

Communicating consent in sport: A typological model of athletes' consent practices within combat sports

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Abstract

This paper provides a systematic attempt to empirically describe the ways in which athletes' consent to take part in sport is socially constructed, communicated and understood by others. Due to a notable lack of prior research on this topic, we draw on insights from sex research to theorise consent as a communicative social practice, specifically applying this notion to interpreting the world of competitive combat sports. To do so, we combine data from across numerous studies using the method of concatenated exploration, producing a post hoc, longitudinal, cross-contextual qualitative analysis of the ways in which consent is practiced in such settings. We then outline a four-point typology of how consent is performed, including the following categories: overt communication; subtle communication; assumed consent and deferred consent. We conclude by arguing that the apparent predominance of subtle, assumed and deferred consent presents some worrying implications for athletes' freedom, potentially undermining the morally transformative potential of consent within these ostensibly 'violent', often injurious sports contexts.

Keywords

consent, combat sports, martial arts, violence, injury, risk

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Introduction: A sociology of consent

Consent is a vital moral principle underpinning much of the everyday regulation and negotiation of social life. It forms the basis upon which individual people interact with each other in mutually agreeable ways, helping to constitute productive social relationships in myriad contexts. Whereas sociological attention to consent tends to focus most sharply on moments where consent breaks down or is absent – that is, in moments where things happen to people that they do not consent to (Weinberg, 2016) – the mundane performance of consent, as an everyday, taken-for-granted process, is just as important to study. Doing so enables researchers to shine analytical light on the ways in which people morally authorise others to act towards or upon them in particular ways. While certain sub-disciplinary fields of sociology have long-established traditions of theoretical and empirical scholarship on such processes – e.g. medical sociology; gender studies; sex research – the practical, everyday working-out of consent has received scant attention from sociologists of sport.

This is surprising given the centrality of consent to the legal status of (in particular) contact sports in many countries, including the UK (The Law Commission, 1995). In the field of medicine, for instance, procedures for obtaining and demonstrating patients' consent are of paramount importance to the legality of medical practice and are a central tenet of its practitioners' standards of professional conduct. Accordingly, there is a robust body of literature critically reflecting on such processes that helps to inform policy and practice in this field (e.g. Harper, 2014). Although consent plays a similarly vital role in the legal status of sports competition (Young, 1993), effectively insulating competitors from being arrested for assaulting their opponents on the field of play, sociologists of sport have all but ignored the practical ways in which sport participants develop and communicate consent to each other (or, indeed, fail to do so).

Such a blind-spot in the research literature is particularly strange given the breadth and depth of scholarly attention to moments where consent visibly breaks down, or is otherwise problematised, in sport. This includes athlete violence (e.g. Young, 2019); manipulation of athletes to play through injury (e.g. Nixon, 1992); breaches of medical consent, including around confidentiality (e.g. Malcolm and Scott, 2014); the question of athletes' exploitation by sports authorities and owners (e.g. Murphy and Waddington, 2007; Young, 1993); the sexual abuse of athletes (e.g. Johansson, 2018); state-sponsored doping practices (e.g. Dimeo et al., 2011) and so on. The everyday social production and communication of consent therefore appears to be something of an absent presence in sociologists' understanding of sport; there is plenty of evidence of various problems that arise when consent is violated in sport, but little exploration of how it is constructed to begin with.

In the light of this lack of research, we mean to take some initial steps in this paper towards outlining what Weinberg (2016) – in her comparative study of mixed martial arts (MMA) and sexual sadism and masochism (BDSM) in the USA – refers to as a 'sociology of consent.' To do so, we focus on the specific context of competitive combat sports.

Combat sports, morality and risk

Of all sporting contexts to use as a case study for exploring consent, those which involve full-contact fighting – e.g. boxing, kickboxing and MMA – offer acute examples of two particularly urgent problems that studying consent can help us to understand. First is the question of violence, and the role of consent in mediating the legal as well as moral implications of people purposefully hitting each other. As we have previously argued, the action constitutive of combat sports is not typically understood by its practitioners as ‘real’ violence *per se* (Channon, 2020; Matthews and Channon, 2017; see also O’Shea, 2019). This position largely depends upon the use of a definition of violence that incorporates notions of violence-as-force as well as violence-as-violation (Channon and Matthews, 2018; Matthews and Channon, 2017). Put simply, this involves viewing ‘violence’ as occurring when force is enacted by one person upon another in violation of the other’s will. Such a definition rejects the idea of violence as a series of static objects (i.e. a punch is always a violent act) in favour of an understanding of violence as an intersubjective characteristic of interaction (i.e. my sparring partner’s punch is not understood by either of us as violence when thrown during a round in the ring, although it would be when thrown during an argument outside). Clearly, consent plays an important role here as it constitutes the mechanism for determining what does and doesn’t count as a context-specific, subjectively interpreted ‘violation’ (Channon and Matthews, 2018; Matthews and Channon, 2017; O’Shea, 2019).

Secondly, full-contact combat sports are activities replete with numerous, highly consequential physical risks. These most notably include brain injuries from long-term exposure to repeated head trauma (Bernick et al., 2020), and musculoskeletal injuries resulting from strikes, throws or joint manipulations (Jensen et al., 2017). While all sports involve some degree of physical risk, combat sports typically emphasise performing actions which result in damage to one’s opponent; indeed, this is often the central goal of the activity. It is this format of sports such as boxing and MMA that sees them coming under fire as ‘intrinsically immoral’ (Dixon, 2015) and in need of greater ethical justification than other sports.¹ The near inevitability of injury in competition and training raises the moral as well as legal stakes involved with ensuring that participation is always a voluntarily consensual act.

Seen in this light, consent takes on great significance for the social practice of these (and other) sports (Weinberg, 2016; Young, 1993). Thus, charting how consent is constructed, communicated, understood and acted upon clarifies the social mechanisms via which sports’ moral and legal legitimisation is founded. Before moving on to discuss such phenomena in detail though, it is necessary to sketch out our conceptual understanding of what consent actually involves. While space precludes a more comprehensive discussion, below we outline an understanding of consent as a *communicative social practice*, drawing largely on insights derived from the field of sex research.

Consent as a communicative social practice

While conceptual definitions of consent vary in their exact formulation, common to most theoretical accounts is the recognition that consent is a specifically intentional,

interpersonal construct; that is, it involves an individual's decision to do or permit some particular thing (Hurd, 1996), within a context where the decision about that thing can be understood and acted upon by others. Yet, due to its ubiquity in constituting everyday social relationships, consent often plays out beneath the level of conscious thought and deliberate action. As Weinberg writes, 'consent in everyday life tends to operate implicitly or as an institutionalised and ritualised process where consenting individuals have little input or knowledge about what they are consenting to' (2016: 101).

When consent is experienced as assumed and implicit in nature, articulating what the concept means can become challenging; as Beres writes, consent can be 'both obvious and hard to figure out' (2007: 106). As a consequence, an important finding across the literature on sexual consent has been that consent is most regularly communicated between people in an unspoken, implicit and indirect manner (Archard, 1998; Beres, 2007; Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999). Indeed, despite recent attempts to shift towards normalising explicit, verbally communicative models of sexual consent, the embodied understanding and often-implicit nature of sexual consent remains as a firmly entrenched norm (Weinberg, 2016).

In this context, Pineau provides a simple example of how verbal communication is not necessarily required for someone to indicate sexual consent:

If you undo one of my buttons, and I help you with the rest, you may presume that I am happy to get undressed. If you undo my button, and I try to do it back up again or clutch at the gap created, then you should presume the opposite. (1996: 97)

When foregrounding the implicit, communicative nature of consent, the relationship between the psychological experience of giving consent and the behavioural communication of such feelings is important to note. Here, Hickman and Muehlenhard define sexual consent as 'free verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness', recognising the connection between a person's invisible/internal intentions and their visible/external expression (1999: 239). Importantly, attending to both feeling and communication highlights the potential for misalignments between the things people think and express in relation to consent, as well as the possibility that others may misread subtle or implicit hints about the giving or withholding of consent. To revisit Pineau's (1996) example, the possible meaning of neither facilitating nor resisting the undoing of one's buttons clearly leaves space for misunderstanding between partners: does inaction communicate a desire for the undressing to continue, or to stop?

In addressing the possible disjuncture between communication and intention, Malm suggests that consent often involves 'signification of a particular mental state through the performance of a conventionally recognized act' (1996: 147–148). By highlighting the importance of normative understandings of signifiers of consent, Malm (1996) centres on its socially constructed nature. That is, particular idiomatic or esoteric ways of asking for, indicating, recognising or withdrawing consent are learned within the specific social contexts for which they hold relevance. The individual relationships within which consent is produced also shape this process; for example, Humphreys (2007) argues that consent is more likely to be communicated verbally in new relationships or during casual sex than it is in more long-term partnerships. When taking all these

points together, we can consider the communication of consent as containing psychological, behavioural, interactional, normative and sociological components – all of which belie any simple construction of the communication of consent as a straightforward matter of one person just saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to another.

One crucial foundation upon which the preceding understanding of consent is built is the concept of freedom. Here, Beres and MacDonald argue that ‘for sexual consent to take place it must be within a context where the people involved are considered free from coercion, force or undue influence’ (2015: 420). The authors continue by noting that ‘the trouble with the notion of freedom comes when we consider the social contexts within which individuals engage in sex’ (2015: 420). This problematises a further simplistic reading of consent as simply a question of choosing to do something rather than being forced into it. Pateman (1980), for example, considers how habitual acquiescence and assent can characterise relationships shaped by unequal power relations. That is, unequal constructions of roles within sexual relationships can lead to the normalisation of non-consensual sex within them (Fantasia, 2011).

Notions of freedom, conceptualised without reference to such social strictures, are often contrived to provide what Hurd refers to as the ‘moral magic’ of consent, whereby it can ‘make an action right when it would otherwise be wrong’ (1996: 123). This is particularly instructive when considering the moral impropriety or illegality of apparently ‘violent’ (sexual) behaviours. For instance, in BDSM practices, consent often comprises a carefully negotiated setting out of permissible activities and the use of pre-arranged safe words or signals that clearly mark boundaries for participants (Beres and MacDonald, 2015; Cross and Matheson, 2006). Such affirmative and explicit communication effectively becomes an extra-legal apparatus, intended to stand in for the moral authority of the law whilst practitioners engage in activities that otherwise transgress it. This effectively shields BDSM partners from becoming subject to litigation by each other, enabling the practice to proceed as its participants desire (Weinberg, 2016).

Yet, despite these pre-considered practices, which are taught within BDSM communities (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2011) and are carefully regulated by their members (Weinberg, 2016), Beres and Macdonald highlight the limits of explicit, pre-negotiated consent:

This does not always work, either because people have a desire to experience the unknown, or because it is not possible to predict at the outset all eventualities that may require negotiation. To account for the limits of explicit consent, practitioners of BDSM ... must also pay attention to *flow* and read the body language of their partners to ensure their safety and comfort. (2015: 429)

Indeed, deliberately pushing up against or violating pre-determined boundaries may itself constitute the very object of some BDSM encounters (Newmahr, 2011; Weinberg, 2016). That explicit practices of consent may be either foregone or purposefully transgressed without nullifying its implied presence – and the morally transformative work it does *vis-à-vis* otherwise violent and illegal acts – illustrates that constructing and understanding consent may involve a high degree of interactional skill, shared among members of communities wherein specific understandings of consent are reflexively negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

In sum then, the foregoing work illustrates that consent is a complex social process that involves intricate, often embodied forms of communication. Giving consent requires that individuals be considered free from coercion or control, although the reality of such freedom may be complicated by uneven power relations or social inequalities. Provided that such conditions are met though, consent is strongly implicated in the moral legitimacy of otherwise taboo or illegal activities. This means that people who practice such things must carefully attend to the process of working out consent in practice – be that via explicit, formalised mechanisms or through careful negotiation in situ. In what follows, we extend these observations into the context of combat sports. Specifically, our research addresses the following questions: how do combat sport athletes give consent to take part in the high-risk, apparently ‘violent’ actions of such sports? What behavioural, interactional and cultural phenomena characterise this process?

Method: Concatenated exploration

To answer these questions, we draw on data from various episodes of fieldwork during long-term and continuing research on, and participation in,² combat sports over the past 16 years. Although we did not initially set out on all of the various studies involved with this particular idea in mind, we developed a systematic post hoc method of analysis which Stebbins describes as *concatenated exploration*, in which ‘open-ended studies are all linked together, as it were, in a chain leading to cumulative, often formal, grounded theory’ (2006: 464). Seizing on the serendipitous nature of qualitative ethnographic research (see Waddington, 2014), this method involves the reorganisation of data drawn from multiple, otherwise discreet investigations around unanticipated, recurring patterns. Among other things, it allows researchers to communicate unplanned research outcomes that become apparent over time, thus constituting a form of longitudinal research (Stebbins, 2006).

Each of the projects which we drew data from when constructing this paper were undertaken following rigorous ethical, methodological and analytical procedures. Space here precludes giving full details of the methodological designs adopted in each, but such are available for readers to check within prior publications. These include the following: AC’s research on sex integration in martial arts (Channon, 2014); CRM’s research on masculinity and boxing (Matthews, 2014, 2016, 2019); CRM’s study (with Mark Jordan) on drug use in boxing (Matthews and Jordan, 2020); AC and CRM’s study (with Mathew Hillier) on medical care in combat sports (Channon et al., 2020, 2021); AC’s study of MMA referees (Channon, forthcoming); CRM’s study (with Reem AlHashmi) of injury management in combat sports (AlHashmi and Matthews, 2021); AC’s ethnographic participant observation in various martial arts (Channon, 2013, 2020); CRM’s ethnographic participant observation in boxing (Matthews, 2021a, 2021b).

Each principally involved gathering data via a combination of interviewing and participant/non-participant observation. All were approved by institutional ethics review panels; in line with these various approvals, all data presented throughout were gathered following participants’ informed consent to take part, and are anonymised below via the use of pseudonyms. These studies have variously involved us working together,

independently, and with others (in line with Stebbins' (2006) appraisal of the value of teamwork in developing concatenated analysis) to explore the lives of people involved in various combat sports.

Primarily, our data are derived from work on the competitive sports of boxing, Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), kickboxing and MMA. Despite the stylistic, cultural, pedagogical and other differences that exist between (and even within) these different practices, we found that the issue of consent posed similar challenges, met through a similar range of practices across each of them. As illustrated below, the main point of differentiation throughout the combined sample was not to do with the style or discipline of combat sport, but the differences between training and competition settings.

All of our data have been derived from research sites in England. Alongside revisiting field notes from across each of the projects noted, we specifically re-analysed interview data from 55 people (39 men and 16 women, all of whom were over the age of 18), drawn from a wider body of the hundreds of participants involved across eight data sets. Collating these data involved selecting the most pertinent interview and field note transcripts based on keyword searches through our entire set of documents, before then re-coding these in accordance with the use of the concepts outlined in earlier sections of the paper. Eventually, we constructed a set of typological analytic categories to help answer the research question posed above, illustrating the variety of ways in which consent is routinely performed – or not – within combat sports.

Findings and discussion: A typology of consent in combat sports

In line with the points raised at the outset, when asked about consent, participants across our data sets typically asserted that this principle served as a key point of differentiation between legitimate sport, and illegitimate violence. This is exemplified neatly by Charles, a competitive kickboxer and junior doctor:

To me, if you had two people in the street, punching each other in the head, trying to render each other unconscious, choking each other, that's a crime. Because neither of them have agreed to that. But if you get into a ring and do it you've both agreed that's acceptable. And that's the basis for all, sort of medical ethics isn't it? The first thing is autonomy, and if you agree to get punched in the head, to me that makes it ok. (Charles, kickboxer)

For Charles and many other athletes, consent thus plays a vital role in shoring up the moral and legal legitimacy of their practice of combat sports.³ While not all of our participants articulated it quite so neatly as this, it is abundantly clear to us that consent *mattered* to them in these ways. In what follows below then, we outline how consent is performed and read by such athletes, by way of a four-part typological model. Each category within this model is organised around the balance between the clarity of communication involved and the apparent degree of freedom with which they enable participants to act. Throughout each section, we evidence each with illustrative descriptions of different social practices.

Overtly communicating consent: Written affirmations and verbal negotiations

One means by which participants could communicate consent to participate in combat sports was using written forms that explicitly affirmed their willingness to take part. Although we did not encounter this in the context of consent to take part in training, we have occasionally witnessed competition organisers requesting participants to sign documents indicating their willingness to participate, often taking the form of pseudo-legal papers intended to indemnify the organiser from liability for injuries.

In Weinberg's (2016) study of MMA in the United States, such formal contracts signed by competitors were a norm, typically required by state regulators sanctioning bouts. Yet in the UK, where combat sports competitions are not regulated in the same way – and many are not regulated at all (see Channon et al., 2020) – this was something of a rarity in the field. Indeed, we only directly witnessed this kind of form-signing at two separate events out of more than 60 we have attended, while few interviewees had experience of them. This indicates that contemporarily, as well as historically, there is very little formal recording of participants' consent in these contexts. As one interviewee told us:

Not once in all my thirty-one years of experience, being a world champion multiple times in kickboxing, sport jiu jitsu, Thai boxing ... doing international karate tournaments, international MMA bouts, all that, plus more besides just for fun. Not once have I ever signed a waiver, consent form, anything. (Tyler, kickboxing coach)

While formally recorded consent is therefore not a norm within the field, verbal expressions were more common. In fact, at the very start of a fight in most combat sports, the referee will ask both fighters if they are ready. This practice is arguably more symbolic and performative than genuinely communicative, particularly when the referee's question is delivered with showmanship in front of an audience ('Fighter: Are. You. READY?!'). Yet, we have also noticed that some referees ask fighters to confirm their willingness to participate via more discreet conversation:

After each fighter enters the cage, the referee, Ali, directs them where to stand with a hand signal. He then walks over to them once they are in place, and leans in close, whispering to them beneath the din of the arena, out of earshot from everyone else. I ask Ali what he's saying and why he does this, and he tells me, "We are basically reminding them we are there for them because they might be uncomfortable saying anything when their corner⁴ are around them, but we want them to know that in the cage they can tell us if they are not feeling right, it's our space and we're there if they need us." (MMA competition, July 2018)

Away from the bright lights and performative pressures of competition, negotiations around consent are more commonplace in gyms where participants engage in sparring. As indicated in the following note, partners may engage in brief discussions wherein they negotiate levels of intensity, often at the direction of coaches, or as part of helping to manage injuries, before they start sparring:

"All right" coach says, "Let's do some rounds then. Five minutes, go easy, talk to each other, you all know the drill!" We jog excitedly back onto the mats; some of the lads put in gumshields

and others adjust their belts, while I bounce up and down waiting for my partner, Jason, to join me. He jogs over and we find a spot in the corner. “All good mate?” he asks. “Ow’s yer neck?” I give a slight grimace, patting at my injury; “still playin’ up. Think I need to go easy for a while, that alright?” He nods, “yeah yeah, same wi’ me, let’s just do some flow rounds, yeah?”⁵ (BJJ training, September 2019)

As we return to below, the role of coaches is significant here as leaders or mediators of the explicit communication of consent between training partners. Elsewhere, we often witnessed coaches asking if someone would like to take part in sparring for the first time, while others would deliberately leave it to the participants to approach them and ask:

I always leave it to people to come and speak to me about it, it’s always got to be them that takes that step, I’m not pushing anyone into it and ‘cus of, like, the position I hold here I’m always careful, ‘cus I don’t want some young lad who’s not ready feeling like he’s got to do it ‘cus I mentioned it to him. (Dan, boxing coach)

This position demonstrates a coach’s desire for their trainees to provide explicit, affirmative consent before engaging in sparring. Clearly, Dan – as well as Ali, above – recognises the mediating influence of others’ expectations on participants’ ability to give such consent. In each case, these authority figures take certain steps to correct for this, thereby attempting to facilitate freedom in the exercise of consent; a phenomenon we return to below.

However, within our broad exposure to the field, none of these steps are uniformly taken nor enshrined within universally accepted codes of practice. That is, few referees we have observed made a point of explicitly affirming the (sincere) communication of consent prior to the commencement of a bout. Coaches who require affirmative indications of participants’ willingness to spar usually reserve this for the first few times someone takes part, while not all coaches do this at all. Providing formal written consent at competitions depends upon event organisers’ choice to implement this mechanism, while communication between training partners may often require a reminder to do so from the coach. As such, we can see that each of the practices discussed here seems to depend upon situational factors such as the involvement of third parties, or exceptional circumstances like injury or first-time exposure, rather than being a habitual, continuous and normalised part of the sport.

Subtly communicating consent: Gestures, rituals and implicit communication

While the explicit written or verbal communication of consent is something of a rarity then, participants commonly draw on a variety of ritualised gestures to signify willingness and readiness to take part in the action constitutive of combat sports. In training, this varies from sport to sport and gym to gym, but usually occurs at the start of a round of sparring and involves such things as a touch of gloves, a bow, a slap of the hands and/or a bump of fists. Clearly forms of the ‘conventionally recognised acts’ noted above (Malm, 1996), these gestures are usually accompanied by eye contact and a nod of the head, helping denote an acknowledgement of the norms that constitute

sparring, and an agreement to act according to such etiquette that these gestures call forth. Likewise, gestures such as a ‘tap-out’ or ‘taking a knee’ indicate a desire to call sparring to a (temporary) halt, signifying the withdrawal of consent previously given.

Throughout much of our own engagement in sparring, these symbolic acts serve to identify clear start and endpoints for the practice. They work as indicators between partners that they have stepped across a threshold into or out of realms where otherwise unacceptable levels of physically intense interaction are expected, even welcomed (O’Shea, 2019). In the words of one of our training partners,

When we do it [slap palms and bump fists], we know it’s go-time. Whatever happens next, you gotta be ready to defend yourself, so you only do it when you’re ready to start rolling ... [Then] you keep going until the buzzer goes, or one of you taps. (Steve, BJJ player)

The glove-touch at the start of boxing, kickboxing and MMA matches replicates this kind of behaviour within competitive encounters. Importantly though, this act may in many cases be similarly performative and ritualised as the ‘referee’s question’ noted earlier. Indeed, it doesn’t always happen, and it needn’t happen for a fight to legitimately commence. Thus, while touching gloves might serve as a fairly literal symbolic indicator of willingness and intention – *here are our fists, we are about to put them on each other* – this is not a necessary signal of consent to fight. For competitive fighters, there are more meaningful indications of consent, which we return to later.

Interestingly, fighters visibly refusing to touch gloves when one suggests they should, or when a referee asks them to, can sometimes be read as a deliberate (but again, most often performative) sign of disrespect. In this regard, the gesture is arguably more meaningful when it is foregone, rather than performed. Tapping-out in grappling or MMA competitions, meanwhile, is rarely reduced to such symbolism; fighters who ignore another’s submission – or withdrawal of consent – are heavily censured, facing social stigma as well as formal punishment. Yet, as we return to below, athletes’ decisions to withdraw consent, via these gestures or otherwise, can often become complicated by the subcultural expectations of competitive combat sports.

In training contexts, where glove-touches and similar gestures appear to be more important as signifiers of consent, their exact use is often shaped by informal norms and personalised interpretations of the process. For instance, some of our participants knew their long-term sparring partners so well that they shifted these rituals as part of the playful banter constitutive of their specific relationships:

CRM: You touch gloves like everyone else when you’re sparring, but I noticed with Lee you sometimes whack his hand away, doesn’t that...

Nick: I know what you’re gonna say, doesn’t that go against “the rules”, but we’ve been sparring so long we don’t need all that stuff, so I sometimes fuck it off to wind him up ... We push each other hard but it’s always safe, the stuff we do in the ring is proof we’re looking after each other, we don’t need a daft touch of the gloves at the start. (Nick, boxer)

Reminiscent of the general drift away from explicit consent in long-term sexual relationships (Humphreys, 2007), gestures of consent seem to become less common – or at least, less uniform or formal – between long-term training partners. Here personalised, playful reinterpretations of familiar gestures, or the act of ignoring them altogether, becomes its own way to communicate consent, rendered meaningful and recognisable as such within the parameters of specific relationships.

However, even within pairings where there is no intimate or long-term familiarity, a similarly intuitive form of communication sometimes takes place. Sparring sessions often ebb and flow, and in our experience, it is uncommon for one person to completely dominate the other for the entirety of a round, even when there is a marked gap in ability. Instead, fighters usually find a level of intensity that they are both comfortable with and work around that zone (Mallette, 2021; Matthews, 2021a). Having spent hundreds of hours engaging in and observing sparring, one is able to identify tiny movements, noises and gestures which fighters use to demonstrate a willingness to increase or reduce intensity. The following interview excerpt illustrates this well:

The better you get and the better you know who you're sparring, the better you get at knowing if they're alright or not. If you can pick up on the signs your partner is giving you then you can take things up or down a gear ... There's the obvious one like someone smiling after taking a shot and coming back at you hard, but also, like if I land and there's not that smile that might not mean anything, but it could mean it hurt, and ya have to look out to see if you've proper hurt them or not, like are they buzzed, do they back off? Also though, there's one I can't explain, like you get a feel for if someone's not happy in there, if they need you to lay off them or even carry them a bit. (Carl, boxer)

Noting the need to 'look after' their sparring partners in this way was a common finding in our interviews with experienced practitioners of various combat sports. Tellingly, this phenomenon was often framed around the potential for (particularly inexperienced) sparring partners to be hesitant to show weakness by outright asking to stop or reduce the intensity of an exchange. In this way, sparrers protected each other by guessing at their partner's internal feelings via interpretations of their body language, breathing tempo, and other signs, in the absence of any explicit and deliberate communication.

In sum, while the communication of consent via conventionally recognised gestures is a common practice in combat sports, such gestures may become hollowed-out in the ritual performances of competition, while they are not the only subtle form of communication that needs attending to within training. Instead, significant attention to changes in comportment and disposition is sometimes required, illustrating skills in interpersonal awareness reminiscent of the sensitivity towards in situ changes in the parameters of BDSM encounters noted earlier (Beres and MacDonald, 2015). Importantly, this reliance on reading and interpreting others' body language indicates a significant paradigm shift in the communication between athletes, away from clear, apparently unambiguous expressions of intent or willingness between two people, towards privileging the interpretation of potentially ambiguous signals by just one party. As such, the tendency to favour subtle expressions of consent in combat sports could involve a drift towards the outright *assumption* of consent, rather than its communication *per se*.

Assuming consent: Inferences and normative expectations

The assumption of consent figures as the most consistent finding from all our attempts to directly question practitioners, coaches and other players in this field about the nature of how consent is performed. Whenever we broached this question directly, the typical response was that overt and explicit communication of consent was not necessary in a context where a person's physical presence spoke for itself: 'if they come through them doors, they must wanna be here; it's not easy walkin' through them doors, y'know' (Mike, boxing coach). After initial exposure to training, continued attendance was taken to demonstrate a motivation to keep engaging in what passes for the normal behaviours within these sports. Largely, the coaches and more experienced participants who we asked about this told us in a matter-of-fact way that withdrawing consent was as simple as 'they just stop turning up' (Jenson, boxing coach).

The assumption of participants' volition underscores this reasoning at all times. That is to say that their presence was read as voluntary and as such, the consent it inferred was assumed to be freely given: 'one day *they're into it*, the next they're not' (Gary, boxing coach); 'we lose them and we get them back, sometimes *they choose* to come, sometimes they don't' (Mark, boxer). This extended to competition settings as well: the very act of 'stepping in' to the ring or cage was understood by everyone we questioned about consent to constitute the clearest and most visible indicator possible:

It really isn't that important to me to like, hear it. I know [my opponent] must be ok with this, otherwise she wouldn't step in. It's not like they can't withdraw, people withdraw all the time. And it's not like they're gonna be surprised in there, we all know the rules, it's not the dark ages anymore, there are the unified rules, proper coaching, proper reffing ... So yeah I know that she must be ok with it and it's not like I need to hear her say so to sleep at night if I knock her out! (Justine, MMA fighter)

Here, our observations bear close similarity to Young's (1993) discussion of typical legal responses to workplace injuries that occur within professional contact sports, but also to the findings of Weinberg's (2016) study of competitive MMA fighters. Specifically, the institutional parameters of sport – its rules, designated spaces, time limits and so on – are taken to provide a clear referential framework for understanding the limits of what others had consented to. With particular reference to MMA, such institutionalisation carries great significance for its public recognition as a legitimate sport (see Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010), but also provides athletes with the reassurance that they are not engaging in immoral acts. Importantly, the legal and moral reassurance provided by the existence of combat sports as publicly recognised institutions means that competitive fighters are less likely to engage directly in outright communication with each other over what it is that they do and do not consent to (Weinberg, 2016). There is something of an irony here, inasmuch as the formalisation of consent within the rules and norms of a sport undermines athletes' perceived need to purposefully engage with consent as a process of clear and explicit interpersonal communication.

This observation has important implications for athletes who want to withdraw consent but feel unable to do so. Indeed, the apparent freedom with which athletes

'opt in' to sport does not always shape their ongoing participation within it (see Young, 1993). During one period of fieldwork spent shadowing medical staff at competitive events, we noted several moments wherein fighters' willingness to participate appeared to waver, particularly evident backstage prior to their bouts. Most of the medics we spoke to in this study told us that this was not uncommon, and something that they saw as a responsibility of theirs to address as professional caregivers. Noting that the cultural norms of competitive sport mean that fighters are unlikely to raise concerns, doubts or fears in front of their coaches or teammates, medics rejected the assumption that all decisions to participate were always free and voluntary. As such, they took it upon themselves to give space for fighters to think twice, and at times might even act as an advocate for athletes who needed their help in withdrawing:

Sometimes a fighter might be fighting for the first time, they've brought their family with them. But they're outclassed, getting hurt, and his pride wants to fight on, so ok, I go up to him in between rounds, and whisper to him, "right, ok, I'm the medic. You don't have to stop the fight but I can. Your pride will not be hurt, your family, your coach, they will not know. You're getting a beating, you're outclassed, ok? If you don't want to fight, I will stop it. And this is between me and you. Just tap me on the shoulder now, and I will say medically, you cannot fight. Me, not you. So your family think, it's the injury. What do you wanna do?" He taps me on the shoulder. "Right, referee! Medically, he can't fight." (Ravi, paramedic)

Similar to referee Ali's decision to speak to a fighter out of earshot of their team, Ravi demonstrates a keen awareness that at times, fighters may lack agency to withdraw consent once (implicitly) given. Thus, they may require the intervention of a third party, particularly someone whose primary concern is the athlete's welfare, to restore this freedom to them. Although apparently not a regular occurrence, such incidents highlight the problematic nature of privileging an inference of consent simply through one's physical presence in a particular space.⁶ It also further highlights the role played by third parties in facilitating consent – although as we show below, third party involvement does not always work to empower athletes in this respect.

Deferring consent: Leaving it up to others

When exploring the role of others in mediating participants' consent, coaches play perhaps the most significant role. In training contexts, a coach's authority typically sees them determine what kinds of activities take place; when and where those activities start and finish; who gets to participate in them; and what degree of control individual participants have over how, when and where they happen. Indeed, throughout the many hundreds of hours we have spent training in combat sports, participants have rarely, if ever, questioned a coach's directives. That is, combat sports practitioners generally trust that if their coach thinks something is safe, appropriate and good for them to do, then they should do it. This trust in a coach's authority is reflected well by John, when justifying why he allows his coach Simon to determine when his sparring rounds should end:

[Simon] must have seen millions of rounds, he knows what he's looking for in the fighters, he knows how hard they can be pushed and which ones will get carried away. So you've got to trust that, you can't really be second-guessing the coach when they're watching from the outside and you're in the middle of it, they can see it more from where they're looking. (John, boxer)

At times, we found that once consent was thus deferred to coaches, this could lead to them pushing athletes beyond what might otherwise be accepted levels of intensity or duress (see Young, 1993). However, rather than being seen as problematic regarding its implications for depriving athletes of their autonomy, this was very often framed by coaches (as well as fighters) as a necessary step in an athlete's development:

You've got to push them past what they're comfortable with sometimes, especially if yer gettin' 'em ready for a fight. I don't want a lad in [the ring] who's been lookin' for a way out in sparring, they need to know they might have to fight it out in there. (Jenson, boxing coach)

Here, a tension between freely exercised, volitional consent and the development of habitual acquiescence (Pateman, 1980) begins to surface. Although ostensibly in service of improving an athlete's competitive performance abilities, normalising the deferral of consent to others raises important questions over how much agency they retain within this relationship. Once athletes grow accustomed to deferring to coaches over the terms of their participation, the extent to which coach-athlete power dynamics may serve to override partner-to-partner consent negotiations become salient:

CRM: What happens then if you know your partner doesn't want it, but the coach says keep going?

Barry: Ya keep going don't ya, but I guess ya just look after 'em a bit? The coach won't be doing it to hurt 'em obviously, they'll be trying to test 'em. (Barry, kickboxer)

While coaches play central roles in mediating consent within training, they are also important figures in the context of competitive fights. For instance, coaches may encourage fighters to continue competing even when they express a desire to quit (see Matthews, 2018); conversely, they may 'throw in the towel', effectively submitting on behalf of a losing fighter. Similarly, referees retain a broad remit to enact 'stoppages' when fighters are determined to be incapable of defending themselves.⁷ These practices are generally lauded by combat sports insiders as indicative of the care shown by others towards heroic athletes who are 'too tough for their own good' (Aubrey, MMA fighter). Indeed, few fighters want to remove themselves willingly from competition, and often portray the coach's or referee's intervention as a mechanism that allows them to save face:

Nobody wants to tap to strikes, man! It's an unwritten rule, if you're gettin' swarmed you might cover up, turn away, give up your back, like, "go on then, get the choke on me" or whatever, so *it's up to the ref to stop it*, basically. Even if you want outta there, you don't want the rep that comes from tapping to strikes.⁸ (Damon, MMA fighter)

This represents a clear moment where the deferral of consent poses specific risks. That is, because fighters decide to trust others with the responsibility for deciding when they have had enough, they leave themselves vulnerable to harm through incompetence, carelessness, or poor judgement. The following field note exemplifies this well:

The fight ends with a triangle choke: one fighter has the other's head and arm caught between his legs, which he squeezes shut against the neck and shoulder. The referee is positioned poorly and cannot see what happens next: the losing fighter doesn't tap, and gradually loses consciousness. His corner team can't see it; the medics are up on their feet and screaming at the official – "he's out! He's out!" But the man ignores them, staring instead at the losing fighter's limp free hand, waiting for a tap-out. Now, even the other fighter looks up at the ref, although he has not yet relinquished the hold. He tries to say something through his mouth guard, and finally the referee understands. The video feed of the fight later confirms the losing fighter had been forcibly rendered unconscious for twelve seconds before the referee called "break!" (MMA event, April 2018)

As noted above, relying on the existence of an institutional framework for articulating consent involves athletes taking little part in actively negotiating this consent within competitive encounters (Weinberg, 2016). Fighters trust that the institutional apparatus of the competitive context will safely manage such decisions on their behalf, accepting also that their opponents do likewise. Indeed, fighters are often coached – and even admonished by referees prior to their bouts – to keep on fighting until the referee calls them to stop. Sharply contrasting the norms of sparring, this absolves them of responsibility for their opponents' welfare in such situations, which – in the case of those athletes 'too tough for their own good' – therefore rests squarely at the feet of coaches and referees.

This clearly has worrying implications, both with respect to the stated importance of consent in debates over competitive fighting's moral and legal legitimacy, but also concerning the tangible consequences of allowing others such power, *vis-à-vis* the potential for injury involved in the activity. The act of deferring consent is enshrined within the norms of competitive combat sports to the point that it takes on the appearance of being a requirement for effective training and competition. While athletes may understand and accept this process – effectively, perhaps, consenting to such deferrals and whatever consequences they entail – this nevertheless constitutes a clear loss of autonomy in a context where others cannot always be trusted to act decisively and in one's best interests.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, we have attempted to sketch out an account of how consent is performed by combat sports athletes, as an initial foray into constructing a sociology of consent within sport. In sum, consent is occasionally negotiated explicitly, but more often communicated through subtle, idiomatic gestures imbued with context-specific, even personalised meaning. However, it seems that broadly speaking, understandings of others' consent is very often grounded in inference and assumption rather than any form of overt communication, while its construction in practice may also involve a significant degree of deferral to others.

Returning briefly to the theoretical discussion outlined above, we argue that the implications of the privileging of particularly subtle, assumed, or deferred consent presents some cause for concern, mostly with respect to the vital importance of freedom in imbuing consent with its much-vaunted moral power (Hurd, 1996; Weinberg, 2016). The complicating influence of cultural norms and close involvement of third parties – consistent features across each of the categories outlined above – suggests that what is considered to be the free, volitional, agentic practice of partner-to-partner consent in sport may be facilitated or disrupted in various ways. Thus, our findings lead us to question the degree to which athletes are always empowered to freely give consent to participate in ostensibly ‘violent’, potentially injurious sport on an ongoing and reflexive basis.

Clearly, further research on this topic is required, which we propose take particular note of the following issues. Firstly, the extent to which athletes are cognisant of the dangers of participation and the risks they take by training and competing has important implications for ensuring that their consent – however it is given – is *informed*. For lack of space, we have had to forgo tackling this issue here, although it is likely to play just as important a role in social processes of consent as are the degrees of agency in its construction and explicitness in its communication. Secondly, questions over how children and young adults understand, communicate or defer decisions on consent to others are likely to be particularly instructive. Such analyses are sure to have important legal implications with respect to safeguarding and child welfare, making understanding the social practice of consent by children vitally important to various sports professionals. Thirdly, contemporary research, debate and policy concerning concussion management in a variety of sports may benefit from engaging with the question of how athletes’ consent is constructed in practice. This has relevance to both the questions of athletes’ apparent freedom in participating in concussion-inducing sports to begin with, but also to how athletes respond to being forcibly withdrawn from competition following suspected concussions. How consent is achieved among athletes, coaches and medical support staff in such contexts is likely to impact adherence to protocols and thus athletes’ safety.

Lastly, research that adds to, refines, or otherwise extends our initial typology through more purposeful exploration of this problem, in this and other contexts, is sure to benefit the sociology of sport. Particularly, attempts to quantify the prevalence of different consent practices in sports may add depth to typological differentiation such as ours. Whereas our qualitative methodologies were ill-equipped to do more than suggest appearances of prevalence, identifying clearer patterns here will sharpen up (or perhaps challenge) the critical observations we have raised. Analyses which identify patterns in consent practices by gender, social class, ethnicity and so on may also be instructive in this regard. However this work is received, we hope that it will go some way in inspiring further sociological attention to the question of how athletes construct and communicate consent in sports.

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Notes

1. See Channon (2020) and Veit and Browning (2021) for conceptual counterpoints to this argument.
2. AC has trained in several disciplines including kickboxing, kung fu, karate, and most recently Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), between 2005 and present. CRM has trained in amateur boxing since 2008.
3. Although hypothetical, violent encounters ‘in the street’ are often used as a foil against which to construct the moral legitimacy of combat sports, it is of course possible for street fights to be consensual (see Jackson-Jacobs, 2014).
4. A fighter’s ‘corner’ comprises their coaches and other hangers-on who accompany them to the ring or cage.
5. ‘Flow rounds’ are a form of sparring in BJJ, where participants use minimal strength to execute their techniques.
6. The methodologies we adopted throughout each study did not provide us with opportunities to hear from athletes who had ceased participation in sport following the withdrawal of consent. Accordingly, there may be more to this phenomenon than we are able to highlight here.
7. The exact rules for stoppages vary between sports, but typically involve referees acting to preserve fighters’ safety once a bout tilts heavily in favour of their opponent.
8. In MMA, ‘tapping to strikes’ refers to actively submitting while being punched; as the quote indicates, it is generally taken as a sign of poor moral fortitude.

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