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Love Fighting Hate Violence: An Anti-Violence Program for Martial Arts and Combat Sports

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the Love Fighting Hate Violence (LFHV) project: an anti-violence initiative aimed at inspiring reflection and generating pedagogical interventions within martial arts and combat sports. The goal of LFHV is to harness the potential of these activities for educating people about violence, specifically with respect to understanding the principles of consent and violation. The chapter provides a theoretical overview of the project's core philosophy by way of an interactionist reading of fights as social encounters. It then turns to discussing some of the practical materials already developed for use within LFHV. These draw on the aforementioned theory, as well as a values-based teaching methodology, to frame the potential contribution that this project can make to anti-violence education.

Introduction: Paradoxes, Assumptions and Silences

Martial arts and combat sports (MACS) occupy something of a paradoxical place in Western culture. On the one hand, it is often claimed that training in such activities provides a particularly meaningful route to developing valued psychological attributes such as discipline and respect, echoing the oft-cited mantra of sport's 'character-building' qualities (see Theeboom et al. 2009). This is certainly the case with respect to participation in the so-called 'traditional' (read, 'Asian') martial arts, around which pacifistic philosophical discourses have long been constructed to insulate them from critiques of 'celebrating violence',¹ while promising (Western) practitioners access to unique, often esoteric, orientalist visions of spiritual self-transformation (Bäck and Kim 1982; Fuller 1988). Sport-oriented fighting disciplines – such as boxing – are met with similar claims, wherein exposure to the rigorous training regimes required of pugilism is thought to impart lessons in discipline that are particularly valuable for social groups often associated with the sport – namely, men drawn from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and/or those who are at increased risk of engaging in crime (Leslie, 2008). Elsewhere, various self-defence practices are popularly argued to represent opportunities for the empowerment of women, specifically through enhancing their (perceived as well as actual) ability to defend against (men's) sexual violence (e.g., Criado-Perez 2014). Although such notions may at times appear to draw on or help to sustain various sexist, racist, or class-based stereotypes, they nevertheless constitute discourses suggestive of a positive social role for MACS, relative to possibilities for containing or reducing violence. Such notions often feature in popular advocacy promoting these activities to children and adults alike (see, for instance, Parsons 2013).

Yet, the supposed barbarity of (in particular) full-contact fighting sports, including boxing, kickboxing and mixed martial arts (MMA), leads many social commentators to call for them to be banned, if not heavily regulated (e.g. Sarre 2015; see also Mayeda and Ching 2008). The ready association of such activities with 'violence' often has implications regarding gendered, racialised or class-based

stereotypes (Haynes 2015; Rana 2014), potentially marginalising both the activities themselves, and those social groups with whom they are most often associated. This aversion to the 'violence' of MACS is not limited to sportised disciplines either; a moral panic over an impending explosion of street violence following the development of the 1970s and '80s 'kung fu craze' in the USA, UK, and other Western nations, suggested wide social unease with the prospect of (particularly) young men practicing 'deadly' fighting techniques popularised by action movies of the time (Goto-Jones 2016). Similar concerns appear more recently within reaction to young children's involvement in MMA (Nye 2013). As such reasoning often asks, if a person has no pressing need to use martial arts to fight, then why would they bother to practice fighting at all (see Foster 2015); and moreover, if one specifically wants to avoid violence, would it not be preferable to advocate against violence rather than to practice its techniques oneself?

It is our view, as subcultural 'insiders' who have participated in several different fighting disciplines, as well as scholars with a long-running interest in understanding these phenomena, that each of these perspectives represent somewhat simplified distortions of a more complex reality. To begin with, we argue that unchecked assumptions about the positive value of MACS are, very often, deployed in misleadingly optimistic ways. This scepticism is borne out by research which paints a rather ambiguous picture of the social value of these activities; for example, while some work has shown that practicing boxing can be a useful component of crime desistance programs (Deuchar et al. 2016; Wright 2006), other work has argued that despite such outcomes, there is an associated potential for it to exacerbate existing criminal behaviour (Jump 2015). Scholarship arguing that learning a martial art can promote discipline, as well as other positive social-psychological outcomes in children, is offset by that which identifies more ambivalent, or even potentially negative outcomes (see Vertonghen and Theeboom 2010). Similarly, women's experience of 'empowerment' through learning to fight has been shown to be contingent on the specific features of their practice, and cannot be taken for granted as a generalised outcome of any and all MACS practices (see Channon and Matthews 2015). While positive possibilities certainly do exist in these various respects, their failure to be realised automatically across the full spectrum of MACS activities suggests there is more to these relationships than is often implied.

Further to this, and as discussed later in this chapter, we are similarly critical of the simplistic association between MACS and the supposed promotion or celebration of violence. However, despite this we do not believe that such a connection is entirely non-existent. Rather than accepting that the practice of fighting is always fundamentally 'violent' itself, here we are specifically interested in how various forms of harm can be done to MACS practitioners in ways which are not obviously the consequence of direct interpersonal acts (e.g., one person punching another). On closer examination, several normalised aspects of MACS training regimes and subcultures reveal morally questionable practices which may indeed be taken to constitute 'violence', albeit of a different type (see Matthews and Channon 2017 for a discussion of sports violence typologies).

In competitive or otherwise highly disciplined spaces, high training intensities, restrictive dietary regimes, the endurance of potentially debilitating pain and injury, and drastic weight cutting practices (Crighton, Close and Morton, 2016; Spencer 2009; 2012) present the possibility of doing damage to the bodies of MACS practitioners in ways which could be argued to constitute a form of 'self-inflicted' violence; one that is subculturally produced, normalised and legitimated (see Curry and Strauss 1994). In this sense, questions around the degree to which a person may be well-enough informed to give their consent to participate in inherently risky sports practices are important to ask. While the risks involved in full-contact fighting are reasonably plain for all to see, the risks of severe dehydration to

make competition weight, or of repeated sub-concussive trauma following long-term courses of high intensity sparring (etc.), are less immediately obvious. In fact, such acts are often framed as necessary elements of practice or, in the typical parlance of many sports practitioners, 'just part of the game', which members of such subcultures must accept and endure in order to maintain a place within them. We argue that harmful outcomes arising from certain practices within fighting sports that are not solely the consequence of fights themselves constitute a key 'silence' in this field, being rarely challenged by moral critiques focusing on the more readily apparent 'violence' of competitive fighting.

With these points in mind, we developed the Love Fighting Hate Violence (LFHV) project as a deliberate means of both questioning and intervening into these issues. Taking the paradoxical status of MACS vis-à-vis 'violence' as a starting point, we have sought to use practitioners' often implicit knowledge of the ethical integrity of martial artistry to construct a rationalisation of the morality of such activities. This work was undertaken in order to develop an intervention strategy that can apply such logic towards transforming existing practices, both to better realise the positive outcomes assumed of MACS, while also challenging practitioners to tackle some of the more subtle forms of violence that can exist within them. Before discussing the specifics of the project itself, we offer a theoretical elaboration on the distinction between fighting and violence that rests at the heart of the project's philosophy.

Resolving the Paradox: An Interactionist Approach to Fighting

Having both practiced various fighting disciplines for a combined total of 20 years, and conducted several academic research projects pertaining to MACS, we are interested in how the conflation of discourses around fighting and violence are interpreted by diverse groups of practitioners. In our experience, many who train for either competitive, self-defence, or other reasons, are often very quick to assert that they are not 'violent' people, and that their martial art is not a 'violent' activity (see Abramson and Modzelewski 2011; Channon 2012; Matthews 2014). Indeed, while training in MACS involves deliberately performing techniques which can be used with violent purpose, the meaning constructed around such training by practitioners themselves often posits a directly non-violent epistemology (Bäck and Kim 1982; Fuller 1988). As one critical contributor to the LFHV blog put it, martial artists engage with violence as a *subject* of study rather than as an *object* in itself (Hall, 2016). Within such discussions, the importance of upholding an identity as honourable, civil, respectful, etc. in the face of the stigmatising effects of being seen as 'violent' illustrates that resolving this paradox has meaningful consequences for the self-image of MACS practitioners – which is itself a useful phenomenon with respect to developing interventions into the field of practice. In this section, we outline our theoretical grasp of how this resolution can be understood.

Fights as Social Encounters

Taking as our starting point the assumption that a fight is a *fundamentally social encounter*, interactionist sociology provides a fitting means of understanding the interpersonal dynamics of such moments and the meanings that may be constructed around or through them. In this sense, the social interaction of a fight can be seen as taking place within frameworks that render it meaningful in particular, socially-specific ways (Collins 2008; Goffman 1967). Such conceptual work best begins with the recognition that a fight (imagined here as constituting some form of 'mutual combat') is but one form of interpersonal violence, and can be differentiated from – for example – an assault (taken to

imply a one-sided attack). Importantly, while these definitions have important legal consequences attached to them (Jackson-Jacobs 2014), such a divergence of meaning is also a highly salient component of the social accomplishment of identity.

Here, fighters may variously be seen as valiant, villainous, or anything in between depending on how they comport themselves while fighting, or how their audience is given to understanding what they do. This is certainly the case within sports involving apparently 'violent' or aggressive physical exchanges (Baird and McGannon 2009; Matthews and Channon 2016), but is equally applicable to non-sporting, or 'real', fights. Who one fights against, how one chooses to fight, whether (and how) one initiates a fight, the reasons one fights to begin with and the ends towards which one works while fighting (among other factors) all stand to impart such meaning. Given the high moral stakes often involved in apparently 'violent' actions, these are likely to confer honour or disgrace on the individuals involved, depending on the meanings established within the socio-cultural contexts within which any given action takes place (Collins, 2008).

For instance, in the United States, Hirose and Pih (2010) argued that novice MMA spectators interpret certain techniques used in the sport as unmanly and dishonourable, stigmatising fighters who rely on them to win. Gong (2015: 614) described how practitioners of 'no-rules' fighting in California "selectively deploy self-restraint as a trope central to their moral world", comparing themselves favourably to other competitive martial artists by virtue of their (assumed) self-control while fighting in otherwise apparently rule-less settings. Further, Jackson-Jacobs (2013) showed that American youths sometimes deliberately manufacture conflicts to morally justify themselves while engaging in 'real' street fights, even though they actually started those fights for fun. In the UK, with respect to a range of martial arts, Channon (2013) argued that some British men's aversion to being 'the kind of man' who 'hurts women' led them to avoid working at high intensity when training with or competing against female partners/opponents, while Matthews' (2014) work with English boxers identified ways in which they socially construct 'appropriate' training practices that enabled them to channel what they considered to be their 'natural' aggression, because of similar concerns.

Given such immanent consequences of fight behaviours for fighters' social identities and moral standing (Goffman 1967), the construction of meaning around fights, fighters and fighting in fact goes a long way towards shaping – either overtly, explicitly and consciously, or covertly, implicitly and pre-reflexively – the actual behaviour of people when they fight. Far from always being a chaotic, lawless eruption of violent hostility then, fighting is usually governed by social conventions acutely oriented towards socially-constructed, specific, moralistic meanings (Collins 2008; Gong 2015). In particular, the act of starting a fight to begin with requires the successful co-action of two (or more) people (Jackson-Jacobs 2013) who recognise and understand the cues suggestive of engaging in a (certain kind of) fight. Continued cooperation is necessary to sustain what might be socially recognised as a 'fair fight', which, despite its dangerous, unsettling and confrontational nature, nevertheless represents a significant degree of harmonious co-action between antagonists in order to continue to count as 'fair'. As Collins writes,

Agreed-upon limitations in a fair fight come about as a shared orientation, a tacit or even explicit communication between the fighters. Even when they are trying to smash one another into unconsciousness, or to kill one another, they are keeping up a level of solidarity in their mutual agreement... It is this structure that... allows the fight to proceed, indeed to proceed with enthusiasm. (2008: 198-199)

In this sense, even when it involves extremely high stakes, fighting is often shaped by performative, rule-bound and ritualised interactions, imbued with multiple layers of meaning which have immanent consequences for fighters' social identities (whose 'fault' was the fight; who won the fight, or won a moral victory through it; was the fight fair, or the conduct of the fighters honourable; etc.). The social scripts by which different types of fights are rendered meaningful therefore become a crucial object of analysis for understanding the sociology of fighting, which itself represents a key moment in the development of LFHV as a logically coherent idea. Specifically, it leads us to ask how the construction of meaning around the behavioural comportment of fighters can be implicated in the question of what makes something violent, or not.

Consent and Violation

In addressing this question, LFHV presupposes that a fundamental difference exists between the interactional dynamics of fighting encounters which involve *mutual consent*, and those which do not. We argue that consenting to participate does not, by definition, involve a *violation* of either fighter's person – one of the key elements of what we take to be constitutive of 'violence' (see Matthews and Channon 2017) and thus of a crucial moral boundary among fight behaviours. Akin to, but not a direct manifestation of, Collins' (2008) discussion of the 'fair fight' above, 'non-violent' fights have an often highly ritualised dimension that enables them to take place in ways which do not preclude individuals' ability to determine the conditions of their continued engagement or disengagement. Essentially, such fights are characterised by interactions which do not involve a threat to, or loss of, either party's individual agency; in Jackson-Jacobs' (2013) terms, they do not challenge the 'interpersonal sovereignty' of either fighter. Rather than being oriented towards domination or destruction, such fights fundamentally respect the personal integrity of the fighters – even if, ironically, they consist of actions which *mimetically approximate* the domination or destruction of the other (Matthews 2014; Matthews and Channon 2017; Mierzewski and Phipps 2015).

In this sense, the interactions occurring within such 'non-violent' fights take on distinctly different qualities to those seen within others, as antagonists' reasons for fighting shape their orientation to each other and determine the nature of the experience of the fight itself. Here, fighting may be enjoyable (Hollander 2015; Matthews, 2014; Wacquant 2004); it may promote skill development or the cultivation of self-knowledge (Jennings 2010; Spencer 2009); it may become a means of mutually testing ability or of competing for a prize; or even a way of entertaining an audience through either genuine or staged competition (Smith 2014). In all such cases, fighters work together to varying degrees so they might achieve some end that both agree to mutually pursue, most often according to implicit or overt rules and codes that provide a framework for recognising the parameters to which each party has consented. Thus, the purpose of such a fight is not *to violate* one's opponent, but to cooperate with them in accomplishing an interactive performance of some kind, which may be more or less mutually beneficial in various ways, even if it involves actions which might be experienced or characterised as violations under most other conditions.

The types of fights we are describing here are almost exclusively to be found within the practices common to MACS.² Importantly though, this theorising does not rest simply upon a differentiation between fights taking place in legally legitimised settings, or those which have formalised sets of 'rules' (such as boxing matches), versus those taking place outside and/or in an unregulated manner (such as bar brawls). Rather, it requires us to attend to the interactional dynamics of fights, and to the degree to which any such interaction is shaped by mutually-understood parameters to which both parties have consented. It is entirely plausible that certain actions or structural norms existing within

formal combat sports settings could involve numerous violations of individuals' moral rights, including even actions occurring within the formal rules governing the activity, as alluded to above.³

Thus, by unpicking the symbolic reference points within the interactional performances of fighters, we move closer to grasping how it is that someone might see no contradiction in loving fighting but hating violence. More to the point, by recognising the imminent consequences that fight behaviours have for fighters' social identities – and accepting that, for many MACS practitioners, claiming a 'non-violent' or even 'anti-violent' ethos can be an important element of identity work – we argue that there is a potent motivation to demonstrate one's ethical credentials within and through MACS spaces. It is with a view to operating within such a social milieu that LFHV has been developed, as both a device for encouraging reflection but also a pedagogical platform for anti-violence education and advocacy, capitalising on the implications that resolving the MACS-violence paradox has for practitioners' identity construction. We explore the initial work we have undertaken in this regard in the final section of this chapter.

Questioning Assumptions and Breaking Silences: LFHV as Pedagogical Intervention

LFHV's theoretical underpinnings led us to develop and refine a manifesto for the project (LFHV 2016). The manifesto represents the core message of LFHV. So far, it has served as the basis for discussion and debate among a community of academics and practitioners in person and on social media, as well as inspiring a number of essays hosted on the LFHV website's blog. However, while this has provided an important point of reference for the development of the project, it does not offer much in terms of directly effecting positive transformation within and among the practitioner communities that LFHV was developed with and for. In order to apply the ideals of LFHV in a more tangible and impactful way, we have recently developed a coaching toolkit that seeks to provide MACS practitioners with a resource useful for tackling the two key issues outlined at the start of this chapter – namely, the assumed positive outcomes of MACS training, and the silencing of certain types of violence within them.

The coaching toolkit

Working in collaboration with a group of experienced coaches and teachers, we built the LFHV toolkit around a 'values-based teaching' methodology; specifically, that which was developed by our colleagues at the University of Brighton through the highly successful 'Football 4 Peace' project (see F4P International 2017). Such an approach emphasises educational outcomes which centre on imparting values, rather than developing fitness, skills, or other typical objectives of sport coaching. As such, the LFHV toolkit enables coaches and instructors to adapt their regular training practices with a specific view to delivering moral education. In this way it presupposes a break with the assumption that developing self-discipline, respect for others, and similar moral qualities is a guaranteed consequence of any and all training practices, instead pointing to particular methods that might be used to directly work towards achieving such outcomes. Although we do not suggest that there is any universally effective way to ensure that desired learning outcomes of this type can be attained, we argue that purposefully pursuing them through a dedicated approach, as opposed to passively expecting them to just happen, is more likely to yield positive results.⁴

In addition to this generic values-based approach, we drew inspiration from the popular 'Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility' (TPSR) model of physical education (Hellison, 2011), specifically by framing the LFHV toolkit around three progressive 'levels' of development, and with a view to the concept of 'transfer', which relates to the possibility of delivering lessons within a sporting context that carry over into participants' lives more widely. Using martial arts, combat sports, and related activities as devices for engaging young people in moral education, our aim was therefore to create a resource that will enable coaches to teach lessons specifically on the importance of *consent*, both within and outside of MACS practice. Our reasoning is that given its centrality to the moral differentiation between interactions characterised as either 'fighting' or 'violence', there is a valuable opportunity to teach young people about how to recognise, obtain, and give consent, through the medium of MACS activities. To facilitate such teaching, each of the toolkit's progressive levels contains suggestions for types of practical activities, as well as topics for discussion and reflection.

The first of these levels, which we named '*Places to Fight*', centres on understanding the spatial boundaries of MACS, and the role of formalised training centres and competitive arenas as places wherein fighting behaviours are ritually legitimised. By attending to organisational factors external to the individual, teaching activities and reflective discussions emphasise how rules in place 'at the gym' frame the act of fighting and protect the welfare of fighters. These incorporate mini games or drills that emphasise certain 'ritualised' interactions (Goffman, 1967), like the touching of gloves or bowing to opponents, as markers of respect or indications of one's preparedness – and willingness – to fight. Workshop-like activities are also included where young people creatively suggest and refine different rules that will help their club promote specific values, like respect, safety, or others, while allowing reflective discussion to draw out the explicit lessons that are intended within any given exercise. More specifically then, the key goal at this level is to understand that tangible rules, norms and rituals function as a kind of apparatus for recognising what it is that training partners mutually consent to when preparing to engage in 'non-violent' fighting practices.

The second level, '*Fighting Together*', draws attention more closely to the interactions within MACS training and competition, and the degree to which trust is essential to effective participation. Here, the central issue of interpersonal consent is foregrounded, as teaching exercises focus on ensuring each person understands what their partner agrees to do with them within any given practice. Such exercises can be used to highlight the often difficult nature of knowing precisely what someone else consents to without properly communicating with them first. Here, one particular exercise sees sparring activity with 'rules' figured out by individual pairs, with frequent partner rotations requiring attention to any new partner's specific requests, as well as adaptations to intensity, balance of defence and attack involved, and other adjustments specific to working with partners of differing abilities. This emphasises the importance of shaping behaviour around the characteristics of any given interpersonal relationship, rather than forcing through one's own interpretation of propriety onto any and all similar types of interaction. As with the first level, brief, reflective discussions are advocated as a way of reinforcing the intended learning outcomes of such exercises. At this stage then, participants are led to consider that establishing mutual, consenting relationships with others is central to the difference between violent and non-violent interaction.

The third and final level, '*Fighting for Yourself*', extends the idea of consent to encourage personal reflection on what it is that each practitioner hopes to achieve from their training, and where they should be comfortable with setting personal boundaries for engagements with others. Teaching at this level enables coaches to tackle what we have identified above as a key 'silence' in many MACS spaces – the subtle encouragement of damaging behaviours among practitioners, often accompanied

by externalising the responsibility for welfare and health protection to coaches, doctors or others. Because of its focus on empowering (particularly young) practitioners to take control over this aspect of their participation, the third level of the LFHV toolkit goes some way to answering critiques over the morality of participation in risky sporting activities, as briefly outlined above. Activities here involve exercises whose goal is to normalise and de-stigmatise the act of ‘tapping out’ or ‘taking a knee’, and position these as crucial elements of any mature practitioner’s behavioural repertoire. The key learning outcome at this point revolves around strengthening individuals’ sense of self-determination in the face of potentially manipulative or coercive demands from others; again, this objective can be supported through the use of reflective discussions between coaches and practitioners.

While these different levels of teaching may be animated by a great number of actual practical activities, our approach has been to suggest some specific exercises, but to otherwise leave this relatively open for interpretation among the coaches/instructors making use of the toolkit. As we continue to develop this in collaboration with our partners, suggested or indicative exercises will be elaborated for different MACS disciplines, but we nevertheless encourage flexibility and reflexivity in their application, given the divergent needs of differing groups of practitioners. It is our hope that this coaching toolkit will allow theory to manifest in practice in diverse ways, while effecting positive change throughout the various sporting spaces that comprise the field of MACS.

Summary

The interplay between MACS participation, fight behaviours, and the construction of identity, combined with the peculiar social dynamics of ‘non-violent fights’, creates an opportunity through which to promote moral pedagogies within various fighting-based sports. LFHV presents the opportunity for coaches, instructors and practitioners to construct and maintain positive self-images in the face of widespread stigmatisation of MACS as ‘violent’, by providing a clear platform upon which to develop specific, anti-violence pedagogical interventions. At the same time, its core theoretical reasoning brings into view forms of violence which are rarely centralised in mainstream moral critiques of MACS, advocating their eradication. In sum, LFHV is an initiative which aims to positively transform sport, principally by leveraging practitioners’ commitment to a non-violent identity for themselves and their practices towards tangible, pedagogical outcomes. While it remains very much in its infancy at the time of writing, its reception to date among key stakeholders across a wide spectrum of MACS disciplines is encouraging; the actual effectiveness of its application in practice is a question for future research, which is the challenge that now lies ahead of us.

Notes

¹ Farrer and Whalen-Bridge define martial arts as “the things done to make the study of fighting appear refined enough to survive elite social prohibitions” (2011: 2); a compellingly sociological observation of the discursive construction of martial arts, often overlooked within more technically-driven definitions.

² Interestingly, Jackson-Jacobs concludes his exploration of non-sporting ‘competitive violence’ by noting that “some may question whether competitive fights of the type I describe are violence at all” (2014: 182). Indeed, the negotiation of *consent and violation*, although not centralised in his analysis, is key to grasping this ambiguity.

³ As we argue in our 2017 paper, the issue of ‘consent’ needs to be interrogated widely here, specifically relative to forms of violence that are not strictly interpersonal/physical. For example, the structural violence

embedded in commercially exploitive combat sports organisations, whereby professional fighters' health is risked for the sake of promoters' profits, becomes an important consideration here.

⁴ This assumption is reasonably well supported by research on the efficacy of explicitly feminist pedagogies used in self-defence teaching as a route to women's empowerment (Hollander 2015), and through the successful proliferation of sport and exercise programs such as Football 4 Peace, and the various interventions based on the TPSR approach mentioned below (Hellison 2011; Martinek and Hellison 2016).

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