

CAUTION, THIS IS SPARTA!: A GENDERED EXAMINATION OF MIXED MARTIAL
ARTS AND THE SPARTANIZATION PROCESS

by

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B.A., Kansas State University, 2005
M.A., Kansas State University, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

The sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was once referred to as a No Holds Barred (NHB) fighting contest, but is now known as cage, extreme, or ultimate fighting. Showcasing athletes from a variety of martial arts backgrounds, a referee stoppage, knockout, or submission is the only way to win. Pushing their minds and bodies to the limits, fighters often engage in hand-to-hand combat inside of a ring or cage in front of a crowd, for anywhere from three to twenty-five minutes. How does one become an MMA fighter? Through a rigorous and complex process of socialization that will be referred to in this work as the 'spartanization' process. A mixed methodological approach, primarily qualitative in nature, was used to reveal the rigorous and complex nature of this process. This study's data collection began with six site visits taking place over the course of six months. Utilizing a convenience sampling method, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 male and 14 female fighters. The interview schedule addressed fighters' involvement in the spartanization process, their experiences in the gym as well as the cage, and their perceptions as fighters. Male and female participants described the spartanization process and ascribed meaning to it in similar ways. Their motivations for becoming MMA fighters are explained using theories of identity and alienation. Findings demonstrate that the sport of MMA and process of becoming a fighter are both highly gendered. One was neither found to be more nor less gendered than the other, but according to this study's findings women are more likely to feel the effects of gender at the organizational level than they are at the level of training. Not sure what MMA is? Never heard of the UFC before? Do not worry, the histories of both are provided. By reading this work you will also learn more about the athletes participating in this sport, and discover whether or not you have what it takes to be the next 'ultimate fighter.'

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Finally, I would like to thank the gyms and fighters who participated in this study. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to share your perceptions and experiences with me. This study would not have been possible without your willingness to participate in the research process.

Dedication

To Combative Sports Center,
Jiu-Jitsu or Die!

Chapter 1 - We All Have to Start Somewhere

“Wait, go back! What was that?” I said to the person controlling the television remote. I had just caught my first glimpse of a mixed martial arts fighting contest. The television’s picture flickered as the channels shuffled backwards, the stations coming to a halt on Spike TV. On the screen were two men fighting inside of a cage. I sat in awe completely unaware that what I had just witnessed during a brief changing of channels was about to change my life for forever.

I am quickly informed that the scene before me was once known as a no holds barred (NHB) fighting contest, but is now referred to as MMA, cage, extreme or ultimate fighting. The sport showcases athletes from a variety of mixed martial arts backgrounds as they engage in combat for anywhere from three to twenty-five minutes¹, pushing their minds and bodies to the limit (Plyler & Seibert 2009). A referee stoppage, knockout, or submission is the only way to win² I am told, and the latter occurs when ones opponent verbally or physically ‘taps out.’

“I want to do that!” I exclaimed. The irony is I was 26 years old, had never participated in a competitive sport before, and was extremely overweight (read out of shape) when I uttered this statement. But from the moment I saw those two men on television, I knew that I too, wanted to step into the cage someday. Within a couple of months I had drastically altered my diet and joined a gym. I have since lost a total of fifty pounds, earned a blue belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), and fought in one exhibition kickboxing match.

I can honestly say that prior to embarking upon this journey I had no idea what it meant to be an athlete, let alone a fighter. Never having participated in sports before, the process has been an arduous one in which I have attempted not only to become physically fit, but mentally and emotionally fit as well. The methods of socialization have been both rigorous and complex, resembling (I imagine) the highly organized and powerful mode of socialization used by the

¹ Amateur bouts consist of three, 3-minute rounds; professional bouts consist of three, 5-minute rounds; main events and/or title bouts consist of five, 5-minute rounds.

² I would later learn that if a referee stoppage, knockout, or submission does not occur, the winner of the fight will be determined by the judges. This is known as winning by “decision.”

Spartans in ancient Greece. Given this and MMA's striking similarity to Pankration³, I decided to refer to the socialization of an MMA fighter as the 'spartanization' process.

While I recognize that the cultural origins of the sport are actually quite diverse, this conceptualization of the quasi-military type lifestyle MMA fighters live was not solely based on an attempt to be provocative. As I looked back on my participation in this process it occurred to me that several aspects of it were reminiscent not only of Spartan training, but of Spartan society. For example, camaraderie, austerity, and discipline were among Sparta's controlling principles. Spartans also received instruction regarding obedience, bodily fitness, and the courage needed to be victorious in battle, through the state controlled education system or *agoge* (Hooker 1980; 137). Although designed for the current study as a means of making sense of the bodywork, emotion work, and identity work involved in preparing oneself to enter into a "violent" contest in an abnormal sporting arena, the concept of spartanization is likely applicable in a variety of other settings that are not explored here (e.g., other combat sports and military preparations for war).

The longer I participated in the spartanization process the more curious I became about the experiences of others. As a result, the purpose of the current study was to further examine the process of becoming a fighter and others' experiences with it. The research question, *Do individuals experience the spartanization process differently and if so, why?*, was addressed by uncovering answers to the following questions:

- What practices and processes are involved in the spartanization process?
- Who participates in this process and why?
- In order to participate what, if anything, must participants acquire and/or give up?
- Do any structural- or individual-level barriers to participation exist?

Hypotheses were derived for each question based on personal experience. Table 1.1 on the following page provides a summary of these questions and their corresponding hypotheses.

³ "Pankration, the third combative sport of the ancient Olympics in Greece, was the first mixed martial arts [fighting] contest" in history and is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (Gentry 2011:3).

Table 1.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

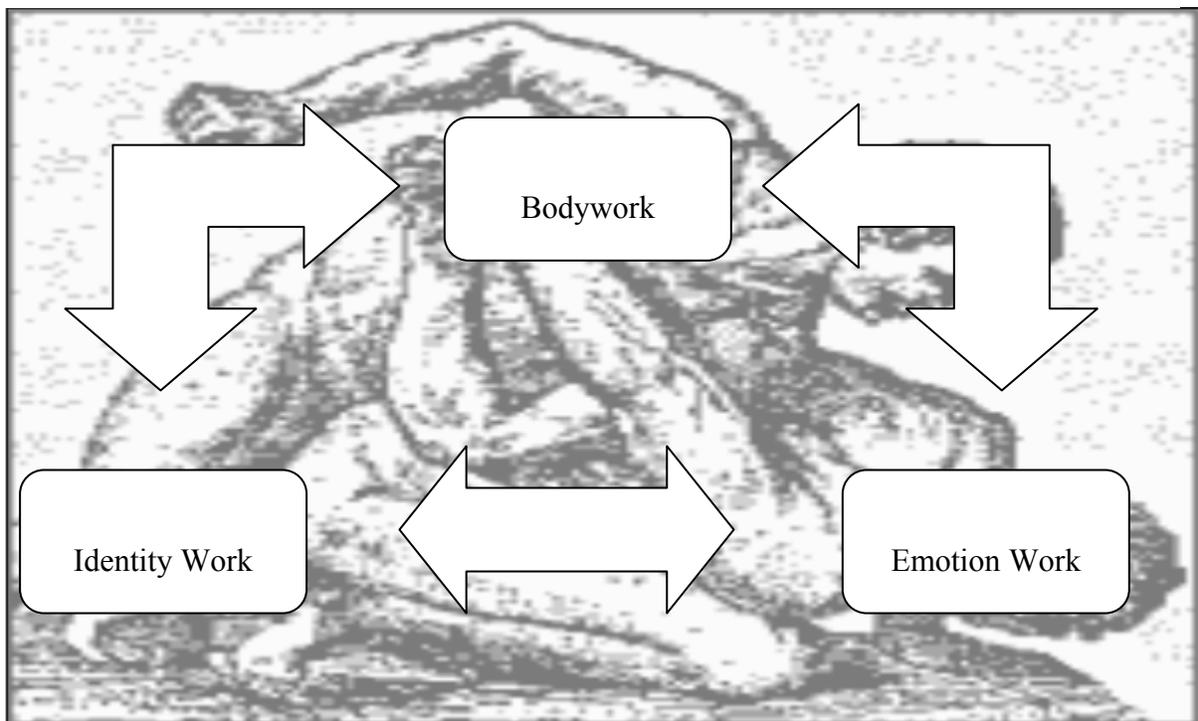
Question	Hypotheses
Do individuals experience the spartanization process differently and if so, why?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is a process involved in becoming a fighter. 2. The process resembles the powerful mode of socialization used by the Spartans in ancient Greece. 3. Individuals experience this process differently.
What practices and processes are involved in the spartanization process?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The spartanization process is made up of three types of work: body work, emotion work, and identity work. 2. All MMA fighters engage in all three components of the spartanization process. 3. The amount of time and energy dedicated to each part of the process differs from one individual to the next.
Who participates and why?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The majority of the participants will primarily be middle or working class white men between the ages of 25 and 35. 2. Motives for participation will vary.
In order to participate what, if anything, must participants acquire and/or give up?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Participants have to acquire the appropriate attire and training gear. 2. Participants also have to acquire certain technical and emotional skills as well as the identity of a fighter. 3. Participants have to surrender things such as time, money, junk food, alcohol, and sex.
Are there any individual- or structural-level barriers to participation?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Differences in experience will be attributed to individual-level barriers such as health, athleticism, and sports participation history. 2. Differences in experience might also be attributed to structural-level barriers such as age, race, class, and gender.

Looking at Table 1.1, you will see that the current study was conducted the under the assumptions that:

- There is a process involved in becoming a fighter.
- The process is similar to that of the socialization process used by the Spartans.
- Individuals participating in the process experience it differently.

I further hypothesized that the process was made up of three interconnected sub-processes or types of work: bodywork, emotion work and identity work. Assuming each sub-process was comprised of its own set of practices, I proposed bodywork to consist of diet and exercise; emotion work of controlling fear, instilling fear in others, overcoming inhibitions, and building self-esteem or confidence; and identity work of identity formation and managing or negotiating one's identities. A visual representation of the spartanization process is provided in Figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1 The Spartanization Process



The study's sub-questions were developed as a means of comparing the fighters' experiences. I first hypothesized that all fighters engage, at least to some extent, in all three components of the spartanization process. It was assumed however that the amount of time and energy placed on each part of the process might differ from one individual to the next. It seemed obvious that other experiential differences might also exist. In particular, the participants would probably have different motives for participation and quite possibly will have had to acquire and/or give up different things in order to become fighters. I further hypothesized that should differences in experience exist, they would more than likely be attributed to individual-level barriers such as health, athleticism, and sport's participation history, or structural-level barriers such as race, class, and gender.

An initial search for other sociological studies conducted on the sport of MMA uncovered a total of four journal articles. A brief summary of this literature is provided in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Initial Literature Search Summary

Author(s)	Year	Focus	Description
Van Bottenburg & Heilbron	2006	Sportization	Provides an historical examination of the sportization of MMA
Downey	2007	Sportization and Bodywork	Illustrates how the sportization of MMA affected fighters' training regimens
Spencer	2009	Bodywork and Identity Formation	Demonstrates that the body work involved in becoming a fighter leads to the development of a fighter habitus
Vaccaro, Schrock & McCabe	2011	Emotion work	Examines the emotion working involved in becoming a fighter

This table illustrates that several authors have placed an emphasis on one or more of the types of work involved in becoming a fighter. While the scholars acknowledge the existence of these processes, they do not define them as sub-processes of a larger structure or system of socialization. The idea that there is a reciprocal relationship between these types of work is also

not entertained. Finally, a review of this literature revealed that the female mixed martial artist's point of view has been completely ignored by all prior research. Although the authors briefly note that women's MMA exists, they never return to these women's experiences or perceptions.

As an aspiring female mixed martial artist, I must admit that I was saddened by this discovery, but I was not surprised. I had been training for approximately two and half years at this time and had met very few female fighters. This study was partially designed in hopes of meeting other women like me and learning more about their experiences. Realizing women had been excluded from previous analyses increased my desire to illuminate the perspective of the elusive female fighter. I turned to gender and sport literature and also began to consider the applicability of gender theory. I developed some additional hypotheses upon reviewing Michael Messner's work in particular. These include the following:

- Female fighters, much like other female athletes, will have had to deal with a variety of issues including negotiating their identities on and off the mat, competing with their male training partners for the instructors' time and attention, and a lack of female training partners⁴.
- These issues may or may not be amplified by the fact that MMA is a full contact, combat sport that is practiced in what might be viewed by some as a "hyper-masculine⁵" environment.

A mixed methodological approach, primarily qualitative in nature, was used to uncover the answers to the study's research questions. The process involved spending time as a participant observer at several MMA training facilities. Utilizing a convenience sampling method, I also conducted in-depth face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with MMA fighters and the individuals who own and/or teach at these facilities. The interview schedule (Appendix A) addressed the participants' involvement in the spartanization process, their experience in the gym as well as the cage, and their perceptions as fighters. As a supplement to these procedures,

⁴ This particular issue may be one that only pertains to women participating in combat-related sports, because they are not usually team sports.

⁵ MMA may be viewed by some as "hyper-masculine" due to a perceived emphasis of the sport on physical strength, violence or aggression, and hetero-sexuality.

the study's methodology also included a content analysis of books, magazine articles, websites, documentaries, as well as televised shows and sporting events.

Taking this approach provided me with an opportunity to test all of the study's hypotheses. I was able to assess whether or not the spartanization process was made up of any other practices or processes that I, or my predecessors, may have overlooked. This information helped me to better conceptualize (and operationalize) the various aspects of the spartanization process, ultimately aiding in the comparison of others' experiences with it. As a result, this study fills in some of the gaps in the literature, adding to and diversifying the discipline's examination of the sport.

Don't know what MMA is? Never heard of the UFC before? Don't worry, the histories of both are provided in the next chapter. While many are under the assumption that they are one and the same, you will learn that being a mixed martial arts practitioner is not synonymous with being a 'UFC fighter.' The discussion of the sport's history and the evolution of the UFC are followed by a review of relevant sociological literature published on the sport to date. The chapter concludes with an examination of how the current study is similar and/or different from previous studies.

Chapter three introduces readers to the gender theorists and theories guiding the current research. Learn the difference between the terms sex and gender, how we are socialized from a young age to perform gender, and what it means when someone says that sports are a gendered social institution. The study's theoretical underpinnings are followed by a review of prior research examining women's participation in other masculine sports. The focus is specifically on more recent research examining women's participation in sports such as wrestling, boxing, and judo (i.e., common sports practiced by many mixed martial artists). Find out what 'gender and sport' literature brings to the cage, as key themes within the literature are discussed and the theoretical implications for the current study are explained.

A discussion of the study's research methodology is provided in chapter four, but the site visits are the focal point of the chapter. It begins with a brief description of the six gyms that were visited. Afterwards, I attempt to enhance the readers' vision of what a typical MMA gym looks like by not only comparing and contrasting the gyms to one another, but to more traditional, weightlifting/fitness gyms as well. The chapter concludes with an explication of the

alternative data collection methods and procedures that were used when participant observation and in-person interviews were no longer viable data collection options.

Readers will meet the forty-five (45) MMA fighters who participated in an interview in chapter five. One of the study's primary purposes was to gain an inside look at the lives of the men and women participating in the sport. The chapter begins by presenting socio-demographic information about the participants such as their age, race, gender, education, and occupation. Learn more about each participant's sports participation history and motivation for becoming an MMA fighter. This part of the discussion is followed by an examination of the participants' fight demographics. Find out what their cage names are, if they are amateur or professional fighters, and other things such as their fight weights, records, and future goals or aspirations.

Chapter six is dedicated to the spartanization process and how the study's participants experience it. Throughout the chapter participant narratives are used to inform readers of the physical and mental preparation involved in becoming a fighter. Readers will also learn that in order to be an MMA fighter one must obtain things such as "technical skill," "discipline," and "mental toughness." Sacrifices including time with friends and family, food, and alcohol must also be made. Fighters reveal what they perceive is the hardest thing about being a fighter, reiterating the difficulties associated with "finding balance," "cutting weight and/or dieting," and coping with "mental or emotional" stress.

Curious what men have to say about women's participation in the sport? In chapter seven find out who said Women's MMA (WMMA) "definitely puts more butts in the seats," and who thinks that "women are the most precious things on earth, too pretty to be bleeding." Men will weigh-in on things like training with women and coaching or instructing women as well. In this chapter you will also hear from women. Learn what they have to say about being a participant in the sport, and the ups and downs of training with men.

Finally, chapter eight is what I like to refer to as the 'so what' chapter. Readers will be presented with a brief summary of the study's purpose, theoretical underpinnings, and methodology. Findings will be discussed, limitations highlighted, and my positionality examined. The chapter concludes with an offering of suggestions for future research and some advice from the study's participants to those who are thinking about becoming MMA fighters. I challenge you to read on with an open-mind. Be prepared to 'keep your chin down and your hands up,' because the following is a read you will not want to put down.

Chapter 2 - Not Everyone Who Participates in MMA is a UFC Fighter

I'm having a conversation with someone I just met and she says to me, "What did you say you do in your spare time?" Honestly, I'm not surprised that she is asking me to elaborate. This is a question that I am often asked when meeting someone for the first time or updating friends and family I haven't seen for a while, about what I have been up to. It seems that while the sport of MMA and its athletes have reached super star status at an alarming rate, there is still a fairly large portion of the population that either does not know about the sport or equates MMA directly with the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC). As a result, the aforementioned conversation almost always goes a little something like this:

"I train Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Muay Thai kickboxing and wrestling at the local MMA gym," I reply.

"MMA? What's that?" s/he says.

"MMA stands for mixed martial arts," I say. "It is a sport in which two athletes, with backgrounds in one or more martial arts, engage in combat in a controlled environment, known as 'the cage.' I'm sure you've seen it or at least heard about it on television."

"Oh, you're a UFC fighter?!" s/he exclaims.

"No," I say laughing. "Not everyone who participates in MMA is a UFC fighter."

In the past many members of the MMA community (myself included) have had a good laugh at the expense of those who do not know that participating in MMA and being a UFC fighter are not synonymous. What the MMA community may not know, and what I did not realize, is that this common misconception may not be the result of ignorance. You see, despite having trained to become an MMA fighter for quite some time, I had not attempted to uncover the history of the sport until I decided to turn my passion into the subject of my research. But

when I reviewed the literature on the history of MMA, it became increasingly apparent that the sport's history and the history of the UFC are closely intertwined.

In fact, my quest to unveil MMA's history was railroaded at every turn by discussions of the creation and evolution of the UFC. And to my dismay I found even less literature about the mixed-martial-arts training facilities that are popping up all over the nation or the athletes competing in the sport at the local and/or regional level; in other words, those fighters who are *not* in the UFC. In this chapter, I provide readers with a comprehensive history of both mixed-martial-arts and the Ultimate Fighting Championships. This is followed by a review of the empirical literature that has been published on MMA in the field of sociology to date. The chapter concludes with a summary of what all of this means and how it relates to the current study.

According to Gentry (2011) "sport fighting can be traced back to the Trojan War in 2000 BC, but for practical purposes most will agree that Pankration, the third combative sport of the ancient Olympics in Greece, was the first mixed martial arts [fighting] contest" (3). This particular combat sport was made up of a combination of boxing and wrestling and although its history dates back to 1062 BC, Pankration was not introduced into the Ancient Greek Olympics until 648 BC. Plyler & Seibert (2009) state that,

From the limited information we have about [these] early Olympic contests, there were very few rules, no time limits, and no weight classes. The matches were often very brutal, and it wasn't uncommon for fighters to suffer severe and sometimes permanent injuries as a result of competing. Many bouts ended by one contender knocking the opponent unconscious or by joint locks that caused a fighter to submit and surrender the match. A referee was present only to enforce rules that prevented biting, eye gouging, and groin shots (2).

With a record like this, it is no wonder that Pankration was eventually abolished from the Greek Olympics.

MMA's more recent history however can be traced back to the Gracies and the South American country of Brazil (Bledsoe 2009; Plyler & Seibert 2009; Gentry 2011). In the early

1900's Mitsuyo Maeda, a highly skilled jujutsu fighter immigrated to Brazil, where he met the Gracie family. In exchange for their hospitality Maeda agreed to teach the family's children the art of jujutsu. Maeda eventually returned to Japan and "the Gracie family [began] expand[ing] upon Maeda's teaching, creating Brazilian Jiu-jitsu and pioneering a new art they refer to as Gracie Jiu-jitsu" (Plyler & Seibert 2009:3).

Around the same time a new martial arts competition, Vale Tudo⁶, was entering mainstream Brazilian culture. The art of Brazilian Jiu-jitsu quickly became one of the three most common martial arts to be showcased in these events⁷. According to Plyler & Seibert (2009), although these fighting contests returned to being a sub-culture in the 1960's due to their violent nature, they "continued to gain support, and the early success of Vale Tudo inspired the Gracie family to further advance their style of Brazilian Jiu-jitsu" (4).

A move to the United States in the 1970's proved beneficial for the family, as they became entrepreneurs opening Brazilian Jiu-jitsu schools and teaching the art to Americans. To generate interest in their gyms and the art the family began issuing challenges to other martial arts schools to participate in Vale Tudo-type contests. During these contests a member of the Gracie family would take on an individual from another martial arts background. These contests were referred to as the "Gracie Challenge," and ultimately led to the creation of the UFC in the early 1990's.⁸

"What is distinctive about this period is that individual fighters remained practitioners of a particular martial arts style and MMA was not [yet] considered a sport, only a fighting contest" (Spencer 2009:121). Much like the ancient sport of Pankration, the first few UFC's consisted of very few rules and regulations. Marketing of the events had a tendency however to insinuate that there were *no* rules, turning the cage in which the martial artists fought into a symbol of the contest's bestiality. Subsequently making the contests seem more barbaric and even less like a sport.

Although this marketing approach was initially successful, "when reports of NHB contests began to appear beyond the world of martial arts periodicals and men's magazines,

⁶ Vale Tudo is Portuguese for "anything goes."

⁷ Other popular martial arts showcased in Vale Tudo fighting contests include capoeira and luta livre (Plyler & Seibert 2009).

⁸ The event was held for the very first time on November 21, 1993 in Denver, Colorado.

some countries were soon in the throes of a social and political debate about their admissibility” (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron 2006:261). The political pressure experienced by the cable networks became so unbearable they were forced to stop airing the UFC and other fighting contests, but this does not mean that participants ceased to train or compete. According to Green (2011), “during this period, both training schools and spaces for competition remained unregulated and off the grid” (379).

Eventually the UFC changed hands and in an attempt to regain public support, the sport, its athletes, and its marketing approach underwent a series of changes. Those participating in the sport “became more rounded fighters, training in those areas which they were weakest and leading to a hybridization of fighting styles” (Garcia & Malcom 2010:40). More rules were put into place, the focus shifted to the fighters themselves, and MMA was no longer marketed as a NHB event.

Early literature in the field of sociology examined these changes using the figurational approach and the concept of ‘sportization’ as a starting point. For those who may be unfamiliar, sportization

Refers to a process that began in the 18th century, in which organizations arose which acquired the power to formulate the rules of sport-like recreation more precisely, strictly and explicitly, oriented around an ethos of ‘fair play’ and eliminating, reducing and/or more strictly controlling opportunities for violent physical contact (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron 2006:262).

According to Van Bottenburg and Heilbron mixed-martial-arts fighting contests have experienced a fluctuation of sportization and de-sportization. They also note that the current UFC’s represent the newest phase of re-sportization.⁹ To better explain these fluctuations the author’s suggested that future researchers place an emphasis on “the changing balance of power between organizers, practitioners, spectators, and viewers” (2006:262).

Downey (2007) picked up where Van Bottenburg and Heilbron left off, focusing on the effect that social forces like sportization had on the ways in which fighters prepare for a fight. He

⁹ For an alternative explanation see Garcia & Malcom (2010).

states that, “even minor shifts in the physical tools available to participants radically transformed the relative efficacy of different body techniques for self-defense” (215). Using plenty of historical context Downey’s work illustrates that MMA fighters’ training regimens were greatly affected by things such as the advent of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, the introduction of the ‘Octagon’¹⁰, and the addition of various rules and regulations. He demonstrates that many of these changes were in fact also a result of the ever-changing perceptions of organizers, spectators, and viewers.

An ethnographic study conducted by Dale Spencer further confirms Downey’s findings. “Through participant observation in an MMA club and in-depth interviews with professional fighters, [Spencer’s] research reveal[ed] how manifold fighting techniques are learned and deployed” (Spencer 2009:120). By examining the sport in a more embodied way Spencer was able to support Downey’s conclusion that fighters have and must continue to adapt to changes occurring both in and outside of the cage. His discussion of reflexive body techniques (RBTs) and body callusing, demonstrates that the ‘MMA fighter’s habitus’ “is a lived-through structure-in-process, constantly evolving as an effect of the interactions of the agent with both others and their physical environment” (Spencer 2009:126).

Subsequent literature has since all but abandoned the examination of the evolution of MMA and its athletes, and any further discussion of the subject is beyond the scope of the current study. What is important to take away from the preceding discussion is that over time both the sport and its athletes have evolved. As a result, public perception of MMA and the UFC has also changed. Today, MMA is seen as a sport, and UFC events are reported to have thousands of people in attendance as well as millions of pay-per-view viewers worldwide.

The surge in popularity has also led to an “increased viability for sites training members in MMA” (Green 2011:379). And even though the UFC is the largest most well-known fight organization in the world, many other fight organizations exist at the local and regional levels. Participants in the sport usually start out fighting for these smaller organizations, some of them in hopes of building a name for themselves and reaching their goal of fighting for the UFC or some other big-name organization (i.e. Bellator, Invicta, etc.). These events and the facilities in

¹⁰ “A natural habitat to no marital art or sport-fighting style, the eight-sided, fenced in arena was supposed to settle definitely the question of which fighting technique was the most effective by placing them on level ground” (Downey 2007; 212).

which these men and women train are often the primary site of more recent research on the sport, including my own.

While the bodywork involved in becoming a fighter has remained a staple focus of mixed-martial-arts research, scholars have also begun to examine things such as the seduction or appeal of participating in the sport, pain, and the formation of a ‘fighter’ identity. Some of the more recent and relevant sociological research on the mixed-martial-arts phenomenon is briefly presented in chronological order below. A more in-depth examination of these and other studies’ findings will be intertwined with the discussion of my own findings in later chapters.

To my knowledge the book *Fighting for Acceptance: Mixed Martial Artists and Violence in American Society*, provides the most comprehensive examination of the sport and its athletes to date. “In reading this work, [the author’s] hope [their readers] walk away with a greater awareness of how diverse those in the MMA industry are, and see that like many other athletes, they are forced to pummel their way through exploitation, structural barriers, and stereotypes” (Mayeda & Ching 2008:5). The book begins with a discussion of the sport’s history, before moving on to a general discussion of injuries and violence in sport. Next, the specifics of the study are outlined, and this is followed by a detailed analysis of various aspects of MMA.

Interviewees of the study included Jayson “MayheM” Miller, Tony “The Freak” Fryklund, “Quinton “Rampage” Jackson, and Randy “The Natural” Couture.” For those of you who are less familiar with MMA, these are some big names in the sport and as you read the book you “hear their voices, feel their pain, and consider their opinions while learning about [MMA] and its inner most intricacies” (Mayeda & Ching 2008:6). These, and many other fighters, weighed in on a variety of topics including, but not limited to, growing up with violence, their families and father figures, pain, emotion, masculinity in MMA, their future plans, and attitudes on women’s growing involvement in the sport.

Then in 2010, Abramson and Modzelewski published an article about their study in which they set out to answer the following question:

Why do middle class participants, with ready access to conventional avenues of success and status, participate in the world of cage fighting despite the amount of bodily, interpersonal, and professional sacrifices this entails (144)?

This research addressed previous, somewhat incomplete explanations of the appeal of participating in the sport, and uncovered a series of sacrifices participants make in terms of their bodies, relationships, and careers as they follow their dream of being MMA fighters. The authors found that “the moral world that underpins the subculture created by cage-fighters has three key elements: self-improvement through hard work; “being true to yourself”; and constructing a voluntary community” (Abramson & Modzelewski 2010:162). They effectively demonstrate that the motivations for participating in the sport are not the same as the motivations driving other individuals to watch it.

Finally, Green (2011) examined the pain involved with physically preparing for and competing in a fight. His methodology was similar to his predecessors and his research suggests that pain serves three purposes within fight-based schools: (1) it provides confidence in training; (2) it is itself an avenue to encounter the body as a united organism with clear limits and boundaries; [and] (3) it establishes and allows intimacy between participants, which is central to the formation of community within the site (Green 2011:378). Therefore, his research provides additional insight as to why one might want to step into the cage.

Like those who became before me, I too set out to discover who participates in this sport and why. What the current study adds to this discussion is an in-depth examination of the process involved in becoming a fighter and the ways in which individual fighters experience this process. This research is different from Mayeda & Ching’s, but similar to Abramson & Modzelewski’s as well as Green’s, in that the majority of my interviewees had not yet made it to the “big-time.” Although I was able to interview one Bellator fighter, a former UFC fighter, an individual who aspired to be in the UFC and has since made his UFC debut as well as several women who fight for Invicta.

A review of the literature revealed that the majority of prior research has largely ignored the female mixed martial artist’s point of view. Although many of the authors briefly note that women’s MMA exists, they never return to these women’s experiences or perceptions. Abramson & Modzelewski’s work and Janet L. Martin’s¹¹ piece on the female apologetic are exceptions however. Mayeda & Ching (2008) also sought to uncover gender-based attitudes in

¹¹ Martin’s work entitled, "Girl Fight: Apologetic Behaviors among Female Mixed Martial Arts Fighters as a Reaction to Social Stigmatization, Stereotyping, and Labeling of Sports Participation," was written in 2011 as a requirement for her Bachelors of Arts Degree in Sociology from Warren Wilson College.

MMA in light of it being a male-dominated, hyper-masculine sport. They did not however, interview any female fighters. I, on the other hand, was able to interview 14 female fighters and two female Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu practitioners, who at the time of their interviews had no aspirations of entering the cage.

But before I introduce you to the men and women you participated in the study, I would like to discuss the study's theoretical underpinnings, and provide you with some additional background information regarding the study's research sites and methodology. In chapter three you will read about gender definitions, gender socialization, and interactionist theories like "doing gender." This will be followed by an examination of gendered organizational theories in general as well as in sports. The chapter concludes with a literature review focused on women's participation in other combat sports. Discover what 'gender and sport' literature has to say about women's participation in athletics, and how it relates to the current study.

Chapter 3 - What's Gender Have To Do With It?

Upon being born we are placed into one of two sex-classes, male or female. This classification process is based solely on our primary sex characteristics and is universal. Once this classification has been made it is continuously reconfirmed by the stages of growth that occur throughout our lifetime. It is important to note that although sex-class behavior does change over the course of our lifetime, it does not do so solely as a result of some sort of inner development. Instead, sex-class placement inevitably leads to a socialization process that is ultimately different for boys and girls. While each society has its own approach to gender socialization, the effect is the same; the differential treatment of boys and girls leads to different types of experiences as well as life chances and opportunities (Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000; Thorne 1993; Lorber 1994).

Gender socialization also leads to specific ways of looking, acting, and feeling. Since the process varies from one society to the next, the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics that are most commonly associated with being a man or a woman also vary. Nevertheless, they are always deemed to be “essential” or natural/normal characteristics of their respective sex category (Thorne 1993; Lorber 1994). Norms regarding masculinity and femininity are therefore, often directly linked to the biological differences of the sex-classes, which has unfortunately led to what Goffman (1977) refers to as the “doctrine of biological influence” (304). Gender *is* a social/cultural idea however, and *not* a biological one. People remain convinced that gender differences are the result of biology because it is a product of our beliefs and practices; both of which are ingrained in our social structure, interactions, and organizations (Acker 1990; Ridgeway 2009, 2011). These beliefs and practices reinforce inequality and subsequently have social consequences. Awareness of these facts has led scholars away from traditional conceptualization of gender as something that is taught or learned, and into the arms of the theoretical perspective known as “doing gender.”

In the following paragraphs I describe in detail the theoretical underpinnings of West and Zimmerman’s classic piece, “Doing Gender.” Next, I turn to a discussion of the recent theoretical move towards “undoing” gender. Drawing on Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009), I attempt to explain what it means to “undo” gender. I conclude this section of the chapter with an

explanation of what these studies add to our understanding of gender and provide my personal outlook on the “doing/undoing” gender debate. Subsequent sections of the chapter examine what it means to say organizations are gendered, present sports as just one of society’s gendered organizations, and examine small portion of gender and sport literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the impact of gender theory and literature on the current study.

The “Doing” and “Undoing” of Gender

The purpose of West and Zimmerman’s “Doing Gender” was to advance “an ethnomethodologically informed, and distinctively sociological understanding of gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (1987:126). What separates this theoretical approach from those that came before it is its framing of gender as an accomplishment. Whereas previous approaches attempted to reduce gender to a set of psychological traits and/or roles that are learned and then performed, the “doing gender” approach shifts our focus outward to social structure and interaction. Thus the authors argue that gender “is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (West & Zimmerman 1987:129).

West and Zimmerman began building their theoretical framework by making the distinctions between sex, sex category, and gender more clear. They “contend that recognition of the analytical independence of sex, sex category, and gender is essential for understanding the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in “being” a gendered person in society” (West & Zimmerman 1987:127). As was discussed in the introduction, when we are born we are either classified as male or female based on our primary sex characteristics. The concept of ‘sex’ is therefore synonymous with biology. Sex category, on the other hand, is how others categorize us during our daily interactions based on our outward appearance. In contrast, gender “is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West and Zimmerman 1987:127).

Turning to Goffman’s (1976) account of ‘gender display’ for help, West and Zimmerman then attempted to illustrate the ways in which gender is done in all contexts. They explored “how gender might be exhibited or portrayed through interaction, and thus be seen as “natural,” while it is being produced as a socially organized achievement” (West and Zimmerman 1987:129). The idea is that when we interact with another individual we do so on the basis of assumed beliefs about the “essential” nature of their sex category. The open display of masculinity or femininity

by any and all parties involved in the interaction is therefore a sign of respect. It indicates that everyone knows who he or she is in relation to everyone else as well as how the contact or situation should proceed.

For Goffman, 'gender displays' are a mechanism to outwardly present what is commonly assumed to be our "essential" nature to others. West and Zimmerman (1987) believe that, "while it is plausible to contend that gender displays are optional; it does not seem plausible to say that we have the option of being seen by others as female or male" (130). The authors contend that as people we are constantly developing accounts of what is going on around us. "These descriptions name, characterize, formulate, explain, excuse, excoriate, or merely take notice of some circumstance or activity and thus place it within some social framework (locating it relative to other activities, like and unlike)" (West & Zimmerman 1987:136). This process of 'accountability' occurs through interaction and because everyone develops these accounts we are aware that while we are in the process of accounting for the actions of others, they are trying to account for our actions as well. Taking this into consideration we design our actions accordingly. While this does not mean that we always have to live up to normative notions of masculinity and femininity, any deviation from them puts us at risk of receiving a negative gender assessment.

To summarize, because traditional conceptualizations of the gender order focused on things internal to the individual and were unable to account for power and inequality, they proved to be inadequate. In an attempt to resolve these theories inadequacies West and Zimmerman developed the theoretical perspective known as "doing gender." The focus of this framework is on things that are said to be external to the individual, namely social structure and interaction. Gender is presented as a situated accomplishment that people hold themselves and others accountable for. Therefore, according to West and Zimmerman, gender is something we "do" and the way that gender is "done" may vary from one context to the next. Since its emergence, the "doing gender" approach has been widely used. So much so that some scholars decided to shift their attention to how gender can or should be "undone."

According to Risman (2009), the concept of "undoing gender [was] first introduced by Butler (2004) and [more] recently offered with a slightly different twist to *Gender and Society* readers by Deutsch (2007)." Proponents of this work believe that the idea of "doing gender" as a theory has done its job and now we should do ours by moving forward with new ideas. While they do not deny the importance of the "doing gender" framework, stating that it "alerted us to

the taken-for-granted expressions of difference that appear natural but are not,” they believe that it has failed to achieve its goal of reducing gender inequality (Deutsch 2007:108). They argue that the language that has been used and the ways in which the “doing gender” approach has been employed, may inadvertently be contributing to the maintenance of the current gender order.

So what does or would it mean to “undo” gender? Deutsch (2007) proposes that it would mean that we “reserve the phrase “doing gender” to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase “undoing gender” to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference” (122). Thus, Deutsch and scholars like her, indicate that it is all about language and perspective. From this point of view, acts of resistance should be viewed as instances in which gender is being “undone.” They argue that because the term “doing gender” has been used to discuss both acts of conformity as well as acts of resistance, the “doing gender” framework “has become a theory of gender persistence and the inevitability of inequality” (Deutsch 2007:106).

By re-conceptualizing acts of resistance our perception of these things would change, thereby allowing us to study them in a new light. Risman (2009) indicates that gender should be thought of as a structure, and research should focus on examining and documenting changes that occur within it. From this perspective we should be concerned with the documentation of “different kinds of gender, how doing gender might be changing [and] whether it is being undone” (Risman 2009; 82). Once we have obtained knowledge of the contexts in which the “undoing” of gender is most likely to occur, new ideas on how to go about changing the power dynamics and inequities between men and women can be developed; a task that the “doing gender” framework unfortunately had little success with.

West and Zimmerman (2009) point out that in order to study gender in this way we would first need to generate a list of all characteristics defined as either masculine or feminine. Given the frequency with which the definitions of these things change, this would be a difficult task to say the least. They go on to criticize proponents of “undoing” gender for their failure to take into account “doing gender’s” emphasis on accountability and claim that what these scholars see as an “undoing” of gender are simply changes in how gender is being “done.” West and Zimmerman (2009) state that because studies have shown that acts of resistance can and often do reify current gender norms and beliefs, they cannot also be referenced as actions that

“undo” gender. Instead, they propose that what Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009) are referring to is a “redoing” of gender.

Although I am not sure that gender can be “undone,” I believe that we cannot blame scholars like Butler, Deutsch, and Risman for attempting to explore new avenues. According to the “doing gender” perspective we cannot *not* do gender, we are doing gender even when we think we are not doing it, and acts of resistance ultimately serve to reify the current gender order in some way. Furthermore, new behavior is immediately classified as masculine or feminine, which means that our behavior never has a chance to be anything but gendered. This makes it even more difficult to decide who is and who is not “doing gender.”

So far I have provided a description of the theoretical roots and current iteration of the “doing gender” approach. Drawing on Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009) I then explained and addressed the critiques of the recent theoretical move toward “undoing” gender. But humans aren’t the only things that are gendered, social institutions and organizations are too. In the following paragraphs, I define the basic assumptions of the original conceptualization of this perspective. Next, I address what is problematic with this approach and explain why paying attention to the context of work organizations is important. Using several empirical examples I illustrate why context matters for understanding how work organizations are gendered. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of “inequality regimes” and what they offer to our understanding of gendered organizations.

Gendered Organizations

According to Britton & Logan (2008), “the appearance in 1990 of Joan Acker’s *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations* marked a fundamental paradigm shift in the study of gender, work, and organizations” (107). Although sex differences in organizational behavior had been examined before Acker’s work, organizational theory and research had primarily been influenced by a white, middle-class, and male point of view. Structures were thus seen as being gender-neutral, which shifted the focus away from organizational structures and placed it on the individual. The view largely held at this time was that the people who came to inhabit these structures brought their gendered beliefs and attitudes with them. Issues faced by women in the workplace were often ignored and differences in

positions, power, etc. were usually attributed to outside forces such as biology and socialization, instead of an organization's recruitment practices.

The truth of the matter is however that organizations *are* gendered. While individuals may bring gender with them, the organization of sex within society's institutions is also a structural feature. The gendered division of labor within them causes men and women to be recruited into specific positions, with men occupying those that have more power and authority. Acknowledgement of these facts led to the creation of what is known as the gendered organizations perspective. And what does it mean to say an organization is gendered? Well, Acker (1990) explains "to say that an organization is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (146). In short, she argues that the organizational logic on which bureaucracies are built is gendered. Using an examination of job evaluation systems, she demonstrates how all aspects of a job are created in the abstract. She notes that in job evaluation the unit of analysis is the actual job and not the individual who fills the position. In theory, this means that the job and the individual that occupies it are separate entities.

When jobs are discussed this way nothing appears to be gendered, at least on the surface. This is because all aspects of the job, when created in the abstract, have nothing to do with the individual who fills each position. Thus, it is not until we add an actual person into the equation that the gendered nature of the organizational structure reveals itself. According to abstract organizational logic, the best person for any job is one that has no other responsibilities. In other words, the individual's one and only purpose is to work. The person who best fits this description in reality is a man, and it is for this reason that the abstract concept of a job is gendered.

Acker's examination of the job evaluation system reveals that the organizational "principles of hierarchy" are built upon similar "existing gendered structures" (1990:150). Given that the abstract worker has no desires or responsibilities, for example, h/she also has no sexuality. In order for organizations to remain asexual, sex must be kept out of the work place and this requires that men and women be separated from one another. In sum, Acker's work illustrated that the gender-neutrality of jobs and organizational theory only exists if we stay in the abstract, and we obviously cannot do that considering that jobs and the people who occupy them exist in reality.

Gender and its associated processes therefore affect structures, relations, and control within organizations. This means that the gendering of organizations not only occurs at the structural level with the division of labor, but also at the levels of culture and agency. Existing within them are symbols and images that perpetuate (or oppose) the gendered division of labor as well as patterned interactions that create dominance and submissiveness respectively. All of this leads to the creation of a gendered identity that is based on stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity. Hence, gender is everywhere at all times and may be said to constitute a “substructure” within the actual organizational structure itself (Acker 1990).

Acker is often credited for de-emphasizing the role of the individual and being the first to synthesize previous works in to a somewhat coherent and applicable framework. Her approach however is problematic, because within it organizations are framed as being inherently gendered. According to Acker (1990), organizational logic is laced with gendered undertones. In other words, all aspects of an organization are based on the differences between men and women and in turn, reproduce those differences. Britton (2000) states that empirically, “giving gender ontological status in this way (Wharton 1991) makes the theory virtually untestable, at least in the sense that sociologists have usually thought about theory testing” (422).

By assuming that all organizations are gendered we not only have no way of knowing or deciding whether one organization is more or less gendered than another, we are also left with little hope for change. Under these conditions, “it becomes impossible to imagine what an “ungendered” bureaucratic organization would look like or how “ungendered” work could be carried out” (Britton 2000:422). Although Acker calls for the complete destruction of organization as we know it, it ultimately seems easier to try and change the structure. Furthermore, it is hard to believe that all organizations are equally gendered. Britton (2000) notes that “conceptualizing bureaucratic organizations as inherently gendered may keep us from seeing settings in which gender is less salient and can thus obscure those points of leverage that might be used to produce change” (423).

For Britton, painting organizations as inherently gendered keeps us from seeing instances in which gender is a less salient feature of an organization. When context is under-emphasized or held constant things are often ignored or missed, denying researchers valuable insight into the gendering of society’s organizations. Britton argues that it may be that gender is deployed at some levels of an organization and not others. “Understanding what makes some

contexts less oppressively gendered than others may be [a] crucial step in learning how to change organizations for the better.” (Britton & Logan 2008:114)

Utilizing several empirical examples I will now attempt to illustrate how this approach differs from more individualist treatments of gender. I also hope to demonstrate the usefulness of examining context in order to develop a better understanding of how work organizations are gendered. In “Differential Recruitment and Control: The Sex Structuring of Organizations” Acker and Van Houten (1974) attempt to apply the gendered organizations perspective to data that was collected at a time when organizations were still thought to be gender-neutral. They argue that had the researchers of the Hawthorne and Crozier studies focused their attention on selective recruitment processes and these organizations’ social control mechanisms, instead of biology and socialization, their findings would have been much different.

Acker and Van Houten’s application of the gendered organizations perspective ultimately reveals that differences in the sex structuring of these organizations was not a result of things intrinsic to the individuals working within them. They were, on the other hand, specifically related to three other things. First, jobs were defined based on what type of individual should fill them. This means that women were hired to fill jobs that required them to be dependent and passive. This in turn led to the “selective recruitment of particularly compliant women into these jobs” (Acker & Van Houten 1974:161). Finally, the authors found that similar sex power hierarchies exist within the home and the workplace and the dual exposure to this hierarchy seemed to have what they refer to as a “power multiplier effect.”

More recently the approach has been used to examine sexual harassment in the workplace (Dellinger & Williams 2002) as well as men’s experiences with women’s work (Williams 1995; Wingfield 2009). Utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation, Dellinger and Williams (2002) explored the distinctions between definitions of sexual harassment among the editorial staff of a men’s magazine and a feminist magazine. Findings showed that both workplaces were highly sexualized, but in different ways. As a result, the definitions of what constituted sexual harassment were also very different. What those working for the feminist magazine may have seen as sexual harassment, was actually an everyday occurrence for the editorial staff at the men’s magazine.

This brings me to the concept of “inequality regimes.” According to Acker (2006), “all organizations have inequality regimes, defined loosely as interrelated practices, processes,

actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities with in particular organizations” (443). What Acker essentially calls for here is an intersectional approach to the study of organizations and she attempts to extend her gender model to other socially constructed concepts such as race and class. She indicates that race, class, and gender are often examined separately and claims that figuring out how to examine the simultaneous effects of all three has been and continues to be a concern.

Although Acker believes that the gendering of organizations is a multi-level process, in this work it seems that she has given up the idea that society’s organizations/institutions are inherently gendered. She shifts her focus instead, to the idea that organizations are not only gendered, but also racialized and classed. Acker (2006) places an emphasis on the idea that inequality will inevitably arise when there is unequal power and control over things such as goals, resources, decisions, and benefits. The extent to which inequality is viewed as a problem and the practices taken to correct it will however vary from one organization to the next as well as between the organization and its subunits.

In my opinion, Wingfield’s (2009) “Racializing the Glass Escalator: Reconsidering Men’s Experiences with Women’s Work,” is a good example of what the “inequality regimes” approach adds to our understanding of gendered organizations. Building on Williams (1995) conceptualization of the “glass escalator” effect, Wingfield (2009) addresses the fact that “while extensive work has documented the fact that white men in women’s professions encounter a glass escalator effect that aids their occupational mobility, few studies, if any, have considered how this effect is a function not only of gender advantage, but racial privilege as well” (6). The parts of the article that I find to be most relevant to the current discussion are the excerpts in the study’s theoretical framework and findings sections that discuss colleague and supervisor relations.

Wingfield (2009) notes that previous studies have shown that whereas “women tokens find that their visibility hinders their ability to blend in and work productively, men tokens find that their conspicuousness can lead to greater opportunities for leadership and choice assignments” (7). Wingfield’s study indicates however, that this is not the case when the male token’s race is taken into account. The author’s findings show that racial stereotypes about Black men have a negative effect on Black male nurses’ ability to develop strong bonds with their colleagues and supervisors. Why is this important? Prior research has shown that a man’s ability

to ride the glass escalator rests squarely on his ability to have a gendered relationship with those in leadership and/or supervisory positions. “Studies in this vein are important because they emphasize organizations – and occupations – as gendered [as well as racialized] institutions that subsequently create dissimilar experiences for men and women” (Wingfield 2009:7)

In conclusion, the concept of gendered institutions has transformed thinking about gender primarily by challenging the notion that gender is a property (only) of individuals. This section began by defining the assumptions of the gendered institutions/organizations perspective as presented by Joan Acker (1990). I then discussed why the original conceptualization of gendered organizations was found to be problematic and addressed the importance of paying attention to context. Using empirical examples I explained how this approach differs from more individualist treatments of gender and attempted to further illustrate the importance of context in developing a better understanding of how work organizations are gendered. Finally, I discussed “inequality regimes,” elaborating on what they bring to the gendered organizational table and how it has been used in research.

Sports: A Gendered Organization

Sports have often been known to teach people of all ages about things such as fair play, an acceptance of authority, and the importance of obeying the rules. It is important to recognize however that sport is also a place that forms and reinforces many people’s ideas and beliefs about gender differences (Anderson & Taylor 2005). According to Michael Messner (1992), “organized sport as we know it emerged largely as a masculinist response to a crisis in the gender order,” during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (159). With the rise of capitalism came a separation of work and leisure as well as of the public and private spheres of life. The changes that occurred in terms of work and family led to a fear of social feminization, and Messner states that it is “within this context [that] organized sports became increasingly important as” what Dubbert (1979) has deemed to be a “primary masculinity-validating experience” (1988:200).

The creation of sports not only provided men with an escape from a culture that they feared was becoming too “feminine,” it granted them an additional opportunity to (re)affirm their masculinity. Since this time, “organized sport has been a crucial arena of struggle over basic social conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and as such has become a fundamental arena of

ideological contest in terms of power relations between men and women” (Messner 1988:199). The first feminist movement and its fight for women’s suffrage would constitute the beginning of this struggle. The desire for political equality soon became a desire for equality in all areas of life, and it was not long before women began participating in their own sports under an anti-competitive, feminine philosophy.

“By the 1970s, just when symbolic representations of the athletic male body had taken on increasing ideological importance, a second wave of athletic feminism had emerged” (Messner 1988:202). The number of women wanting to participate in sports would dramatically increase at this time, leading to a rise in their demands for equality in the sports arena. Virtually removed from the world of sports, women would not be provided with an equal opportunity to participate in them until the passage of Title IX in 1972. Unfortunately, this did not change the fact that “sports organizations are often places that still reproduce traditional gender roles as well as male privilege and dominance” (Cunningham & Sagas 2008:3).

The research concerned with the role of gender in relation to sport often focuses on the reproduction of gendered stereotypes and/or norms at both the organizational and individual levels. Findings from these studies consistently reveal that, “sport organizations are contexts where men and masculinity are privileged and where jobs are linked [to] traditional gender and sex-role stereotypes” (Cunningham & Sagas 2008:4). Images and discussions about female athletes and femininity continue to prevail in their attempt to control society’s views about what is and is not feminine. In the paragraphs that follow, I examine empirical studies concerned with femininity and the ways in which female athlete’s negotiate having a body that does not fit traditional conceptualizations of the term. In addition, I present two studies that have taken a more relational approach to the study of sport as a gendered institution. Upon providing brief summaries of these articles’ research methodologies, participants, and one or two key findings, I turn to an examination of reoccurring interrelated themes found within this literature. I find that many of these themes illustrate the ways in which sport shapes gender as well as how gender shapes sport.

Although traditionally a male-dominated sport, wrestling is practiced today by men and women of all ages all around the world. Some of its defining characteristics include “controlling an opponent’s body movement, defending takedowns and throws, and securing a superior position when the action lands on the mat” (Plyler & Seibert 2009:42). The article, “Elite

Women Wrestlers' Muscles: Physical Strength and a Social Burden," examines the personal backgrounds and sport biographies of Norwegian men and women wrestlers. Utilizing theoretical perspectives on the gender order in society as well as traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity, Sisjord & Kristiansen tried to assess female wrestlers go about negotiating the development of a "wrestler body," given traditional conceptualizations of a culturally acceptable female body.

Findings revealed striking differences between the junior and senior women in regards to the priority given to the private- and athletic-body. The authors found, for example, that senior wrestlers were more likely to give priority to the athletic body than were juniors. The juniors were instead choosing to focus more on their wrestling technique, than on the development of muscle mass in hopes of avoiding the social burden of being viewed as too masculine. Seniors, on the other hand, "had accepted the 'athletic body' and muscularity with [all] its social costs" (Sisjord & Kristiansen 2009:231). This group of women was therefore less likely to go out of their way to emphasize their femininity by actively engaging in what is known as the 'female apologetic.' In a similar study, Macro, Viveiros, & Cipriano (2009) conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight university-level female wrestlers. Data was also gathered from forty-seven other female wrestlers via the use of a questionnaire. But unlike Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009), these researchers' findings indicate "that female wrestlers are comfortable with their body; that public perception concerning their sexuality is not an issue of concern for them; and that they do not experience gender-role conflict nor engage in the female apologetic" (Macro et al. 2009; 42).

Moving away from the individual examination of female athletes, Lafferty and McKay (2004) decided to take a relational approach to the study of gender and boxing. In particular, they focused on the interactions that took place between men and women training at a Golden Gloves Gym (GGG) located in Australia. Observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews revealed that both the GGG's warm-ups and sparring sessions were "highly segregated along gender lines" (Lafferty & McKay 2004: 260). Men not only monopolized the spaces allocated for each of these activities, but also the instructors' time and attention. Finally, authors of the study entitled "Gender Construction in Judo Interactions," hypothesized that an examination of interactions involving judokas of the opposite sex would reveal that the 'judo framework' conflicts with that of the larger social structure's 'gender framework.' They assumed that this

would be the case because “judo features scenes of confrontation where aggression is channeled and codified by a collection of rules that claim formal equality between fighters” (Guerandel and Mennesson 2007:169). To test this hypothesis, the authors observed and interviewed boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 17, participating in high-level Judo training courses at a school located in Toulouse, France. Their findings illustrated that “aside from the particular situation of the fight on the ground and intensive fight; the judo framework tends to be replaced by that of gender experience during training” (Guerandel & Mennesson 2007: 180). In other words, the judokas (male and female) could be found “doing” gender before, during, and after training.

In sum, the history of sport and/or sporting organizations and the construction of gender are relatively interdependent. “Although females have been gradually allowed to participate, history shows that females’ entrance [into the sporting world] has been a struggle against gender stereotyping, and structural and organizational barriers” (Sisjord & Kristiansen 2009: 231). Unfortunately, cultural ideals associated with hegemonic gender representations affect all women and because women who participate in martial arts and other combat sports are able to display strength, violence, and control they are often seen as what scholars refer to as ‘flag carriers of masculinity.’ As a result, Krane and her colleagues (2004) state that, they are more likely to be “labeled as social deviants and experience discrimination” (316).

The literature reviewed here illustrates that gender is “done” in a variety of contexts. The ways in which it is “done” however varies from one context to the next and whether the acts of “doing” gender reproduce or deconstruct common ideas and beliefs about gender is also context-specific. Moreover, Guerandel and Mennesson’s (2007) examination of high-level Judokas demonstrates that even in a context where a different framework for interaction should be in effect, the ‘gender framework’ of interaction often prevails. According to Guerandel & Mennesson (2007), “women involved in traditionally masculine sports have to deal with a paradox: on one hand, being a woman needing to conform to an image of ‘femininity’ and display ‘normal’ (heterosexual) sexuality and, on the other hand, being an accomplished athlete in an environment created by and for men” (168). Despite being discriminated against and having to negotiate their identities within conflicting cultural/social realms, however, many women continue to participate in a variety of sports traditionally defined as masculine.

“In response to a social context where sports are associated with hegemonic masculinity, female athletes may exhibit the reformed apologetic defense of exaggerating their femininity

while at the same time embracing their athleticism” (Macro et al. 2009; 43). This was true of participants in both Mennesson’s (2000) study of female boxers as well as Guerandel and Mennesson’s (2007) study of high-level judokas. Findings from Sisjord and Kristiansen’s (2009) study on wrestlers however demonstrate that not all female athletes feel compelled to engage in ‘apologetic femininity.’ The authors noted that while the seniors that were interviewed “touched upon the topic of a muscular body possibly conflicting with comprehensions of femininity, [they] denied it as being a personal issue” (Sisjord & Kristiansen 2009:237).

Finally, many of the female respondents who participated in these studies had a tendency to refer to themselves as “tomboys.” According to Sisjord & Kristiansen (2009), “by perceiving themselves to be ‘like boys’ [female] athletes reinforce and reproduce, rather than challenge, the power relations and binary oppositions of masculine/feminine and men’s versus women’s sports” (234). The acquisition of a ‘masculine-type capital,’ via participation in sports beginning at a young age and identification with masculine role models and friends, keeps female athletes from being viewed as a threat by their male counterparts. Women with ‘gender capital’ are said to reinforce instead of challenge larger societal beliefs that are tied to hegemonic masculinity. As a result, these women are less likely to experience discrimination within the world of sports. They may however, be more likely to be discriminated against within the larger social culture.

The Current Study

Mixed-martial-arts matches involving women have been taking place at smaller events for years. But while events featuring men began to be televised in the United States in 1993, the first televised women’s MMA bout would not take place until 2007. Plyler & Seibert (2009) note that, “women’s MMA is still in its infancy, but it has both an increasing number of talented fighters and a growing fan base” (26). Prior to beginning this study, I had encountered very little sociological research on the mixed martial arts phenomenon. Over the years a few additional pieces of literature have popped up here and there. Many of these scholars have however, failed to provide a detailed look at women’ participation in this sport. In light of this information, I chose to conduct a study aimed at uncovering a) the influences and/or motivations for participation in this sport, and b) the ways in which these motives and individual experiences differ based on race/ethnicity, class, and gender.

Given the aforementioned theoretical frameworks and literature, I expected to find that MMA training facilities are primarily owned and operated by men. In addition, the majority of these gyms' members would also probably be male. I hypothesize however that the sport has seen a dramatic increase in the number of women participating in it in the past 10 years. Furthermore, I believed that I would find that these women, much like other female athletes, would have dealt with a variety of issues including (but not limited to) negotiating their identities on and off the mat, competing with their male training partners for the instructors' time and attention, and a lack of female training partners. Finally, I assumed these issues may or may not be amplified by the fact that MMA is full contact, combat sport that is practiced in what might be viewed by some as a "hyper-masculine" environment.

A discussion of the study's research methodology is provided in the next chapter. A general description of the methods used to answer the study's research questions, is accompanied by a brief description of each of the six research sites. Next, I attempt to enhance the readers' vision of what a typical MMA gym looks like by comparing and contrasting the sites to one another as well as to more traditional, weightlifting/physical fitness gyms. At the end of the chapter you will learn more about how I utilized the popular social networking site, Facebook, to obtain contact information from an additional 23 MMA fighters; all of which agreed to a telephone interview.

Chapter 4 - MMA Gyms: Land of Blood, Sweat, Tears and Pubic Hair

When I first started training at Combative Sports Center (CSC) in January of 2009 it was located off the highway, in the unfinished basement of an International Foods store. Due to its location and the activities going on inside, a musty smell combined with that of various international foods, lingered in the air. A garage door served as the air conditioner, mat space was limited, and training equipment was in short supply. Quenching your thirst with water from the basin located in the training area was risky, as its brown color hinted that it might not be potable. Men, and the very few women attending classes at CSC, shared a restroom with walls that did not quite reach the ceiling.

The gym has since moved back into its original location, the basement of the local Red Cross building. Its entrance is not visible from the road, and the only thing vaguely directing interested parties where to go is a realtor's "FOR SALE" sized sign. The smell of a popular pizza place located adjacent to the gym greets you as you step out of your car and onto the pavement into a parking lot filled with new and old vehicles of various makes and models. An awning indicating not that you have found CSC, but the "Optimist Wrestling" club, covers the entrance.

Hanging inside the gym's doorway and along the wall on the left-hand side are approximately 25 championship belts. Most people are however more likely to notice the giant square cage located towards the front of the room in the gym's primary training area. Scrawled on a piece of paper and posted above the walkway to this space is a sign that reads "Victory is always possible for the one who never stops fighting;" the cited author is Napoleon Hill. With the exception of where the cage is sitting, the majority of the training area is lined with Zebra mats. Four heavy bags hang in the middle of the room, training equipment such as grappling dummies, kick pads, and catch mitts are piled in a corner, and random pieces of gear (i.e., hand-wraps, shin guards, gloves, groin protectors, and mouth pieces – yes, mouthpieces) litter the training area's sidelines.

Exiting the training area to explore other parts of the gym, you might notice that the opposite side of the aforementioned sign reads, "Do not leave your gear here! This is your only warning!" This rule is not strictly enforced, as is evidenced by the gym's cubbyholes; most are

filled with gym bags, clothes, and various other pieces of gear. The walkway where the cubbyholes are housed leads to the gym's weight room, which resembles the type of gym one might find in a garage. While there are a few pieces of equipment, one might also notice the tractor tire, sledgehammer, and kettlebells. All of which are staple features of most MMA gyms.

Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, CSC became the first of six MMA gyms to participate in this study. In addition to conducting interviews and administering surveys, I was given permission by the IRB to be a participant observer. Site visits became the first step in a data collection process, spanning a little over one year. Research sites and participants were chosen using convenience and snowball sampling, and informed consent (Appendix B) was required of the owner or manager of each training facility as well as from those agreeing to a separate interview. Most participants were however verbally informed of the study's purpose, research procedures, and right to refuse participation at any time.

I have decided to make the site visits the focal point of this chapter. Subsequent chapters will introduce readers to the fighters who participated in the study (chapter 5), and provide an inside look into their experiences with the 'spartanization' process (chapter 6). For now, I will only attempt to paint readers a picture of the typical MMA gym and I will do this by not only describing each one, but by comparing them to one another as well as to traditional (read "cookie cutter") gyms. At the end of the chapter readers will learn more about the alternative data collection methods and procedures that were used when traveling and doing in-person interviews was no longer feasible.

I started gathering data at CSC in Manhattan, Kansas on April 9, 2012 and continued to collect data at this location throughout the month of May. Joe "The Nose" Wilk, professional fighter and owner of CSC, was well aware of my intentions and happily agreed to sign a consent form granting me access to his gym. As one of my coaches, I was curious about Joe's MMA journey and chose to continue my research with visits to two of his past instructors' gyms, Elite Combat Sports Center and Gracie Barra Jiu-Jitsu Miami. So in early June (June 4-9, 2012) I traveled to "The Nose's" hometown of Hutchinson, Kansas, to gather data at Elite Combat Sports Center.

Wilk had provided me with owner and operator, Ernest Bell's contact information, and had let him know that I would be in touch. I called Ernest approximately one week before my visit, informing him of the study's purpose and requesting permission to conduct research at his

gym. Inhabiting a small storefront located on the cusp of Main Street, Elite Combat Sports Center was the smallest gym I visited.¹² Unsure of the gym's parking situation, I chose to park on a road adjacent to the building. I crossed the street, walked around the corner, and peered into the gym through its large front window.

Entering the door I found myself in a very small walkway, separated from the primary training area by a half-wall. Ernest was on the mats "getting a workout in" before class. He stopped what he was doing and took off his gloves as I proceeded to introduce myself. Ernest grabbed a shirt, introduced himself, and shook my hand. "Where should I put my stuff?" I asked, assuming there was a locker room or cubbyholes located in the back. Ernest informed me that the gym's patrons stored their gear in the very walkway that I was standing in. So I set my gym bag on the floor along the wall, placed my backpack on top of it, and tucked my shoes underneath one of the chairs.

As I began to check out my surroundings, I noticed that the training area was about a quarter of the size of CSC's and most of the walls were lined with wrestling mats. Located towards the back of the mat space were three heavy bags and two end-to-end bags. A speed bag hung inside the front window, and a few grappling dummies could be found either lying around or leaning against the wall. Elite Combat Sports Center was run a lot like a boxing gym, and conditioning was a common theme among all of the classes that I participated in.

Next, I traveled with two of my Jiu-Jitsu instructors, Andy Wefald and Sean Roberts, to Professor¹³ Daniel "Montanha" de Lima's Gracie Barra Jiu-Jitsu Academy located in Miami, Florida. Professor Montanha, another one of Joe Wilk's past instructors, is a third-degree black belt who boasts an amazing record in the world of BJJ. The academy is located in South Miami, and was roughly the same size as CSC, one of its affiliate schools. Knowing that it is not uncommon for fighters to train at several different types of gyms, I falsely assumed there would be several MMA fighters enrolled in the Jiu-Jitsu academy. I obtained the professor's permission and for comparison purposes proceeded to take field notes regarding the layout of the gym and the structure of its classes. Students were verbally informed of my presence, but no interview data was acquired at this location.

¹² The gym has since moved to a new location, which is advertised as being "bigger and better, with tons of new equipment."

¹³ A person who earns a Black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu also achieves the status of "Professor."

During my stay in Miami I learned that there were a couple of American Top Team (ATT) gyms in the area. I took a cab to the closest one visiting the ATT in Doral, Florida on June 22, 2012. This MMA gym is owned and operated by Christopher Silva, a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu black belt and MMA fighter. Christopher was the first person to actually read the entire consent form. Others just glanced at it, listened to my spiel, and promptly signed it, but not Christopher. He seemed genuinely concerned that I may bad mouth the sport of MMA; cause it to appear “brutal” or “barbaric.” A concern that was not unwarranted, as other researchers had duped him in the past.

While some had portrayed the sport in a negative light, others were never heard from again. I assured him that my intent was not to give the sport a “bad name,” and promised to contact him once I had completed the study. The ATT Doral training facility was the largest MMA gym I visited. Unlike other gyms, when I walked through the front door I found myself in a space that slightly resembled that of a family room. To my left, in the corner, was a small section of puzzle mats for children to play on. A foosball table sat a little more out in the open and a few more paces in was an area containing a couch, some chairs, a coffee- and end tables. On one of the end tables was a small stack of children’s books, and across from the couch, a television. A video game system, complete with games and a couple of remote controls were attached to the TV.

Next to this area towards the back of the room was the front counter. I had called ahead, so I quickly introduced myself to the two women sitting behind the counter and Christopher. We further discussed the purpose of the study, and after addressing his past experiences with researchers as well as his current concerns, he signed the consent form granting me access to his gym. I began by asking Christopher some questions about himself and his career, the gym, its classes, and his relationship with the students. Approximately 20-30 minutes later he excused himself from the conversation so that he could head into the gym’s training area to teach one of his classes, at which point I was left to wonder around the building.

A long hallway running down the center of the gym seemed to cut the building in half. From front to back, on the left side, were the lobby, front desk, some offices (most of the doors were closed), and the restrooms (male and female). The entire other side of the building was divided into several different training areas. Starting at the back of the room and moving

forward, there was a wall of heavy bags and then a matted area. The mats in this space were different from the other gyms' mats, more like the flooring found in traditional gyms.

The "striking area" was separated from the space in front of it by a small set of bleachers that appeared to primarily be used by the gym's students for storing their belongings during class. I however used them to spectate and take a few field notes. Sitting on these bleachers and facing the striking area, I could see a couple of closed doors. They were located towards the back of the room on the right-hand side and my assumption was that they were either additional offices or storage spaces. To my left, a little closer to the bleachers, was a boxing ring with a heavy bag hanging from the ceiling down into the center of it. Turning my back towards the striking area and facing the front of the room, there was a six-sided cage to my right and a jiu-jitsu/grappling area lined with Zebra mats in front of that. Facing this matted space was a larger set of bleachers, where some students had placed their gear and a few spectators had accumulated.¹⁴ A cage wall at the far end of the grappling area separated this space from the facility's strength and conditioning area, and from where I was sitting I could see that this part of the gym housed items such as free weights, tractor tires, and sledgehammers. Lastly, at the very front of the training area were two large garage doors.

I decided to take a brief hiatus from conducting research in July, but resumed data collection in early August with a visit to Grindhouse Mixed Martial Arts (Grindhouse) in Lee's Summit, Missouri. This gym was owned by Brian Davidson, an MMA fighter, and operated by James Krause an MMA fighter who recently made his UFC debut. The first thing I noticed upon entering Grindhouse was the large matted space to my right. It was framed on its left-hand side by a cage-wall that ran the length of the building. A cage door served as an entrance to this space and attached to it was a yellow sign that read "CAUTION" at the top, "THIS IS SPARTA" at the bottom. In between these statements were two stick figures and it appeared as though the one on the left had kicked the one on the right hard enough to make him fall backwards.

To my left was a vending machine containing some fairly non-traditional vending machine items; mouth guards, protein bars, and sports drinks. In the corner next to it, somewhat sectioned off from the rest of the room, was an area containing gym t-shirts and other MMA merchandise. The gym's front desk was also located in this vicinity, and this is where I found the

¹⁴ Olympic Judoka Miles Porter was visiting the gym and teaching the jiu-jitsu class some Judo takedowns.

gym's owner and manager engaged in a conversation about marketing when I arrived. I sat my belongings down on one of three or four chairs facing the training area, not wanting to interrupt. Looking through the cage wall into the training area, I could see a small, rectangular slab of concrete located in the lower right-hand corner of the room. There were a few chairs located there, but during my visit I rarely saw anyone sit in them. Instead, they served as storage units for the students' shoes, gear, and other belongings.

My sixth and final gym visit was to Janjira Muay Thai Kansas (JMTK), located in Wichita, Kansas. I had been to JMTK and met owner and operated Andy Zerger a few years before. Zerger is a kickboxer and a self-proclaimed "journeyman." This is a term I had heard before, but Andy also defined it during our conversation. He said to me, "what this means is that I have no manager, I take fights all over at the last minute, I am tough and will put on a good show, but I am not supposed to win." He started martial arts at a very young age and has owned and operated several different types of martial arts gyms over the years. While he still entertains the idea of competing in more kickboxing matches, he expressed no desire to become an MMA fighter.

At the time of my visit JMTK was located on South Oliver Street, but can now be found in the Genesis Health Club located at 13th and West Street. I have not been to the new facility, but will briefly describe the gym for you as it was when I visited. A small flight of stairs led to the gym's entrance, and I could hear music playing as I walked through the door. A bunch of flyers and fight posters hung on the wall right inside the front door, and like other gyms JMTK had a garage door and several belts hanging on two of its walls. Turning to my left put me face-to-face with a boxing ring on risers. A small walkway led past the ring and the front desk, and a corner extending beyond the front counter was home to a cage. There were some bleachers in front of the cage, facing the gym's mat space. I sat here to conduct interviews and take field notes during my stay. Sitting here placed the cage at my back and gave me a good view of the entire gym. Puzzle mats lined the floor in front of me and several mirrors lined the wall to my right. Along the left-hand side of the room were the cage, 8 to 10 heavy bags, and what appeared to be an office tucked away in the far left-hand corner of the room. At the back of the room in between the aforementioned office and a bathroom located in the far right-hand corner, was a smaller, rectangular-shaped boxing ring.

You should now have a slightly better idea of what an MMA gym looks like. I have tried not to overwhelm the reader with tons of details about all six sites, but instead described portions of each gym in hopes of constructing a comprehensive image of where the modern day warrior, known as the MMA fighter, trains both his/her body and mind for battle. Although I tried to highlight some of the similarities and differences among the research sites, I would like to take a moment to further compare and contrast these locations to more traditional weightlifting or physical fitness (a.k.a. “cookie cutter”) gyms as well as to one another. This will be followed by a discussion of the other methods I used to gather data about the sport and its athletes.

MMA gyms are similar to “cookie cutter” gyms in that they offer memberships and require patrons to sign an injury waiver, stating that they will not sue the gym should they suffer an injury as a result of their participation in the gym’s classes or activities. This however, is where the similarities between the two types of gyms stop. For example, many of the sites I visited were fairly difficult to find, and were dimly lit, with concrete or brick walls and tile or other flooring systems that could be easily mopped. Only a few of the research sites provided members with a locker room or place to shower and most locations lacked carpet. From the preceding discussion it should also be clear that the equipment used in an MMA gym is very different from the equipment used in a weightlifting/fitness gym.

No you are not going to find a bunch of machines lined in rows at your local MMA gym. Instead, you will find cages and/or cage walls, grappling dummies, striking equipment, tractor tires, sledgehammers, kettlebells, and the dreaded ropes. Unlike “cookie cutter” gyms an MMA gym’s primary training area is “the mat.” The activities taking place here require that one remove their shoes and be comfortable having others inside of their “bubble.” Yes, due to the nature of the training those attending classes must come to terms with the fact that they will be leaving the gym each night soaked in at least 5 other peoples’ sweat, and with one or more of the following attached to their clothing and/or being: bodily fluids, toe or finger nails, dead skin, or others’ body hair. Having trained in an MMA gym for quite some time, I was well aware that each gym’s “mat space” had at one time or another collected the blood, sweat, tears, and pubic hair of everyone who had ever trained there.

Most MMA gym patrons do not wear the typical athletic gear such as Nike, Reebok, or Adidas, but brand names like “Clinch Gear,” “Jaco,” “Animal Instinct,” and “Combat Sports International.” Depending on the class, students in an MMA gym may also be wearing a Jiu-Jitsu

gi and belt, boxing gloves and shin guards, or MMA sparring gloves.¹⁵ Mouthpieces are highly suggested, and rarely will you find an individual listening to an iPod, as it is both difficult and dangerous to do so while practicing or “going live.” Stereo systems are often used to blast music across the entire gym, and during my site visits I heard everything from rap to rock, to 80’s, country, and pop. What was playing seemed to depend on who had reached the stereo first. Finally, commenting on the smell of these locations is often met with rhetoric from these gyms’ members, who claim that it is nothing more than the smell of “hard work.”

Site visits were included as a means of data collection for two reasons. First, by visiting the gyms and participating in the process, I hoped to learn more about the practices and processes involved in becoming a fighter as well as the environment in which they take place. Second, I thought that there was no better way to meet both male and female fighters that might be willing to share their experiences as MMA fighters with me. While I definitely learned more about the spartanization process and met many male MMA fighters, approximately half of the women I met had no aspirations of becoming a fighter. They were more likely to be attending classes for health and/or fitness reasons. To put it in perspective, before I began conducting this study I had only met two women who had actually fought before. Jen “Cold” Case is one of these women and one of very few (less than 5 maybe) female training partners that I have had in the past six years. To say I was consumed with the possibility of hearing other women’s stories is an understatement, but when I got to Elite Combat Sports Center I did not meet a single woman. At Gracie Barra Jiu-Jitsu Miami, I had the pleasure of meeting one woman, a BJJ practitioner who was about to graduate high school. According to Christopher, seven women were enrolled in ATT’s classes at the time of my visit and only two of them were fighters. This number paled in comparison to the 80 men enrolled at ATT, 15 of which were MMA fighters. Although I was able to meet one of this gym’s female fighters, she was in a hurry and did not have time for an interview. I met two more female fighters at Grindhouse and conducted an interview with one of them. Finally, one of the four women I met at JMTK was training for her first fight at the time of my visit. We visited a bit, but she since she hadn’t fought yet I did not ask her to participate in a full interview.

¹⁵ Small, finger-less gloves similar to those worn inside the cage; the only difference is the amount of padding found in the glove, making them safer for training.

Upon returning home from JMTK I found myself physically, mentally, and financially drained. I rarely traveled prior to becoming an MMA practitioner and wasn't used to being on the road so much. I was unaware and optimistic that traveling expenses would not be an issue, but the costs involved in staying at each location for even a short period of time turned out to be much more than I had anticipated. Fortunately, I packed food, stayed with friends when I could, and was thankfully not charged class or visitor fees by any of the gyms that I visited. After assessing the additional difficulties that I was having trying to balance the project, work, and training, I determined that site visits would no longer be a feasible data collection option.

The question I asked myself as I returned to the methodological drawing board was how could I quickly gather another 15-20 interviews? I concluded that by creating a Facebook page for the study, I could easily inform others of my research and need for additional participants; and so the *MMA Research Forum* was born. My initial posts contained brief synopses of the study's purpose, research procedures and data collection efforts. Then I began to regularly extend invites (both through the page as well as private messages) to potential participants, informing fighters they could participate in the project in one or more of the following ways:

- Answering the *MMA Research Forum's* question of the day
- Clicking a survey link included in the post or message
- Messaging me to find out more about the opportunity to be involved in a telephone interview

The *MMA Research Forum's* "Research Question of the Day" was often pulled directly from the study's interview schedule, and allowed fighters as well as other members of the social networking site's MMA community, to weigh-in on various topics. On average three to five individuals answered the question of the day, and rarely did the same people provide an answer to more than one of these questions. I would occasionally ask respondents for clarification and this would often turn into a brief dialogue between the participant and me, as I attempted to gain additional insight into that person's point of view. At one point in time, people following the *MMA Research Forum* were also given an opportunity to pose their own questions.

Created as a supplemental means of gathering information, the study's survey was developed using Axio, an online survey system available to graduate students. The survey (Appendix C) mirrored the study's interview schedule and contained 6 closed- and 29 open-

ended questions. Participants were given the option, but were not required, to provide personal information such as their name, telephone number, or email address. The survey was posted on the *MMA Research Forum*, my Facebook profile, the study's blog and twitter account, as well as on a couple of online MMA forums.

My experience with posting the survey on MMA forums was a negative one. For whatever reason, my call for help was not received well by the people who frequented the forums. While some posted rude comments on the message board containing the study's information and survey link, others went as far as to click on the survey link and completed the survey with bogus information; mocking the study and its purpose. The data these individuals provided was both vulgar and sexual at times. Upon discovering the falsely completed surveys I immediately canceled my memberships to these forums, and requested that my message boards be deleted. I was disheartened and discouraged, afraid that these inconsiderate "punks" might thwart my entire survey effort. But fortunately, I obtained a total of 18 completed, useable surveys. The data was analyzed separately and select survey results are provided in Appendix D.

I had a much different experience using Facebook however. The *MMA Research Forum* currently has 273 "likes," and several MMA fighters used the page to respond to my call for help. Contact information was also gathered from several additional fighters by setting up a booth near the locker room of the *Victory Fighting Championships* (VFC) Wichita 1¹⁶ in April 2013. Fighters participating in a telephone interview were verbally informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and right to refuse participation at any time. Their verbal consent was obtained using a digital voice recorder, which was also used to capture the content of the interviews. Many of these fighters provided me with contact information of friends or training partners who might also be willing to participate in an interview. I reached the majority of the study's female participants in this way, speaking to a total of 11 female fighters and one female jiu-jitsu practitioner who at the time of the interview had no plans of becoming an MMA fighter. Eleven men also participated in a telephone interview, bringing me to a total of 48 interviews.

Now that the data collection process has come to an end, the *MMA Research Forum* and my Facebook profile are being used to keep the study's participants informed of my progress. I

¹⁶ The Victory Fighting Championships (VFC) is owned and operated by Ryan Stoddard, who also manages several MMA fighters including Joe Wilk, owner of CSC.

would eventually like to utilize the social networking site as a means of creating a dialogue about the study’s findings. As is noted by Stewart and Draper (2009), a key task involved in leaving the field is to convey research findings to participants not only because they should be able to benefit from the results, but also to check the interpretation of the results (132). In other words, this type of reporting back process would aid in the verification of research results, facilitate communication amongst MMA fighters and others in the MMA community, and hopefully inspire future research (Stewart & Draper 2009).

In sum, while you may find the above description of MMA gyms to be repugnant or disturbing my intent was not to provoke unease, but instead to accurately depict the spatial setting in which the spartanization process takes place. Although a complete examination of these spaces has not been provided here, it is worth noting that the atmosphere in an MMA gym may be off-putting to some. I guess what I am trying to say is that MMA gyms should be seen as “Spartan” facilities for “Spartan” people. As a result, these spaces may even make some people feel welcome, while excluding others; something which I have not fully explored here, but may choose to further examine in future research.

The data collection process began with six site visits taking place over the course of a six-month time period. Names of the gyms, their locations, and the dates of my visits are summarized in the table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Research Sites

Gym	Location	Dates Visited
Combative Sports Center (CSC)	Manhattan, Kansas	April 9, 2012- May 29, 2012
Elite Combat Sports Center	Hutchinson, Kansas	June 4-9, 2012
Gracie Barra Jiu-Jitsu Miami	Miami, Florida	June 19-23, 2012
American Top Team (ATT)	Doral, Florida	June 22, 2012
Grindhouse Mixed Martial Arts (Grindhouse)	Lee’s Summit, Missouri	August 8-11, 2012
Janjira Muay Thai Kansas (JMTK)	Wichita, Kansas	September 12-14, 2012

Looking at table 4.1, you can see that the majority of the gym’s I visited were located in Kansas, and with the exception of CSC, I spent 1-4 days at each location. Interviews were conducted with fighters willing to spare a moment (read 30-60 minutes) of their time. Jottings in my field

notebooks took place before, during, and after my attendance at each location, and were expanded upon over time.

The *MMA Research Forum*, a Facebook page, was created for the study when I realized how time-consuming and financially draining traveling was becoming. An online survey containing questions from the interview schedule was developed using Axio, and distributed via the study's facebook page, twitter, blogs, and MMA Internet forums. Finally, I obtained contact information from several more fighters by setting up a booth near the locker room of the *Victory Fighting Championships (VFC) Fight Night Wichita 1* in April 2013.

The aforementioned data collection efforts resulted in a total of 48 interviews (31 male MMA fighters, 14 female MMA fighters, 1 male kickboxer, and 2 female jiu-jitsu practitioners) and 18 surveys (12 men, 6 women). Interview and survey data were analyzed separately, and portions of all 48 interviews were transcribed for analysis purposes. Interviews conducted with the kickboxer (male) and two jiu-jitsu practitioners (both female) were ultimately excluded from the analysis. Information from these interviews has however been included where relevant. All of the study's demographic data was analyzed in Excel using the most basic of quantitative analyses. Thus descriptive statistics such as frequency and percent, means and standard deviations will be provided when appropriate. Interview and open-ended survey data were qualitatively coded for themes, using a simple coding process that also took place in Excel¹⁷.

Curious as to who participates in this sport? In the next chapter, meet the study's interview participants. The chapter begins with an examination of the fighters' socio-demographics. Things such as the participants' age, race, gender, education and occupation are highlighted. Readers are also provided information about the fighters' sports participation histories and motives for participation in MMA. The chapter concludes by providing readers with the participants' fight demographics. Find out what their cage names are, whether they are amateur or professional fighters, and other things such as their fight weights, records, and future goals/aspirations.

¹⁷ Questions were analyzed in separate tabs with participant responses inhabiting column A. Themes were identified and placed in individual cells across the tab's top row. Response categorization was performed by placing a number "1" in the column corresponding to the theme(s) found within the response. Frequency and percentage of response were determined using the appropriate Excel formulas.

Chapter 5 - Are MMA Gyms Really Lightning Rods for Weirdos?

Now if I were you I would be asking myself who participates in this sport and why? You may be thinking that there has to be something wrong with a person who makes a conscious decision to “square off” with another person locked inside of a cage, and some of this study’s participants would agree with you. I have heard Joe Wilk (owner of CSC) say, on more than one occasion, “MMA gyms are lightning rods for weirdos.” Is this true? Are MMA fighters “weirdos” as Wilk jokingly claims? Are they barbaric, inherently violent individuals or are they just like everyone else? A primary purpose of the current study was to learn more about who these individuals really are, and what motivated them to become MMA fighters.

All of the study’s participants were at least 18 years of age and in order to participate in the study they had to have fought in a minimum of one cage fight. Participants agreeing to an face-to-face interview were required to sign a consent form¹⁸ which informed the fighters that their interviews would be both tape recorded and transcribed for inclusion in current as well as future research. All audio files and field notes were transcribed with fidelity, and participant narratives have been accurately reported to the best of my ability. It is acknowledged that what the fighters said cannot necessarily be taken at face value, because as MMA enthusiasts they are also advocates for the sport. They agreed however to go ‘on record’ thereby recognizing that they could be held accountable by others for what they said. In addition, the study’s findings can be read in a variety of ways, and readers are both invited and encouraged to entertain alternative interpretations of the current research.

The study’s initial interviews were conducted with fighters training out of Combative Sport Center (CSC). Although I consider these participants my teammates, I did not treat them any differently. It is possible however, that these individuals might have been more open with me as a result of our relationship as training partners. I used these initial interviews as a means of testing out the study’s interview schedule, which at the time consisted of 11 questions and over two-dozen probes. I began each interview by asking the participant to provide me with some background information. The focus was primarily on the fighters’ socio-demographic

¹⁸ The consent form was summarized for those agreeing to participate in a telephone interview, and these individuals were asked to verbally confirm their consent on record over the phone.

information such as age, race, education, and occupation, but I also used this as an opportunity to learn about each fighter's sport participation history.

Next, I asked a series of questions about the participants' involvement in MMA. Fighters and I discussed the length of time they had been participating in the sport, their cage names, fight weights, and records. We also talked about their motivation for participating in the sport, training regimens, and the methods they use to mentally prepare themselves to enter the cage. This section of the interview schedule concluded with questions like, "What do you have to give up in order to be a fighter?" and "What are your aspirations or long-term goals?" After inquiring about the fighters' experiences and interactions with coaches and training partners, I asked the fighters to discuss the reactions of friends and family to their decision to participate in MMA. These interviews concluded with a series of self-reflection questions, which were eventually dropped from the interview schedule because they failed to elicit responses from several of the fighters (some indicated that they felt as though they had somewhat alluded to the answer to these questions throughout their conversation with me). At the end of each interview I asked the participant if s/he had anything else they would like to add, and provided them with an opportunity to ask any lingering questions they may have had about the study or its purpose. I adapted my approach to conducting interviews as I went, and was eventually able to gather the same amount of information using fewer questions.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in my or the fighters' homes, at the gym during the site visits, and in coffee shops. These interviews lasted between one and two hours, which was substantially longer than those conducted by phone. All telephone interviews were conducted from my home using a cell phone placed on speaker and a digital voice recorder. On average these interviews lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. Participants were able to "go off record" at any time, and were assured that any information deemed to be embarrassing or potentially harmful would not be attributed to them without their permission. All interviewees granted me permission to use their real names and cage names in the study.

In the paragraphs that follow, you will be introduced to the study's participants. I begin by providing descriptive statistics of the sample's socio-demographics. This is accompanied by what I like to refer to as the participants' 'fight demographics.' These include things such as the fighters' cage names, records, and fight weights. The chapter concludes with an examination of the fighters' sports participation history, motives for becoming MMA fighters, and long-term

goals or aspirations. You will learn that many of the study’s participants have been athletes their whole lives, and contrary to popular belief most are educated. Furthermore, the majority of the fighters I interviewed were employed and a portion of them reported raising families. It will be left up to you, the reader, to decide just how “weird” these individuals really are.

A total of 45 MMA fighters were interviewed for this study. Twenty-two (22) of these individuals participated in a face-to-face interview, and an additional 23 in a telephone interview. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the sample was male and thirty-one percent (31%) was female. The frequency and percent of male and females participating in each type of interview is presented in the table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Number of Participants by Data Collection Activity

Data collection activity	Frequency (Percent)		
	Male (n=31)	Female (n=14)	Totals (n=45)
Face-to-face interview	20 (64.5%)	2 (14.3%)	22 (48.9%)
Telephone interview	11 (35.5%)	12 (85.7%)	23 (51.1%)

The majority (82%) of the study’s interview participants were between the ages of 20 and 30. A complete breakdown of the participants’ ages can be found in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Age

Age Group	Frequency (Percent)		
	Male (n=31)	Female (n=14)	Totals (n=45)
19 or younger	1 (3.2%)	--	1 (2.2%)
20-24	9 (29.0%)	5 (35.7%)	14 (31.1%)
25-30	16 (51.6%)	7 (50.0%)	23 (51.1%)
31-35	3 (9.7%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (8.9%)
36-40	--	1 (7.1%)	1 (2.2%)
40+	2 (6.5%)	--	2 (4.4%)

Twenty-four (24) men and thirteen (13) women reported being of White or Caucasian descent. Only four (9%) of these men and women reported being of more than one race/ethnicity; three of these individuals were male and one was female. Other reported race and/or ethnicities include African American ($n=6$), Hispanic ($n=4$), and Indonesian ($n=1$). Women were more likely to report having a Master’s ($n=2$), Doctoral ($n=1$), or Professional degree ($n=1$), but the sample was well-educated overall with eighty percent (80%) of the interviewees indicating having attended at least “Some College.” The frequency and percent of reported education levels is provided in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Education

Education	Frequency (Percent)		
	Male ($n=31$)	Female ($n=14$)	Total ($n=45$)
Less than high school	--	--	--
High school/GED	7 (22.6%)	2 (14.3%)	9 (20.0%)
Some College	18 (58.1%)	2 (14.3%)	20 (44.4%)
2-year college degree	3 (9.7%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (8.9%)
4-year college degree	3 (9.7%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (17.8%)
Master’s degree	--	2 (14.3%)	2 (4.4%)
Doctoral degree	--	1 (7.1%)	1 (2.2%)
Professional degree (JD, MD)	--	1 (7.1%)	1 (2.2%)

All but two of the fighters (91%) were employed in either a full- or part-time position. The portion of the sample that was currently unemployed included a disabled veteran (male) and two students (one male, one female). Men were more likely than women to be employed as “professional fighters” (6 men, 1 woman), or in other MMA-related jobs (7 men, 0 women) such as gym owner, gym manager, gym instructor, or fight promoter. Both men and women also reported a variety of other occupations. For example, female fighters reported occupations such as police officer, lawyer, EMT/nurse, small business owner, and assistant professor. Reported

professions of male fighters include dairy farmer, delivery driver, manager, medical assistant, and firefighter. Although it was not a question included in the interview schedule, during this portion of the interview 20% (5 men, 4 women) of the participants mentioned that they were also trying to raise a family (i.e., were caring for at least one child).

Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the women who were interviewed and 68% of the men had “cage names.” These nicknames were unique to the individual and had been given to them by their coaches, teammates, family or friends. Sited reasons for not having a cage name included “never having been given one” and “not having picked one out.” Some of the female fighters’ cage names include “The Piranha,” “The Lady Killer,” “The Showstopper,” and “The Showgirl.” Men, on the other hand, reported cages names such as “The Naked Ninja,” “Caveman,” “The Rooster,” “Monkey Mack,” and “The Smashing Machine.” For a full list of the participants’ cage names see Appendix E.

The men in the sample reported fighting at various weights ranging from 125 to 205 pounds, and the women’s reported fight weights fell between 105 and 235 pounds. Male fighters indicated having anywhere from two to eighteen (18) amateur fights underneath their belts, and as few as four or as many as 34 professional fights. Female fighters had far fewer amateur and professional fights, with ranges between 1 and 9 and 1 and 5, respectively. A little over half (64%) of the sample reported being currently involved in the sport as an amateur, and men were more likely than women to have achieved the status of “professional fighter.” Table 5.4 contains the frequency and percent of the participants reporting on their current level of involvement in the sport.

Table 5.4 Current Level of Involvement

Level of involvement	Frequency (Percent)		
	Male (n=31)	Female (n=14)	Total (n=45)
Amateur	21 (67.7%)	8 (57.1%)	29 (64.4%)
Professional	10 (32.3%)	6 (42.9%)	16 (35.6%)

The majority (91%) of this study’s interviewees had participated in one or more other sports prior to training for and competing in mixed martial arts fighting contests. While thirty (30) fighters indicated having participated in traditional sports such as football, baseball, basketball, or soccer, twenty-nine (29) reported having competed in combats sports like wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, and traditional martial art (i.e., Karate and Tae Kwon Do). Reported sports not falling into one of these two categories include gymnastics, wakeboarding, and skateboarding. Table 5.5 shows the number of men and women who reported participating in each of these sporting categories.

Table 5.5 Sports Participation History

Prior Sports Played	Frequency* (Percent)		
	Male (n=28)	Female (n=13)	Total (n=41)
Traditional Sports (i.e., football, baseball, basketball, soccer)	22 (78.6%)	8 (61.5%)	30 (73.2%)
Combat Sports (i.e., wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, traditional martial arts)	21 (75.0%)	8 (61.5%)	29 (70.7%)
Other	3 (10.7%)	1 (7.7%)	4 (9.8%)

*Percentages are calculated using the number of participants who indicated having played sports prior to becoming a mixed martial artist. Participant responses could be coded into more than one theme so frequencies may sum to more than the total number of participants and percentages may sum to more than 100%.

Interviewees were asked if their participation in other sports had prepared them for fighting in a cage, and a little less than three-quarters felt as though it had benefited them in some way. The most frequently cited benefit was “athleticism.” “Eye-hand coordination,” “footwork,” and “endurance” are just a few of the athletic abilities fighters reported having gained or improved upon by participating in other sports. Others indicated being “strong” or “stronger” and more “explosive.” The discussion about how sports had physically prepared these individuals for fighting often turned to how their participation had also helped them to acquire some of the technical knowledge required to fight. For example, Chance “Half-Ass” Thackston discussed “wrestling as another form of fighting” and stated it had helped him with his “mat awareness.” Wrestling also taught Drew Dober a few things including “how to control [his]

opponents on the ground.” Women, on the other hand, reported knowledge gains in terms of having more awareness of “hip movement” and “weight transfers.”

Participants also indicated that they felt playing other sports had instilled a competitive drive within them. In an interview with Dave “The Caveman” Rickels, a Bellator lightweight tournament champion, Dave said “sports give you a competitive attitude and that carries over to MMA.” Others agreed with Rickels and considered this to be another benefit of having participated in sports prior to becoming MMA fighters. According to Laura “Fancy” Sanko, “anything that brings out your competitive spirit or requires you to be disciplined prepares you for fighting in the cage.” Several additional fighters also believed that training for and competing in other sports had taught them the discipline needed to be an MMA fighter. For example, James Krause indicated that playing sports had helped him with “setting up a solid work ethic and being disciplined.” Training partners Manuel “Man Dog” Meraz and Cody Carillo agreed. Meraz stated he had obtained a work ethic that led him to “always want to be the last one standing,” and Carillo said other sports “taught him about hard work and perseverance.” Gregg Van De Creek highlighted the importance of discipline stating that MMA, like wrestling, “is not a team-based sport making [each individual] accountable for [his/her] own training.”

Mental toughness was another thing the fighters felt that they had acquired as a result of having played other sports. For example, Tyler Bell an amateur fighter from Herington, Kansas, said “the mental toughness that I needed to make it through a wrestling practice really coincides well with fighting.” This was also true for Jessica Philippus, one of two women in the study who indicated having been a wrestler. She discussed being the only girl on the team for four years, stating that her coach and team “put [her] through the wringer trying to get [her] to quit and [she] didn’t.” Others believed that individual sports had mentally prepared them for the cage more than team-based sports did, because they could only depend on themselves to get the win. According to Ben Wallingford the important part of “playing any sport is making yourself mentally strong and learning to overcome when you are not having your best day.”

Not everyone who had participated in other sports believed that their prior sport participation had prepared them for fighting in a cage however. According to Ashley Cummins, a police officer who currently fights for the Invicta Fighting Championships, “MMA is a unique sport” and she felt her participation in Tae Kwon Do (TKD) was “a waste of time; not relevant to fighting.” This sentiment was echoed by Wendy Julian, who replied “MMA is completely

different.” She had been a martial artist most of her life and noted that some of the sports had helped for obvious reasons, but Wendy was ultimately “not sure that previous experience really helped [her] all that much.” Giovanni Lemm, fight promoter and former fighter, also said “team sports do not prepare people for MMA; at least they didn’t for me.”

Several fighters offered explanations as to how other sports and/or activities had prepared them for MMA. For example, Nick “Taco” Garrett a U.S. Army veteran explained that, “a lot of stuff [he] did in the military carried over to MMA.” He reported “knowing it would be bad, but eventually it would be over.” Nick went on to say that this “carries over in sparring with people who are better than [him].” Nick’s training partner, Josh “Gizmo” Martin, indicated that he had an opportunity during college to attend a “Modern Army Combatives Program. Like Nick, “Gizmo” felt that this program had somewhat prepared him for MMA.

Jessica Philippus, on the other hand, reported that her participation in gymnastics had not only “helped with flexibility,” but also mentally prepared her because “running full speed at an object (i.e., the pommel horse)” can be intimidating. She believed that her participation in gymnastics had ultimately helped “broaden her horizons.” Then there was Russell Batista, a former bull rider, who stated that “bull riding helped with mental toughness and dealing with the adrenaline” rush. And Matt “The Predator” Hensley explained that skateboarding prepared him for dealing with a “body that aches” all the time. Lastly, Laura “Fancy” Sanko provided a response that I found to be quite interesting. Sanko said,

I went to college to be a piano performance major, and would say that more than [her] physical pursuits, being a pianist probably helped her more than anything; just in terms of being willing to put in a lot of hard work and just hours of creating muscle memory.

Participants were then asked to describe what motivated them to become MMA fighters. For a third of the fighters that I interviewed training and/or competing in the sports they had played growing up was no longer feasible. These individuals often stated that they became MMA fighters because they “missed training” or “working out” and “competing.” For example, Russell Batista, a dairy farmer from Nebraska said, “I couldn’t wrestle anymore and I thought it would be the closest thing to wrestling.” Rob Kimmons, a former UFC fighter, echoed this statement noting the community college he attended “didn’t have wrestling and [he] wanted to do

something to continue competing.” Becoming an MMA fighter was also about competition for Ernest “Thunder” Bell. Bell explained, and others agreed, that “it’s hard to just come and train, you got to have something that you’re training for.”

Women also noted that their decision to fight was one based on the need or desire to compete. Laura Butler, an amateur fighter with a record of one and zero, said she chose MMA to “satisfy the urge to compete.” Marissa “The Showstopper” Smith could identify with this statement, but indicated that her decision to participate was also based on being part of “the team;” which she also referred to as “family.” “The Showstopper” went on to say “being able to punch somebody in the face, that’s really nice too.” Finally, for Jina “The Showgirl” Cole, what began as “something to do for fun” turned in to a desire to compete, and she ultimately decided to “make fighting her career.”

Some fighters described becoming an MMA fighter as a “natural progression.” For life long athlete Drew Dober, “one thing led to another.” He wrestled in high school, took up Muay Thai, and then Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I said, “So what I hear you saying is you started learning one sport, became interested in another, and before you knew it you were entering a cage?” Drew said, “Absolutely.” Female fighter, Wendy Julian, had a similar story. She reported “starting martial arts when she was young.” Julian, a lawyer, discovered the sport at the age of 16. She was attending a gym “where people were doing it (MMA).” She indicated becoming an MMA fighter was a “natural progression as [she] has gotten older.”

Steve “The Naked Ninja” Nichols had also participated in martial arts growing up. When he decided to get back into them he joined a gym, and indicated that some of the guys there were “doing MMA training and they were excited to have [him] around.” It seems “The Naked Ninja” “was a unique body for these men to have around” because he is a tall guy, with long limbs. He started helping with MMA classes, and before Steve knew it he too was entering the cage. Other men had similar experiences. Nick “Taco” Garrett, for example, was also at a gym where “some guys were training and needed another sparring partner.” They asked “Taco” to put on some gloves and join them. He eventually decided that he would take one fight, and as he gained confidence he made the “decision to go as far [he] could.”

When “Monkey Mack” Marcus Mack was in the Army he participated in the Modern Army Combatives program. As a result, he was qualified to teach kids classes on post and recalled that one of the children’s fathers “had a fight coming up.” This man was also short on

training partners and asked for “Monkey Mack’s” help. According to Marcus, at some point someone “dropped off of a fight card” the guy he had been training with “was fighting on.” Marcus filled that spot and has been fighting ever since.” Finally, Sarah “The Piranha” Goodlaxon, said “I didn’t start out wanting to fight, it just happened.” She also described a scenario in which she just “naturally progressed” into an MMA fighter. “The Piranha” told me about going to a gym with a friend where there was a “girl hitting pads,” and “I didn’t understand it” she said. She was intrigued by it (the pad work) and decided that she wanted to try it (stand-up/boxing). “I didn’t even want to spar at first” Sarah said, “but once I started sparring and rolling live, I figured I might as well try it.”

Other individuals reported becoming MMA fighters “to prove to themselves or others” they could do it. While some indicated being “influenced and/or encouraged by others,” others reported becoming involved in order to “test their skills or abilities.” Eight additional themes were found among men’s responses. Of these themes, “watched it on TV” received the highest frequency of response. Rob “The Rosedale Reaper” Kimmons said

I was a huge fan of the UFC from the time it came out. I would rent the VHS tapes from Blockbuster and watch them.

Jake “The Librarian” Lindsey also reported having watched the sport both on television and the internet. He described his choice to become an MMA fighter as follows:

You know when you’re a little kid and you see a really motivational movie and right after the movie you start doing whatever it is they were doing. It was kind of like that, I was like I’m going to start training.

“The Librarian” admitted however that for him the motivation to fight has since changed. He said “being famous and all that isn’t going to be all that bad, but I want some money now; it’s more about the money.” He went on to say,

Now I’m looking for that money and breaking into the big show.”
But even if I had a really good job and got paid tons of money

where I didn't need the money, I would still do it. I would just do it on a much more casual basis than I am doing right now.

Male fighters also cited "success" as a motivating factor. Others talked about the "health/fitness" appeal of participation and some said the sport provided them with "structure." It seems the sport was helping to keep more than one male fighter "out of trouble." The responses of one man and four women were grouped into the "other" category. The male respondent, Pake "The Mountain Man" McNally, said "I just want to face that fear." When asked to elaborate "The Mountain Man" added,

It's (fighting) unnatural, for me anyway. Like I hate hurting people... I mean I like dominating people in the cage and on the mat, being in total control, but I really do not like punching people in the face and I want to get over that. I want to get past that.

But for Ashley "Smashley" Cummins, participating in the sport is all about the challenge. She said "I always like challenging myself and in my opinion MMA is the toughest sport in the world mentally and physically." Women also reported that they had "started doing it for fun" or "just wanted to do it."

In summary, the majority (69%) of the fighters participating in an interview were male. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the sample indicated being of "Caucasian" or "White" descent, and most (82%) were between the ages of 20 and 30. The sample was quite educated overall, but women were more likely than men to have completed a Master's, Doctoral, or some other professional degree. Ninety-one percent (91%) of the sample were employed and 20% were raising families. With the exception of three men and one woman, most had participated in traditional sports and/or other combat sports prior to becoming MMA fighters. A little less than three quarters of those who had participated in other sports felt that their participation in them had benefited citing things such as increased "athleticism," "technical knowledge" gains, and the development of a "competitive drive." This desire to compete was so strong many men and women indicated that it was their primary motivation to become MMA fighters. Others described becoming a fighter as a "natural progression" of events, simply stating "one thing had led to another." Additional motives for becoming a fighter reported by both men and women include

using the sport as an outlet for stress, energy, or anxiety, to prove to themselves or others they can be a fighter, and to test their skills or abilities. Motives reported only by men include things such as watching it on television and wanting to give it a try, being successful in terms of money or fame, and participating for health and/or fitness reasons.

Female fighters were slightly more likely than the male fighters to use cage names, and those men and women who did not have one reported either never having been given a cage name or never having chosen one. Whereas male participants' fight weights ranged from 125-105, women's fight weights ranged from 105 to 235 with most women falling towards the smaller end of the scale. The women in this study had far less experience in the cage than the men did, reporting having had between 1 and 9 amateur fights and 1 and 5 professional fights. As a result, men were far more likely than the women in the sample to have reached the status of professional fighter; indicating having had as few as 4 professional fights and as many as 34.

In the next chapter, readers will learn more about what kinds of physical and mental activities MMA fighters participate in as they prepare to enter the cage. This is followed by discussion of what one has to gain as well as sacrifice in pursuit of becoming an MMA fighter. Fighters will discuss needing to acquire things such as "technical skill," "discipline," and "mental toughness." Participant narratives will also be used to illustrate the sacrifices being made by these individuals as they pursue their mixed martial arts goals. Discover what the fighters' perceive is the hardest thing about being an MMA fighter, and learn more about the difficulties they encounter in terms of "finding balance," "cutting weight and/or dieting," and coping with "mental/emotional" stress.

Chapter 6 - Survival of the Fittest

I was not sure what to expect as I entered Combative Sports Center (CSC) for the very first time. The only thing that I had heard about the gym prior to my arrival was that the warm-up was difficult enough to make people quit. So I spent close to a year and a half preparing myself for what I had suspected was going to be a pretty intense workout environment. I had planned to sit and watch that day, but that game plan quickly flew out the window when Tony Goldsby (an MMA fighter and close friend of mine) walked through the door. He immediately threw a gi at me and said, “Al, put this on.”

“Oh no,” I replied. “I’m just going to watch today, see what I’m getting myself into.”

“AL PUT IT ON!” he yelled, drawing attention to where I was sitting. I quickly put the pajama-like outfit on and was struggling to figure out how to tie the white belt I had just been handed, when I was instructed to join the warm-up. This portion of the evening’s workout lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. It consisted of a variety of exercises tailored to the class, and repetitions were counted in cadence by all of those in attendance. We are eventually told to “Stretch out and get a drink!” Leaving behind body-shaped sweat prints, we created beaded trails of sweat that lead to the mat’s edge where water bottles and footwear were strewn across the floor.

Suddenly the instructor barks at us to “Bring it in!” The gym’s patrons moseyed back to the center of the room where two instructors proceeded to review a technique they had taught a few days prior. The submission was divided into a series of small steps and taught piece by piece. Students partnered up and repeated each piece chronologically, “brining it in” when told to either find out how to “clean up” the technique or to receive the next piece of instruction. This (the technique portion of class) lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, and was followed by 30-45 minutes of “rolling” or “going live,” which is also referred to as “sparring” in MMA, Muay Thai (kickboxing), and boxing classes.

I was exhausted as the class came to a close, but pleased to know that the previous year’s weightlifting, cardio, and kickboxing classes had paid off. Not only did I finish the warm-up, I made it through the entire first day of class without throwing up (something that occasionally happens to the best of us). As my journey progressed, my stamina increased and I began

participating in two or more of the gym's classes back-to-back each evening. I knew that if I wanted to feel confident enough to enter the cage, I would have to be somewhat proficient in at least two martial arts. So I attended CSC's gi and no-gi jiu-jitsu classes as well as their striking courses on a daily basis, and eventually found myself training 2-3 hours a day, 5-6 days a week.

While this might sound crazy to someone who does not participate in the sport (or know much about MMA), my research shows that most MMA fighters typically spend large amounts of time physically preparing to enter the cage. You see in a sport with no "off-season," these athletes must be ready to engage in combat at a moment's notice. Thus, MMA fighters train year round increasing the intensity of their training during what is known as a "fight camp." Male and female fighters agreed that a fight camp should ideally begin 6-8 weeks prior to the fight, but several discussed instances in which this time frame had been drastically shortened by a last minute phone call they had received asking them to "take a fight on short notice."

I requested participants forget that I had trained with them the day before or that I had informed them of my status as a practitioner of mixed martial arts, and asked them to describe their fight camps to me as if I did not know what one was. Drew Dober, a 155-pound professional fighter, fighting out of Omaha, Nebraska, likened mixed martial arts training to attending college courses. He said,

MMA gyms have kickboxing, BJJ, and wrestling classes. Some days we will start with a lecture, other days will be drills, and some days will be sparring.

On average, those who take this 'school of hard knocks' seriously, train 5-6 days a week for anywhere from 2-4 hours a day throughout the fight camps entirety. Rarely did a fighter report spending less than two hours a day in the gym, and at least two fighters indicated spending as many as six.

"To really get ready for a fight I try to make sure I am working out at least twice a day, five days a week," David "Caveman" Rickels said. When prompted to elaborate on the specifics of his training regimen, Caveman replied

I concentrate a lot on strength and conditioning types of stuff, because I believe being in the best shape is what wins most fights a lot of times. [The person] who is in better shape [wins], and I have to work out really hard to be in the best shape. I do a little bit of Jiu-Jitsu. Focus on kickboxing too, because you know that's what I started off doing mostly. I got really into the kickboxing and I think having your one skill that you are good at and toning that, keeping it good, is a good idea. But also building on your weaknesses... So I make sure to fit in time for that too.

In a telephone interview with Giovanni "The Messenger" Lemm, Giovanni said to me,

You have to be prepared to push yourself to where your body has never been before. A lot of people think they are fighters until they try to become a fighter and realize that this is a different world. You have to be able to push yourself beyond anything you have ever done before. You need fast twitch muscles, slow twitch muscles, healthy joints, and to be on your diet. You need to be able to spar, do extreme training that other people don't do, and really cross-train your body for fighting.

Jake "The Librarian" Lindsey, an undefeated professional fighter from Manhattan, Kansas, further highlighted the importance of "cross-training" reporting that

First off, you want to train a little bit of everything. You want to train your ground game. You're going to have to do your striking, then you have to do your wrestling, then you have your jiu-jitsu. Well you don't have to, but that is the general consensus. It's like you got to work this, this, and this. Then you got to work your cardio. Got to jog in the morning, you've got to do some strength and conditioning workouts to get stronger and to have more muscle endurance.

Jake concluded by saying that “there are just a lot of things to do.” Other fighters agreed, often discussing the importance of things such as technique and/or skill training, live sparring/rolling, as well as strength and conditioning. And the latter does not always take place in the gym. In fact, many fighters reported performing cardiovascular exercises like “running stairs,” “swimming,” and/or “jogging” outside of the gym anywhere from 3-5 days a week.

Discussions of the body work involved in becoming a fighter were often tied to the importance of fueling your body before, during, and after a workout. According to the fighters in this study, dieting serves two purposes: a) eating healthy allows the body to keep up with the physical training, allowing it to perform well and b) eating healthily allows a fighter to walk around a little lower in weight and leaner all the time. “Walking around at a lower weight” means that the fighter will have less weight to cut during the course of their fight camp, thereby making the weight cut far less strenuous (read counterproductive) for the body.

Many fighters reported struggling with their diets and talked about how much they miss their favorite foods (primarily sweets and various carbohydrates). But men and women were quick to agree that finding and maintaining the appropriate diet for you is mandatory, if you want your body to perform at its best come fight time. Josh “Slipknot” Pfeifer, a 155-pound amateur fighter and manager of CSC acknowledged his struggles with nutrition and said,

I think if I really want to step it up and make it to the next level, it will be worth paying some money to have somebody who knows what they are doing to say “hey, you can eat this, and this, and this at these times.

The Librarian agreed stating in his interview that “nutrition is the hardest part for people to learn.” He indicated dieting “is about what foods you should eat, when you should eat them, and how much of each you should be eating.” The purpose of this Jake said, is to “have a steady amount of fat loss throughout your whole camp.”

Dallas “The Smashing Machine” Browning, a professional fighter fighting out of the Kansas City area, also had quite a bit to say about dieting. He informed me that he believes “diet [to be] one of the most neglected things.” According to Browning,

The key is finding out what your body reacts to. It's different for everyone and a pain in the ass to figure out, but worth it once you do.

He reported having a diet that is “pretty plain,” and stated that it “isn't anything you can't go to a trusted dietary website and find.” For Dallas, being on a diet means spending 4-5 hours every Sunday preparing and portioning out food for the week. He believes the difference between him and other fighters is that he follows his diet consistently, even when he is not in a fight camp. According to “The Smashing Machine” many fighters fall victim to poor dieting in between fights, which causes them to “walk around” at a much heavier weight than they fight at. Dallas said

Old ways of cutting weight work if you want your kidneys failing and you want to go to the hospital to get an IV, or you want to look like a cancer patient.

He suggested that consistently eating “as natural and as organic as possible” is the key. Doing so proportionately, allows him to eat and drink all the way up until the day of weigh-ins. Browning reported “water logging” throughout his entire fight camp and cutting “10-15 pounds of water weight” on the day of weigh-ins. He said, “Honestly I have never had a terrible performance since I started doing it this way.”

“Sassy” Cassie Rodish stated that “one of the biggest things, especially for women, is their diet,” but only she and one other woman talked about this. Rodish reported eating “paleo, lots of vegetables and protein, very little fruits,” and Jen “Cold” Case follows what she likes to refer to as the “Jen Case Diet;” a modification of the Zone diet. The general consensus among those fighters discussing their diets with me was that a “high protein, low carb” diet of some sort should be followed. But a few fighters admitted relying on meal replacement bars or shakes the closer they get to the fight. Take Joe Wilk, for example. He said towards the end of his fight camp he is

Usually taking down like one actual real meal a day, and then having a couple protein shakes for the last couple of weeks or so to cut that last little bit of weight.

“What does that mean for your training?” I asked. “It sucks, you don’t have as much energy for the workouts,” Joe replied.

Whatever you do, warns Gregg Van De Creek, “don’t starve yourself, it messes with you physically and mentally.” So what’s the bottom line when it comes to dieting? Well, according to Jake Lindsey, “you have to be on a diet and you have to stay on a diet.” Drew Dober echoed this sentiment stating, “you have to watch what you are eating and try to avoid a social life that will get you into trouble.”

So now that you know more about the physical preparation and dieting involved in being an MMA fighter, it will probably come as no surprise that approximately half of the fighters I interviewed reported having made one or more of the following sacrifices: a) social life, b) food and/or alcohol, and c) time with family. For example, Giovanni Lemm said

I gave up a social life. If you are going to be this type of fighter you have to be willing to put in the hours and then the extra time. No partying, no going out with the girlfriend or wife, or to the kids’ activities. Some people say it is a lonely road because at the end of the day it is just you.

And Rob Kimmons replied,

Partying, hanging out, and going to bars or clubs. If you want to be a fighter you have to gain discipline and give up a lot of things. If you want to be the weekend warrior you can do whatever you want and step into the cage and get beat up if that's what you want to do, but if you really want to see how far you can make it then you have to give up everything that is going to hinder you.

Many indicated that it is hard to spend time with friends or family when “you can’t take part in most social activities, because many revolve around food.” Marissa Smith, for instance, talked about how she used to live with a few other girls who “always wanted to go and have a good time, but you don’t go out and get drunk or eat a bunch of food when you are training,” Smith said.

Ashley Cummins reported that she doesn't go out much either, and she chooses not to drink so that her "body is healthy for fights." Cummins said,

Essentially I have two careers, police officer and fighter. My daily routine revolves around this (fighting) and keeps me from having a social life.

Rob Kimmons agreed, identifying sacrifices such as "fast food, alcohol, partying, and staying up late." He said

If you want to be a professional athlete, then you have to train like a professional athlete. You have to diet like a professional athlete. People in the NFL and NBA, they aren't doing whatever they want they have a regimen, they have a trainer that's got them on a nutrition program and everything else.

For Russell Batista this means giving up Buffalo Wild Wings. Batista noted that he "could eat there every night of the week, but it's not a healthy choice to eat so he has to give it up."

Courtney Belcher, on the other hand, simply replied that she "hates dieting so much, she tries not to think about it."

These aren't the only sacrifices male and female fighters are making though. According to Cody Hazard, "the more time you are in the gym, [the more time you are away from friends and family." Eric Belcher agreed, answering the question "What else do you have to give up in order to be an MMA fighter?" by stating,

Time... A lot of time... Time with my kids, time with my family, time with my friends. Lots and lots of time I have to sacrifice to train.

And Pake McNally said,

I'd say time. I've given up some time with family. Not a lot, but every time I'm hanging out with my mom and my sister and I'm

skipping the gym, I'm sure to let them know. Yeah, even to this day, I'm like "I'm missing the gym for this."

During this portion of the interview Josh "Slipknot" Pfiefer recalled having to miss a family event due to something gym related. He indicated that although his family is supportive of his pursuits as an MMA fighter, they "get frustrated when he has to cancel or miss family events due to having to train and/or support the gym." Finally, Xavier Lewis reported having moved away from his family so that he could "live in a city with a decent gym and more training partners."

Six male and no female fighters also discussed having sacrificed romantic relationships. Pake McNally reported that fighting had "ruined a couple of relationships," but he quickly recanted that statement stating, "Well it was a factor in ruining a couple of relationships I was in." Tyler Bell also indicated that fighting can "take a toll on relationships." He went on to say,

I feel that being single is helpful for me, because I don't have to worry about all of the outside drama.

He and training partner Gregg Van De Creek agreed that "you have to find the right person to deal with the MMA lifestyle." Gregg added that "he would never enter a relationship if [the love interest] was not okay with it; if [the love interest] didn't understand what the commitment that it takes."

Fighters were then asked "what, if anything, did they have to acquire in order to become a fighter?" "Technical skill" was the most frequently cited necessity for successful participation in the sport, followed by "discipline" and "mental toughness." For example, participants made statements such as "I had to have knowledge of what fighting was about because it's not just beating people up," and "when I decided to climb into the cage I needed to feel like I could defend myself." Valerie Aspaas took this time to reflect on her first fight, and noted that she wasn't very technical when she first started fighting. "Thinking back, had I gotten into the cage with a more technical, experienced opponent I would have been defeated" she said.

Miles Johns indicated that for him gaining the required skills meant having to "really slow down and go back to the basics." And during my conversation with Allison Jaffe Haynes I said, "Becoming a 'technically sound' fighter obviously takes a lot of time, is this a concern of yours?" "Yes", Allison replied, "because I am going in there with people who have been doing

this for 4, 5, 6 years.” As was noted by Tyler Bell, “there is a big learning curve and experience comes with time.” Thus, it seems that one must have excellent time management skills in order to be able to put in the time it takes to acquire an adequate level of technical skill.

Fighters also discussed having to acquire “discipline.” According to my findings, without it, following such a strict diet and training regimen would be nearly impossible. Josh “Slipknot” Pfiefer said,

Discipline with diet and training. There are nights you don't want to go into the gym and train and you just don't want to spar with Jake or Caveman, but you just got to do it you know?

Others talked about discipline in terms of “work ethic” and “self-control.” Russell Batista, for instance, said “one thing I had to gain was probably self-control,” he said. He went on to say

I had a bit of a temper prior to becoming an MMA fighter, which can lead to mistakes inside of the cage. On top of that if you get angry outside of the cage and snap on someone that's not going to be good for your career; [you have to] control and channel the anger.

Some fighters noted that a good work ethic was needed, but felt that they did not have to acquire this particular skill because they already had it. For example, Evan Woolsey said “I already had a good work ethic.” And James Krause replied,

Being in the gym every day; everybody wants to be a champion, but nobody wants to train like a champion. I have good work ethic and train hard.

Further discussions of what is needed for successful participation in the sport often centered on “mental toughness.” For Pake McNally this meant

Not quitting... Just having that attitude that no matter what you are going to hit harder and be more aggressive than your opponent.

And for Jake Lindsey it meant being able “to manage stress.” Meanwhile, James Krause used this opportunity to point out that “it’s okay to get beat by somebody that is better than you, but it is never okay to get beat by yourself.” According to teammates Dave Rickels and Gregg Van De Creek, those fighters lacking mental toughness eventually succumb to the pressure. For example, Dave Rickels said

You’ve got to be strong mentally. I’ve seen a lot of amazing fighters that can’t fight in a cage with an audience, because they think way too much into it.

“Some [fighters] can’t handle getting tired, hurt, or beat. You see guys all the time that weren’t great athletes, but they are mentally tough and they go a long way in the sport,” said Gregg.

Ashley Cummins reported that when it comes to being mentally strong “you either have it or you don’t,” but my research shows that most fighters use a variety of techniques to mentally prepare for each and every fight. For example, a little over one-third of the fighters interviewed reported the use of visualization as their primary means of mental preparation. “In sports, all athletes visualize what they want to accomplish and what they can accomplish; setting goals usually helps you achieve them,” said Drew Dober. Ashley “Smashley” Cummins said she just “tries to replay in [her] head over and over again, what [she] wants to do inside the cage,” and Wendy Julian indicated doing the same. While some fighters reported visualizing both good and bad scenarios, Jessica Philippus stated that she “tries not to go anywhere negative with it.” She said “I once pictured myself getting ‘armbarred’¹⁹ and it happened exactly the way I saw it.” Fortunately, Philippus was able to fight out of the submission attempt in real life.

This part of the ‘spartanization’ process comes at a cost, because it usually occurs late at night and leads to sleeplessness. “I try to spend a lot of time envisioning how I want different parts of the fight to go, it keeps me awake at night” said Laura “Fancy” Sanko. She, and others, reported that the insomnia stems from the “adrenaline rush” that accompanies the visualization process. For example, Joe Wilk said “I’ll get my heart pounding like 200 beats per second and

¹⁹ The ‘armbar’ has several variations which involve the manipulation of one or more of the large joints found in the arm, and is just one of many submissions learned by Jiu-Jitsu practitioners.

then have to use my breathing to calm myself down, to slow my heart beat.” He and Valerie “Valociraptor” Aspaas both spoke about going over some of the tiniest details. Joe said,

I think about my walk out, what I’m going to wear, you know? The little moves I’m going to do when I’m doing my [walk out]²⁰.

What I’m going to be doing when I’m walking back and forth waiting for the guy to come out or whatever. What color gloves I think I’ll have on. What my shorts are going to look like. And I do all of that all the way through the fight to getting my hand raised. What am I going to do afterwards? What we (the team) are going to be doing that night for the party. I do the whole thing over and over again.

And Valerie stated

I’m constantly visualizing stretching out, warming up, walking out, my walk out song, what I am going to wear, what I am going to do when I enter the cage. Overcoming bad spots and getting my hand raised at the end of the fight.

While Laura Butler also discussed playing through different scenarios in her head, she indicated that what it ultimately comes down to is that she “knows what [she] knows, and if [she] has prepared enough it is just going to come naturally.” “It’s like an out of body experience,” she said, and “you do what you are supposed to do because you have trained it so many times.”

Participants reported watching movies and/or listening to music as another means of mentally preparing for a fight. For some music and movies served as a distraction. Ben Wallingford, for example, said “I like to listen to a lot of music because it keeps my mind off of it (the fight).” Other fighters also reported distracting themselves with things such as horseback riding, video games, socializing, and reading books. Music and movies were however used by others as a means of inspiration and/or motivation. “There’s a bunch of motivational videos on

²⁰ Warm-ups take place behind the scenes at MMA sporting events. Joe is known for singing, dancing, and performing skits while making his way from this area to the cage (i.e., during his “walk out”).

YouTube,” said Pake McNally for example. “One’s this coach that is giving a speech to his high school football team, everybody should watch that!”

The powers of positive thinking and taking time to relax were also cited as being beneficial for one’s mental game. Others reported “pumping themselves up” through the use of self-talk. Wendy Julian, for example tells herself things like

She can’t hurt me. I’m going to win. You can’t lose, you worked too hard.

Additionally, Julian and another female fighter, Marissa Smith, discussed the need to obtain or achieve a violent state of mind. Marissa Smith, for instance, said to me

You just have to get that hate running through your veins. You have to build up that hate. Anything bad going on in my life, I use that as fuel or ammunition to push myself harder to be better. The negative in my life, I turn it into a positive. That’s what I mean, getting the hate running through your veins.

Wendy Julian agreed, stating

You have to get into a violent state of mind before you get in there, because you don’t want to hold anything back.

And how does Julian do this? She revealed that she and a friend “send texts back and forth.” She indicated “they (the texts) are brutal” and chose not to provide me with an example.

So what is the hardest part of being a fighter? The most frequently cited response was dealing with the mental/emotional side of things. Fighters said things like “fighting is nerve-racking,” “trying not to over think [the fight],” and “mentally preparing yourself to get into the cage.” Russell Batista talked about how he didn’t have any fans in attendance at his last fight. He said, “I had to block that out and go other there to compete for myself.” He went on to say that “if you have any personal issues, you have to block that out and focus on going to the gym.”

“Tell me more about why mental preparation is so difficult, but so important,” I said to Giovanni Lemm. Lemm replied,

It's about getting to that place where you truly believe that you are the best and willing to truly hurt somebody to get to the next level. Without that fighter mentality, all the technique, all the conditioning means nothing.

“The hardest thing for me is nerves the week of,” said Sarah Goodlaxon. “That’s when everything becomes real.” She went on to say

When you get your hands wrapped and getting ready to walk out, you are asking yourself “why are you doing this?” You find yourself saying, “I don't know why I thought this was a good idea.

Goodlaxon indicated that the problem is

You get so scared in the moment; you've worked so hard for so long and you don't want to let anyone or yourself down. The funny thing is as soon as you touch gloves and the bell rings, you are fine. You just go back to doing what you've been trained to do.

Allison Jaffe Haynes agreed stating that

The hardest thing is keeping your mental composure that three to four days leading up to the fight until that moment you walk into the cage. You have to keep your mind strong and have the confidence to get in there and kick somebody’s butt, and know that you are going to get in there no matter what.

Allison further indicated thinking that “this (mental preparation) is something that a lot of people struggle with.” Ashley Cummins added that the once you go pro “there is a lot more at stake.”

She said

You are always being judged and looked at, and you have to look past that and compete to your full potential.

Finally, the hardest thing for Jina “The Showgirl” Cole “is going up against girls that have more resources.” “The question that I often ask myself is ‘Am I doing enough to compete?’” said “The Showgirl.”

For one third of the study’s participants “finding balance” is the hardest thing about being a fighter. “Balancing the sport with everyday life,” said James Krause and “keeping up with the lifestyle,” replied Amanda “The Lady Killer” Bell. Gregg Van De Creek, and others, talked about planning their lives around training. “You don’t go on trips,” Gregg said, and followed up with, “summer is also miserable because people are doing fun stuff, but you can’t go out on the lake or you will be too tired for practice.”

Mothers, like Jessica Philippus and Courtney Belcher, talked about having to “juggle daily life and training.” Jessica Philippus said

My last fight was really trying. My husband had left and it was just me and the kids. I have an almost five-month old and a 7 year old. I had to work, train, and take care of them.

Philippus went on to say that “fighting is very selfish and very time consuming sport, and when you are a mother the last thing you are is selfish.” She said this causes her to carry “a lot of guilt.” While her first child is used to going to practice with her, she said the addition of another child to the family “is what’s been keeping [her] from fighting again.” She indicated that the guilt of being away from the children while training was overwhelming. The combination of this and missing weight for the first time in her life (due to trying to balance everything), has since kept her from entering the cage. Courtney “Bad Karma” Belcher, mother to an 8 year old and a four year old, said “I feel bad, we always have to pack up to go train.” She reported that her children, like those of many other female fighters, spend lots of time in the gym.

Eleven fighters indicated that “cutting weight” and/or “dieting” are the most difficult or challenging parts of being a fighter. Most proclaimed to “love” food and discussed the discipline it takes to stay on track with their diet at all times. Xavier Lewis said “I love food!” I laughed and asked “what food or foods are the hardest to give up?” “Ice cream” Xavier replied. Valerie Aspaas also talked about ice cream saying

I love food and it's no more nonsense once you get into your fight camp. It forces you to eat healthy; something as little as a bowl of ice cream can affect you if you are four weeks out.

Overall, the general consensus was that the same is true for alcohol. It appeared that "cutting or "making weight sucks the most," because alcohol and sweets such as ice cream and chocolate are some of the most difficult things to give up.

While men were more likely to say the hardest thing about being a fighter is not getting paid for fighting, women were more likely to struggle with finding female training partners as well as other women to fight. "Sassy" Cassie Rodish said it has been "hard for me to find people that are same weight and strength, and I have also had difficulty finding fights." "How does this impact your training?" I asked. Rodish replied

It makes it hard to stay active and motivated when you go six months without fighting sometimes. It is hard to stay focused and have that hunger.

Other women echoed these thoughts saying things like "as an amateur it is hard to find a fight and gain the experience I need," and "for women the hardest thing is finding fights." Laura Butler stated that

Guys get fights easier and faster, and it is hard to keep going to practice, getting beat up when you are the only girl. The guys are respectful, but it is hard on your body.

To recap, during the study's site visits I had an opportunity to both watch and participate in at least two classes per gym. Classes were structured similarly across all six sites in that most started with a warm-up, transitioned to a period of technique, and finished with live "drills," "rolling," or "sparring." Gym owners, coaches/instructors, and students were primarily male. Partnering for both the technique and live portions of class was usually based on size and/or experience. Although women (when present) seemed to partner with other women when possible, they were always encouraged to "work in" with the men; most did not shy away from doing so. Both the casual student and MMA fighters often participated in more than one class or

type of workout during each gym visit, and it was not uncommon for a male or female fighter to spend as much time as I was in the gym.

In choosing the sport as the subject of my research, I immediately began to think about all of the hours that I had put into the gym. It seemed to me that the quasi-military type lifestyle my teammates and I were living both in and outside of the gym was reminiscent of Sparta. Comradeship, austerity, and discipline were among Sparta's controlling principles. The "state controlled education, or agoge, occupied a central place in the Spartan system," and "instruction consisted for the most part in inculcating habits of obedience, bodily fitness, and courage to conquer in battle" (Hooker 1980: 137). Finding all of these things to also be a part of a mixed martial artist's lifestyle, I have chosen to refer to the socialization of an MMA fighter as the 'spartanization' process.

The more I participated in the process the more curious I became about the experiences of others. Growing increasingly concerned with not having entered the cage despite training for quite some time, I started to question whether my experiences with the spartanization process were similar and/or different from the experiences of others. A review of the literature and theory told me that my and other female fighters' experiences with this process would more than likely be different from those of our male counterparts. In the paragraphs above, I utilized participant narratives to paint a picture of what it takes to be an MMA fighter. Readers discovered not only what these men and women do to physically and mentally prepare themselves to "square off" against another person, but what they have to gain as well as sacrifice in their fight to become the next "ultimate" fighter. In the next chapter, you will hear more from the men and women I interviewed. Find out what they had to say about training with one another, and discover what women identified as the pros and cons of being a participant in a male-dominated sport.

Chapter 7 - He Said, She Said

The first women's MMA bout to be nationally televised in the United States took place on February 10, 2007, approximately fourteen years after the historical airing of the very first Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC). At first only the EliteXC, BodogFight, and a few other minor promotions accepted women's MMA, while major organizations like the UFC remained reluctant. "UFC President Dana White even went so far as to denounce it altogether" (Crigger 2008; 78). Women's MMA has however come a very long way since then. For example, the professional women's MMA organization known as the Invicta Fighting Championships was founded in 2012, and the first UFC fight featuring women would take place during the organization's 157th event on February 23, 2013. In addition, at the time of this chapter's drafting, the UFC had announced that the eighteenth season of *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF 18) would feature female coaches and competitors for the very first time.

The women who have made it to this highly competitive, professional level of MMA have been training and competing for small-scale promotions for years, but their participation in the sport has unfortunately largely been ignored by prior research. In, *Title Shot: Into the Shark Tank of Mixed Martial Arts*, Kelly Crigger freely admits that he had started his "journey to learn why men fight, but had completely failed to consider the motivations of women to get into the ring and throw down" (2008; 78). Mayeda and Ching (2008), on the other hand, deliberately chose not to interview women. They considered doing so as part of a follow-up study, and indicate having used their research instead, as an opportunity to learn more about how male mixed martial artists perceive women's growing involvement in the sport (187).

Although gender theory posits that women will be discouraged from participating in this type of activity (i.e. fighting) and excluded from sports in general, Mayeda and Ching (2008) found quite the opposite to be true for women participating in MMA. According to these authors, the men they interviewed demonstrated a "respect for work ethic regardless of sex," stating "that if women had the athletic attributes and put in the work they should be able to compete freely as mixed martial artists" (Mayeda & Ching 2008; 188). Male fighters interviewed by Abramson and Modzelewski (2011) also expressed similar viewpoints. These scholars note having found that,

Being male was not a prerequisite to membership. Women were not denied access, sanctioned, or admonished in the gym or the ring by other fighters or coaches because of their gender, provided that they participated in the same activities and accepted and lauded similar sportive virtues such as gameness, heart, courage, and aestheticism (Abramson & Modzelewski 2011; 156).

Findings from the current study mirror those of the aforementioned studies lending support to my claim that MMA gyms should be seen as equal-opportunity masculine environments. My research shows that like the participants observed in Abramson and Modzelewski's (2001) study, "male fighters encourage, support, and actively train with women" (156). Furthermore, the women participating in this study often reported having been treated equally by their male coaches and teammates. While this is not to say that gender is not present within mixed martial arts organizations, gyms, or the subculture itself, it does illustrate that gender by itself may not be a sufficient explanatory framework for examining the experiences of those participating in the sport.

As a woman who aspires to be a mixed martial artist, I can honestly say that I have never felt as though my coaches or teammates treated me differently because of my sex and/or gender. In fact, I am confident that I have earned my status in the same way as my male training partners and as a result, truly believed MMA to a progressive sport in terms of gender equality. Curious as to how my own experiences compared with those of other men and women, I set out to interview as many fighters as possible acknowledging that I would probably reach far fewer women than I would men during the course of this study. In the paragraphs that follow learn how this study's male participants feel about women participating in the sport, and find out what they had to say about coaching as well as training with women. Curious what women have to say about their own participation? The second half of the chapter draws on my discussions with female fighters. Discover the difficulties they have encountered and learn why they say "training with men has its benefits." The chapter concludes with some general comments made by women about their participation in the sport and MMA in general.

He Said

During the course of the study, women's participation was often referred to by male fighters as being "great," "awesome," or "fantastic." For example, when asked, "What do you think about women's participation in the sport?" Tyler Bell replied, "I think it's great! It puts more butts in the seats." He went on to say that women's participation in the sport is "seen as something new and fresh," but what I think Bell meant is that it is taboo to see women participating in this type of activity; as is evidenced by the following comment made during an interview with Cody Hazard. Cody said

When you have fights and there are girls on the card people get really excited, because it is not that common. It is usually men you see fighting in a bar, and you don't see that side of women very often.

Thus it may not be surprising to learn that many male fighters seemed genuinely impressed by women's performances. Evan Woolsey, for instance, said women are "scrappy and seem less scared." And according to James Krause "they just bring it and are not afraid to fight at all." Others agreed and discussed what has impressed them most about fights featuring women. Chance Thackston said that women "are scarier than men," and added that "all of the fights [he has] seen [between women] have been slugfests and [he doesn't] know how they take all of those shots." Dallas Browning also insinuated that fights between women are "slugfests" stating,

I don't know what it is, but you don't see a lot of knockouts in women's MMA. What you will see is girls going toe-to-toe just hitting each other the whole time. I enjoy watching it.

Finally, male fighters occasionally praised female fighters for their willingness to "put it on the line" as well as for displaying a visible determination to win at all costs.

During the study's preliminary interviews, I asked a few of my teammates to tell me why they think more women don't "stick with it." In other words, why had Combative Sports Center (CSC) seen several women come and go. Head coach and owner of the gym, Joe Wilk replied,

If we had as many females as we had guys, I bet we'd have a bigger percentage of girls that wanted to fight. We just don't have a lot of girls, that's why we don't have a lot of girls that fight. You know maybe one out of 10 guys that come and train at the gym are going to stick with it and want to get into competition or fighting.

So you don't think that gender has anything to do with it? I asked. "No, I don't think it's attributed to being female or not being female," said Joe.

I think it just has more to do with peoples' schedules. You know people will have things come up. We just notice it more when it is a female because there are 5 or 6 girls and when you lose one you notice. We lose guys at the gym all the time and you guys don't even notice. You know I'm dealing with that constantly, people getting out of their contracts and doing stuff like that. So I think that it's just because of the smaller number of actual people you're looking at and you lose one or two people, it's really noticeable you know?

Alternatively, Gregg Van De Creek stated that "the training is tough and many women might not know what they are getting into when they come in." As he continued to mull the question over, Gregg decided that there might also be other factors to take into consideration. "For example, aesthetics may be a part of it; MMA gyms are a little rough around the edges," said Gregg. He stated that

If the gym was nicer we might have a lot more women, but we would need to have a gymnasium with you (referring to me) at the front of the room with a headset on telling them to throw lefts and rights as well as someone at the front counter to greet and talk to them.

Van De Creek also reported that it might just be that [a woman's] significant other [is] against their participation. He said,

If I didn't know about it and had a girlfriend who wanted to do it, I would be uncomfortable with it.

Like Joe, Gregg also believed that men and women have different "lifestyles." He briefly listed things such as "work," "training," "family," and "chores."

Josh "Slipknot" Pfiefer and David "Caveman" Rickels both indicated that women's participation is stigmatized. David explained that the stigma associated with their participation in MMA might be even greater than for other female athletes due to the full contact nature of the sport. Caveman said,

It is looked at as being manly, or a stigma.... Especially if a girl is doing kickboxing and she is getting punched in the face. For a female, I would imagine that's a little more frowned upon. Like coming home with a black eye or a bloody lip you know?

Many male fighters seemed aware of gendered stereotypes and acknowledged that for women participation does come with a certain amount of stigma, which in turn may be impacting women's desire and/or willingness to participate in what is seen as a stereotypical masculine behavior. Participant narratives illustrated that deeply held beliefs about how men and women should act as well as what activities are appropriate for each group of individuals to engage in, are clearly still present in today's society.

Additional evidence of this can be found in statements made by other men about the perceived physiological differences between male and female fighters. For example, Cody Carillo said, "women are physiologically different and have to work harder." Eric Belcher said something similar, stating that in his personal opinion "because women are physically different from men, they have to be more technical." Several fighters agreed with Belcher reporting that women are "more technical." Why? Well, because they have to be according to one fighter. This individual indicated that the bottom line is that as a man, he will always be stronger than a woman. "That's just biologically how it is," he said. And while Xavier Lewis was not willing to admit that women are more technical (chuckling when I asked him about this), Chance Thackston indicated that women are just as technical as men. Thackston said,

When you are training with a woman you realize that although you may be bigger than they are, women are just as technical. You have to watch your neck.

Steve Nichols also discussed the different yet “natural qualities” held by men and women. He noted “women have better technique and are more flexible, while men are naturally stronger.” Nichols concluded this portion of our conversation however by saying that it is “not nice to generalize.” Finally, Drew Dober indicated that MMA involves more technique than athleticism compared to other sports “so it allows women to excel.”

Very few fighters indicated that they were against women’s participation. One man said to me, “I think women should be housewives, but have fun as long as they are taking care of everything at home.” He added that it makes him sad to see women fighting, because “girls are too pretty to bleed.” As I chuckled at his response, he defended himself saying, “Women are the most precious things on earth that’s why I think like that.” The other man, a kickboxer, said

I don’t really want to see a girl fighter and I don’t think women should want to fight. It is not cool or sexy. I wouldn’t mind if she knows how to defend herself, but women should be women and mothers to their children.

He also said that he wouldn’t want his daughter going to war. “My ideas may be old-fashioned, but it’s a free country,” he said. Another man reported that he would support his girlfriend if she wanted to do it or his daughter, if he had one. “I would support her,” he said, but as a man it is my job to protect her.” He added,

I wouldn't want her getting punched in the face, but I suppose that it is difficult for any parent to watch their child get into the cage.

Despite having had very few opportunities to train with women and utilizing gender stereotypes to ascribe meaning to both male and female participation in the sport, many men said that MMA is a sport for everyone. For instance, Josh “Gizmo” Martin said, “it’s not a man’s sport... it’s not Man’s Mixed Martial Arts (MMMA).” And in an interview with Randall “The Donut Man” Patterson, Patterson stated that “women should be able to compete too, they have as much equal rights as I do.” Other fighters agreed with the sentiments saying things like

“female fighters work just as hard, they put their time in and if they want to fight go ahead and let them,” and “if it is something they (women) want to do, then why shouldn’t they be able to do it?” While Cody Carillo stated that, “he respects anyone who does it,” Josh Pfiefer said to me, “I get excited at anybody who wants to try to compete just because it’s such a demanding sport and you have to put so much on the line.” Miles Johns, on the other hand, said he loves the sport so that he “can’t tell anybody else that they can’t do it no matter what their sex is.”

Male fighters who were also gym owners and/or instructors were asked to talk about their experiences teaching or coaching women. All of these men indicated that gender is neither seen nor recognized on the mat. Take the following comment made by Ernest Bell, for example. Bell said,

If you are in here to train, you are in here to train. There is no gender. If he is doing 500 pushups, you (referring to me) are doing 500 pushups. I take the same approach with everyone, kids and all.

David Rickels also reported taking the same approach with men and women. “The way I train is the way I was taught” said David.

My coach taught me this way, so I am going to teach others this way. I believe he had a solid good basis of how to train any body and that’s how I train everyone.

The only time that Joe Wilk reported instructing men and women differently is when the class is geared towards women’s self-defense. Joe said, in this instance he is

Going to show a lot more from the bottom probably to the females, because if we are dealing with a self-defense situation especially against a male attacker, they’re (the man) probably going to end up on the top position on the ground. Whereas with the guys, if I was teaching a 300lb guy I’d show him how to squeeze somebody down, sit on top of them, and beat them up.

“Other than that I don’t feel like there is any need to separate them and it was like that in the Army too,” said Joe. “Can you elaborate on that?” I asked.

Yea, rank, sex, race, things like that, none of it mattered on the mats. Everybody just got treated like the exact same person. So that's how we do it at the gym too. You know, I usually talk to the girls. I tell them, "look if there is a situation at all, just let me know." If some guy at the gym can't handle the situation we are going to get rid of that guy, not get rid of the girl.

Comments made by male fighters who had had a chance to train with women, mirrored those of the coaches and gym owners. They reiterated that women are not treated any differently, but are instead treated as if they are "one of the guys." In an interview with James Krause, James said to me, "If I was a woman, I wouldn't want anyone treating me differently." As a result, he treats women the same way as he would anybody else. "It is the same as training with I a guy, I don't go easy on them or treat them any differently," said James. Cody Carrillo also indicated that training with women is the same as training with men. He noted however, that "everyone is different or has a different skill level" regardless of gender. Steve "The Naked Ninja" Nichols agreed, stating that "there are slight variations between how everyone trains, but there isn't a dramatic difference between men and women."

My experiences as a participant observer, coupled with these fighters' narratives demonstrated to me that even though gender is present, to most men it does not seem to matter on the mat. Instead anyone who trains MMA is treated according to his/her size, strength, and experience. Joe Wilk explains that

You hit people according to their weight. If someone is bigger than you, you can lay into him or her. Someone smaller than you, you need to back of a little bit and hit them somewhere around the power of someone their size.

Drew Dober felt similarly and was one of many fighters to liken training with women to training with a "smaller" male or the new guy. He indicated that there are no real differences between training with a woman and training with a man. He said, "The technique is the same regardless of gender, but you need to realize when they are smaller than you and treat them accordingly."

When I asked Jake Lindsey about training with women he replied “I’m obviously not going to blast a chick in the face, but the same goes for the new guy.”

Training partner Nick Garrett said, “Al, you know we don’t treat women differently.” “No, Nick I don’t feel as if I have been treated differently by anyone at CSC,” I replied, “but can you tell me about your own approach to training with women?” Nick informed me that how he treats a woman depends on whether or not she is trying it (the gym) out for the first time (i.e., on her skill level). “If she is trying it out for the first time, I’ll go easier on her – similar to training with a smaller male” said Nick. And in a conversation with training partners Matt Hensley and Cody Hazard, Matt also said that men don’t beat up women the way they aren’t going to beat up the new guy.” He went on to say that you train “with a girl to her level.” Hazard agreed and said, “I don’t treat them any differently just because they don’t have a pair of testicles.”

Two fighters indicated that it doesn’t help anyone to be treated differently. For example, Eric Blecher said,

I believe in training with people the size that you are. I don't see a girl or a woman getting ready for a fight training with a guy who weights 170-185 pounds. I don't see that benefiting either of them very much.

Gregg likened the gym and training to the military’s Modern Army Combatives program, informing me that a soldier is a soldier, regardless of race, class, or gender. He said, “They (women) are soldiers and they aren’t treated any differently, because it doesn’t help anyone to treat them differently.”

When asked whether they had noted any differences between how men and women train or experience the process, two fighters replied that women are more likely to say “they can’t do it” and to “get frustrated.” Another fighter, Rob Kimmons, said

One difference is that I have to keep them focused. A lot of times they get side-tracked and will be talking. That and women apologize for everything.

But according to Rob, “people in general vary so much, and each person is completely different.” Others explained to me that women are more likely than men to ask questions and to be better listeners. For instance, Nick Garrett said

Women ask more questions. Guys don’t question why, they just do it. Asking questions is a good thing though, because it helps you to understand the moves of technique better. Breaking it down will help you learn it faster.

Nick went on to say that he has learned from the women he teaches and trains with, and now asks more questions. David Rickels agreed, saying

I think women listen a lot better. They actually listen to what you are saying and they try to do it. I run into so many problems with guys. You can repeatedly tell them over and over to do something different and they just go right back to doing it incorrectly. So teaching wise I would say women are a little easier to teach.

As a result of these attributes, women were view by Drew Dober as being better fighters. Drew said,

I actually think that women are better fighters than men, because men have a preconceived notion that they already know how to fight. Women can actually step into the gym and learn so many new things, because they are willing to accept that they don't know.

Finally Randall Patterson noted that “men are more aggressive,” but said that what women don’t understand is he is not going to “blast” them. Similarly, Miles Johns reported that you “naturally just want to be soft with women.” Giovanni Lemm reported never having gone “100 percent when sparring with a girl,” but indicated that, “it is different if you are doing pad work or technique.” He concluded this part of our discussion by stating that, “if a woman wants to be in a man’s sport and she wants to be treated equal, then I am going to treat her equal short of the one

thing I just said” (i.e. going 100% while sparring). David Rickels also expressed that a certain amount of hesitance in being too rough when striking with a woman. He said,

There is a stigma associated with hitting a girl really hard. I think it’s just not right, you know? I definitely try to avoid knocking a girl out.

She Said

At this point you may be saying to yourself enough with the guys already, what did the women have to say? Well, some reported difficulties with “fitting in” or “being accepted” at first.” For example, Ashley Cummins said, “when I first started training (over 5 years ago) I felt like no one took me seriously.” “What do you mean?” I asked. Ashley said,

My coach ignored me for almost a year, and then he realized I was serious. It took me a year to gain respect.

She later clarified that it was a “BJJ/MMA coach” that hadn’t taken her seriously. She went on to say, “the striking coach took me seriously though, he helped me out a lot.” “What about the guys, the male fighters?” I inquired. Ashley replied that some guys took her seriously and others didn’t. “How frustrating was this for you?” I said. “It was pretty frustrating, but I just had to put the time in to show everyone that I was serious about it,” replied Ashley.

Jessica Philippus also indicated that she had not felt welcome at some places, but had at others. As was the case for Laura Sanko who said “I’ve been really lucky, I definitely feel like I am part of the team at the gym I am at now.” “Does that mean that you do not feel as though you were part of the team at the last gym you frequented?” I asked. Sanko replied that she had had “some different experiences” at other gyms, but she felt that this was due to training less and not having as much time to fit in. When asked to provide me with an example, Laura talked about a gym in California. She said

It’s not that they didn’t want me there, but it was kind of a joke to them. They weren’t mean; they just thought it was “cute” that I was “trying.” I can also hang with any amount of guy humor, but the guys in California managed to shock me.

“How did you deal or cope with this?” I asked. She explained that she knew that she had chosen the sport and was going to have to “roll with the punches.”

I needed to fit in with their environment and not expect them to act differently because I am there. Frankly, they probably didn’t really want me there. But at the gym I am at now, I do not feel that way.

As I was chatting with Laura Butler about this, I asked why she thought it might be that some men are more accepting of women’s participation than others. Butler replied,

It’s the caveman mentality. Their caveman mentality is still there, it is a part of a lot of male athlete’s personalities.

Butler felt that women definitely have to overcome a lot more and that they may “have to work a little bit harder than men, but she also believed that women should “have to earn respect just like everybody else (i.e., men) does.” “You just have to prove yourself,” she said.

Sarah Goodlaxon attributed women’s difficulty fitting in to “gym floosies.” She said “sometimes it takes a bit longer to be accepted, because some girls are gym floosies who are there to play and not work.” She talked about training at a well-known gym where most girls who had frequented the gym prior to her had trained with the sole purpose of “sleeping their way through the gym.” She described being questioned about her own motives until the owner of the gym told the guys not to mess with her, that she was there to train. “Did that help?” I asked. Sarah said yes, but indicated she still had to go through a “hazing” period in which the guys gave her a “hard time.” “When they saw I could handle their shenanigans, things were okay,” she said. The female fighters in this study were more likely than men to discuss having experienced a period of time where they needed to “prove that they were there to work” and not just to “mess around.”

Wendy Julian informed me that I wasn’t the first person to ask about her experiences as a female mixed martial artist. She indicated that people often want to know if she is harassed, but reported that she’s “been to three gyms and never had any issues or bad experiences.” She did however proceed to shed a little light on another difficulty encountered by women. Julian said,

We don't have testosterone flowing through our veins, we aren't as heavy as guys are, and we don't have the power or the strength. It is really easy to be over-powered and sometimes the guys use their strength to their advantage. This means that we really have to work on our technique, especially in Jiu-Jitsu, because the guys are only going to be able to over-power you for so long.

Others said things like "I'm never going to be as strong as the guys, so I have to be more technical," and "for me it is especially hard because I am the smallest." Most of these women agreed however that training with men "has its benefits." For example, Valerie Aspass said,

Always being smaller and weaker than everyone else, it can be discouraging at times. But in all honesty being the smallest and the weakest, and always going against people who are stronger and not necessarily always better technically... It really, really, really gives me the edge, because I have to have super sharp technique in order to be able to do anything to them. I feel like it has given me an advantage.

And Allison Jaffe Haynes replied,

I think with guys they have guys to train with all the time. A lot of times I am training with someone, and I am a smaller than they are. It's always someone who has 40-50 pounds on me. Even a lot of the females are 140 lbs at my gym. So that's definitely a challenge for me, but I'm finding that when it comes to the fight it benefits me.

Two women provided a synopsis of these perceived benefits. Marissa Smith, for instance, indicated that although some men are stronger she would rather train with them, because that is going to make her better in the ring against another woman. She said,

I roll and spar with 170-180 pound guys and then get into a ring with 135-pound girl... I'm going to kick the shit out of her because I am used to sparring with bigger guys. So I would rather spar and grapple guys any day.

And when I asked Jina Cole to tell me more about training with the guys, her response was similar. She stated that for her "sparring with the guys is a confidence booster," and added that the girls she will fight will not be as tough as the guys that she trains with. "I also gain more confidence when new girls come in and I can man-handle them," Jina said while chuckling.

Outside of the gym women reported having difficulty "finding fights." According to Jen "Cold" Case "fights fall through or turn into grappling matches" all the time. "Why is that?" I asked.

There are not as many girls as there are boys in this sport, and a lot of the girls are too little for my body composition. One hundred and thirty-five pounds is really hard for me to get to. So my biggest problem is trying to find a woman my size to fight.

Jen also indicated that part of the problem stems from dealing with promoters who don't necessarily want to work with women for whatever reason, but "there are other promoters who love women too," said Jen. She cited Jeff Osborne in particular, noting that he had given "a lot of women their first break." Wendy Julian was another female fighter who discussed having had trouble finding fights, and used this opportunity to tell me about a couple of instances in which her opponent had "backed out." She said she was fortunate enough to "never have had someone back out the day of weigh-ins though." Ashley Cummins explained to me that this type of behavior is typical when you are an amateur, but reported that "it doesn't happen as much when you go pro, because everyone has to sign a contract."

According to Jen Case and Marissa Smith, if you are a female fighter and you look a certain way, you may also have the unpleasant experience of having your sexuality questioned. Jen told me about a time when she was fighting and spectators were yelling at her and her opponent to kiss each other, among other things. "What did you do?" I asked. "I flipped them off, and they eventually got kicked out" said Jen. I shared a similar experience with her,

describing a time in which men were commenting on a female fighter's physique. Jen replied, "you know spectators make comments about guys too, but it usually isn't about their sexuality or physique." When I asked Jen if people had commented on her physique, she said that people often tell her she looks "like a dude," but this is primarily because "my hair is short;" a statement that Marissa Smith could also identify with. She said,

As a female fighter I get called a lesbian all the time because I do have short hair and everything like that. I'm not a lesbian, but I deal with it... Take the punches as they come, make the best out of it. I do the best I can to be the best I can.

Despite the difficulties they have encountered, several women referred to themselves as being "fortunate" or "lucky" to have had this opportunity. It seemed that overall, the women in this study felt as though their experiences both in and outside of the gym have been positive. Valerie Aspaas, for example, told me that her team is "fantastic."

They treat me like one of the guys. They don't make exceptions for me. They don't patronize me. They don't make me feel any different.

And Allison Jaffe Haynes said,

I have found nothing but positive things out of it. The support from the people when I fight, it's like they are excited to see women the sport like most MMA fans are.

Jen Case discussed being the first woman to train at CSC on a regular basis, and feeling as though her experience may be different from that of other women. She felt accepted and attributes this to having trained at another gym beforehand. She said Joe, the gym owner, knew her "from another school." She joked about having "street cred," but said that in all actuality "training is based on the person's technique or skill level and aggressiveness; it is not based on gender." Courtney Belcher also felt that she hadn't "experienced the prejudice" that other women may have, and attributed this to the fact that her husband is also an MMA fighter. When I asked her about women's participation in the sport, she said "It's great! I have gained so many friends."

She added that even though some people are not a fan of women's participation, to her "it doesn't matter if you are a male or female, if you are skilled you should be able to do it."

Female fighters, like male fighters, viewed women's MMA as "evolving." Laura Butler talked about how "we used to be lucky to see one female fight on a fight card, and now we have Invicta as well as women in the UFC." "We have come a long way," said Laura. Similarly, Amanda Bell reported that women's MMA is building "as we get a lot more opportunities to excel" in the sport. She felt that women are an asset or are valuable to promoters because there "are so few of us." Most women were also realistic and quick to acknowledge knowing that women's participation in the sport would always be tied to their sex and/or gender. "Being feminine, people look at you as a girl and want you on the fight card because you're pretty," said Laura Butler. To this she added that "men don't have to worry about being objectified." Jen Case and I discussed the number of popular female fighters who had recently posed nearly or completely nude. Jen concluded this piece of our conversation by saying "this doesn't do anything for women's MMA and it definitely doesn't help us to be seen as athletes." She asked if I knew how well women fighting in Japan are treated, and said "they are treated like athletes and they make a nice living." "If I were trying to make this my life, I would not stay here I would go to Japan," said Jen.

Finally, Laura Sanko reported that she was still trying to decide how she "feels about how some women choose to promote themselves." She indicated that she is "totally fine with women using their sexuality to promote or make themselves more marketable in MMA." Sanko said, "But I think that there is a tastefulness level and I think my personal boundary for that is probably a little bit more conservative than what I have been seeing." Unfortunately, she and other female fighters agreed it isn't realistic to expect the fact that "sex sells" to go away. "It may decrease, but I don't think it will every completely go away," said the fighter whose nickname is "Fancy." Laura went on to say that she hopes "it becomes more athlete first, what you look like second," someday and cautioned women "not to freak out about it." "I'm not here to judge, but there is a level of responsibility when it comes to marketing yourself," she concluded.

In conclusion, although women have been competing for small-scale promotions for years, they would not make their UFC debut until 2013. The gender theories discussed in chapter three led me to believe that this is partially due to the fact that women have traditionally been

discouraged from participating in masculine activities like sports, and more specifically, fighting. But this study's findings show that women are neither being discouraged nor excluded from participating in the sport. Instead, like Mayeda and Ching (2008), I have found male fighters, gym owners, and coaches/instructors to be both supportive and encouraging of women's participation. Furthermore, with few exceptions, male and female fighters both described and ascribed meaning to their experiences in similar ways. Male fighters described women's participation in the sport as "great," "awesome," or "fantastic," and in some cases even went so far as to say that female fighters are more technical than male fighters as well as better learners and listeners. In the next chapter the study's purpose, theoretical underpinnings, and methodology are summarized. Findings are discussed, limitations highlighted, and my positionality examined. This is followed by an offering of suggestions for future research and then readers will hear from the study's participants one more time, as they offer up some advice to those who might be on the fence about participating in the sport.

Chapter 8 - In Pursuit of a Dream and a Degree

When I started this study I was a graduate student who had been passionate about very few things in life. In fact, despite finally having found something that I was good at, I was least passionate about going to graduate school. Having been offered an assistantship, I viewed obtaining a higher education as an opportunity that if passed up, I would live to regret. Attending was something that I had to do, a social requirement if you will, and not something that I had a strong desire to do. In my mind failure to attend could be directly equated with an inability to make something of myself or to achieve the “American Dream.” This does not mean that I did not take graduate school or this study seriously.

What it means is that the motive for making MMA the focus of this study was personal. Not only did I want to be able to remain highly involved in the gym and the sport, I was looking for an explanation for not having entered the cage despite having trained so hard for so long. My educational background led me to believe that like most things in life there was a process involved in becoming a fighter. A multi-tiered process, which I felt I had fully engaged in to no avail. As the study got underway, I accredited not having stepped into the cage to two things: a) the lack of a sports participation history and b) injury. But I did not want to believe either of these things; at the time both seemed like nothing more than excuses to me.

A review of both theory and previous research led me to believe my findings would show that the process of becoming a fighter is gendered (read the odds are stacked against me). In short, sports were made by men for men and as a result they are inherently masculine. Since women are both expected and encouraged to be the exact opposite of masculine (i.e., feminine), theory states that women are less likely to be exposed to and/or to participate in sports. As a result, our bodies and athletic abilities are stifled from the outset subsequently affecting our overall sporting experience should we ever have the pleasure (or pain) of entering the sports arena. Coupled with the masculine environment and nature of the training, women who desire to be athletes may ultimately be alienated from the process a whole.

From this perspective, my lack of a sports participation history no longer seemed like an excuse but the result of a structural-level barrier. It explained so many things including my lack of bodily awareness, athleticism, aggression, and competitive drive. It seemed as if I had finally come face-to-face with the real reason I had not yet fought in a cage, and so gender became the

focal point of the study. I had been plagued by gender my whole life though, and every part of me refused to believe this was true. I was too close to my research topic and terrified that my findings would portray MMA as a gendered organization inhibiting successful participation by women. I also did not feel that my instructors or training partners had ever treated me differently, so in my mind there was no way that the process could be gendered. At this point I was clearly viewing the sport and my participation in it very subjectively.

Yes, I an academic and a gender scholar, had convinced myself that the spartanization process was not gendered. I believed that MMA would be an exception and that my findings would prove it to be progressive in terms of producing gender equality. Looking back, it was crazy to think that the process was gender-neutral especially given the definition of masculinity and what constitutes a gendered organization. Needless to say, I was in denial. To distract myself from the truth and to keep myself from influencing participants' perceptions of their own experiences, I claimed that the purpose of the study was simply to:

- Legitimate MMA
- Introduce the public to the male and female athletes participating in the sport outside of the UFC
- Dispel stereotypes about fighters (i.e., they are loud, arrogant, uneducated, jobless, violent, aggressive, men who are likely to abuse women)
- Further explore the spartanization process

To recap, I discovered MMA on television and was chasing my dream of becoming an MMA fighter when I started this study. I jumped fists first into an arduous socialization process that I believed would both physically and mentally prepare me to engage in hand-to-hand combat with another human being in front of a large crowd. The longer I participated in the process without actually engaging in a live sporting event, the more curious I became about the experiences of others. As a result, the purpose of the current study was to further examine the spartanization process and others' experiences with it. The research question, *Do individuals experience the spartanization process differently and if so, why?*, was addressed by exploring answers to the following questions.

- Who participates and why?
- What practices and processes are involved in the spartanization process?
- What must be acquired or surrendered in order to participate?
- Do any structural- or individual-level barriers to participation exist?

As was previously noted, I had suspected that there was a process involved in becoming a fighter. I likened it to the powerful mode of socialization used by the Spartans in ancient Greece, and coined the term ‘spartanization.’ Drawing on previous research and personal experience, I hypothesized that the process is made up of three components or sub-processes that are each comprised of a particular set of practices.

I expected to find that MMA fighters engage in all three components of the spartanization process, but believed that the amount of time and energy dedicated to each part may differ from one individual to the next. I hypothesized that the majority of the sport’s athletes, gym owners, and instructors would primarily be middle or working class, white men between the ages of 25 and 35. I assumed that although motivations for participation would vary, all MMA fighters would have to acquire certain technical and emotional skills as well as the identity of a “fighter.” I claimed that most would also have to surrender things such as time, money, junk food, alcohol, and sex in order to pursue their goal of becoming the next mixed martial arts superstar.

Finally, I hypothesized that participants may encounter barriers to their participation. It was believed that differences in experience might be attributed to individual-level barriers such as health, athleticism, and sports participation history, for example. I suspected that structural-level barriers associated with age, race, class, or gender may also lead to experiential differences. Theory and prior research told me that female fighters, much like other female athletes, would more than likely had to have dealt with a variety of issues including negotiating their identities on and off the mat, competing with their male training partners for the instructors’ time and attention, and a lack of female training partners. In my opinion, these issues may or may not have been amplified by the fact that MMA is a full contact, combat sport that is practiced in what might be viewed by some as a “hyper-masculine” environment.

As you may or may not recall, I have previously referred to the discussion and conclusion as the ‘so what’ chapter. In the paragraphs that follow readers will be provided with a brief summary of the study’s research methodology and findings. This is followed by an explication of

how the current study lends itself to gendered organizational theory and research. Additionally, I explore the study's findings as they relate to identity theory and theories of alienation. I conclude by highlighting the study's limitations, further examining my positionality, and offering some suggestions for future research.

Summary

The study began with six site visits taking place over the course of six months. The majority of the facilities visited were located in Kansas. I spent as little as one and as many as four days at each location; Combative Sports Center (CSC) is an exception seeing as it is the gym where I have trained for the past five years. Interviews were conducted during the site visits with those willing to spare 30-60 minutes of their precious training time. When I realized that traveling to other gyms was becoming too time-consuming and was wearing a hole in my pocketbook, I created a Facebook page for the study called the *MMA Research Forum*. The interview schedule was eventually turned into an online survey, and was distributed via Facebook, twitter, blogs, and other MMA internet forums. My attendance at several MMA sporting events led to the gathering of contact information for several additional fighters.

As a participant observer I learned that MMA gyms can, at times, be difficult to find. Many facilities I visited were dimly lit, with concrete or brick walls. Tile or other flooring systems that could be easily mopped replaced areas that would have traditionally been carpeted in other gyms, and very few locations offered amenities such as locker rooms and showers. I rarely encountered mechanical workout equipment; because unlike weightlifting/physical fitness gyms an MMA gym's primary training area is the mat, where one must remove their shoes and be willing to let others invade their personal space. Those attending classes at an MMA gym will most likely leave covered in sweat, dragging home a minimum of five other peoples' bodily fluids, dead skin, or body hair. A mouth piece is a necessity, and if you plan on training at one of these facilities you should probably get used to the smell of "hard work."

During the study's site visits I encountered one or two female participants for every 15-20 male participants. Although more and more female fighters are being showcased on television and the Internet, the truth is that most small-scale MMA sporting events only have one female fight per card. As is evidenced by my discussions with women, the fact that there are considerably fewer women than men participating in the sport, presents certain barriers or

obstacles to participation for this group of athletes. These differences in participation will be reiterated later in the chapter, but for now let's examine some of this study's participants' similarities.

Male and female interviewees were similar first in terms of age and race. A majority of the individuals interviewed were between the ages of 20 and 30, and indicated being of Caucasian descent. Overall, the sample was also quite educated. At a minimum, fighters reported having obtained a high school diploma, but they were more likely to have completed at least "some college." Some had completed a higher education earning a 2- or 4-year degree, masters, Ph.D., or other professional degree. The mixed martial artists in this study were also productive members of society working in part- or full-time jobs. Female fighters reported working as police officers, lawyers, EMTs or nurses, or assistant professors, and a couple indicated they are small business owners. Men were more likely than women to be employed as professional fighters or in other MMA-related jobs such as gym owner, manager, instructor, and fight promoter.

A sports participation history was something else that these men and women had in common. Yes, surprisingly women were just as likely as men to have participated in other sports prior to becoming an MMA fighter. While this contradicts theory and prior research, later you will see that despite having a prior sports participation history women participating in MMA still feel at a disadvantage in terms of size and strength; but more on that later. For now it is only important to note that regardless of gender, mixed martial artists frequently report having played one or more other sports prior to competing in MMA fighting contests. While many reported having played traditional sports such as football, baseball, basketball, and soccer, over half indicated that they had also participated in other combat sports such as wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, or traditional martial arts like Tae Kwon Do or Karate prior to taking up MMA.

While some claimed that MMA is so unique nothing can prepare you for it, many felt differently indicating that their sports participation history had definitely benefited them in some way. Increased athleticism was the most frequently cited benefit with participants discussing gains such as eye-hand coordination, footwork, endurance, strength, and explosiveness. Other notable benefits include acquiring things like technical skill, discipline, mental toughness. Participants also noted having developed a competitive drive through their participation in other sports, and on more than one occasion this was referred to as the primary motivation for

becoming involved in MMA. It seems that once the participant had reached a certain age or level, participating in the sports they had previously played was no longer an option. You see participation in other sports especially after college is highly competitive, but with MMA you can compete at a variety of different levels simultaneously satiating the need or desire to compete while staying healthy and physically active.

While I am unsure how the training compares to other sports, mixed martial arts training appears as though it may be slightly more time-consuming and complex. But alas, I have not researched any other sports. What I do know, is that a) MMA fighters train year-round, b) they must study more than one martial art in order to be successful, and c) compete in a variety of different competitions including BJJ, judo, wrestling, boxing, and kickboxing in order to prepare themselves for battle inside the cage. MMA fighters also train with a team, but compete as individuals. Furthermore, this study's findings confirmed the existence of the spartanization process, a rigorous and complex process of socialization that consists of bodywork, emotion work, and identity work.

As hypothesized, the bodywork involved largely consists of both diet and exercise in the form of technical skill training as well as strength and conditioning. The fighters reported spending large amounts of time (5-6 days a week for anywhere from 2-4 hours each day) physically preparing their bodies. Because there is no off-season fighters train year-round, increasing the level of intensity during the 6-8 week fight camp that takes place prior to each fight. Maintaining a healthy diet reportedly allows the body to keep up with the physically exhausting amount of training the fighters must engage in, while simultaneously keeping the fighter closer to his/her weight class. Several reported that although the training is difficult, dieting is the real struggle because they often crave the foods they should not indulge in (primarily those containing man-made sugars). Needless to say, this part of the spartanization process involves a lot of discipline and its fair share of sacrifice, something that will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

Interestingly, the participants in this study often said that preparing for a fight is more mental than it is physical. I found this surprising given the amount of time and energy they reported spending in and outside of the gym physically preparing. But it does seem that while anyone can train or teach their body to perform, getting your brain to perform is not as easy. Although some fighters indicated that mental toughness is an inherent characteristic (read "you

either have it or you don't”), based on their responses to interview questions regarding the emotion work involved in the process, I am not so sure. According to this study’s findings “mental toughness” is something that is learned and perfected through long-term sports participation. Emotion work is therefore part of the spartanization process, and it must be engaged in regardless of a fighter’s gender. Additionally, it not only involves a series of practices used to mentally prepare for the fight, but also to cope with the guilt or shame that often accompanies losing.

The most commonly reported necessities for participation in the sport included technical skill, discipline, and mental toughness. Fighters often discussed the importance of developing good technique in a minimum of two martial arts, and equated discipline with things such as a strong work ethic and self-control. For most mental toughness was defined as having the will or determination to not quit, being able to manage stress, and dealing with nerves and adrenaline. Fighters who lack mental toughness were said to have been known to cave under the pressure. The emotion work involved in the spartanization process was identified as one of the hardest things about being a fighter along with finding balance, dieting, and having to cut weight. In order to participate in the sport numerous sacrifices must also be made. The amount of physical training required to perform well leaves very little time for friends and family, and having to maintain a healthy diet keeps fighters from attending social gatherings where they may be tempted by unhealthy food or drink. Again, the majority of the fighters reported being employed. A few however, had passed up viable job opportunities in order to have enough time for the physical preparation the sport requires. This translated into one of many financial sacrifices, which included things such as gym and tournament entry fees, personal training, gear, travel, and diet.

To summarize, the men and women who participated in this study were similar in age, race, education, and occupation. They also had similar sports participation histories and motives for becoming MMA fighters. All interviewees seemed to experience and ascribe meaning to the spartanization process in similar ways, with few exceptions. In chapter three we learned that women are socialized differently than men and will therefore be excluded or discouraged from participating in sports, and those that do find themselves active participants in the sporting arena will unfortunately encounter certain obstacles or barriers to their participation. My discussions with female mixed martial artists illuminated two such obstacles. First, the women in this study

were less likely than men to have training partners their size, strength, or gender. This finding is interesting given that most of the women I interviewed had a prior sports participation history, which would lead one to believe that they would have developed the strength, athleticism, and agility equivalent to their male training partners. In other words, shouldn't similar sports participation histories equate to similar physical structures? Not necessarily according to this study's findings, which may or may not lend additional support to arguments that men and women while socialized differently are also physiologically different.

My findings show that women do not however, see the lack of female training partners as an issue. They instead felt as though it benefited them in the long run, stating that because they can "hang" with men, they can also "hang" with women. Ironically, they did not seem to take into consideration that the majority of their opponents are also forced to train with men. Second and closely related to similar ideas, the women who participated in this study often reported difficulties associated with finding fights. With fewer women than men participating in the sport, this is not surprising. According to theory both of these "obstacles" are undeniably gender-related, but neither had kept any of these women from training or competing.

Discussion

And so, as an agent of socialization sports have been known to teach people of all ages about things such as fair play, an acceptance of authority, and the importance of obeying the rules. Acknowledging this is crucial to the understanding of sports as a social institution. Equally important, is the recognition that sport is also a place that forms and reinforces many people's ideas and beliefs about gender differences (Andersen and Taylor 2005). Research focused on the role of gender in relation to sport often focuses on the reproduction of gendered stereotypes and/or norms at both the organizational and individual levels. Findings from these studies consistently reveal that "sport organizations are contexts where men and masculinity are privileged and where jobs are linked to traditional gender and sex-role stereotypes" (Cunningham and Sagas 2008:4).

Despite having read and written about these ideas on multiple occasions, I still set out wanting to prove that sport of MMA is not gendered. Instead, I falsely assumed that if gender was an issue biology and socialization were to blame. It seemed to me at the time that the people participating in it were more likely to have brought their gendered beliefs and attitudes to the

table. But according to Acker (1990) an organization is gendered if “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine (146)” All sports (including MMA) are therefore gendered organizations by definition, and if this is true the spartanization process must be gendered too.

Before returning to gender theory and literature, I refused to believe that gender was inhibiting my ability to become a fighter in any way. Realizing that gender very well could be the obstacle to my participation led me to question every aspect of my own experiences, which caused me to become very emotional. I felt as though the theory and literature were influencing my perception of my own experiences, and became concerned about influencing the perceptions of others. Although I acknowledged that gender was an area of interest, I attempted to de-emphasize it as a primary concern of the study. My hope was that gender-related experiential differences would instead arise from my casual conversations with the fighters about the spartanization process and their experiences with it.

As I reviewed the data, I became hyper-focused on the fact that men and women were describing and ascribing meaning to their experiences in similar ways. Both groups of individuals had participated in sports from a young age, were physically and mentally preparing to fight in the same way, and reported having to both gain and sacrifice similar things in order to become MMA fighters. Once again I found myself trying to argue that the process and sport are not gendered, but the truth is that the gym’s atmosphere, nature of the training, and sport are undeniably masculine. What I have learned is that identifying them as such is not necessarily a “bad” thing.

From the outside, spartanization may appear to some as a militaristic masculinizing process. It may be argued that women who participate in the process are taught to “act” like men or to do the “male” thing. While I cannot deny that those engaging in the process (both male and female) are doing things that society has defined as masculine, I also cannot overlook the fact that the spartanization process does have some feminine aspects. Not only are fighters taught to manage their body weight through diet and exercise, the process involves just as much emotion work as it does body work, if not more. According to Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe (2011), “social psychologists’ perception that men are less skilled at and less likely to manage their emotions than are women can be traced back to the origins of the sociology of emotions” (416).

The idea as argued by Hochschild (1983) is that women are more likely than men to be socialized in a way that leads to them obtaining jobs that further develop their emotion management skills. Given the amount of emotion work involved in becoming a fighter, this may mean that women are better suited for the sport. Unfortunately, I do not have sufficient data to support this. It may however, be an area of exploration for future research.

But I did find that what sets MMA and the spartanization process apart from traditional, Title IX sports and other masculinizing processes, is that women have not been excluded from participating. Male fighters, gym owners, and coaches have been welcoming of women rather than hostile towards them. Thus, whereas I once viewed the process of becoming a fighter as being gender-neutral, I now see it as an equal-opportunity “masculinizing” process. The men and women who participate in it work side-by-side in a masculine environment known as an MMA gym, performing masculine and feminine activities that subsequently produce what is viewed by most of society as a masculine product. Only men and women who lack a strong work ethic are excluded from the process, and long-term participation leads to a happy, healthy lifestyle for anyone who enters the gym (and sticks with it) regardless of gender. The biggest issue women have to deal with inside of the gym is a lack of training partners. This gender-related obstacle is not viewed by women as being detrimental to their participation, but is instead seen as a blessing in disguise.

The sport of MMA, on the other hand, is not an equal opportunity masculine environment. In fact, it is at the organizational level that a woman will most likely feel the impact of being involved in a gendered organization. Not only is their sexuality questioned at the organizational level, they are treated as sexual objects by some spectators; a direct result of being portrayed or in some cases portraying themselves as sex symbols. To reiterate, it is not that the spartanization process is less gendered than the sport of MMA. Women are just more likely to feel the effects of gender at the organizational level, than they are at the level of training. This study’s findings indicate that this is neither a deterrent nor an obstacle for those who are currently participating in the sport. The fact that the spartanization process and MMA are gendered may however, deter some women from choosing to participate resulting in fewer training partners and difficulty finding fights for those who are.

Before I conclude I think that it is also important to return to the question of who participates in the sport and why. This is an interesting question given that participation in the

sport will neither lead to fame nor fortune for most. Some will become local celebrities if you will, but only a select few will gain notoriety on a large scale. While this explains why so few of those interviewed are choosing MMA as a career, it does not explain what drives an individual to risk pain, injury, and humiliation. When asked about their motivation for becoming a fighter, some indicated that “one thing had led to another,” and others cited things such as money, success, health and fitness, needing to prove they could do it to themselves and others, enjoying a challenge, or wanting to face their fear. The most frequently cited response was however, that participating in other sports had fostered a competitive drive. These participants were therefore attempting to fulfill a need or desire to compete.

What I believe these individuals were trying to tell me is that their participation in sports had led them to identify themselves as athletes. According to both identity and social identity theorists “the self is reflexive in that it sees itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (Stets and Burke 2000:224). While this classification of the self is based on roles in identity theory, social identity theorists conceptualize of it in terms of groups or categories. Behavior is goal-oriented regardless of how the self is classified or categorized however. In other words, “behavior is considered to be organized into meaningful units that are subsumed by specific self-definitions” and is performed with the purpose of meeting the expectations associated with said classification of the self (Hogg et al. 1995:262).

Social identity theorists propose “that a social category into which one falls, to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category” (Hogg et al. 1995:259). According to this theory then, our identities or self-perceptions are based on the ability to think, feel, and act as part of a group. Furthermore, proponents of social identity theory argue that “behavior is organized to change the situation and hence the perceived self-relevant meanings in order to bring them into agreement with those in the identity standard” (Stryker and Burke 2000:287). Given the aforementioned theoretical frameworks I have come to view peoples’ participation in the sport of MMA as an attempt to maintain their identity as an athlete.

As is noted by Stets & Burke (2000) a merger of identity- and social identity theory “would look at agency and reflection, doing and being, behaviors and perceptions as central aspects of the self” (234). My intent was to do exactly this and what the study’s findings do

show, is that there is a lot less identity work involved in becoming a fighter than I had originally anticipated. In terms of their participation in the sport the most salient identity for this study's participants was that of "athlete" and not "fighter." In fact although some had been troublemakers in the past (i.e. reported having been in fights and drug- or alcohol-related trouble) most had never even been in a fight prior to becoming involved in the sport. Furthermore, according to my findings the men and women who participate in the sport rarely choose their own fight identity (e.g., cage name), but are instead given this identity by family, friends, coaches or training partners. While they take pride in what others call them, they are quick to acknowledge that fighting is only a part of who they are; it does *not* define them. In addition, the identity of a "fighter" seems to come more from having participated in an actual sporting event than from having engaged in the spartanization process.

Finally, an alternative explanation might be that the work done in today's society leads to a sense of alienation or anomie. Based on the participant's demographics, the individuals participating in this study do not seem to be much different from other people. Several were raising families, most have been or are going to school, and 90% reported having a full- or part-time job. What may separate MMA fighters from other people is the fact that they have structured their lives in a way that will allow them to achieve whatever mixed martial arts goal they have set for themselves. For example, despite having graduated from college many have chosen to be employed in positions that allow them to continue training or to stay involved in the sport in some way.

This finding demonstrates that some MMA fighters may simply be trying to avoid "punching the clock" in the traditional way. The reasoning behind this might have something to do with the fact that the work done in today's society no longer leads to the production of a product that belongs to us. When training to compete as an MMA fighter it would be difficult to feel alienated from the product of the body- and emotion-work being done, because the product of that work is a strong mind and body that we are able to carry with us and utilize in multiple facets of life. In other words, the product of our work is our own and our bodies become a commodity in the world of sports.

Additionally, I have found that participation in the spartanization process leads not only to sense of belonging, but also to a sense of community. Participants claimed to have gained a happy, healthy lifestyle as a result of their participation, and also spoke lovingly about the

camaraderie among their teammates. Not only did they refer to their teammates as family, they boasted about the support system this provides them both in and outside of the gym and cage. While these benefits may not be tangible, based on participant observation and narratives, I would have to say that they are very real to the study's participants and do seem to outweigh the costs. Even though the same may not be true for those who no longer fight or who participate in the sport on a much smaller scale, I would venture to argue that some fighters and MMA enthusiasts just might be seeking out things that society no longer provides them (i.e., discipline, a sense of community, structure, and a happy, healthy lifestyle).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my belief that the methodology used was the most appropriate way to answer the proposed study's research questions. Qualitative methods provide a researcher with the opportunity to connect with their respondents on a more intimate level by allowing the researcher to become the instrument with which they will gather data. As a participant observer and the interviewer, I was placed in direct contact with the individuals and the phenomenon that I wished to know more about. The fighters who participated in the study were driven, passionate individuals who told their stories with enthusiasm, and willingly provided additional information or clarification when necessary. Through the use of probing questions when the participants' feedback was insufficient or unclear, the interviewing process allowed me to further explore these men and women's lived experiences as MMA fighters; something that surveys or other quantitative research methods would not have allowed me to do. While readers may question the integrity of the fighters' responses due to their position as MMA enthusiasts, it is important to note that I have done my best to accurately report what the fighters told me. In addition, the fighters chose to go on record using their real names and thereby acknowledging the possibility that they could later be held accountable for what they had said.

The study was not however not without limitation. As the study got underway I predicted that data collection would take anywhere from six months to a year, when in all actuality it would take closer to a year and a half. Flexibility in the interview schedule resulted in inconsistencies in the types of information gathered from each participant. During the course of the study a variety of methods were used to gather data. The result was a large collection of print media (books, journal and newspaper articles), eight field notebooks, 48 interviews (some audio

recorded, others not), and 18 surveys. Needless to say, the amount of information gathered was unwieldy, making it difficult to analyze at times. But I was able to talk at length to quite a few people and do believe that I only concluded this part of the process upon reaching a saturation point. Finally, the sampling procedure may or may not have been ideal, but in my defense MMA fighters are a unique population. Since the study was exploratory in nature, the sampling process still allowed me to gather important and useful information. It is my belief that using the methodological approach outlined in chapter four gave me an opportunity to not only grow through my work, but with it as I was forced to examine my own ideas and beliefs, which evolved throughout the research process.

My biggest concern going into this project however was my personal relationship with MMA and the impact that may have had on the research process as well as with how others might view my personal relationship with it. As a participant in this culture I must admit that at times, especially during the interview process, it was difficult for me to maintain my role as interviewer and researcher and not become a fellow mixed martial artist. In an effort to ensure that my research and its findings would be taken seriously, I have attempted to be upfront and honest about my own experiences and the role they played in the interpretation of the data. I think that this is evident in the discussion of the findings and the extent to which they confirm as well as contradicted what I believed I would find. This study's exploratory nature limited my ability to draw definitive conclusions from my findings. Furthermore, because of the location of the study as well as its small sample size, I am unable to generalize my findings to the larger population of MMA practitioners.

As a social scientist and a practitioner of mixed martial arts, I think that it is very important for current and future research to explore all aspects of the mixed martial arts phenomenon and the culture that surrounds it. Scholars may want to focus on the intersection of race, class and gender in particular. It is important to note that the purpose of the current study was merely to ascertain base-level information about the spartanization process, MMA, and the athletes who participate in it. The sample did not vary much in terms of race or class nor was I able to reach as many women as I did men. In addition, the sampling procedure was not ideal. This may have prevented me from obtaining a more diverse sample, discouraging me from making generalizations about how these participants experiences may differ from those of others.

When it comes to gender in particular, scholars might want to focus their efforts on the feminine aspects of the spartanization process and how femininity is employed in the production of what is considered by most to be a masculine product (i.e., a hardened body that will ultimately be used as a weapon). A useful research question to pose might be in what ways are women better suited for the sport of MMA? Scholars could delve deeper into the current study's findings that women are better listeners and learners than men, or more fully explore the various types of emotion work involved in becoming a fighter.

Yet another area researchers may want to examine a bit further is fighters' motivation for participation. Similar to the current research, future studies can continue to examine what it is that MMA fighters are really doing. While this study's findings illustrate that some participants may be avoiding "punching the clock" in the traditional sense and others might be seeking out the things that society no longer provides them, it is possible that there are other explanations as to why MMA fighters are willing to endure the social, physical, and emotional costs associated with participation in the spartanization process. The focal point of this research might be on how the current structure of society influences an individual's decision to participate in something of this nature.

Finally, I believe that there is also a need for research that looks at the spartanization process and sport of MMA from the perspective of others. These studies may focus on the points of view of those who participate in the spartanization process, but do not intend on becoming MMA fighters. Spectators and others who do not know much about the sport could be fun to interview too. In the latter scenario, the research focus may be on the stigma associated with being a participant in what is considered by most to be a "violent" sport. The purpose would be to gain a better understanding of the sport and its athletes from the perspective of those who know little about it (i.e., are not fans). Scholars may ask the question: What do others think about the sport of MMA and those who participate in it?

So has this study inspired you to become an MMA fighter? According to the fighters I interviewed, "it is not for everyone." They would however recommend that you try it, because you won't know if it is for you until you do. "Just jump in and see if you like it," said Jen Case. While Tyler Bell reported that "if you try it and don't like it, it's fine because you're not going to be called a coward," Case jokingly stated that "if it isn't for you, you can go wear a skirt." Laura Butler indicated that "you can train without having to take a fight," and Chance Thackston

agreed stating that although “competing may not be for everybody, training might be since it is a good way to learn self-defense.” Sarah Goodlaxon cautioned that “it takes a special kind of person to get punched in the face and think it is fun,” but agreed with Cassie Rodish and others who indicated that “anybody is welcome to try it.” Several individuals also wanted others to know that “fighting isn’t easy” and “you should be realistic about the time and energy that you can put into it.”

According to Rob Kimmons it is best to decide what “you want from it first.” “What do you mean by that?” I asked. Rob replied,

If it is your hobby, know that it is your hobby and treat it accordingly; don't let it mess up your job. If it is your job, train like it is your job; don't treat it like it's your hobby. If you want it to be your job, but you train like it is your hobby then it is going to be your hobby and you are never going to make it anywhere. That's my advice, know the difference and train accordingly.

James Krause and several other fighters agreed with Kimmons. For example, Krause said “if you don't plan on being obsessed with the sport, don't waste your time.” When asked to elaborate, Krause explained that

If you want to do MMA for fitness or as a hobby, perfect it is a great hobby. If you want to do this for a living, think straight to the top. If you can't see yourself putting in the work that Ben Henderson puts in, and being as good as him, then walk away. It's not worth it. It's like trying to get the girlfriend back that doesn't want to be with you.

And when asked “What advice do you have for others who are thinking about becoming involved in the sport?” Dallas Browning reiterated that there are a lot of sacrifices to be made. He said,

You better be able to sacrifice your social life, girlfriend or wife, family, and kids if you are going to be a professional MMA fighter. You are going to have to work 16 hour days, and then go

home to deal with all that bullshit. If that is something that you think you can do, by all means go ahead, have fun. If you can't then don't try it, because it's not worth it. The money sucks, the chances of making it big are slim to none, and it's just really not worth it.

Amanda Bell was in agreement with these men, also indicating that if you are not going to “go all the way with it, it's not worth it.” She concluded this part of our conversation with the following statement:

If you're not built for it, if you're not willing to put in the time and effort, and if you're not going to be focused then it's not worth it, because you are going to walk into the cage and get your ass kicked.

If you still think that you have what it takes to be an MMA fighter, the participants in this study suggest that you start by selecting a good gym. Joe Wilk, for example, said

Whatever you do, don't go to some butt-fuck local gym that lets you fight in six weeks. You'll get your head broken and never want to do it again.

Several of Joe's students made similar, slightly less vulgar comments. For instance, Pake McNally said

Get to a good gym. Don't be a moron and get your ass kicked. At least know what you are doing.

And training partner, Nick Garrett replied

The most important thing is to go to a credible gym. This is not something that you can teach yourself or train in a garage. You can't go to a Tae Kwon Do school to learn MMA either.

Laura Sanko, and several other female fighters, reported that it is best if you do your homework before deciding where to train. Sanko stated that “you should be willing to drive a little bit

further or pay a little bit more money to train at the best place,” and reiterated that “you’re not going to do yourself any favors if you sign up at ‘so and so’s’ garage gym.” “Where you train is a big deal,” she said.

Courtney Belcher indicated that the best approach is to visit several gyms. She suggested that you “train for a week at each gym to see where you fit in,” and said that it is also important to “watch your back; you have to take care of yourself.” It seems that she and her husband have had some bad experiences, but she admitted that it isn’t always like that. She went on to say,

There are some good coaches out there, and there are some that will take advantage of you too. But if you can find a good gym and good coaches, it can be like a family environment.

Other fighters indicated that finding a good camp is imperative, because not everyone knows what they are talking about. The bottom line, according to Jake Lindsey, is that you have to “find a good camp within a good gym where the coach will care about you personally.”

Once you have found the right gym for you, the fighters say that it is important that you “do it right.” What this means is that you should “commit to the training,” “be dedicated,” and “work hard.” Male and female fighters cautioned against moving too quickly indicating that it is best if you “take it slow,” and recommended “not taking a fight too soon.” David Rickels indicated that there is a need to “get as much training in as you possibly can and to train all facets.” Miles Johns agreed saying “slow it down and learn a lot before you get into the ring.” Johns went on to say that he knows guys “who have been training for a year, and still haven’t taken their first fight because they don’t feel ready.” Xavier Lewis also stressed the importance of taking your time to learn the skills you need. He said

I took a fight after training for two months. I won, but realized that the other guy was more prepared than me.

“How long should one train before taking their first fight?” I asked. Lewis replied that “it depends on the individual.” Others agreed saying things like “only you will know when you are ready to take a fight.” Similarly, Cassie Rodish stated,

There is so much talent out there right now; you have to be serious about your training. I would suggest that you put years into the gym before you even think about fighting.

Other women were in agreement with Rodish. For example, Jessica Philippus advised that you need to “train for an adequate period of time.” And Ashley Cummins said, “don’t take a fight right away, do what I did and train first.” She went on to say that “a lot of females will train for three months and then take a fight.” In her opinion, “that is not enough training.” She and others also suggested participating in things such as BJJ tournaments and Muay Thai fights before taking your first match; each is a component of MMA and should help prepare you for the cage.

Last, but not least, the participants wanted to tell those who are interested in becoming involved in the sport to be prepared to risk pain, injury, and humiliation. Josh Pfiefer said you have to be “willing to take some blood, bruises, and scratches.” Training partner, Nick Garrett, agreed adding that “it’s not easy and you are going to get hurt.” And according to Valerie Aspaas,

You will get smashed. You will get punched and you will get hurt. Maybe not seriously, but you are going to get hit in the face a few times and not like it. That’s how you are going to learn how not to get hit in the face though.

Pake McNally indicated that it is also important to remember that “it is just a fight.” He said,

You could lose. You could go out there and get your ass kicked, but as long as you go home at the end of the night that is all that matters. What I’m trying to say is that what matters is getting in there and doing it, not losing.

Finally, Mile Johns advised that if losing gets you down, you should “probably learn a lot of technique before getting into the ring for real.”

Well now that I am done pursuing my degree, I am going to return to pursuing my dream of becoming an MMA fighter. I must admit that there is just something about the lifestyle and the training that keeps me coming back for more. And with that I will allow my head coach, Joe

Wilk, to have the last word. At the end of each interview, fighters were asked if they had any additional advice or comments they would like to add. To this Joe Wilk said,

Al, if you prepare and train properly MMA can be very safe. It can also be a life changing experience.

“Thanks Joe, are you sure you wouldn’t like to add anything else?” I asked. “Oh yeah I almost forgot,” said Joe, “Jiu-Jitsu or Die!”

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule

A. Background Information

- a. General:
 - i. I'd like to start by gathering some background information. Could you begin by telling me a little bit about yourself? (i.e. how old are you? Where are you from? What do you do for a living?)
- b. Sport Participation History:
 - i. Did you participate in any sports prior to competing in fighting contests?
 - 1. If yes: Which ones? And at what age?
 - a. Were any of these teams co-ed?
 - i. If yes: What can you tell me about this experience? How was it similar/different from other experiences?
 - b. Would you say competing in these sports prepared you for this sport? Why or why not?
 - c. Was training for and/or competing in these sports similar or different to training and competing in MMA?
 - 2. If no: What affect, if any, do you think not participating in other sports has had on your participation in MMA?

B. Participation/Involvement in MMA

- a. How long have you been participating in MMA?
 - i. How many fights have you had?
 - ii. What is your current level of involvement? (i.e. Are you an amateur or professional fighter? Currently training for a fight? Have fought, but are no longer participating in fighting contests?)
- b. What was your motivation? (i.e. what made you decide to become a fighter?)
- c. How do you physically prepare for something like this? Or what does your training regimen involve/consist of?
 - i. Do men and women train together at your gym?
 - 1. If so, what can you tell me about this? Is training with the opposite sex similar/different from training with someone of the same sex?
- d. How do you mentally prepare for something like this?
 - i. Do you have any pre-fight rituals?
- e. What, if anything, have you had to acquire in order to become a fighter?
 - i. What have you had to give up?
 - ii. Have you had to overcome any obstacles and/or barriers in order to be a fighter?
 - 1. If yes: What did you do to overcome these
- f. Do you think you will continue to participate in the sport?
 - 1. If so, for how long?

C. Experiences/Reactions

- a. What is your relationship like with your coaches?
 - i. If participant trains at a gym w/ male and female coaches: What kind of relationship do you have w/ your male coaches? Female coaches?
- b. What is your relationship like with your training partners?
 - i. If participant has male and female training partners: what is your relationship like with your male training partners? Female training partners?
 - 1. Do you have a relationship with one another outside of the gym?
 - 2. If participant is male: How do you feel about women participating in this sport?
- c. Describe to me how people react to your decision to participate in MMA?
 - i. Friends?
 - ii. Family?
 - iii. How about your employer? How do you explain to someone who is going to hire you that you may show up with bumps and bruises every now and then?

D. Self-reflection

- a. What does the sport of MMA mean to you? (i.e. what do you think about MMA and your involvement in it?)
- b. What do you think your participation in the sport says about you as a person? What do you want it to say about you? Do you think that others “get” that about you?
- c. Do you have any advice of others who are thinking about becoming involved in the sport?

E. Closing Questions

- a. Do you think I have missed anything? Is there anything else you would like to add?
- b. Is there anything else that you would like to know or are unclear about in relation to the study itself?

Appendix B - Consent Forms

Training Facility Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Survival of the Fittest

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: 11/03/2011 **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:** 11/03/2012

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Robert Schaeffer

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Allison Teeter

CONTACT NAME AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

- Dr. Robert Schaeffer, Principal Investigator, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Social Work, 211 Waters Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-6978.
- Allison Teeter, Co-Investigator, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Social Work, 204 Waters Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 341-7989.

IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:

- Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
- Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study will be to gain an inside look into the lives of the men and women who participate in the sport of MMA. The study aims to explore the influence and/or motivations for participation in the sport.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: To learn more about the sport of MMA and the people involved in it, I would like to spend some time as a participant observer at your training facility. What this means is that I intend not only to train at your gym, but also to observe and take notes about your facility's daily routines and practices, individual and group interactions, etc. In order to also gain a better understanding of who participates in the sport and why, I will be recruiting individuals from your gym to take part in a brief (1-3 hour) interview. Interview questions will address these individual's sport participation history, their interest and participation/involvement in the sport, and their experiences in the gym as well as the cage.

LENGTH OF STUDY: I will be conducting research at various training facilities for the next 6 to 9 months. I may visit your training facility approximately 1-3 times during that time period. The duration of each visit may vary, but I do not see any visit lasting more than 3-5 days.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: This study involves minimal risk and discomfort. All that is required of you is your time. Asking you about your involvement may however, lead to the following risks:

- Explaining your involvement in the sport may lead you to recall intimate details from your past. This could quite possibly cause you emotional distress.
- You might say something that would embarrass yourself or someone else.

- If you are an employee of the training facility, you might say something, which if attributed to you, might get you fired.
- There is also the potential for those participants competing in MMA fighting contests to embarrass themselves in the ring (i.e. lose terribly or engage in unsportsmanlike conduct).

RISK MINIMIZATION PROTOCOL:

- All participants must be at least 18 years of age or older to participate in the study. I will not talk to minors and any information gathered regarding minors and their participation in the sport will not be attributed to them.
- Consent forms (attached) will be used to inform gym owners and those agreeing to a separate interview of the benefits of the research as well as its risks and the protocols for dealing with them.
- Participants desiring anonymity will be given the option of using a pseudonym. Gym owners/operators will also be given the option of providing a pseudonym for their training facility should they not want the establishment's name to be on record.
- The participants private, personal lives (sexuality, criminal history, etc.) will not be the subject of interest and will only be a topic of conversation as it relates to the sport, their experience as fighters, and their perceptions.
- Participants will be allowed to go off record at any time and information deemed to be embarrassing or potentially harmful to yourself or others (if the participant says something stupid/offensive, for example) will not be attributed to the individual without their permission.
- Participants will also be allowed to retract any comments/statements (or even their entire interview, if they wish) at any time without penalty or prejudice.
- As interviewer, I will remain alert and aware of my participants emotional state. Should a participant become emotional during the interview, I will remind them that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to refuse participation at anytime. I will let them know that we can either stop the interview or avoid the subject that is causing them distress.
- At the end of each interview I will ask the participants if there is anything else that they would like to know or are unclear about in relation to the study. Should they have any questions or concerns, I will be happy to address them. I will also give all participants to make a retraction on anything they have said, even if it means they want to retract their entire interview.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

- Interview subjects in this type of research typically report some subjective benefit from being able to discuss their experiences.
- It will add to the diversity of sociological research conducted on gender and sport.
- It will also add to the literature about MMA, its athletes, and its spectators.
- The information collected may help society to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for MMA and those who are involved and/or interested in it.
- As a person who has chosen to participate in the sport, I hope that this study will help me to better understand myself, and others, like me.

- Finally, the fighters, training facilities, and fight promotion companies who participate in this study may possibly experience an increase in popularity as a result of any reports or publications that are developed from this research.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: All interview materials, surveys, and signed consent forms will be held in a locked file cabinet. Interview tapes will be transcribed and destroyed following transcription. Consent forms will be held for three years and then destroyed and electronic transcriptions will remain password protected on my personal computer.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant)

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Witness to Signature: (project staff) _____

Date: _____

Interview Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Survival of the Fittest

APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT: 11/03/2011 **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:** 11/03/2013

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Robert Schaeffer

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Allison Teeter

CONTACT NAME AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

- Dr. Robert Schaeffer, Principal Investigator, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, & Social Work, 211 Waters Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-6978.
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- Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study will be to gain an inside look into the lives of the men and women who participate in the sport of MMA. The study aims to explore the influence and/or motivations for participation in the sport.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: In an attempt to gain a better understanding of who participates in the sport and why, 50 – 100 interviews will be conducted with individuals who are currently involved in or with the sport. Interview questions will address the participant's sports participation history, their interest and participation/involvement in the sport of MMA, and their experiences in the gym as well as the cage. The aim of the study is simply to understand your involvement in the sport, so you will not be asked to subject yourself to anything that you would not normally subject yourself to. The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed.

LENGTH OF STUDY: The interview will last approximately 1-3 hours.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: This study involves minimal risk and discomfort. All that is required of you is your time. Asking you about your involvement may however, lead to the following risks:

- Explaining your involvement in the sport may lead you to recall intimate details from your past. This could quite possibly cause you emotional distress.
- You might say something that would embarrass yourself or someone else.
- If you are an employee of the training facility, you might say something, which if attributed to you, might get you fired.
- There is also the potential for those participants competing in MMA fighting contests to embarrass themselves in the ring (i.e. lose terribly or engage in unsportsmanlike conduct)

RISK MINIMIZATION PROTOCOL:

- All participants must be at least 18 years of age or older to participate in the study. I will not talk to minors and any information gathered regarding minors and their participation in the sport will not be attributed to them.
- Consent forms (attached) will be used to inform gym owners and those agreeing to a separate interview of the benefits of the research as well as its risks and the protocols for dealing with them.
- Participants desiring anonymity will be given the option of using a pseudonym. Gym owners/operators will also be given the option of providing a pseudonym for their training facility should they not want the establishment's name to be on record.
- The participants private, personal lives (sexuality, criminal history, etc.) will not be the subject of interest and will only be a topic of conversation as it relates to the sport, their experience as fighters, and their perceptions.
- Participants will be allowed to go off record at any time and information deemed to be embarrassing or potentially harmful to yourself or others (if the participant says something stupid/offensive, for example) will not be attributed to the individual without their permission.
- Participants will also be allowed to retract any comments/statements (or even their entire interview, if they wish) at any time without penalty or prejudice.
- As interviewer, I will remain alert and aware of my participants emotional state. Should a participant become emotional during the interview, I will remind them that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to refuse participation at any time. I will let them know that we can either stop the interview or avoid the subject that is causing them distress.
- At the end of each interview I will ask the participants if there is anything else that they would like to know or are unclear about in relation to the study. Should they have any questions or concerns, I will be happy to address them. I will also give all participants to make a retraction on anything they have said, even if it means they want to retract their entire interview.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

- Interview subjects in this type of research typically report some subjective benefit from being able to discuss their experiences.
- It will add to the diversity of sociological research conducted on gender and sport.
- It will also add to the literature about MMA, its athletes, and its spectators.
- The information collected may help society to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for MMA and those who are involved and/or interested in it.
- As a person who has chosen to participate in the sport, I hope that this study will help me to better understand myself, and others, like me.
- Finally, the fighters, training facilities, and fight promotion companies who participate in this study may possibly experience an increase in popularity as a result of any reports or publications that are developed from this research.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: All interview materials, surveys, and signed consent forms will be held in a locked file cabinet. Interview tapes will be transcribed and destroyed following transcription. Consent forms will be held for three years and then destroyed and electronic transcriptions will remain password protected on my personal computer.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant.)

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness to Signature: (project staff) _____ Date: _____

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

I, (name of parent or guardian) _____, grant permission for my child (name of child) _____ to participate in this study. I understand this project is research, and that my child's participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I allow my child to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop their participation at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled to.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to allow my child to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and date copy of this consent form.

Participant Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness to Signature: (project staff) _____ Date: _____

Appendix C - Survey

AXIO SURVEY

MMA Fighter Sport Participation and Perception Survey

Survey Description

The purpose of this survey is to gain insight into the lives of the men and women who participate in the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Survey questions will address your sports participation history, interest and participation/involvement in the sport, and your experiences in the gym as well as the cage. It is anticipated that the survey will take approximately 30 - 45 minutes to complete.

Each participant will only be allowed to take the survey once and the information you provide will not be recorded until you reach the "Closing Message," which indicates that your responses have been recorded. Your responses will potentially be used in my doctoral dissertation and academic publications.

Opening Instructions

Please provide a response to each of the following survey questions. Thank you in advance for taking the time to reflect on your participation in the sport of MMA and for sharing your experiences. If you would like a copy of the consent form or have any questions or comments regarding the study, please contact:

Allison Teeter, M.A.
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506
amt8968@ksu.edu

Page 1

Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may withdraw your consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation or penalty. The questions in this section of the survey ensure that you are aware of and understand the survey's terms of participation.

Question 1 **** required ****

Do you understand that this project is research and that your participation is completely voluntary?

- Yes
 No

Question 2 **** required ****

Would you prefer your responses remain anonymous?

- Yes, I would prefer my responses to remain anonymous. Do not associate my responses with any of my personal information (i.e. name, cage name, etc.).
 No, I do not want my responses to remain anonymous. I would like the information I provide to be associated with my personal information (i.e. name, cage name, etc.).

Page 2

Question 3

Name:

Characters Remaining: 75

Question 4

Cage Name:

Characters Remaining: 75

Question 5

Name of the gym where you currently train:

Characters Remaining: 50

Question 6

Please provide city and state information.

Where is the gym located?

Characters Remaining: 75

Page 3

Question 7

What is your age?

Characters Remaining: 3

Question 8

Sex:

- Female
 Male

Question 9

Please check all that apply.

Race:

- White/Caucasian
 African American
 Hispanic
 Asian
 Native American

Pacific Islander

Other:

Question 10

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than High School
- High School / GED
- Some College
- 2-year College Degree
- 4-year College Degree
- Masters Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (JD, MD)

Question 11

If you have a job (other than fighting) what is it that you do for a living?

Characters Remaining: 75

Page 4

Question 12

Did you participate in any sports prior to participating in MMA?

- Yes
- No

Question 13

Did participating (or not participating) in other sports have an impact on your participation in MMA?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Page 5

Question 14

Current level of involvement:

- Amateur
- Professional
- Previous participant (i.e. have fought before, but no longer take part in fighting contests)
- Other:

Question 15

What is your amateur record?

Characters Remaining: 75

Question 16

What is your professional record?

Characters Remaining: 75

Question 17

Fight weight/weight class:

Characters Remaining: 75

Page 6

Question 18

What motivated you to become an MMA fighter (or what made you decide to become an MMA fighter)?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Page 7

Question 19

How do you physically prepare for a fight?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 20

How do you mentally prepare for a fight?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 20

How do you mentally prepare for a fight?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 21

What did you have to gain or acquire in order to become a fighter?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 22

What did or do you have to give up in order to be a fighter?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 23

What would you say is the hardest thing about being a fighter?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 24

Approximately how many of your coaches are men?

Characters Remaining: 4

Question 25

Approximately how many of your coaches are women?

Characters Remaining: 4

Question 26

How would you describe your relationship with your coaches?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 27

Approximately how many of your training partners are men?

Characters Remaining: 4

Question 28

Approximately how many of your training partners are women?

Characters Remaining: 4

Question 29

How would you describe your relationship with your training partners?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Page 12

Question 30

How do others react to your decision to participate in this sport?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 31

Do you have any advice for others who are currently involved or thinking about becoming involved in the sport?

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 32

Is there anything else that you would like to add? (Think about things that I may have missed or that you would like to include that are unique to your situation/experience.)

Characters Remaining: 1000

Question 33 * required *****

If you answer yes to the following question, please provide your contact information in the additional space provided.

May I contact you should I have additional questions or need clarification regarding any of the information

you have provided?

- Yes, I have provided my contact information below.
- No, please do not contact me.

Further comments about your response:

Closing Message

Thank you for taking the time to reflect on your participation in the sport of MMA and for sharing your experiences. Your responses have been recorded. They will be combined with responses from other survey respondents and included in my doctoral dissertation. If you would like a copy of the consent form, think of something you would like to add, or have any questions or comments regarding this survey, please contact:

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Manhattan, KS 66506
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- End of Survey -

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Appendix D - Survey Results

This is only a selection of the survey data. Participant responses to open-ended questions are provided verbatim.

Table D.1 Cage Names

Response
24 Karat
Aussie Mayhem
Baby Tyger
No Fear
PukeFist
Relentless
Smash
The Heathen
The War Machine
Where The White Women At
Other*

Table D.2 Location (City, State)

Response
Chantilly, VA
Elko, Nv and Winemmuca Nv
Fort Riley, Kansas
Ft Riley/Manhattan, KS
Glendale, AZ
Lacey Washington
Manhattan KS
Manhattan KS
Manhattan, Kansas
Manhattan, Kansas
Manhattan, KS
Manhattan, Ks
Monroe, Iowa
Princeton ,WV
Tucson,AZ
Whippany, NJ

Table D.3 Age

Response
22
23
24
25
25
26
26
27
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28
29
30
31
32
32
33
40

Table D.4 Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	12	66.7%
Female	6	33.3%

Table D.5 Race/Ethnicity

	Frequency*	Percent
White/Caucasian	15	83.3%
Native American	1	5.6%
Hispanic	2	11.1%
Asian	1	5.6%
African American	1	5.6%
Pacific Islander	--	--
Other	--	--

*Participants could select all that apply

Table D.6 Education

	Frequency	Percent
Less than high school	--	--
High school/GED	3	16.7%
Some College	7	38.9%
2-year college degree	1	5.6%
4-year college degree	5	27.8%
Master's degree	--	--
Doctoral degree	1	5.6%
Professional degree (JD, MD)	1	5.6%

Table D.7 Occupation

Response
All source intelligence analyst (US Army), combatives instructor army
Full time student
Gym Owner
I own an MMA Gym
I work as a technician for a phone company
I work part time for Shawnee County Parks & Recreation
IT support and networking specialist part time tattoo artist
Lab tech1 for a gold mine
Licensed Educator
Middle School Teacher
Military (officer)
Oil Leasing Agent
Personal Trainer / Dog Fitness Specialist / Pet Sitter
retail
Sales Manager
Security Advisor for a Major Home Security Company
US Army

Table D.8 Sports Participation History

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	72.2%
No	5	27.8%

Table D.9 Current Level of Involvement

	Frequency*	Percent
Amateur fighter	12	66.7%
Previous participant (i.e., have fought before, but no longer take part in fighting contests)	3	16.7%
Professional fighter	1	5.6%
Other	--	--

*Not every participant responded to this question.

Table D.10 Motivation

Response
I loved the sport ever since I saw my first UFC card on an old VHS. Growing up I always wanted to be a wrestler in the WWF but sadly I learned real fast that I was too little to do it. Also as a wrestler there isn't anywhere we could go other than the Olympics. MMA offers weight classes so people of all sizes and builds can compete in it. I love competition and it was no doubt that this was the next step for me after I started training in BJJ.
I got jumped by 10 guys outside a bar after that I was introduced to MMA and fell in love with the sport, it gave me focus and a drive to learn and progress.
I got tired of dealing with mediocrity and people that were happy when they accomplish the bare minimum. I have always pushed myself to succeed and be the best that I can be. MMA is a way to separate myself from the pack and discover what I am capable of.
I had a few scholarship offers to play collegiate sports but passed on those. I was really looking for something to curb my need for competition.
I knew nothing about MMA other than the tough man contest I had seen on TV, I had no idea what Jiu-Jitsu was until I was 27. I was living in Arizona at the time and the sport was becoming very popular so I was able to gain a better understanding of MMA and my buddy said I should go to the Lions Den in Scottsdale, AZ and give it a try. I went in and took a class and I almost puked because it was my first real intense workout in about 4 years, it was fun and I wanted to see what I could do in this sport so I stuck with it. My goal has always been to be a professional athlete and at age 27 you don't have many chances left to make that happen but this sport is different and I still wanted to compete at an intense/high level and this was/is my last chance for that.
I ran into someone that I went to high school with talked to him and he was doing it and he invited me to train with him as soon as I could. I wasn't doing anything better with my life and knew it was something I could do if I tried it.
I really like the aspect of physical competition. I don't run because I have bad joints, so I don't do many marathons (plus...I'm huge). MMA drew me in because it was a way to stay in shape without having to kill my knees and ankles. I don't mind getting punched in the face once in a while because, let's face it, I'm no Richard Kiel when it comes to the looks department. Anyway, to stay on topic, I decided to become an MMA fighter because I wanted to compete after my college career in athletics ended. Having something to look forward to (such as a fight) is huge motivation to get/stay in shape. It's better for me than going to Planet Fitness and hopping on the elliptical for an hour.

<p>I started doing Muay Thai, not realizing that women competed in mma. Once I learned that they did, I moved into mma without any training. After losing 4 times, I finally found a ground coach and have won my last two mma fights. I just didn't understand learning something, and not applying it. I was learning Muay Thai- so I competed in Muay Thai. Why learn something and never use it?</p>
<p>I wanted to feel like I could protect myself in a real fight. MMA was the closest I could come to a real life fight - it was about testing my skill as a martial artist</p>
<p>I was already training BJJ, and had been for a year. A lot of guys I trained with were fighters, and I looked up to them, and of course, the MMA fighters in the media. When I went to my first live fight and watched my friends compete, I knew I wanted to do that.</p>
<p>I was always a competitive athlete and just generally competitive at everything. I had just got done with Olympic Weightlifting and was in between sports when someone suggested that I should try MMA. I was a former amateur boxer and thought it would be worth a shot to give it a try. I had no training at all in BJJ or kickboxing so I went and signed up for classes and told them I wanted to compete. Although everyone was doubtful at first, I eventually found the right coach and only 5 months after starting to train I jumped into my first amateur fight and won by first round ground and pound and knew I was in love with the sport. I think just the drive to be competitive and the difficulty of the journey and the variety of the training motivated me to push harder everyday to become a better MMA fighter and athlete. What motivated me after my first win was the feeling that I got when I got my hand raised and I wanted to do anything I could to make sure that happened again.</p>
<p>I watched VHS tapes of the old UFC's when I was about 7 with my older brothers. I've been fanatical since then. I didn't really get in many fights before the sport but was always an aggressive kid. I thought I was tough and wanted to find out. The ball started rolling with other things and after I tried Jiu Jitsu, I was hooked. I knew I wanted to fight just for a life experience and goal.</p>
<p>It started as exercise just a boxing class then kickboxing then a muay thai class and then BJJ</p>
<p>It was 1995, I was 22 years old and just divorced. I had watched the first few UFC's and after the divorce I moved to Phoenix and had some anger issues I needed to take care of. I only trained because I knew I wanted to fight. After a couple years, I trained just to become a better person, and fought only because it made me train harder/better.</p>
<p>I've had a long history and love with the sport, but I discovered it recently, within the last five years. I was first involved with wrestling at the amateur level, but I also was involved in boxing as well. The combination of the two just made sense. It's just something that I'm very passionate about, and always will be.</p>
<p>Saw UFC on tv when it was first starting and wanted to fight. I wanted a sport that pushed me to my limits and breaks them. It's the best sport and even as a amateur fighter you get a lot of awesome fans and meet a ton of interesting people</p>

Table D.11 Physical Preparation

Response
I month out i up my training to 3 to 4 hours a day starting with a cardio work out, sparing and drilling. i also eat 6 times a day aposed to my normal 3 to increas my motabilisum.and cut around 10 th 15 pounds of the day before a fight.
constant exercise including: 3 workouts a day, HIIT daily, weightlifting and running
I hit the gym/wrestling room and roll and spar with my training partners and work on some technique. At night I will do 2 or 3 interval runs each week and 2 or 3 longer jogs each week. I live in Iowa and only do these runs during the warmer months. In the Winter its pretty much just wrestling practice with MMA on the weekends. I have trained at many gyms, done bootcamp style training with interval workouts, caveman type training, I have never stuck around at one place for an extended period of time. My wife and I both have careers and we have a 4yr old daughter so I train when and where fits best into our schedule.
I train two to three times a day for six days of the week and usually revamp Sunday and just do some cardio. I didn't do much weight lifting if any. Usually just cardio, rolling, sparring, and scenario drilling. At the same time, I started dieting. I would just cut my portion size and calories back for first 2-3 weeks. Two weeks out, I cut almost all carbs depending on my weight. This was pretty successful because I usually cut 4-5 lbs day of.
I try to train like I'm preparing for a fight everyday I go into the gym. It doesn't matter if I have a fight or not. I know at some point I'll be competing, so I work at getting better every day and improving my cardio every day.
I usually train 6 days a week. Strength and conditioning 3 days per week, BJJ 3 nights per week and boxing/kickboxing 4-5 days per week. When I'm getting closer to the fight I usually spar once a week before my day off.
I would train 6 days a week, eat as healthy as I could in order to drop weight. I unfortunately never got down to the weight I wanted too.
If possible I try to find out my opponent's fight style and sit down with my coaches and teammates and build a game plan around it. I'll train for months prior to it. Work on defending his strengths and work on strengthening any weaknesses I have.
Lift weights eat clean food no fillers. Train 5 days a week stay in shape all year so when it's comes down to training for a fight a can push my body even harder.
Lots of strength and conditioning (at least 4 times per week) when I'm a month or more out. Sparring and grappling every time I go into the gym. Once it starts getting to be closer to the fight (maybe 2 weeks out) I will drop down to two days of strength and conditioning and do more sparring and grappling. The week of the fight I will just do drills and pad work to keep my game plan down and my cardio where it needs to be.
Obviously, through constant training. I always try to learn new techniques, and refine my existing ones, regardless of whether I have a fight or not. As the fight gets closer,I increase my volume of training, add a more intensive strength and conditioning program, and spend more time in live sparring.
running sprints sparring lifting I prepare then they do not happen, a number of my events have had the opponent back out weeks prior.
Strength and conditioning are a big part of it, the most important, because if you get tired, form suffers. Plus it builds a huge amount of mental toughness. A good amount of sparring helps as

well, to get your tempo, as well as the feeling of being hit. Diet, sleep, and recovery are all crucial as well.
Training for 8 weeks consisting of wrestling, bjj, kickboxing and conditioning. We would typically have live sparring sessions 2-3 times per week. Also, dieting to get down to fight weight was a major portion of fight preparation. My walking body weight is around 180 lbs versus my fighting weight of 155.
Well, many of my fights happened before it was MMA as we know it. It was considered NHB (No Holds Barred) when i first fought. No gloves, long or no time limits. Training back then was very primitive. No super schools or training camps back then. I would get other guys who were like minded and we would train BJJ a couple days a week. On sundays we would spar. No gloves, no shin pads, no head gear. It was very tough and I was always beat up for a few days. All while attending college. Later in my career, i was at a couple good schools and my training was much more structured. BJJ classes, Muay Thai classes and then MMA sparring on Saturdays with gloves and pads. Much safer and smarter later in my fighting career.

Table D.12 Mental Preparation

Response
Always try to train harder, to give yourself the confidence of knowing you did everything to make sure you were prepared. I try not to get involved in many social activities that detract from training, and I also watch relevant videos and read relevant books to get me in the frame of mind.
I don't focus on the mental aspect. I focus on training properly If I train right, I have confidence I will perform on fight day.
I establish a game plan and attempt to accomplish that game plan in every round of sparring. As soon as I leave the gym, I do my best not to think about it.
I tend to isolate myself from anyone who isn't helping me train. I focus completely on the upcoming fight and replay how the fight will go in my head over and over again. I did the same thing when wrestling in high school so I guess the process just stuck with me.
I tend to not think too much about the fight until 2 weeks before it happens. Then I get really grumpy for those two weeks. I pretty much keep thinking about how hard my opponent is working and I try to push myself that much harder On fight day I get really anxious, so I have to work on keeping myself calm. Right before I go into the cage, I think about all of the weeks and months I have worked to prepare for this moment, and I get really calm. Then I get punched in the face and I become extremely focused on my opponent and what I have to do in order to win.
i train to the extent that i know my aponont couldnt of reached.
I try not to think about it. If I can't shut my brain off, I visually run through every step in the fight I can. What I am going to do- what she may do. Strikes, counterstrikes, takedowns, ground defense and attacks. I run every permeation that I can think of. Even what I need to do when I am losing. How to turn it around so that I can win.
I try not to think about the fight too much. If i do, it would keep me up at night and consume my day. So, mostly I would just think about getting through each day as it came. Never looked too far ahead. But always a week out from the fight I would be in bed at night and just keep asking myself, 'why am I doing this? What am I proving? I have a REAL job now, i dont have that

anger so why am I still doing this to myself?' I then realized I was doing it because I knew that one day, I would no longer be able to do it anymore. And I would miss it. So I had to do it while I still had the chance. On fight day, I stayed very calm. Took a nap and then once i woke up to leave to the venue, it all flipped. It was now time to prepare for a fight. No more nerves, just kept telling myself to move forward... go forward.... despite the pounding in my heart that yelled GO BACK!
I typically didn't earlier in my amateur career. I think lack of mental preparation and exposure to veteran fighters really hampered some of my early performances. Mental preparation for mma is more important than physical in my opinion.
I visualize the fight over and over in my head.
I would envision how the fight will play out about 100 times before a fight. I really just reassured myself that the level of people I trained with was so high, that my opponent couldn't do nearly that to me.
Meditate, positive self talk, think about the training I did and know I worked hard for the fight.
Mentally I'm fine until weight cut starts then I get into a zone where the only thing I think about and focus on is the fight and my opponent. I block out anything involving social media and anyone outside of my team 2 weeks before the fight. The day of the fight I try to sleep and rest as much as possible during the day then after I'm warmed up and waiting to go out I usually sit and (for lack of a better term) meditate until it's time to walk out.
Picture beating my opponent in every possible way. Watch there previous fights over and over.
Stay focused and sleep well I do not drink.

Table D.13 Necessities

Response
A variety of different skills, since there are so many aspects to the sport. I have alot yet to gain in the way of knowledge as well.
All you really need is a license from the state. Though if you want to be a true MMA fighter; you need to gain a technical knowledge of the various aspects of the sport. You also need the drive a focus to undergo hard training on an almost constant, day-in-day-out basis. Finally, you have to gain the ability to execute in high pressure competition. If you can't execute on fight night, your never going to be successful.
I feel more confident. I did not realize how strong I was.
I gained the positive experience it was. The routine I acquired kept me out of trouble. The option of a better future.
I had to gain knowledge of wrestling and jiu-jitsu and kickboxing in order to become a fighter. I also had to get some outside help because the long hours that it took to train made it very hard for me to work as often as I needed to so I could live. Fortunately I had some supportive people in my corner willing to help out when I needed it.

I had to gain the ability to accept fear. I had to know that nothing would scare me enough from doing it if I really wanted to do it. I was scared to fight, so I made myself fight so I could gain the ability to push through fear.
I just acquired more knowledge of martial arts, particularly Jiu Jitsu, to become a fighter.
I really just had to acquire a license to become a fighter. I think that with my background in athletics, I already had the mental and physical aspects that I needed in order to compete in MMA.
I started with a good fitness base so i had to gain skill.
Nothing when I started fighting. You literally could call up a promoter and get a fight on a week with no previous experience.
Obviously a knowledge for the sport as far as rule sets. I knew that just wrestling wouldn't cut it after my first unofficial fight in an Army Combatives tournament. I had to train in other disciplines and making new friends in the process(which isn't a bad thing). I had to build an entire different mentality to get ready for everything.
physical fitness, a warrior mentality, good friend, and a hard work ethic
Self confidence
Technique I went from bar room brawler and street fighter to a trained fighter with perfect form
Time to train, equipment, more discipline, Bio-Freeze for the body :)

Table D.14 Sacrifices

Response
A lot of money and time
Ego
family time,
Food haha. I really didn't have to sacrifice much. Cutting weight comes naturally from doing so long. I really didn't have to give up much. I don't do much other than train anyways so just isolating myself and burying myself into learning as much as I could was actually a plus to it all.
I believe I gave up a social life. Going to college during the day, training evenings and working late night security shifts didnt leave me much time to go out and socialize. Many girls didnt understand or want to be second place to my training. Dont blame them, but that was what I had to give up.
I didn't feel like I gave up anything to be a fighter except a past I didn't want anyway.

<p>I gave up most of my free time. I took up MMA during college. I dual majored in school with a minor. I worked thirty hours a week for one job four years of college. For about two years, I picked up a second job as well. On top of school and work, I trained 15-25 hours a week. I didn't have much in the way of free time or a love life. I didn't travel home much outside of holidays and had almost no down time.</p>
<p>I gave up pretty much all my free time and a lot of money from working in order to chase my dream to become a pro MMA fighter. I have no social life when I'm preparing for a fight and I don't get to see my family as much but nothing comes without sacrifice. Most recently I injured my shoulder rather severely and had surgery requiring 8-12 months off of fighting so I almost feel like I gave up everything for something that potentially could amount to nothing depending on recovery.</p>
<p>I have given up a lot of time. My family understands that I really enjoy MMA and that it takes time out of my day that I could be spending with them. Honestly, I can't think of anything else I have had to give up.</p>
<p>It really depends on what level you want to get to! If you start younger in your training before you have the responsibilities someone my age has you might become good enough that it can be your career and your work day would be training so you don't lose as much home time. Someone like myself goes to work 7am-4pm then I pick up my daughter and hangout with her and my wife then try to squeeze training into the schedule. No matter what you will be giving up some of your free time and family time if you want to train but it's no different than anyone who wants to go train at the gym to stay in shape even if it's lifting weights, jumping on the treadmill, or going to Kosama. If you are like Bubba on the Ultimate Fighter he has given up almost everything to move and train at one of the top gyms in the world but to me family is more important. Again if you start before you have a family and career then you can set everything up around fighting instead of fighting around everything else.</p>
<p>I've had to give up time with my family and focus less on my military career in order to maximize training.</p>
<p>Time for training and a lot of unhealthy foods.</p>
<p>Time, money, and relationships. I've had to turn away from most of my social life.</p>
<p>weed, fun, food</p>
<p>You have to give up the time you spend training. You have to adhere to a strict diet, depending on your weight class. You have to give up drinking and partying for a time as you prepare for a fight. You have to give up your health to an extent, since injuries and illness are a reality in the sport. You lose weekends and occasional holidays traveling and fighting. Really the biggest loss is in opportunity cost. Every evening at the gym is an evening not spent with your family, or taking a night class, or getting to bed early. Those are some of the biggest sacrifices.</p>

Table D.15 Hardest Part of Being a Fighter

Response
Balancing out family, career, and training time without feeling like you are giving up to much or half-assing one of them. Cutting weight is the hardest part of the actual fight game.
deciding what is a nagging hurt and what is an actual injury. when injured, it is very disheartening to not be able to train or help your teammates train.
Finding and being able to retain a great team and being able to afford training. School/Gym dues can get expensive unless you know somebody.
For me personally is just trying to find a fight. Being the smallest guy on my team and smaller than most people out there it's just hard to track down the right fights to take. I've had 2 fights cancelled on me on short notice and unable to find replacements due to the weight class.
Giving up time to be around alot of people I care about. Since I don't do this solely as a living yet, it makes time very scarce.
I think the hardest thing about being a fighter is the stigma that is attached to it. Most people still think that it's just a bunch of thugs and wannabe tough-guys. I don't usually tell people that I work with what I do, just to avoid all of the BS that they associate with 'those types of people.'
I think the mental preparation and the pressures of competition. In most sports you have teammates to lean on, but in mma it is you versus your opponent. The pressure associated with competition can make you mentally stronger in other facets of your life.
It is incredibly mentally and physically taxing. Once you have been on the daily grind of this long enough, your body hurts all over or breaks and you start to not want to train or work out. A long training camp will generally break you in both ways. You're constantly tired and it takes a toll on you. Also, it's hard to reassure yourself in a positive way mentally. When you feel tired and ground down, your mind starts to betray you somewhat. You can't stay up mentally like you need to. Also, your way of thinking changes from most people's. You're gearing up to get into a fist fight and can be obsessed with it; while other people worry about regular problems. It creates a separation from most the people in your life and definitely the ones not from a gym.
Staying focused and not doubting yourself.
The constant stress you put your body through. There wasn't a day that I didn't wake up in pain and push myself to go harder and do more and repeat it all over again. That and/or the injuries which kind of go together. I have countless injuries that I will have the rest of my life because of MMA but I wouldn't change it for the world.
The fact that I am not a natural athlete. I have to work twice as hard to be half as good. And there are times when I simply can't get my body to do what my brain knows it needs to do. Then I have to overcome the frustration of that and continue to work hard.
The financial drain
time from my family always training,
To me, it's knowing in your head that you are putting yourself in a fight. See, many people are good at fighting when it's spontaneous. When something just breaks out and you just react and fight. Dont really have a choice when that happens. But the test is when you know you have a choice, and you choose to put yourself in harms way a couple months down the road. Every day you wake up knowing you are one step closer to danger and you can choose to get out at

any time. Yet you keep moving forward!

Working you butt off for a fight, then losing in front of your friends and family.

Table D.16 Reactions of Others

Response
A lot of them respect it and usually ask for one of my walk shirts within 5 minutes in the conversation. The others tell me it's dangerous and I'm being stupid and reckless .
At first they kind of said 'um what...why?' My mom, dad, & grandparents used to say we'll pay you to stop fighting and they used to try and talk me into quitting. Now they still dont like it, they dont want to see me get hurt or have long term damage from the sport but they do support me. My dad goes to pretty much every fight I have. My wife didn't go to my first 7 or 8 fights but has been to pretty much everyone since then and she even helps with the show I help promote. My brothers and sister are supportive and my friends are very supportive as well. I have a great friends/fans who continue to come out and cheer me on and always ask when the next one is. I even get pretty good support from my school district that I work for.
every one is very suportive but if you dont do it you dont realy understand what it actualy takes.i am closer with to fighter then eny of my other friends.
I get mixed reactions. My parents and family respect, black males seem to think that I am gay or want to be 'white.'
I got nothing but great responses to my decision to fight. Everyone thought it was a positive thing for me to do and wanted to watch me grow in the sport.
Mixed. Sometimes people scorn the decision, some people automatically assume that there's nothing else I can do, so I just fight. There's nothing else I WANT to do is the part they don't understand. Many people are very supportive though, and those are the people I tend to be around.
Most a supportive, even if they don't understand the motivation to do it.
Most of my family and coworkers don't really understand why I feel the need to do it, so they don't really know how to broach the subject. I have friends that love the fact that I do it, and try to make it to all of my fights. The kids I coach in other sports seem to think it's cool and want to talk about it, but it's mostly about the 'amazing knockouts' and 'death punches' that I have never been a part of.
Most people do not understand mma or why one would compete in such a sport. However, I personally have had more injuries/concussions when I played football when compared to competing in mma.
Most people don't even give me a second look. They see me and all they see is this scrawny little Asian guy. And when I do well in BJJ tournaments or a fight, they see it as just what they call 'The Asian Gene', I'm Asian so I must be good at Martial Arts. It's a stigma that I fight with everyday. Other than close friends and teammates, people either don't support me or just brush me off. When I tell people what my major goal is they just chalk it up to it being a pipedream.
My Dad wasn't surprised and supported it. My Mom was upset but supportive. Everyone else was surprised and wanted to watch me do it. I felt like my friends would be happy win or lose. If I won it's awesome and they don't have to watch me get beat up. If I lose, they get to make

fun of me. Yes my friends are dicks.
My parents at first were terrified that I decided to compete in MMA but warmed up to the idea after I began winning and they got to watch online. Everyone else was completely excited and thought it was awesome to know someone that was a 'cage fighter.'
Some simply don't get it. I hardly see any of the people I was friends with before I began training. I would always make time for them, but they never made time to come support me. Even the ones that watched the UFC wouldn't come watch me competing in the same sport.
they usually support me
When I first started, many didnt even know what I was doing. They hadnt even heard of it. But family was scared, yet supportive.

Table D.17 Advice for Others

Response
dont get upset after an off day. especially if you're cutting weight.
Don't let anyone influence your decision. If you want to try it, jump in and try it, because you can never start to soon. Just make sure it's YOUR decision.
Don't quit. It's mentally just as hard on you as it is physically. Never let anyone talk you out of becoming a fighter if you really want. Last it's gonna hurt you have to be able to take it.
Find a good gym who has a mix of new fighters as well as veteran coaches/fighters. Take a year or more to train before scheduling a fight. The fight should be the culmination of hours spent training. Mma is not going away so there is no rush to get your first fight.
I would just advise people to commit to it. Even if they don't compete, it's awesome to be able to help out a training partner with his/her fight preparation. It really gives a sense of community and it makes it easier to come in day in and day out to train.
If you are in it for money, get out now. Probably only the top 5% of fighters make enough money to live on. The rest have to work another job. If its not because of the money, then understand it may take years to reach your goal. Know that at any time it could all end, and have a back up plan. Also, dont let fighting define who you are. A fight career is a small amount of time when compared to how long you may live. When you are 85 years old there may only be a handful of people who remember you were a fighter years earlier. What matters is how your family and real friends think of you. How you treated them, how you carried yourself through life. They wont care if you were a fighter or not. It doesnt define who you are in the big picture.
If you aren't able to get your ass whipped and come back the next day, don't waste your time.
If your going to do it, do it right. Train hard and learn as much as you can. Proper training prevents injuries or tragic outcomes.
It's a great way to find out who you are and what you're made of. Make sure your compatible with your training partner's and coaches cause if you're not it'll be a unpleasant experience, trust me I know from experience.

My advice would be to find a school and coaches that believe in you and that you feel comfortable with and take your time and learn all the intricacies of the sport and develop every aspect of your game because you will eventually face someone with more skill than you and you have to make sure you feel confident with what you've learned to defeat them.

Research the gyms first- find one that will make you better and challenge you. Then check your ego at the door. You are there to learn. If you were the best at what you did, you would own your own gym. Put in the time and effort. Slacking only wastes your time and that of the teammates and coaches that are working hard. Don't quit, but learn when to push yourself, and when to let your body and mind rest. There is such a thing as training too hard or ignoring mental frustrations. This sport will help you learn more about yourself than you ever thought possible.

Stay with it. Learning an art like BJJ or Judo is essential in protecting yourself and knowing how to defend yourself off your feet.

Whether you decide to do it as a hobby or decide to take fights, it's really an amazing thing to get into. You get to get into shape, make really great new friends, and learn all sorts of new things. It's really just an undescrivable experience.

Yeah when you are talking to someone about MMA and you tell them you are a fighter please dont pretend you are the greatest thing in the world, dont pretend you are a UFC Fighter until you actually make it there. Don't drop F bombs every other word, dont go out to the bars and try to start fights and dont get in someone's face and say dont you know who I am. Just because the sport you participate in is a combat sport doesn't mean you have to act like an uneducated fool who always thinks they have to act hard. You can compete in MMA and be a smart person and a good person. Get to a good gym and learn the techniques! Don't join a gym that is going to use you as punching bag!

you get what you put in. never give up you no one beats you you only beat your self.

Appendix E - Cage Names

Cage names reported by male participants:

The Naked Ninja	Half-Ass
Roadhouse	Monkey Mack
The Nose	The Predator
Caveman	Taco
The Mountain Man	Thunder
Slipknot	The James Krause
The Rooster	The Smashing Machine
The Donut Man	The Librarian
Man Dog	Gizmo
The Messenger	The Rosedale Reaper
The Critter	

Cage names reported by female participants:

The Piranha
The Hammer
Sassy
Smashley
The Lady Killer
Bad Karma
The Show Stopper
Fancy
Valociraptor
Cold
"The Showgirl"