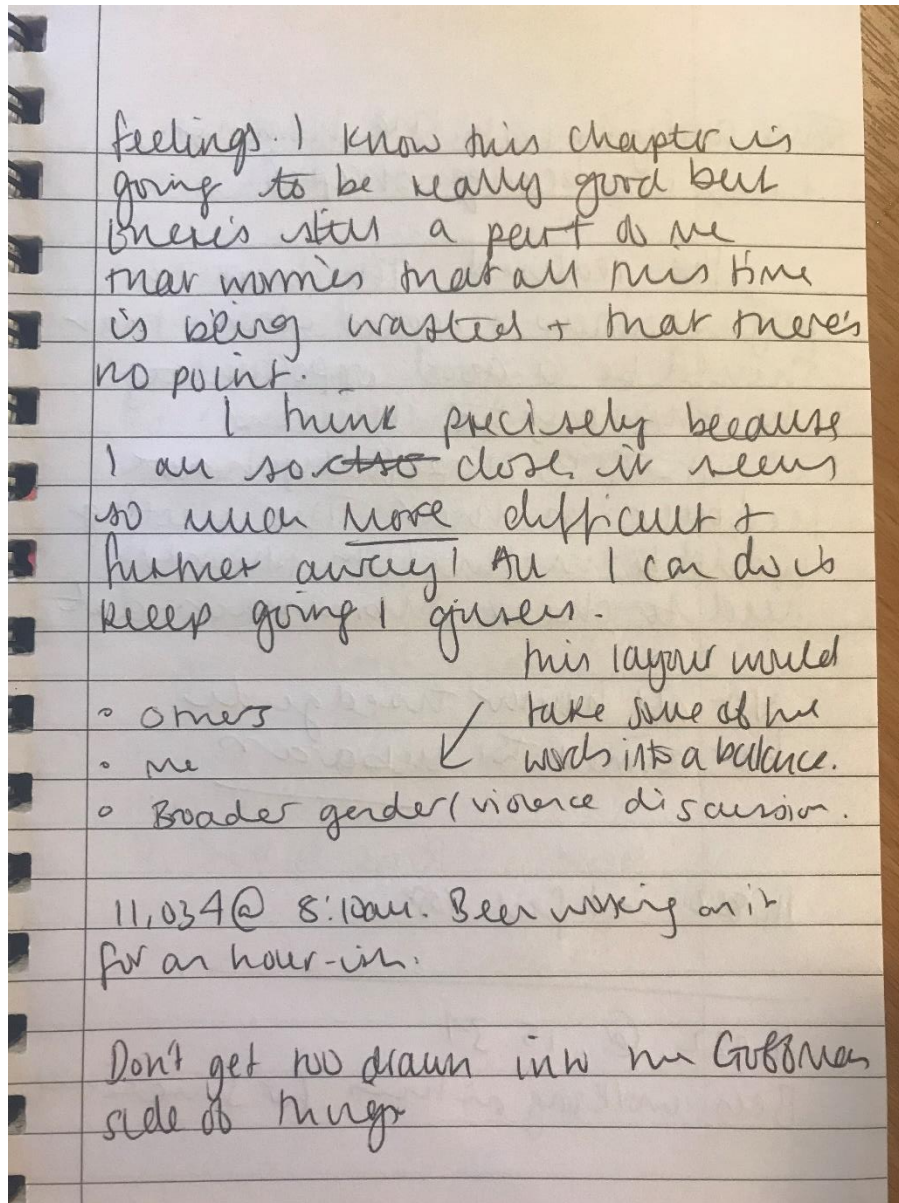
"It's easier"
"You need more"

That we fuck around
with you positive

Don't put off your back hand ever x3

"You punching each other"
"Yes by god"

Appendix G: Examples of my personal notebook



+ O'Leary 2013
* Sánchez & García + Malcolm 2010

Print 800 chapter + fill in the gaps.

Channon 2012 // Kentry 2001 + 2011
Oates - boxing ~~in 1970s~~

Two Quirey? (5)?

Two Channon et al.?

Matthews 2014, 2016

Matthews + Channon - violence

Butler + violence - Underg gender

Teeter. 2014

print bibliography

~~Andreasen + Johansen 2018.~~

~~- negotiating violence~~
Brett

~~Veljan et al. 2015~~

↓

McCaughy 1998

book (1997)
Real Knockouts

Pfister. 2010 bodybuilding.

where is the affirmative — does
what with it.

Story is how you ended it —
needs to be clear.

Back this up

why do we review the Lit?

What's their purpose.

What I'm leaving out + why

I'm leaving it out

Padding it more so we know.

"Quotes" — How are I using it
unusual to write throughout
+ presenting it as more data
EMCA

literature as data?

Ripping things.

A few paragraphs + makes it
explicit

- Ethnography as method

Tracing concepts?

How different is evidence?

Appendix H: My initial analysis

The 'organised' transcribed and printed word documents into their initial thematic folders.



Appendix I: A very early analysis

10th January 2018

Seems to have a bit more organisation.
Made 3 folders for each section
of analysis + have separated
folders for each section of literature
reviews as well.

I'm trying my best to be more
actively involved in coming to the office
but struggling a bit at the
moment. I've messaged Emma
about a meeting soon as
I think that would be wise.
I've made an appointment with
the wellbeing services too.

My major concern ATM is
the ethnography of the WPA docs.
I just need to do that really.

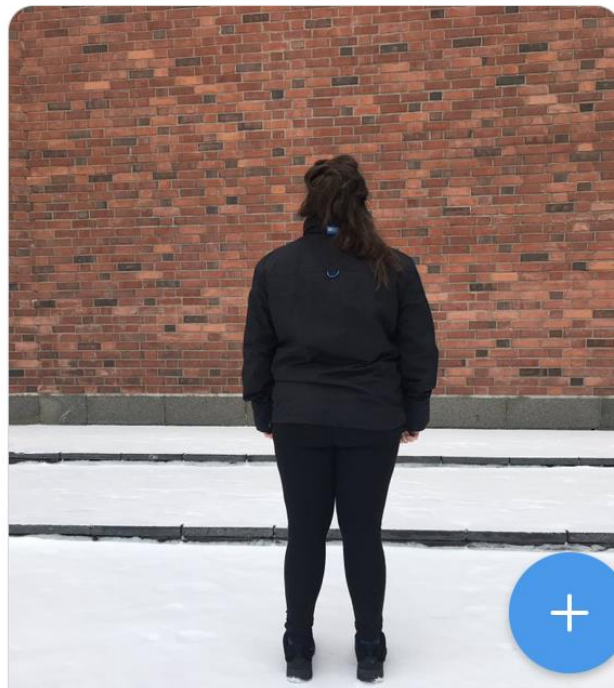
Appendix J: Facing 'the wall' in analysis and the PhD experience

As part of the conference I attended, there was a series of creative workshops. One of the tasks in the workshops was to take some photos of something we created or saw which represents our research. I was overwhelmed with emotion because I truly did not know what it was, what I was looking at in my research anymore, or how I was feeling about it. I didn't want to carry on. So, I turned to the wall and asked another person at the workshop to take a photo of me. This was the best way to represent how I felt, and I didn't feel like I got through 'the wall' until I experimented with the poetry.

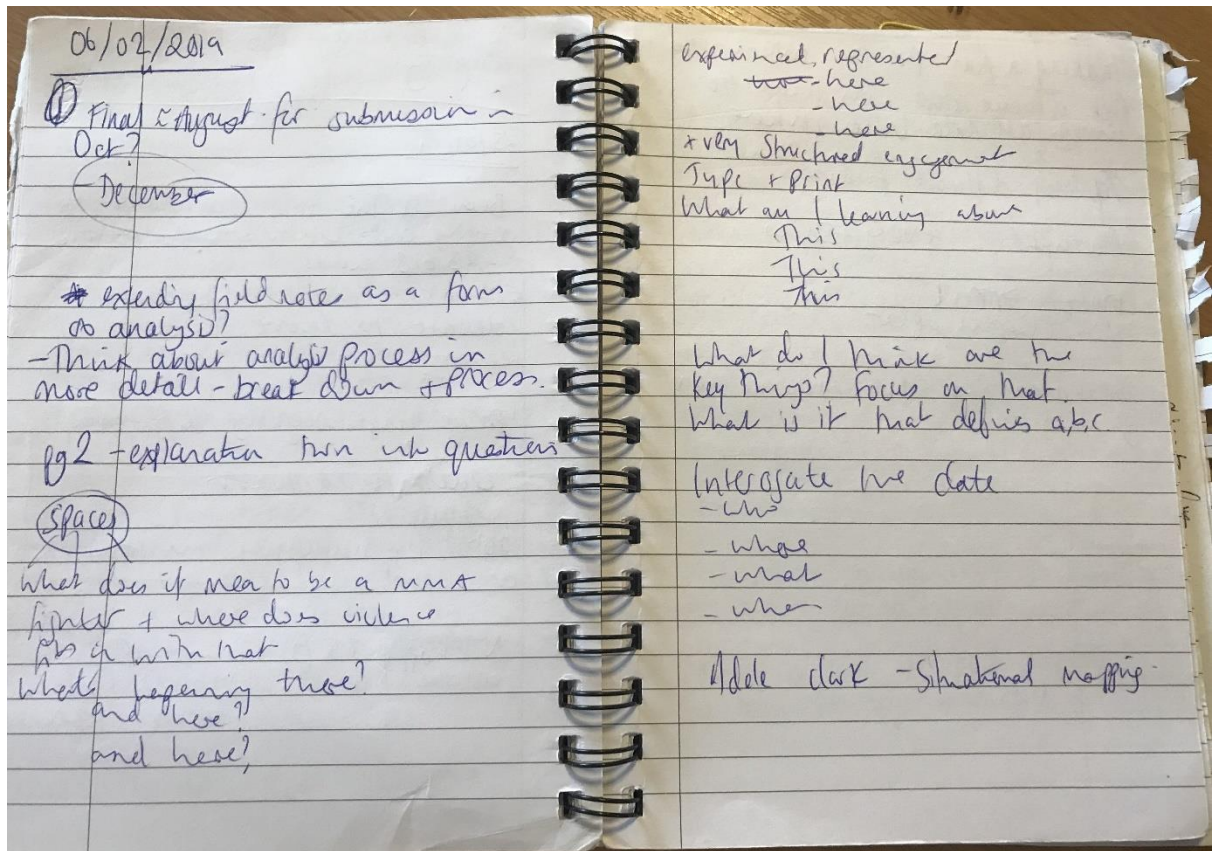


Zoe John @Zoe_John_ · 30/12/2019 ...

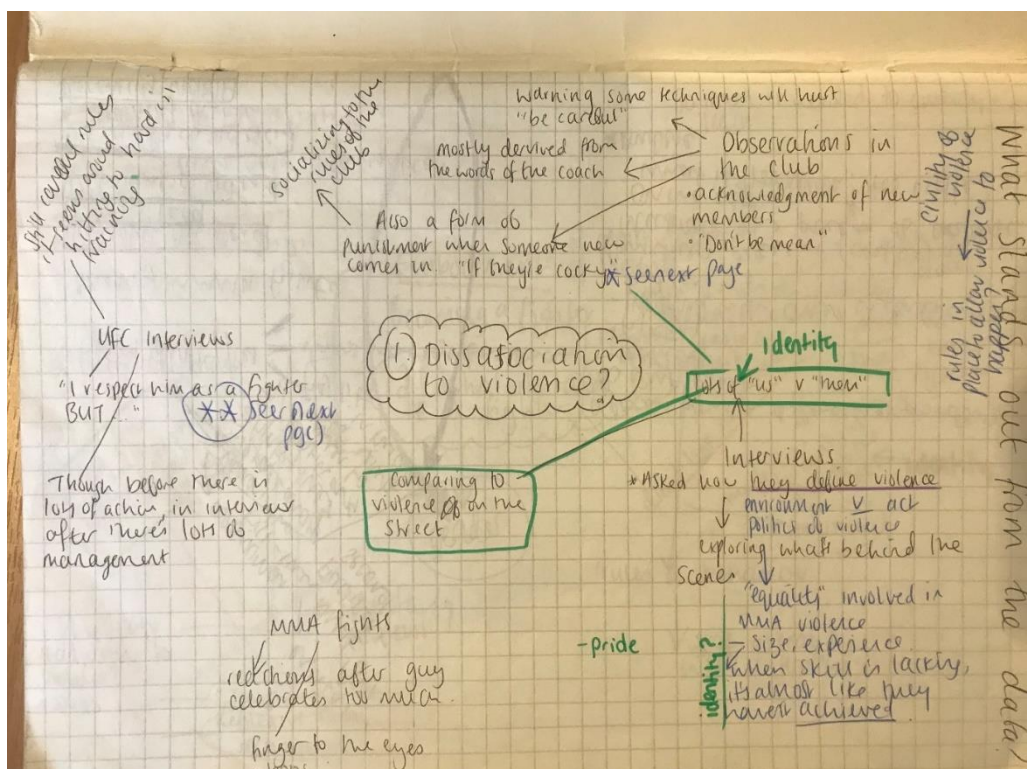
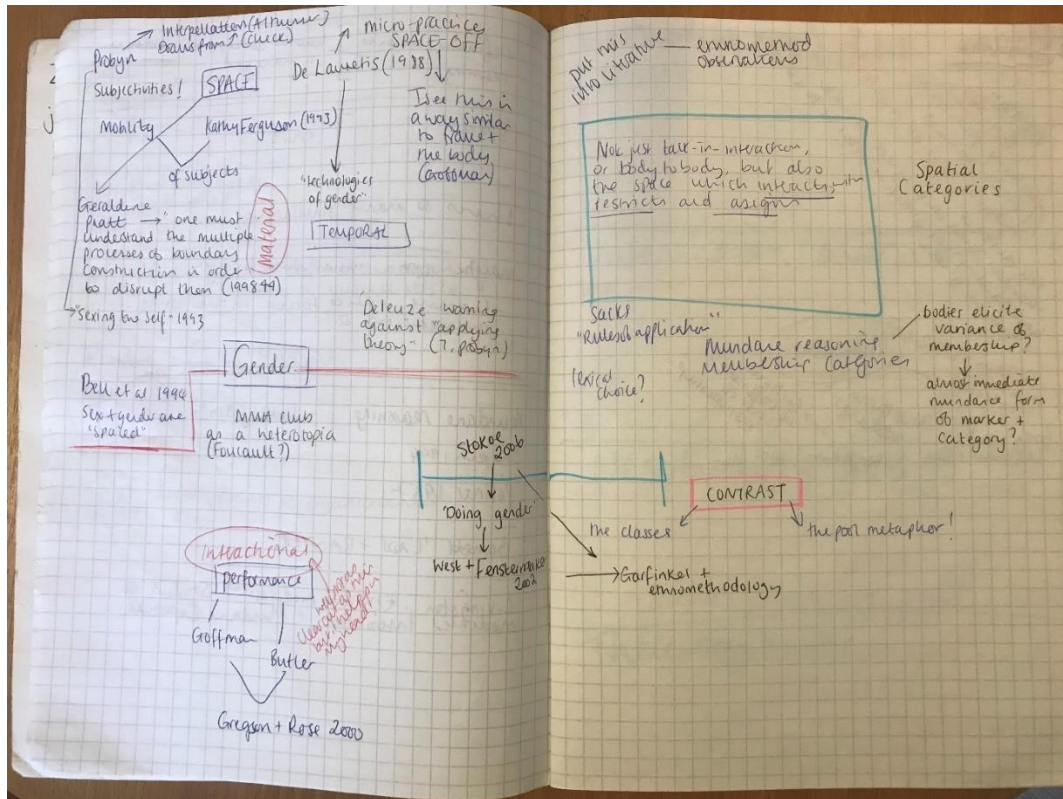
Photo from a Feb conference in a session on creative methods. It represented my PhD: at a wall. I would cry. I felt **lost**. But in the year I've come out of the hole. SO excited for 2020 🙌 Chapters forming, poetry written, memory coming back. Keep going [#academicchat](#) [#phd](#) [#excited](#)

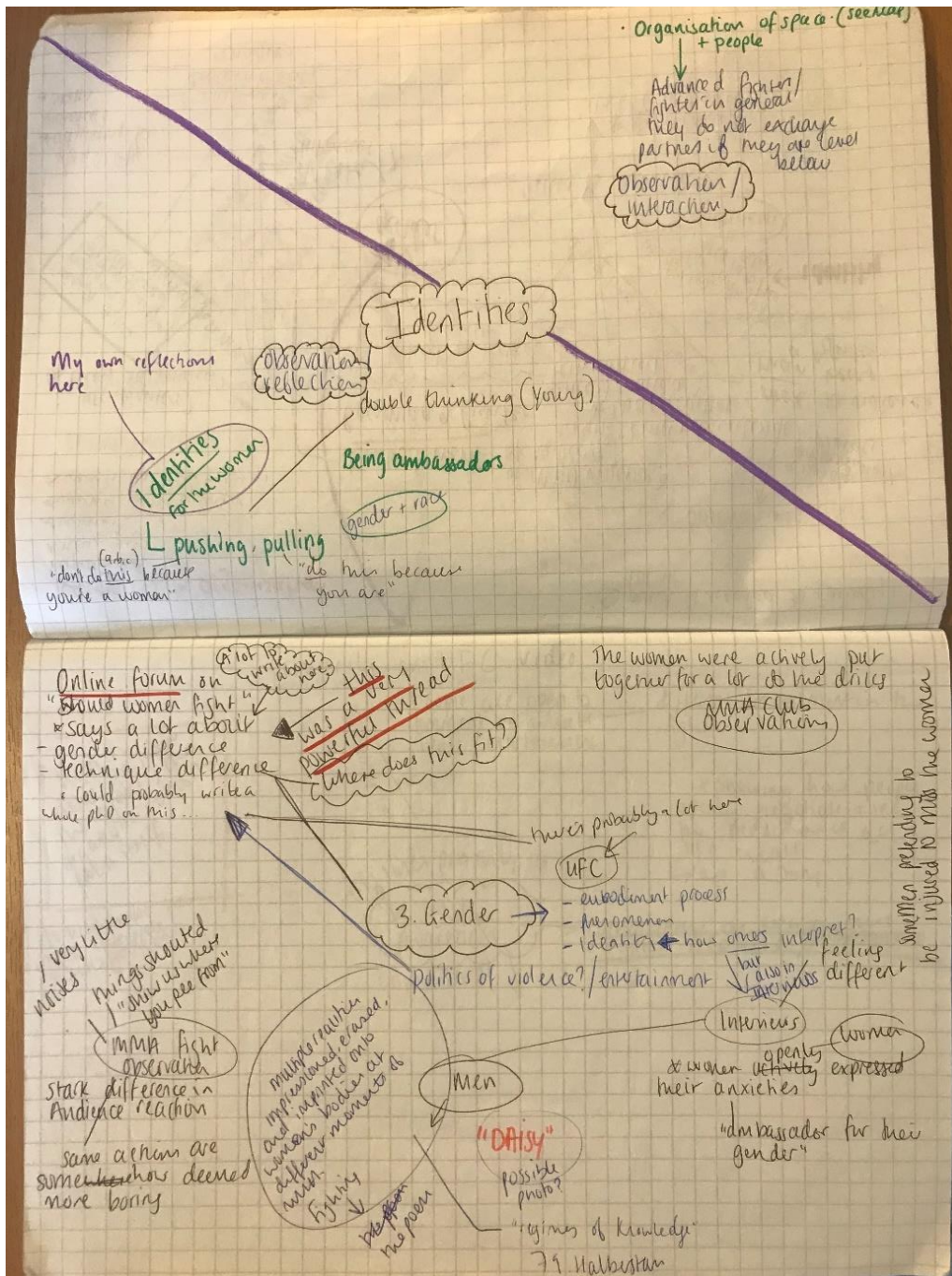


Appendix K: A suggestion of mapping during a supervision

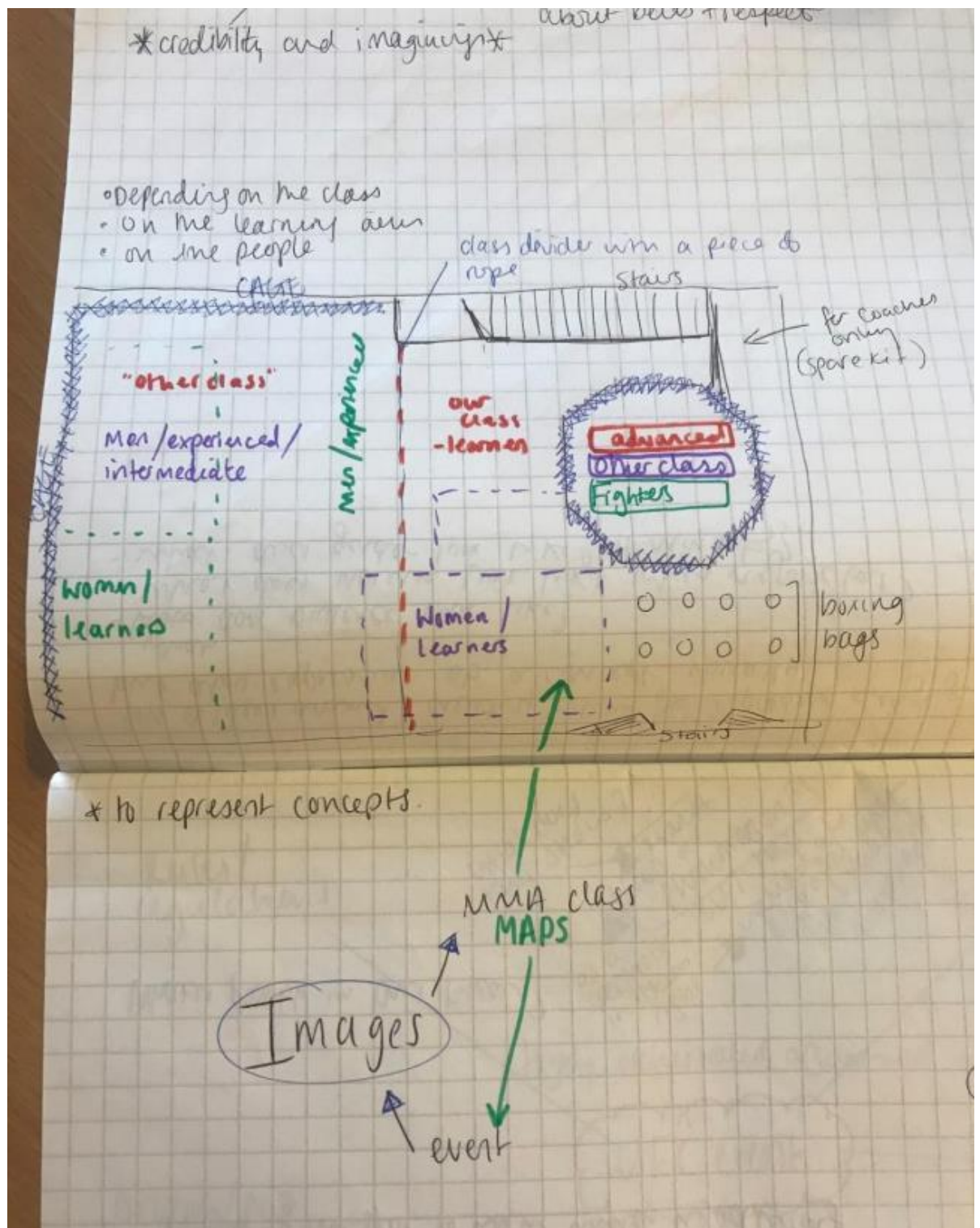


Appendix L: Examples of the mapping booklet





Appendix M: The initial 'mapping' of Fight or Flight MMA club



Appendix N: Examples of poetry I explored

There were various types of poetry that I engaged with, including Haiku (“Investigation and Break”), and poems that didn't include data directly and were not really my 'style' in the end (“Reflection”).

“Investigation”

The pen in my mouth
Sherlock’s pipe is envisioned
“Normally a cock”

“Break”

Bent, broken biceps.
“Can you feel that?” - Un-programme.
Re-start the rhythm.

“Reflection”

A mirror falls from the wall, a change of fate,
Timed reflections strike its beholder.
Hanging onto bodies, casting changing landscapes,
Fibres relax but fight bolder.

Taking space in its corners, new memories emplaced,
Stuck within caged walls yet ever moving.
The body still bends and the mirror still breaks,
It un-programmes until it’s approving.

Appendix O: A poem and researcher in distress

“No”.

No.

I don't want you to call me a cunt,
or lick your lips,
or rub your thighs,
asking how much I cost,
with your eyes on me,
legs around me,
or pretending to a suck a dick.

No.

I don't want you to shout, “Fuck you”,
or talk about my mouth,
like it's a service,
always open,
usually filled with cock.

No.

I don't want to feel this way
but you make me feel -
silent,
alone,
polite.
I wait for the clock,
to free me,
and my notes -
to run away.

No.

I don't understand you.
It's almost on purpose,
you want me -
to feel small.
Like something for you -
to walk on
at one point,
to admire the next -
yours to tease.

No.

I just want to be away,
counting down the weeks,
hoping it will change,
or get better -
to stop feeling confused,
or like a failure,
because I don't want to be there
as researcher,
or member.

No.

I want to go home,
and put this away -
take down my posters,
to hide,
to smile,
to take a breath,
and start over.