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Jiu-jitsu and society: Male mental health on the mats

Abstract

The growth in Mixed Martial Arts gyms worldwide, along with adjunct media discourse has been matched by the number of participants, characterized by the dedication and sacrifice imbued. These factors catalyzed this research which sought, initially to understand the motivations of MMA gym members and the role that the training plays in their lives. Through an immersive participant ethnography lasting 3 years, the author trained, socialized, fought and competed with members of an urban MMA gym in the UK. The findings focus on the subculture of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) existing within and alongside MMA and where men of diverse age and creed profess a path to ease in respect of mental health. Drawing from the salutogenic health model and the sociology of health literature, this paper shows that through membership of an MMA gym and dedication to BJJ, participants embody a version of health that is closely aligned to Antonovsky's theory of salutogenesis. This theory of health helps explain not only the dedication of BJJ practitioners, and the growth of MMA more broadly, but also posits a fresh perspective on the role of alternative physical activities in male mental health redress.

Keywords: Jiu-jitsu, salutogenic health, mental health, ethnography, mindfulness

1. Introduction

This study began when, after a four-year absence, the author returned to the UK in 2017 to find that the popularity of MMA and related participation statistics had ballooned in recent years, as it has done globally (see: Delroy, Roland & Sirost, 2018). In 2009, the UK was home to 12 mixed martial arts (MMA) gyms; today there are around 320 (tapology.com, 2020). Applying a sociological imagination to this situation has meant taking a closer and deeper look into the subcultures of MMA in the hope that we might learn something about the individuals who chose to pursue such a seemingly violent and transgressive sport, along with the societal factors that compel such commitment. Initial interest was piqued through an admittedly lazy attempt to theorise causality between an upsurge in violent crime in the UK (BBC, 2018), and increased participation in MMA. However, the findings have revealed a more nuanced picture, one that focuses on jiu-jitsu as both a sub-sect of MMA and a growing sport itself, along with new ideas around holistic health development among men.

Male mental health is now a vital area of research. From adolescence to middle age, men do poorly on indicators of mental health - evidenced by worrying statistics relating to suicide, substance abuse and interpersonal violence relative to female peers (Rice et al., 2015). A systematic review, relying on global health statistics, indicated the scale of the issue highlighting suicide as the leading cause of death among young men across several, predominantly Western, nations. Connected is an epidemic of health-care disengagement, infecting the same group, beginning at adolescence (Rice, Purcell & McGorry, 2018). This is in line with earlier estimates suggesting that only 13% of men who have suffered/are suffering a recent mental health problem will access mental health services (Slade et al., 2009). As a result, the Copenhagen statement compiled by several male mental health experts concluded that: "Men's mental health should be recognized as a social issue as much as a medical issue". They also highlight that such issues have a major societal impact and that

more social “male-tailored” approaches to mental health service provision, should be formulated as a response (Rice et al., 2018, p. 230).

Organized sport is proven as an important setting for mental health support (Hajkowicz, Cook, Wilhelmseder, & Boughen, 2013). Under certain conditions sport is highly effective in enhancing social and emotional wellbeing (Holt, 2016). Research indicates that participation in organised sport, inclusive of regular attendance at sports clubs and associations, can safeguard adolescent and adult males from suicidal action and thought (Swan et al., 2018). Combat sports, such as boxing (Van Ingen, 2011), Taekwondo (Toskovic, 2001) and MMA (Milligan et al., 2017), have proven effective in garnering positive mental health benefits among groups of men and adolescents who can be hard to reach. The paradox between combat and mental calm (and related outcomes) is something that will be explored in this research. As will the spectre of heteronormative masculinity that both thrives and evolves in such gym environments. Jump (2020) for example, highlights the significance of the boxing gym in which male members inhibit anxiety and vulnerability by protecting themselves with gloved fists and the carnal performance of combat. This signifies a juxtaposition that lies at the heart of combat sports, particularly concerning men who can espouse and perform more blatant tenets of masculinity as part of the gym environment, while simultaneously pulling in and away from actual combat (see also Jump, 2017).

Spencer (2012) highlights how MMA gyms allow “men to work, rework, envision, and re-envision bigger cultural ideas also bring about a renegotiation of the meanings associated with it”. In this respect such contexts have proven fertile ground for the elucidation of contemporary, fluid and inclusive discourses around masculinity (Channon & Jennings 2013; Spencer 2013). While at the same time embedding/celebrating more normative masculine ideals such as competitiveness, lack of fear, aggression and physical capital (Green, 2011). This nuance in combat sports is emphasised by Jump and Smithson (2020) who find that it is

the “contextual norms and discourses” of the (boxing) gyms themselves that drive masculinity formation and cognition around desistance from crime. The sub-cultural codes, norms and strategies for meaning-making and knowledge sharing can be just as important as the practice itself.

Yet combat sports are un-subtle and by their nature often take centre stage. The physicality (pain) of MMA, for example, can add meaning to the practice confirming “that something ‘real’ is happening” denoting an inward turn on the quest of self-discovery (Green, 2011, p. 391). Yet, while pain and injury are ever-present, even essential accoutrements to the sport, the violence accompanying it is often downplayed among participants. Pleasure inflicting pain, fighting away from the cage, and out of anger more broadly, is frowned upon in MMA sub-cultures (Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011) as it is across in other combat sports (Wacquant, 1995, Toskovic, 2001). Through their observations across several MMA gyms in North America, Abramson and Modzelewski (2011, p. 156) noted how “over-aggressiveness and the ‘win-at-all-costs’ mentality were stigmatized while caring was valued”. A contradiction emerges between the undoubtedly hyper-masculine elements of the sport and the premium placed on socio-physical care and cooperation, more typically feminised activities (see Channon 2019, Channon and Jennings 2013). The MMA gym as a site of meaning-making and play, existing as it does between traditional martial sport and individualised risk, allows for the elucidation of emotional issues (Green, 2016). An opportunity then presents itself to investigate cognition and mental health among men in such environments.

Relief from depression, anxiety, low self-worth and other factors that can contribute to a degradation in one’s mental health are proven outcomes of regular sporting participation (Asztalos et al., 2012). Yet, while there is some broad agreement here, there is less around which sports, and the cultural norms that surround them, are effective regarding male mental

health, and why. The findings of this research help address this lacuna by focusing on jiu-jitsu, which emerged as a vehicle for male mental health promotion, and the salutogenic health model which helps explain its use and effectiveness.

2. Salutogenesis and the sociology of health

Salutogenesis is a theory of health that focuses on “what creates health rather than only what are the limitations and causes of disease” (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 12). Salutogenesis is associated with the work of Antonovsky (1979) who argued in favour of a health model that supports a variety of life experiences to help construct ones ‘sense of coherence’ – what makes the world comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, translating to order in our lives. A strong sense of coherence allows you to mobilize resources to manage life’s stresses and tensions. Later he wrote:

The constancy of imposed stressors in such life situations, the continuous emergencies life presents, make it immensely difficult to resolve tension. Life, for even the fortunate among us, is full of conflict and stressors, but there are many breathing spells (Antonovsky, 1990, p. 74).

From this perspective developing the skills, confidence and resilience to manage stress and move across Antonosky’s ease/dis-ease continuum, towards ease and away from dis-ease, is the path to being healthy. Salutogenesis is, therefore, a holistic view of health that critiques the binary, pathogenetic, view of ill/not ill, infected/infection-free (Antonovsky, 1987). It focuses on the interdependencies of health, which is relevant considering research in the sociology of health that highlights the connection between mental/physical health and societal wellbeing (White 2016). Such research indicates causality between increases in physical and mental health disorders and the shifting burden of individual health away from the state towards the individual, disregarding the economic, social and political

institutions that bring about disease (David 1994; Aneshensel et al 2013). This emphasis on individual choice as a determinant of our health feeds into a competitive/survivalist narrative paralleled with contemporary neoliberal social structures, which has negatively impacted mental health across the industrialized West (see Teghtsoonian, 2009). This is somewhat opposed to sociological empiricism that defines health, and the mitigation of disease, in relation to community health and healthy networks of support (Almedom, 2005).

Rather than seeking to define ‘health’, or problematize the societal causes of ill-health, salutogenesis suggests a path to acquiring resources in the formation, maintenance and development *of* health (Lindström & Eriksson, 2005). In this respects, the salutogenic model fits with a sociological view of (ill) health and proffers a solution in which the goal is to “move beyond privileged biomedical perspectives, to investigate health in terms of how to live a good life” (McCuaig & Quennerstedt, 2018, p. 112). Put simply, individuals must acquire and mobilize several resources to assist in the fight against the social production of mental/physical illness.

Sport and physical activity can be a source for many resources for health development as shown by Quennerstedt (2008, p. 278) who apply salutogenic health to physical education and who describes the importance of deriving ‘meaning through movement’, that transcends the boundaries of physical activity. This approach re-examines widely held beliefs about sport’s role in health as more than a cure for disease or obesity, but as a resource for health development. One can learn *about* health by acquiring “physical, psychological and social resources”, and various adjunct knowledge, through sport and physical activity (Quennerstedt, 2008). In doing so lives are enriched through an approach to sport and

physical activity that goes beyond the dichotomy of fit/unfit, in/out of shape to consider broader questions relating to the body, mind and the society that surrounds them.

The salutogenic approach is both holistic and neoliberal in that individuals must develop health and the resources needed to survive in the contemporary tumult. For Antonovsky (1979) such resources are sociocultural and emerge from meaningful experiences that help us to circumvent/handle life stressors by forming a sense of coherence and the confidence to engage with our environment. Continued learning and development, the ability to cope with stress and engagement with mindfulness, are all strategic resources that appear as strong themes in this research. They each speak to a degree of empowerment and self-efficacy that can be engendered through sport and physical activity among participants for them to survive and thrive. The focus on men reflects, to an extent, the sample and make-up of the research context but also the need to engage with diverse (male) sporting sub-cultures to uncover the aspects of the modern male psyche that are missing from dominant discourses on masculinity and male mental health.

More broadly, sports participants who can derive meaning through movement, that goes beyond just physicality and/or simple enjoyment, have a better chance of leading a healthy life (see Thedin Jakobsson, 2014). Jiu-jitsu emerged as one such sport and became a focus of this research as a keystone discipline within MMA, but also as a more specific conduit through which participants revealed they can find meaning and maintain balance in their physical and mental health. This research indicated how committed jiu-jitsu practice helps to build an arsenal of health resources that help people to make the best of their own life situation and to develop their health within, and in relation to, their context (see Antonovsky, 1979).

3. “The Gentle Art”

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The emergence and growth of jiu-jitsu worldwide is connected to the rise of MMA as a sport and spectacle (James, Haff, Kelly, & Beckman, 2016). The mixture of fighting styles in MMA means that participants and fans alike can choose to enjoy that which suits them. However, since Royce Gracie became victorious at the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 1 in Colorado, in 1993, employing Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) to defeat stronger and larger opponents, it has become both foundational to the house of MMA and a fast-growing sport in its own right.

Descending from Japan, jiu-jitsu, which roughly translates as ‘the gentle art’, requires you to redirect your opponent’s force, taking them to the ground where you can battle to submit them through a multitude of chokes and limb locks. BJJ¹, jiu-jitsu’s most popular contemporary form, is as an indispensable discipline in MMA, with many gyms making it a focus, partly as a large amount of professional MMA bouts end in submission (Fightnomics, 2017). But more than this, BJJ is associated with a way of life, a unique philosophy that melds mind and body, sport and art. A fellow participant ethnographer states: “Becoming an adept BJJ practitioner involves absorbing all the complex processes and improvisation that Alfred Schutz (1951) associated with jazz musicians” (Spencer 2016, p. 1 parenthesis in original). The strength, power and ability to inflict pain in BJJ is juxtaposed with the need for contestants to deploy flexibility and calm in decision making, often under extreme pressure. This juxtaposition is, in part, why it is often likened to a physically demanding game of chess (Spencer, 2014), and why yoga, meditation and other mindfulness practices are part of the training regimes of many participants.

BJJ’s exact growth is hard to track, housed as it often is, under the MMA banner, yet an indication is the number of worldwide tournaments hosted by the International Brazilian Jiu-

¹ Brazilian jiu-jitsu is a less classical, less formalised form of the mother discipline of Japanese jiu-jitsu though in practice there are dissimilar. BJJ and jiu-jitsu generally are used interchangeably as is reflected in this paper.

Jitsu Federation (IBJJF) which rose from just three tournaments in Brazil in 1996 - to 134 in 2020 (Calendar IBJJF 2020). Western celebrity endorsement has buoyed its global rise (Millar, 2019), while a Google Trend analysis shows the steady rise of jiu-jitsu overtaking 'Judo' in popularity (Googletrends, 2020). Jiu-jitsu also attracts participants from a range of ages and socioeconomic backgrounds (Chinkov & Holt, 2016). Research into BJJ is, therefore, worthwhile due to its growth and popularity, both within and separate from MMA and also indications as to its benefits; for individuals, stakeholders and (non)athletic communities alike.

Research already suggests, for example, that training in BJJ increases an individual's positive social identity and networks (Rodrigues, Evans & Galatti, 2019), self-efficacy and motivation (David, 2015), along with clear improvements in pro-social behaviour and self-control (Blowqvist Mickelsson, 2019). Extended participation (two years plus) has also shown to facilitate implicit life skill transfer with great benefit to participants' personal development (Chinkov & Holt, 2016). While Reusling (2014, p. iv) believes that BJJ schools in the US "frequently become places to improve quality of life and to inadvertently address a wide variety of maladaptive and clinical issues." In a similar vein, a study into 'Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts' – a martial arts-based mindfulness program – found BJJ to be an important part of an MMA training menu that instilled positive attitudinal outcomes beneficial to adolescents (14-17) with diverse emotional disorders (Milligan et al., 2017). Yet, while there is discourse around the role of BJJ in personal development, there is scant research on the effect of BJJ on mental health specifically, and none focusing on solely adult males.

Achieving personal development through engagement in martial arts is not new, due to the discipline, self-regulation and the various, meditative, philosophies imbued (e.g. Steyn & Roux 2009; Zivin 2001). Yet these positive outcomes do not fully explain the strength and

breadth of BJJ's popularity and its ability to retain committed participants, despite a physically, mentally and temporally demanding training regime (Chinkov & Holt., 2016). It is against this background that this paper has been framed. To uncover the motivations for continued participation, the outcomes derived and the deeper meanings that athletes attach to jiu-jitsu, an in-depth methodology was planned.

4. Methodology

In total, the study has taken 4 years in which time I trained (between 4-8 hours per week), socialized, competed and fought with members of an urban MMA gym in England's North West. For the first year, I focused on training, forming relationships in and around the gym and reflecting on the research context to feed into eventual questioning. In the second year, I began conducting in-depth interviews with experienced practitioners, ranging from committed hobbyists to professional MMA fighters. I was not a fan of MMA or BJJ before the research and had no specialist/academic knowledge of these pursuits prior. This was intentional in part, I wanted to enter the context as a layperson, encumbered with a mainstream bias that by and large perceived MMA in a negative light. I could then apply sociological scrutiny in confirming, challenging and/or making sense of these assumptions in relation to my lived reality as a participant and (later) competitor.

The decision to enrol and actively engage as a participant was not taken lightly due to the psycho-social, embodied and temporal demands of such an endeavor. Yet it was well informed by engagement with the many immersive ethnographies into sporting sub-cultures that have returned valuable theoretical and practical contributions through in-depth investigations into varied sporting lifeworlds: from boxing (Wacquant, 2004) - to fell running (Atkinson, 2010). Characteristic of these studies is the quest for in-depth understanding and an intersubjectivity, that is at once embodied and sensory, treating as permeable the insider/outsider, subjective/objective boundaries (Sparkes, 2009). In such studies,

participation is universally lauded as a route to knowing and understanding sporting contexts and those that populate them. This blend of ‘carnal sociology’ into combat sports is viewed as ‘sociology not only *of* the body...but also *from* the body’ (Waquant, 2004, p. 13). In this study, the body is a conduit through which to learn more, not just about BJJ as a sport, but the MMA gym as a theatre for the performance of contemporary psychophysical culture.

My own thoughts and reflections as a participant meant there is an auto-ethnographic element to the study, recorded in a research diary, that sought to illuminate the wider cultural and sub-cultural aspects (Collinson & Hockey, 2005). Membership of the gyms jiu-jitsu Whatsapp group also allowed for elements of digital ethnography to contribute to the diary/findings - though no messages are quoted here. The diary was populated according to my analysis and self-conscious introspection in pursuit of knowledge and answers to my own questions regarding positionality (Ellis, 2004). For example, as a white male from the UK with reasonable sporting acumen, I was well-positioned to acculturate. However, in applying a sociological imagination I used my life experience to examine and interpret my journey from novice to competitor (see Mills, 1959, pp 195-196). I continually asked myself how I would feel if I were a different ethnicity, gender, age, nationality etc... Hypothetical thought this might be, it was an attempt to add new and varied colors to the sociological impression being constructed in the pages of both my research diary and this paper. For example, I felt that my whiteness had less of an impact on my ability to gather data than my gender. In 3 years of (participant) observation, I saw no ethno-racial tension and could not discern any (in)visible hierarchies beyond those determined by one’s belt color. This is not to say that none existed, only that it did not form part of the data. However, the membership is mostly male and when combined with my own maleness and the fact of separate locker rooms, where much discussion takes place, this had a clear impact on the male-centric interview sample and subsequent findings.

I also drew from participants knowledge in a dialogical and cooperative approach to data analysis. In this respect, the analysis was constant and comparative (see: Charmaz 2006). Close bonds formed with training partners and stakeholders meant that emergent themes could be checked and re-checked informally and fed back into ongoing (participant) observation and interviews. Furthermore, to disrupt the monopoly of interpretation; I conducted 10 in-depth interviews (40 – 60 mins); transcribed and analyzed the data using NVivo; then conducted 8 more interviews with fighters who had been members of the gym for 5 years or more, to delve deeper into these themes and discuss their validity. In this respect, my naturalistic evaluations based on participant observation were checked by participants after the first year, and then again through thematic coding after the first round of interviews. The emergent themes were then checked a final time in the second round to crystalize the themes that you see below.

The membership of the gym is around 80% male, though decreasing as more women sign up and take advantage of the women-only classes (most are mixed) and the openness that characterizes the gym including a gender fluidity that exists on the mats that is at times counter-hegemonic (see Channon & Jennings, 2013). Though I found it to be an inclusive space of diverse class, body type and age (16-50), the gym's ethnic make-up was predominantly white/British – a broad reflection of the local area². The socio-economic melting pot of MMA gyms has been discussed elsewhere (Abramson and Modzelewski, 2011; Spencer, 2013), yet the MMA gym's ecosystem, mixed by design, is a conflation of accents, personalities and sub-cultural types. The co-constructive nature of training and sparing lends itself to the formation of close bonds between; bricklayers and accountants, 18

² This said, BAME groups are still represented and interestingly there are least two members who regularly train jiu-jitsu and maui thai in full hijab sportswear.

and 40-year-olds, fans of rap and folk music etc... in way that (I feel) is uncommon for a sporting culture. As a result, I was able to form close relationships with many members.

If one shows commitment, forming close bonds with participants in MAA research is somewhat inevitable and for qualitative research, this has had clear benefits (see: Channon & Jennings, 2013; Spencer, 2013). Yet a limitation of such closeness is, what Woodward (2008, p. 538) termed as, “excessive subjectivity”. Indeed, the insider/outsider dichotomy, within such embodied research as MMA training, is the subject of forthcoming work. Put simply this research acknowledges this limitation, with introspective measures to help mitigate. However, while he argued for the fallibility of all research as a human endeavor Walcott (1995) also argues that only the insider can get the inside view. Given the deeply personal nature of the research, I felt I must produce a paralleled discourse from the point of an insider alongside attempts at independent sociological scrutiny, imperfect though this may be. Indeed, this co-creation in combat sports is where Green (2016, p. 426) found that “shared energy, pain, and sweat presupposed and set the stage for the discursive.”

A further limitation is that this research took place primarily inside one MMA gym. The rationale was first, to build trustful bonds with participants order to elicit candid responses to personal subject matter. Second, as was the case with Waquant’s (2004) work, I aimed to become part of the gym routines, embodying the practice over countless hours, weeks and months of preparation, so that I might begin to see and feel the familiar in what was initially exotic (Klein, 1993). This presents clear issues with generalization, yet: “Each case is unique, yet not so unique that we cannot learn from it and apply its lessons more generally” (Walcott, 1995, p. 175). In support, Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 5) argued that “context dependent knowledge is at the very heart of human activity”, while Harper et al. (2013) also advise that a strong case study exploring relevant themes in a convincing way can be highly influential. The goal is to

learn, and the interpretation of a contemporary case is, therefore, valuable in the refinement of theory and understanding (Stake, 1995).

The goals of this research are similar, in looking look closer at the world of BJJ and those that inhabit it, we might learn something. It is the writing of a sporting culture, in the case of one inner-city gym and what follows depicts the emergent themes. Where possible, the participants speak for themselves with their identities protected by pseudonyms. The color following their names depicts their BJJ belt ranking to give a sense of their experience. For a graph depicting a rough timeline for achieving each belt grade see appendix 1.

5. Results

I have invested serious time in this, 10 hours a week. I'm at an age [38] where my children want to come here now so that's fine but ... I missed my daughter's first steps because in my head I had to get slightly better at jiu-jitsu. (Mark, brown)

The time sacrifice of MMA participants is no secret, and in part piqued my interest in this study. To reach and maintain a good standard of practice, athletes can spend from 6 to 20 hours a week on the mats from hobbyists to professionals (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011). Coupled with the physical risks of injury and the related effect on outside relationships, highlighted by Mark above, these sacrifices are significant and cut across age groups. The research was framed to find out why? What do (mainly) men find in MMA gyms that inspires such devotion? Around one year into training I began to realize:

Time on the mats is important for progression yeah...but it's more than that, this is a home away from home, a place to escape...to train, stretch, work on technique but also work on the mind. These things are connected in jiu-jitsu it's become my therapy now (diary 13 months).

As I write this, I am getting far more from the gym than I first envisaged. In truth I joined the gym for the somewhat masochistic challenge of completing a long-

term participant ethnography, to uncover the hidden meanings and subcultures in MMA. And because I wanted to keep fit and was bored with lifting weights. The latter is the reason many practitioners give for joining up initially. But Connor (purple), who oversees the gym induction process, having interviewed and trained hundreds of new members, had his own ideas: *‘no-one ever wants to tell you the main reason [for joining] ... they’ll say it’s about fitness or it’s about a hobby but deep down it can be about something else’*.

The ‘something else’ became the focus of the study as training partners, interview participants and other stakeholders began to speak candidly about their motivations and the role of the gym, more specifically jiu-jitsu, in their lives. What follows is an unpacking of key themes of ‘learning and development’, ‘mindfulness’ and ‘coping’ that emerged. Before we delve into these themes this field note sets the scene of this urban MMA gym in England’s North West:

It’s the smell that hits first [on entering], sweat thinly veiled by incense burning at the reception area where a makeshift café hosts parents, friends and fighters awaiting the start or end of the sessions. Then the sound, music booming, from The Stone Roses to techno, shouts of encouragement punctuated by the thwack of pads absorbing impacts of jabs and kicks from the Thai [boxing] lot. Then the sight... 20 – 50 men, women and children at work...sparing in the cage at the center of the gym, rolling [jiu-jitsu sparring] on the mats around it...the [dead lift] bar being dropped in the weights area. This messy ecosystem, mixed by design, will take a lot of time and hard graft [work] to understand...(diary 2 months).

5.1 Learning and development

It became clear early on that despite the number of disciplines associated with MMA, and in evidence at the gym, it was jiu-jitsu which was central to the life of the gym and its

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members. In an early conversation with the gym owner and head coach I told him about the growth of MMA gyms across the UK, his response to the numbers was *‘really?!... I wonder how much of that is jiu-jitsu’* (Rick, black). All interviewees, and many I spoke to informally, steered the conversations towards jiu-jitsu with the learning process and personal development as central to their pursuit, regardless of the sacrifices imbued. Ross (brown) thought about whether the sacrifices were worth it *‘I decided it was. The conclusion was simple. There is nothing I can do that improves me that I can replace it with as much as this.’*

Ideas regarding personal growth and development are often seen as by-products of more mainstream team sports (MacDonald et al., 2011), but in BJJ this discourse goes hand in hand to the physical learning that occurs. Sessions are titled as ‘classes’ on the timetable; across the world, senior coaches/black belts in BJJ are named *sensei* or ‘professor’. BJJ was described to me as *‘an endless puzzle’* where *‘life knowledge, jiu-jitsu knowledge’* are mentioned in the same breath (Cain, purple). I identified closely with Ryan’s (blue) experience of his first jiu-jitsu class *‘As soon as I had my first class and I saw the use of like body mechanics, I was like amazed but baffled and that made me want to learn more.’*

The process of learning in jiu-jitsu lends itself to such personal development; students must individually and collectively, consciously and unconsciously, learn the skills required to overcome an opponent, to deal with and reflect on defeat and then to apply these lessons in the next contest either on the mats, or at a growing number of regional, national and international BJJ competitions. I competed twice during the research, experiencing real disappointment at the first and equally real success at the second event. Competing adds further direction and motivation to the training, deepens bonds with training partners and broadens one’s knowledge of jiu-jitsu and, by extension, oneself. The learning and development linked to the of practice is dynamic, ever-changing and perpetual within a class

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or sparring (rolling) session and across years of training. This was shown to have a profound effect on participants as these two coaches highlighted:

You actually see the personality change in the time that they're here [at the gym]
... people will come in with the egos, that doesn't stay, that goes quite quickly
because you get quite humbled quite fast (Craig, brown).

And then over the course of like a year of doing jiu-jitsu, self-confidence builds
and they start becoming their own man... That's one of my favorite things about
coaching, seeing someone grow (Mike, black)

The experience of these coaches (over 20 years combined) makes for an
interesting perspective that is supported in the research diary.

There's times I look round thinking, 'I love this, I really love being here, I
really love this kind of training, to like listen and think carefully, to
learn...getting achievements, but also getting knocked back and then coming
back stronger' it's personal development that I didn't realise I needed (diary
18 months).

Such sentiments were constantly re-confirmed by new friends and training partners
who extolled the profound effect that the sport has had on them. The training is hard and
often brutal/painful but this up and down road to development is the only path to progression.
Like in so many traditions the elders, (higher belts and coaches), act as physical but also
mental instructors in how best to harness your mind and body in pursuit of (small) victories
and in overcoming the numerous defeats. As black belt Rick stated at the end of a hard
session '*How ever many times you tap [out] I have tapped more than all of you put together,
its part of the journey so keep going*'. Being 'tapped out' regularly and often by smaller
male/female opponents, for example, is part of the learning process and forces a
confrontation and re-negotiation with expectations around hegemonic masculinity. Research
on male mental health has consistently shown how gender role conflict and masculinity

adherence are real barriers to help-seeking among men (O'Neil 2008; Berger et al., 2013).

The ego-busting that occurs within BJJ might be viewed as a counterbalance to this, but it is partly to blame for the high attrition rate. Of my beginner jiu-jitsu class of 15, only 4 remain, and this is not due to the gym's social environment – which I wrongly assumed might be exclusive to certain body/personality types, perhaps as a result of mainstream representations of MMA (see Brett 2017). It is the confronting nature of the training along with the commitment, sacrifice and time required to train and improve, which is significant engendering dropout. Yet the consequences of overcoming these difficulties are profound - as were many of the reflections:

I'm calmer, I don't get as flustered so easily. Jiu-jitsu helps me to have a greater perspective on things in a way. Which I think is uncommon for a sport. Like I played football [soccer] for years and I don't think I ever sort of felt it improve me as a person like jiu-jitsu, it was just a game (Ryan, blue).

This learning and development journey adds meaning to participation. The dedication and rigors imbued create new reasons for people to turn away from aspects of their lives considered harmful and deal with those which are stressful. I spoke to a number of people who were previously affected by unhealthy lifestyles, crime, drugs etc... who were all in some way '*saved by jiu-jitsu*' (Lee, Blue). This can be true of other sporting sub-cultures (Nichols, 2010) and elsewhere the transformative potential of MMA, more broadly, has shown efficacy in instilling a self-reflection in participants that can peel back the layers of societally imposed labels by both practicing and co-constructing a more nuanced contemporary masculinity (Spencer 2013; Channon & Matthews 2018). Yet the frequency at which this theme emerged over the 3 years suggests that BJJ particularly lends itself to self-betterment. This is due, in part, to the practice itself and the self-efficacy instilled from over-coming the

difficulties of jiu-jitsu. This enforces a focus on personal development that is addictive:

There is an addictiveness to the improvement...I feel as though things don't matter as much and I don't fear confrontation as much, so therefore I'm not nervous about anything... I also feel as though I'm in a much better personal condition, which allows me to relax as a human being a lot more, and to let a lot of small things slide (Ross, brown).

The physical, mental and emotional focus lends itself to a presence of mind that is linked very deeply to the practice of mindfulness itself. This is where we turn next.

5.2 Mindfulness

I came to learn to fight but found a sort of... peace...how mad is that!
(Nick, purple)

Mindfulness is a state which involves “consciously attending to one’s moment to moment experience” (Shapiro et al 2006, p. 374). A central aspect of Zen Buddhism, mindfulness is associated with being present, and non-judgmental. It is founded on the three axioms of ‘intention’ – a shift from self-regulation to self-discovery, ‘attention’ – focusing on the here and now, and ‘attitude’ – practicing kindness and openness (Kabat-Zinn 1994; Shapiro et al, 2006). Notably, the two Japanese characters representing mindfulness are made up of the symbols for mind and heart representing, for many, the connection between mind and body advocated by both mindfulness experts (Skinner & Bladen, 2018), and proponents of jiu-jitsu (Reusing, 2014).

The mind/body connection was evident throughout the research, derivations of the word ‘mind’ appeared over 300 times across the 18 interview transcripts and ‘body’ 205

times. Most of these utterances were related to jiu-jitsu as it is '*very cerebral*' (Ross, brown), you must think quickly and calmly to overcome your opponent. As Mike (black) states.

It's [jiu-jitsu] a problem-solving sport...you're always thinking as you're fighting... if someone puts you in the same position, how do you get out of that, and you have to solve that problem... It stimulates the mind as well as the body, and obviously, you're getting fit...that's why people are drawn to it.

The mind and your use of it are key to jiu-jitsu with many books dedicated to it's psychology, extolling the importance of the body and mind connection along with mindfulness on and off the mat (see Gracie et al., 2001: Riberio, 2008). Jiu-jitsu was, for example, often likened to a game of chess during the research. An actual game of which was often in progress in the reception area of the gym as athletes waited for, or cooled down after, their session. This '*cerebral*' element of jiu-jitsu is another aspect of MMA that is rarely portrayed in the way the sport is packaged by mainstream media (Brett, 2017). And neither is the association with personal development and mindfulness that is uncovered here. Indeed, returning to the three axioms mentioned above, beginning with '*intention*', jiu-jitsu lends itself to an interrogation of the self that myself and the participants had not found elsewhere:

You don't really know yourself until you've put yourself into a stress situation, and I think it does appeal to a lot of young men, because they realize, "oh, I've not really been put under a stress situation a lot of the time" (Ross, brown).

Knowing thyself comes from being placed in, and overcoming, difficult situations on the mats. Such practices can be uncomfortable, socially awkward and painful - all at once (see Dutkiewicz and Spencer, 2017). Yet the levels of personal learning and development discussed above emerge from finding your way out of these situations the success of which is determined by one's dedication to BJJ and the

ability to remain calm, focused and present. This leads to the second aspect of mindfulness that was on clear display on the mats – ‘attention’. The physically and mentally demanding pursuit necessitates a presence of mind that is difficult to find in the neoliberal tumult.

People who don’t generally practice meditation will have an experience of mindfulness at some point in jiu-jitsu, and I think that’s a very enjoyable thing, to completely lose that sense of time and just to be focused on one task (Tom, purple)

You don’t think about your work, you don’t think about your relationships or whatever’s going on. You don’t think about any shit that’s going on outside. For a lot of people, it’s almost like a therapy for them. I know guys who like get panic attacks, get stressed and stuff like that, and they come in here and they feel great after it. It’s almost like a medicine for them (Mike, black).

References to jiu-jitsu practice being ‘*our therapy*’ (Mark, brown), ‘*like peace*’ (Gary, purple) or ‘*relaxed*’ (Craig, brown) were common and not what I expected to find within the confines of an urban MMA gym initially. But they were aspects of the sport that I came to know and love. ‘*When I train jiu-jitsu I just feel like I’m meditating*’ (Jan, purple), or as Luiz (purple) put it ‘*It’s our church...it’s our time...whatever is going on [outside] is gone, I’m in there and I just want to do jiu-jitsu*’.

Elsewhere, from an anthropological perspective of BJJ on the military island of Guam, Farrer (2019: 21) describes BJJ practice as “therapy of, by, for and through the body”. The combination of physicality and mental difficulty in jiu-jitsu is key here as it disrupts cognitive cycles of ‘over engagement’ (overthinking/worry) by default at first and then as a

matter of good practice³. One learns quickly that if your thoughts are elsewhere then the rounds will not last long, and this instills an attention to the present that does not come easy to many of the participants, or myself. If the mind does wonder, more experienced training partners will let you know about it in ways which are once physical yet non-aggressive, often followed by words of encouragement.

This third axiom of mindfulness – an attitude of kindness/openness - was perhaps the most surprising due to my own blinkered, media curated, impression of MMA and the culture(s) within. Gym members and coaches were kind and welcoming from the start, this came as a surprise as this diary entry suggests: *‘Everyone is really friendly, so friendly in fact, I was not expecting this from a sporting culture known for aggression and violence, but this is way nicer than any new football or rugby training session I have walked into’* (1 month) (see also Green, 2018; Channon and Jennings, 2013; Spencer, 2013). Though friendly, it was clear that the inner circle of core gym members who have been there for many years would be hard to access, from both a research and a social perspective. This may be due to the high dropout rate of those who expect to be sparring/rolling in the cage/octagon right away, only to find that they are unable to shoulder the physical, temporal and social sacrifices involved to reach the required levels for competitiveness.

Despite this dynamic, the community and closeness that is developed among committed jiu-jitsu participants is unlike anything I have seen in sport and was referenced by participants on numerous occasions - this requires further discussion earmarked for another paper. Yet briefly, the kind and open nature jiu-jitsu participants is somewhat paradoxical as Gary (purple) explained:

³ Elsewhere (non)clinical health interventions with the same outcomes have proven to have both a significant and positive effect on physical/psychological function (see Chu, 2010)

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Nowhere else can you spend an hour on the mat with someone, knock 10 bells out of [beat] each other or choke each other 10/15 times and then come off and chat about what you did right or what you did wrong, and develop this kind of bond and this friendship.

The short but important chats with training partners directly after a round are when these bonds are cemented. The physicality of the round, followed by the release of the bell and then the debrief - consisting of open and honest commentary about the fight - are key in developing friendships, technique and, quite honestly, gathering data. But it is these spaces, between the exercise, that allow participants (myself included) to revel in the presence of mind fostered by jiu-jitsu. The discussion, instruction and sharing of ideas that happens in the reception, locker-room, in the cage, the weights area and on the mats are as much part of the sport as the armbars and collar chokes that bring success. However, your training partners are working to place you in positions where you must tap-out or get seriously injured/lose consciousness. The risks are real, and trust is key as your partner must recognize when you are compromised before any damage is done. As I type, the gym's WhatsApp group are discussing recovery times for a ruptured ACL, a torn pectoral and a broken arm, all from jiu-jitsu.

The glue that bonds this community is made up, in part of sharing experiences and resources for injury recovery, along with the realities of being part of a somewhat esoteric sporting sub-culture. The community exists beyond the gym's boundaries as the following, reflection recorded after I competed at a national jiu-jitsu competition, suggests:

There was just a lot of love around the competition. Everyone was speaking to everyone, all different gyms, people were polite, moving out of the way for each other, going through doors - I know that's pretty standard, but there was such a nice community feeling about it all, there really was (diary 19 months).

An attitude of kindness and openness is visible from the start but is only fully experienced and internalized by committed jiu-jitsu practitioners, and this is true of the other elements of mindfulness discussed. Attention, intention and attitude are encountered, experienced and then internalized as participants seek to better cope with the demands of training but this also bleeds into coping with life outside the gym.

5.3 Coping

The gym enables men to redress for both inner and external grievances. Simon (purple) was candid about this: *‘I think there’s essentially a lot more people that are dealing with a lot more stuff than we realize and I think it’s [jiu-jitsu] very much an important outlet for a lot of people and for a long time I didn’t realize quite how much of an outlet it was.’*

Yet it became clear that this process was both ways. A key line of enquiry examined the role that participation played in lives outside the gym. Coping with stress, anxiety and depression featured regularly in discussions and my own reflections:

I think I became more confident, more calm, more understanding, it’s really hard to make me angry these days. I used to be really angry... anxious. I used to feel like people judged me all the time...but once I started training it sort of faded away (Jan, purple).

I understand now that jiu-jitsu isn’t compartmentalized as a separation from the rest of your life. It’s part of your life. Part of a healthy life, I feel good, I feel better today. It’s Monday, start of a very difficult term [at work], but I’m just feeling up for it. I feel fine, relaxed, calm (diary, 20 months).

Previous research has indicated the ability of jiu-jitsu to foster the transfer of life skills, such as respect, perseverance, self-confidence and healthy habits (see Chinkov and Holt, 2016).

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And this study returns similar findings only with a more specific focus on resources to cope with the outside world. The reasons that participants were able to access newfound resources to assist in this way relate to the practice itself. Connor sums it up well:

You go and do [exercise] biceps every day if you want to have big biceps whereas if you're putting yourself in a stressful situation every day and you're managing to keep yourself calm, it keeps you calm in other situations (Connor).

Stressful situations on the mats are common, there are times when you can't breathe, nearly lose consciousness, feel like your limbs and/or joints are on fire etc. All due to the immense efforts of someone (of diverse gender and age) whom you may have met only seconds ago. This field note describing a battle with Craig (brown) was typical:

I'm too slow and Craig takes my back, both leg hooks are in and he goes for the choke straight away, fuck I'm in trouble here, relax...breath...think...quickly! I pin my chin against my chest to hold off his choking arm, but he readjusts and it slips under...I pull at it and futilely try to hip escape, but he arches his back, and squeezes...am I done??...Can't breath and vision starts to go...I'm done, I tap and he lets go immediately. We bump fists, breathing heavily, 'nice' he says *'you could have prevented that though...come here let me show you'*.

Such scenarios can be profoundly uncomfortable and extremely stressful yet happen in various forms several times a session, over several sessions a week. Success is found in remaining calm, controlling your breathing and thinking carefully, clearly and quickly. Such practice showed to have a significant impact outside of the gym:

Jiu-jitsu has, for me, for everyone who has done it for long enough, it's taught them subconsciously some coping skills that you're not even aware of until that situation has occurred and then you look back at it and go "do you know

what, a few years ago if I'd have been in that situation I would have gone to shit. I would have fallen apart, fallen to pieces" (Mark, purple).

The juxtaposition between the stress and physicality of the practice and the calm needed for success is notable and is a further personification of mindfulness that enhances participants capacity to cope with stress. The ability to separate the torrential, irrational (societally influenced) mind from the objective/logical self (see: Izutsu, 1977). Jiu-jitsu also feeds into yogic and other wellness practices such as meditation that add to participants ability to access calm and deal with stress outside of the gym. The gym itself runs yoga classes and many conversations in the changing rooms revolve around such practices, along with diet and self-care - to a degree that challenges heteronormative conceptions of masculinity that are proven barriers to mental health help-seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Berger et al., 2013).

However, the gym is not a wellness retreat; injuries are prevalent and often significant, yet participants continue regardless and long into their 40s and 50s. As Mark (brown, 41) stated as he walked stiffly to his car after a hard session: *'I'm essentially taking care of my mental health at the expense of my physical health.'* Speaking more broadly Ross (brown, 43) believed *'I think once people start they do realize the benefits. So it's a by-product, but you know, I wouldn't say like a doctor would prescribe it'*. This is an important point, most, if not all of the men I spoke to, trained with and have gotten to know over the 3 years had experienced a degree of mental health relief as a result of their commitment to jiu-jitsu. One member even confided that joining the gym was key in preventing their suicide. Regardless of their level of need many now depend on training to deal with issues they have/had with anxiety, depression, anger etc. Furthermore, none such members had found effective medical help elsewhere. For some, this was because, like me, they didn't realize

they needed any help. But for others, they perhaps fall into the high percentage of men who remain significantly underserved in terms of mental health provision (Rice et al., 2018).

I would probably say I come here [the gym] more for my mental wellbeing than my physical wellbeing. Obviously really our training is for physicality, but I think more mentally it makes me a better person (Ken, purple)

Things take time to change whereas everyone wants the quick fix because again it's programmed into the human consciousness that you're ill, come and get a pill and you're going to be fine (Tom, purple)

The facility for mental health development in jiu-jitsu is, arguably, the reason for such levels of commitment among participants and why so many placed the sport as central to their wellbeing. As Tom alludes above, jiu-jitsu presents an alternative and perhaps more effective path to ease in terms of mental health than hegemonic, medicalized/pharmaceuticalized approaches that pervade Western societies (see Cohen 2017). Jiu-jitsu training engenders good physical and psychological habits, including attitudes to exercise and nutrition. It also forces one to critique destructive aspects of one's life (alcohol, drugs, junk food etc...) that impact on your training and your state of mind. Jiu-jitsu is therefore viewed as a therapeutic practice that melds mind and body in the pursuit of self-betterment on and off the mats. It is an embodied therapy that is acceptable to men who, research shows, tend to avoid help-seeking when compared to women (Swami, 2012). All participants and informal respondents inferred, often blatantly, that jiu-jitsu practice allowed them to relate to their everyday environments in ways that were diverse but fundamentally better. This was also confirmed by jiu-jitsu participants from further afield with whom I spoke informally at two national competitions as well as jiu-jitsu centered research in the US and Guam (Reusing, 2014; Farrer, 2019).

Returning to the initial research rationale, participants' motivations for engagement in an MMA can be numerous, but jiu-jitsu is key. Reasons for staying and becoming committed all converged on jiu-jitsu and the specifics of psychological wellbeing in relation to their everyday environment. In this regard, participants' experience of jiu-jitsu, along with my own, has generally endowed us with improved mental health and the ability to handle the trials of everyday life in better ways. This could be why both the salutogenic model and jiu-jitsu are becoming increasingly relevant in (predominantly) Western neoliberal societies. Each of these aspects is now discussed in turn before concluding.

6. Jiu-jitsu, the river and the swimmer

Emergent from this participant ethnography, and the narratives supplied by the participants, was how sporting practice inside the gym furnishes members with the resources to cope and thrive outside of the gym to a point of necessity. Across the key themes of learning and development, mindfulness and coping it is shown that jiu-jitsu dovetails well with the salutogenic health model.

Aside from the physical benefits of exercise, this then depicts the importance of holistic health development in contemporary life. Indeed, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has long seen health in terms of physical, social and mental well-being that an individual develops in relation to their surroundings (WHO 1948, 1986). Salutogenesis deploys the example of the swimmer and the river to edify its approach to health development. The individual (swimmer) must hone adequate resources to survive and thrive in their own river of life. In this respect health development is relational and the ability to mobilize health resources is "dependent on the historical and sociocultural context within which individuals are situated" (McQuaig and Quennertedt, 2018, p. 117). This goes beyond the physicality, and/or the absence of disease or injury (the ability to swim), more is required. In jiu-jitsu, this is also the case as successful practice requires skills far beyond just

physicality. The mental calm required to deal with the intense stress and discomfort of the practice are translatable to the ability to handle life in the neoliberal tumult.

This marketisation of the self, that foregrounds individualism and economic/social competitiveness, helps to explain spiking mental health figures in the industrialized West broadly (see Teghtsoonian, 2009; Esposito and Perez, 2014; Cosgrove and Karter, 2018) and among men in particular (Rice et al., 2015). These figures are despite the increased synthesis and prescription of psychotropic drugs and together point to a failure of pathological medicalization and the structural violence of neoliberal policies that are impacting on peoples mental health (Cohen, 2017). Short of wholesale societal restructuring, this situation is difficult to reverse, but in alternative approaches, to (mental) health development and maintenance, we might find a way forward.

Studies have shown how ‘alternative’ sports can be an effective means of servicing one’s mental health. Clough et al. (2016) lauded the enhanced wellbeing outcomes associated with ‘adventurous’ or ‘extreme’ sport challenges, as they facilitate mental toughness and resilience that challenge mainstream assumptions about health and exercise. That is the focus of ‘developed’ societies on facilitating safe and undemanding activity choices. Clough et al. (2016, p. 976) conclude by stating

Adventurous physical activity is neither pathological nor inappropriate, but rather a reflection of the diversity that is inherent in humanity. Including opportunities for adventurous physical activity in mainstream well-being and health discourses and interventions will expand the range of possible health benefits available to larger segments of society.

Such ideas fit well with the salutogenic model, as an alternative to pathogenic and neoliberal perspectives on health, while at the same time posing an alternative narrative to that of the thrill-seeking, risk-taking ‘edgework’ associated with extreme or perceived

transgressive sports (Laurendeau, 2008). Though there are elements of escapism and enjoyment of risk associated with the contest in jiu-jitsu, this study has reflected a different narrative. Personal development, mindfulness outcomes and the ability to cope with, not necessarily to escape from, the outside world, is what drives BJJ participation in this context and, potentially, growing numbers across the Western world.

These themes are relational – to each other and life outside the gym. Together furnishing this group of men with the skills to survive and thrive in their own ‘river of life’. The findings show how commitment to jiu-jitsu adds to ones ‘sense of coherence’ (what makes the world comprehensible, manageable and meaningful) but it does by no means complete it. Take the issue of racism, widely declared as a public health issue (Devakumar et al., 2020), though the gym is an inclusive space it remains predominantly white and ideas, values and belief around race are rarely discussed or challenged. Other issues (i.e. politics and sexuality) are also shied away from, perhaps in an effort to preserve this complex community characterized as it is by diversity in age and class. Yet this is a reminder that, particularly in terms of cognitive transformation, sport is not an end in itself (see also Jump 2017).

What is significant here is not only the mental health benefits reported by jiu-jitsu participants, but that so many, (author included) have become dependent on the sport for this reason. There is a paradox here, research shows how the enactment of masculinity is said to be a barrier to ‘mental health literacy’ and help-seeking for sufferers (Swami, 2012). Yet what we are seeing is that in learning to fight through jiu-jitsu, participants are also fighting off threats to their mental wellbeing. Masculinity is undoubtedly enacted, but this is an evolved masculinity, in conjunction with a positive psychology of development and mindfulness, that fosters wellbeing and resilience among men of diverse age and creed (see Seidler et al., 2016). From the outside, the men I shared the mats with might be engaging in

activities that conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity. Yet the nuances of jiu-jitsu along with the vulnerability displayed in participants' narratives show an awareness of the structural stress they are under and a conscious effort to defend against them. This has been reported in combat sports elsewhere (Jump 2020). But, with the above in mind, it is not perhaps the dearth of help-seeking behavior among men, rather the 'help' on offer which may need to be addressed in line with these findings.

7. Conclusion

From the outside MMA and MMA gyms can appear as a playground for innate violence. Yet a deeper understanding, presented here, reveals that within the gym's confines practitioners are undergoing therapeutic/developmental/mindful play that better enables them for life outside its walls. Through jiu-jitsu specifically, participants gain access to valuable resources for physical and, perhaps more importantly, mental resilience. The salutogenic health model has proved effective in explaining why and how this works - by placing themselves and others under physical and mental stress, regularly, jiu-jitsu practitioners inadvertently access a litany of resources to aid mental health development. Delving deep into the psyche of participants and experiencing their lived realities, and embodied routines, revealed how a number of (predominantly white) men are taking such health development into their own hands, consciously or otherwise. It seems that the onus is placed on men to build and maintain a litany of resources to survive in their own river of life and this can be viewed as a damning commentary on the society that surrounds them. This research also suggests that the number of men dealing with poor mental health may even be under-reported. This is despite alarming figures emergent every year across 'Western' societies (Rice, Purcell & McGorry, 2018).

Addressing this issue is difficult as not all men are the same, but neither are they all different in terms of the need for holistic health development. Sharing, sensing and being

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within this embodied community has furnished me/us with a better understanding of what experiencing meaning through movement does for members of this gym, but in doing so provides a window into the nuance of male mental health need and redress. The question remains as to whether the physical risk and injury experienced within jiu-jitsu and MMA more broadly, are worth it for the mental relief experienced. And, if so, then what kind of society makes such a choice worthwhile? The answers to such questions, ones which perhaps broaden the sample to include women and/or minority groups, should form the basis of ongoing research.

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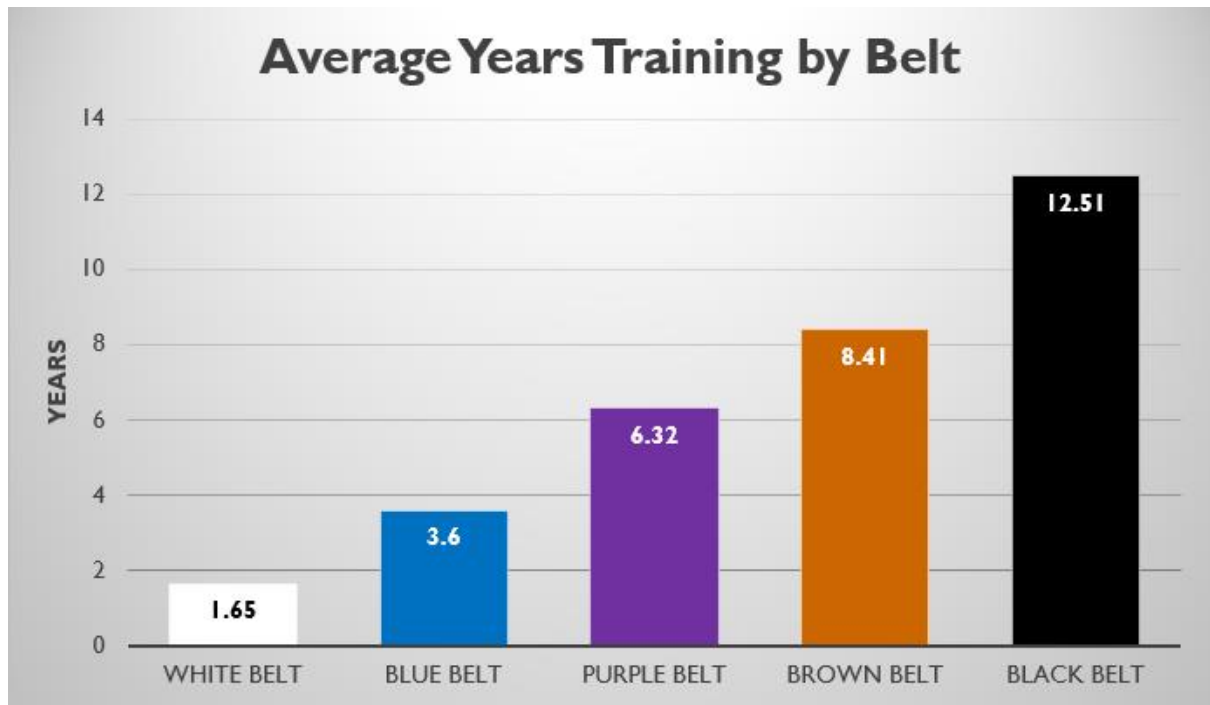
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Appendix 1



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