

How to Fight Without Rules: On Civilized Violence in “De-Civilized” Spaces

Neil Gong

University of California, Los Angeles

ABSTRACT

Sociologists have long been concerned with the extent to which “civilizing processes” lead to the increasing salience of rationalized behavioral guidelines and corresponding internal controls, especially in social situations characterized by violence. Following Norbert Elias’s identification of a civilizing process in combat sports, sociologists have debated, though not empirically established, whether emerging “no-holds-barred” fight practices indicate a rupture in the historical civilization of leisure time violence. Using a critical case study of a “no-rules” weapons fighting group, where participants espouse libertarian values and compete in preparation for hypothetical self-defense encounters, I ask how the boundary between violence and social regulation is negotiated in an arena that putatively aims to remove the latter. Drawing on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork, I specify the mechanisms that moderate action: (1) the cultivation of a code of honor and linked dispositions to replace codified rules; (2) the interactional hesitance that arises when participants lack clear rules or norms to coordinate action; and (3) the importation of external rule sets, such as self-defense law, to simulate the “real” world. Contrary to surface readings of “no-rules” discourse, I conclude that the activity is deeply embedded in larger societal norms of order. Participants’ ethos of honorable self-governance, “thresholds of repugnance” when exposed to serious injury, and aim of transforming emotive, violent reaction into reflective, instrumental action all indicate that the ostensibly unrestrained violence is, in Elias’s technical sense, precisely civilized.

KEYWORDS: violence; rationalization; civilizing processes; combat sport; libertarianism as cultural practice.

The case of “no-holds-barred” and “reality-based” weapons fighting would seem brutal and unrestrained by definition, but this is in fact an open empirical question. Sociologists have long been concerned with the extent to which “civilizing processes” (Elias [1939] 2000) lead to the increasing

The author is indebted to Stefan Timmermans, Ching Kwan Lee, Corey Abramson, Bill Roy, Jeffrey Prager, Phillip Fucella, Jack Katz the UCLA Ethnography Working Group, the UC Berkeley Center for Urban Ethnography Writing Group, Brooks Ambrose, Winston Chou, Matias Fernandez, Alex Holmstrom-Smith, Christopher Rea, Hannah Reiss, Michael Siciliano, Kevin Shih, Eleni Skaperdas, the editors of *Social Problems*, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and conversations through the duration of this research project. Moreover, the author wishes to thank his participants for allowing him to spend time with them and learn the arts of stick and knife fighting. Any remaining errors or inconsistencies in this article are the author’s own. Finally, the author would like to acknowledge funding by the National Science Foundation, UCLA, and the Davis Foundation, whose financial support made this research possible.

Direct correspondence to: Neil Gong, Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095. E-mail: ngong@ucla.edu.

salience of rationalized behavioral guidelines and corresponding internal controls, especially in social situations characterized by violence. A significant body of critical scholarship has evaluated Norbert Elias's theory in light of apparent counterevidence, such as twentieth-century fluctuations in violent crime (Eisner 2001; Gurr 1981; Pinker 2011), the turn away from penal welfarism (Pratt 2002), the rejection or informalization of codified manners (Wouters 1986), and the emergence of violent masculine subcultures (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams 1988; van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). In particular, scholars have struggled with applying Elias's approach to the United States, where American libertarian ideals converge with traditions of self-reliance, gun rights activism, and resistance to centralized state power (Buschendorf, Franke, and Voelz 2011; Mennell 2007). While mainstream sociological inquiry into the civilizing process has typically focused on the *fact* of violence, as in quantitative analysis of homicide rates, Elias was equally concerned with understanding the *character* of social action through case studies of *practices*.

In his pioneering research on sport, Elias ([1971] 1986b) took the transformation of premodern Greek warrior events into rule-bound boxing as a sharply focused lens on the regulation of behavior, embodied reactions to brutality, and changing habitus that compose the microdimensions of the civilizing process. When "no-holds-barred"¹ fight events emerged in the early 1990s, initial sociological commentators took it as evidence of a de-civilizing reversal of Elias's sport thesis (see Howes 1998; Sheard 1998). More recent empirical studies of extreme fighting have since come to seemingly contradictory theoretical conclusions: Where some scholars see a violent de-civilizing process (Brent and Kraska 2013; van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006) and men asserting masculinity (Melzer 2013), others note the informalization of social control (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010) and the pursuit of middle-class values of meritocracy and voluntary community (Abramson and Modzelewski 2011). Missing from these analyses of *what* the phenomena is a case of, and explanation of *why* fighters participate, however, is a concrete account of *how* "no-rules" fighting actually works.

This article furthers these debates by examining how an American weapons-fighting group that espouses libertarian values negotiates the boundary between violence and social regulation in an arena that putatively aims to remove the latter. In preparing for violent self-defense encounters, the "Reality Fighters"² claim to resist all rules and regulation aside from an agreement to remain "friends at the end of the day." My goal in this article is to offer the mechanisms moderating violence in this "deregulated" setting that will both clarify the specific case and improve general theoretical understanding of how violence is regulated when actors explicitly reject formalized behavioral control. By mapping extreme fighting as an embodied and practical activity, I provide an analysis of habitus and the patterning of behavior that speaks directly to Elias's concerns. To that end, my research begins with a concrete line of inquiry: how does one fight without rules? Or put in more sociological terms, how do participants produce and sustain the collective experience of a *laissez-faire* space of unpredictable violence while managing the practical concerns for serious injury or death?

THE CIVILIZING PROCESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A significant literature has investigated whether and how "civilizing processes" (Elias [1939] 2000) lead to the increasing rationalization of behavioral guidelines and corresponding internal controls in modernity. Elias theorized the civilizing process as the concomitant emergence of the nation-state and a new type of inward-looking and restrained human personality, denoting a wide-ranging, if uneven, trend in Western societies that links the monopolization of the means of violence and greater interdependency following the division of labor with continually refined forms of self-control.

1. The labels "no-holds-barred" fighting, extreme fighting, ultimate fighting, and cage fighting were used more or less interchangeably to describe a variety of fighting contests, both underground and quasi-sanctioned, into the late 1990s (see Abramson and Modzelewski 2011). Diverse forms of combat competition were at one time part of a continuum of extreme fighting before the codification of mixed martial arts (MMA) as a sport, which has since gained mainstream appeal.
2. I use pseudonyms for the organization, individuals, and events throughout the article to preserve anonymity.

Through this process, warriors became functionaries, the norms and ethos of court society demanded that violence be replaced with etiquette, and emotive reactions gave way to reflective foresight. With a sociological usage of *habitus* that preceded Pierre Bourdieu's, Elias aimed to transcend such classical Western dualisms as "mind versus body" or "individual versus society" by tracing the history of socially inculcated dispositions. Regarding violence, he argued that the "threshold of repugnance" was altered such that physical force and bodily function became distasteful and increasingly removed from public view. Even in war, policing, or sport, among the only remaining arenas of legitimate violence, such behavior took on a rationalized and instrumental as opposed to affective form (Fletcher 1997).

This account of modern social regulation has come under attack, however, for overstating the extent of the rationalization and corresponding changes in human character. Debate within mainstream sociology has typically revolved around interpretation of aggregate trends in violent behavior that seem to directly contradict Elias's theory, such as the major upswing in homicide rates during the mid-late twentieth century following generations of decline (see analysis from Eisner 2001; Gurr 1981). For thinkers like Claude Fischer (2010) this was likely a "blip" on the radar of overall increasing security and decreasing violence, but for others (Pinker 2011) this indicated a de-civilizing reversal. Policy responses, including the turn away from penal welfarism and rehabilitation, have themselves been characterized as a break with civilization (Pratt 2002). The higher violence rates and harsher penal state found in the American case have proven especially intriguing to scholars of rationalized pacification, as libertarian values and longstanding traditions of resistance to centralized state power seem to mark differences from the European models in terms of both behavior and codified regulation (Buschendorf et al. 2011; Mennell 2007). Quantitative measures like the changing rates of violence, however, can be misleading. As Pieter Spierenburg (2012) noted, a decline in impulsive violence and increase in premeditated attack might indicate a civilizing process *even if rates remain stable*.

Sociologists only familiar with Elias as a macro-historical analyst might be surprised to learn that much of his later work focused not on aggregate trends in violence like homicide rates, but on the dynamics of socially sanctioned aggression in such practices as sport (see Elias 1986a, [1971] 1986b; Elias and Dunning 1986). Indeed, Elias's attention to such minute behaviors as table manners has led some to label his methodology "historical ethnography" (Katz 2004:283). In this vein, and running parallel to the macro-level civilizing process debates, ethnographers and historians have offered case studies of violent sportive subcultures that seemingly complicate a civilizing narrative, such as soccer hooliganism (Dunning et al. 1988) or extreme combat sports (van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). Whether these seeming reversals of or resistance to rationalized pacification in aggregate or case-based studies are divergences, if not outright refutations of Elias's theory, remains hotly debated.

Given the stability of most Western states' monopoly of the means of violence, sociologists have sought to account for ostensible de-civilizing processes unaccompanied by obvious structural change. Cas Wouters (1986) intervened with his theory of the "informalization process," which suggests that the civilizing process may be at work even where it appears to be in reverse. Drawing on the case of late-twentieth-century regimes of manners, where social rules were ostensibly abandoned, he questioned whether de-rationalization of behavioral guidelines was indeed indicative of a de-civilizing process. Wouters concluded that the elimination of codified rules in fact required more rather than less demanding emotional management, indicating the continuing march of civilization. Although he was accused of trying to improperly insulate Elias from criticism (see Crossley 2006 and Mennell 1990 for perspectives on the debate), his theory has since been adopted into ongoing investigations of empirical cases. Thus, differentiating civilizing, de-civilizing, and informalizing processes in apparent cases of expanding violence or societal deregulation remains a central difficulty for sociologists interested in changing regimes of behavioral management.

In 1971, Elias published the seminal text, "The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem." Using the history of combative events as his test case, he argued that a process of "sportization" could be identified paralleling the larger civilizing process he'd outlined regarding state formation and social habitus. Drawing on accounts of the brutally violent practices in the premodern Greek pancration,

an Olympic fighting event with minimal rules and high rates of serious injury, he claimed there was little in common with the rationalized, regulated sports of contemporary boxing and wrestling. Accompanying the varying levels of regulation was also a significantly different habitus and ethos. He (Elias [1971] 1986b) wrote:

Not only the manner but the *aim and ethos* of this kind of fighting was different from those in sport boxing. Significantly enough, the fighting ethos of these pugilistic matches, like that of the Greek *agones* generally, was far more directly derived from the fighting ethos of a warrior aristocracy than is the case with the fighting ethos of sport contests (p.137; emphasis added).

To Elias, the emergence of sportive combat events, complete with rules, organizational bodies, and an ethic of sportsmanship, was a clear confirmation of his civilizing process hypothesis. At the level of habitus, he noted that the Greek fighters of antiquity were far more comfortable with violence and death than contemporary competitors. He viewed this “threshold of repugnance” as key to understanding the relative level of civilization in cultural practices, as in the case of foxhunters that gradually decided it was more appropriate to leave the actual killing up to the hounds (Elias 1986a). Elias’s disciple and collaborator, Eric Dunning (1986), drew further distinction between violent behaviors that are affectively driven and those that are instrumental in aim. In examining the habitus, ethos, thresholds of repugnance, and the instrumentality of violent acts, the relative civilization in sport or other arenas could be interpreted.

Elias did not live to see the emergence of “no-rules” combative events in the 1990s, but scholars influenced by his work quickly took these up as objects of the civilizing, de-civilizing, or informalizing debate. Initial sociological observers (see Howes 1998; Sheard 1998) saw the elimination of rules as explicitly anti-civilizational, and Maarten van Bottenburg and Johan Heilbron (2006) drew on content analysis, crowd surveys, and interviews to argue that, in contrast to Elias’s theory of civilizing sportization, these fight events demonstrated a new process of de-civilizing, “de-sportization” from the highly regulated world of boxing. Raul Sánchez García and Dominic Malcolm (2010) in turn mobilized Wouters’ theory of informalization to refute the de-civilization hypothesis, arguing that comparable injury rates with other sports indicate that the reduction of rules was accompanied by fighters’ increasing self-control. Following the logic of informalization, they argued that extreme fighting only *appears* de-civilized. van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2010) subsequently accused their critics of failing to differentiate between the early non-sportive fight events and the codified sport version of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), which, they agreed, is indeed orderly. The real object of debate, they argued, are the no-holds-barred combative practices that never underwent a recivilizing process following commercial and legislative pressure.

Unfortunately, these researchers lacked the detailed account of practice that could actually enrich and adjudicate their argument. Key concepts like threshold of repugnance and the relative instrumentality of violence simply cannot be found in injury rates or viewer surveys. If what is at stake is whether the control of violence is occurring through formal mechanisms or informal ones, then ethnographic data on the practical activity and embodied experience of “no-rules” fighting is preferable. Ethnographers, however, have primarily investigated *why* people fight, rather than explain *how*.³ Scott Melzer’s (2013) interview-based account of a fight club argued that participation is primarily about gender identity and attempts to secure a sense of masculinity. John Brent and Peter Kraska (2013) similarly suggested that men seek aggressive release in response to an overly civilized society. Dale Spencer (2013), in contrast, argued that there are a variety of identities at play and myriad reasons for participation, rendering concepts like R. W. Connell’s ([1995] 2005) “hegemonic masculinity”

3. Vacarro, Schrock, and McCabe (2011) have asked a different kind of “how” question, investigating the ways in which fighters cope with fear in a process the authors call “managing emotional manhood.” This process of “psyching” one’s self up to get into the ring, however, is different from the interactional processes that occur once there.

problematic. Drawing on extensive fieldwork, [Corey Abramson and Darren Modzelewski \(2011\)](#) further argued that many fighters compete because of a gym culture that aligns with widely shared, middle-class American values of meritocracy and authenticity. Such wildly opposed characterizations suggest that the “why” question, like the “how” question, is far from settled.

Research on the history of sport regulation, injury rates, and existing ethnographic accounts, then, is unable to arbitrate whether the new combat sports are civilizing, de-civilizing, or informalizing. What is theoretically important is not only the *fact* of violence and deregulation, but *how* people comport themselves in the face of precisely the violent stimuli that would seem to force an embodied, non-rational reaction, especially under conditions of ostensible rule-less-ness. Ethnographic examinations of organizations that purport to reject authority and rules, such as the “free schools” of the 1960s ([Swidler 1979](#)) or the “technoliberal” zones of cyberspace ([Malaby 2009](#)), have greatly illuminated their objects by focusing on the practices by which order is maintained. Similarly, a demonstration of how “deregulation” is negotiated in the potentially chaotic and violent arena of limited or “no-rules” fighting can reveal the microdynamics of the embodied reaction to violence, collective ethos, and habitus that Elias saw as crucial to understanding the civilizing process.

METHODOLOGY AND LOGIC OF CASE SELECTION

To investigate how violent conduct is managed in an ostensibly “rule-less” social space, I engaged in more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork with a “no-holds-barred” weapons fighting group I call the Reality Fighters. This group presents a critical case where tensions around rules, regulation, and the management of violence are made especially explicit and amenable to analysis. Unlike the limited rule sets of professional MMA, the Reality Fighters purport to have *no rules*, aside from an agreement to be “friends at the end of the day.” Indeed, the group was once in promotional talks with a major cage fighting organization in the mid-1990s before being rejected as “too extreme” for television. As one of the few underground combative subcultures that survived following the popularization and codification of professional MMA, the Reality Fighters are especially useful for analysis of the Eliasian debate. Rather than aim for statistical generalizability by claiming the group offers a representative sample of all combat athletes, I use them as a critical test case: if there is indeed a de-civilizing process in combat sports, this group, with its use of weapons, rejection of formal sportive rules, and concern with street realism, appears the most likely to display it.

Many participants have military or law enforcement experiences, and a minority have been incarcerated, with violence considered a real possibility in everyday life. Furthermore, the group invokes libertarian ideals regarding the temperance of state power and the protection of self-defense and gun ownership rights, precisely the American cultural orientations that thinkers like [Stephen Mennell \(2007\)](#) see as breaking with the European model of civilization. The use of such a case offers analytical leverage because it crystalizes the issues under examination ([Yin 2003](#)), and in [Jack Katz’s \(2012\)](#) words, “represents with special clarity phenomena that exist widely but in a more diluted form elsewhere” (p. 259). Despite the absence of formal rules and referees, a thriving community of fighters continues to participate without deaths or excessive injury. To explain this, my investigation begins squarely in the interactional domain. I take “no-rules” fights as “ongoing, practical achievements” ([Garfinkel 1996:11](#)) and examine the concrete mechanisms, both strategic and unintended, that regulate action in the competitive space while maintaining the desired aura of rule-less-ness and realism.

Following in the footsteps of recent embodied ethnographic investigations of physical culture, I immersed myself in the sensorial world of my subjects by learning to fight with weapons and then actually “getting into the ring” ([Abramson and Modzewleski 2011](#); [Butryn and deGaris 2008:337](#); [Spencer 2013](#); [Wacquant 2004a](#)). Like other fighters I suffered injuries, such as a broken hand and neck sprain, and learned to cope with the rigors of combat in what [Spencer \(2009\)](#) calls “body callusing.” By spending time with fighters both inside and outside of physical training I was able to gain a better sense of what fighting “without rules” means in their larger lives. I helped film knife-fighting

workshops, ate meals with my subjects, attended social events, and discussed friendships and relationships. After fighting in multiple events I was inducted as a member of the “tribe,” allowing me participation in invite-only RFAs (Reality Fighter Assembly) and access to information that outsiders are not.⁴ Differences like my sportive orientation and sometimes contrasting political beliefs may have affected access and understanding, but such frictions also rendered habitual reactions salient and amenable to analysis.

In his call for a carnally based sociology [Loic Wacquant \(2011\)](#) emphasized the importance of pre-reflective bodily learning in overall socialization, and insists that the body is itself an underutilized instrument for ethnographic investigation. I therefore drew on my embodied experience to investigate the habitus, or socially constituted dispositions of Reality Fighters (see also [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011](#); [Spencer 2009](#)). These are ways of experiencing and perceiving the world that are reproduced through daily interaction and practice. [Bourdieu’s \(1990\)](#) description of the habitus as a “feel for the game” was especially apt in this study, as it was difficult to perceive the unspoken rules of the “rule-less” game until I had developed such a “feel.” Beyond the technical aspects, I noted the way bodily training develops affective and moral judgments about proper physical conduct, pertaining directly to [Elias’s \(\[1939\] 2000\)](#) conceptualization of habitus and the threshold of repugnance. At times I probed at the “feel” and “rules” with interactionist procedures, such as posing naïve questions, entering into political debates, or asking for against-the-grain, “non-lethal” variations on fight techniques.

Following weekly training, social events, and periodic organized fight events I took “jottings” ([Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011](#)) and subsequently elaborated these into narrative field notes. In addition to behavioral observation and informal conversations, I conducted semistructured, in-depth interviews with both fighters and organizers. When possible I reviewed footage of fights to confirm sequences of fight interactions. I approached data collection with the “broadest theoretical base possible” ([Timmermans and Tavory 2012:180](#)), systematically generating codes by reading my empirical materials in conversation with relevant themes in the sociology of violence, rationalization, social control, and embodiment. I initially operationalized preexisting theoretical categories such as “threshold of repugnance,” yet also generated behavioral codes inductively from extensive analysis of fight interactions. Conceptualizations and emergent themes were tested against new observations to ensure that the analysis could account for a full picture of the empirical phenomena at hand. The research project received full IRB approval, all quoted informants were guaranteed confidentiality, and all names are pseudonyms.

THE REALITY FIGHTERS: “ONLY YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOU”

Founded in the 1980s, the Reality Fighters engage in weapons combat that includes sticks, chains, dull knives, improvised tools, and on rare occasion, training guns. Although originally focused on Filipino stick and knife fighting, the range of unarmed combative techniques such as kickboxing, grappling, and submission holds are used as well. The group competes without judges, official referees, weight classes, or codified rules, and many fighters choose to minimize protective gear, which may include gloves or face protection. Other divergences from typical sport fighting include group battles, the ability to hide weapons in one’s clothing, and variable length matches. In the 1990s, the group gained notoriety for the intensity of the bi-annual RFA. The Reality Fighters reinforce their reputation in promotional discourse by referring to themselves as “warriors” instead of athletes, and “sweaty, smelly psychopaths. . .” Much like the early professional “no-holds-barred” tournaments, the RFA is lauded for subjecting fighters and entire schools of training to empirical testing in a live

4. Following initial induction into the “tribe,” there is a hierarchical ranking system that includes advancement to candidacy, membership with a unique nickname, and for a select few, promotion to a high-ranking “council.” Some meetings and discussions were reserved for higher-ranking members, so my access to organizational decision making was, as in any ethnography, always partial.

combative setting. Unlike those cage fighting tournaments, which Reality Fighters assert have “too many rules,” the RFA’s aim to better simulate the realities of “the street,” where one might face multiple assailants or weapons.

The RFAs were initially conducted informally in parks, but some of the events now occur in athletic facilities, with fans paying an entrance fee to watch. As the events grew in popularity the use of timers and other elements of rationalized sport were implemented (see [Guttmann 2004](#) for a widely accepted definition of contemporary sport). There is some cross-participation with both sportive cage fighting and groups like the Gentleman’s Fight Club (GFC) studied by [Melzer \(2013\)](#), but the Reality Fighters place an additional emphasis on realism and preparation for street altercations. In contrast with sport competitors and the Silicon Valley workers of the GFC, the Reality Fighters feature a significantly higher proportion of law enforcement officers and military personnel, estimated by one fighter at nearly 50 percent. Many cross-train in gun-based self-defense but also distinguish themselves from “gear queers,” or gun hobbyists who collect the latest tactical equipment without testing themselves under the pressure of “real” fighting. Participants are predominantly men of white or Asian heritage, but there is additional ethnic diversity and a small contingent of female fighters. Although primarily an American subculture, fighters from Canada and Europe have started their own RFAs and often make pilgrimages to the flagship California event.

According to participants, the “no-rules” format of the RFA offers the most realistic preparation for a dangerous and unpredictable world. While some fight primarily for the “adrenaline dump,” or as a test of skill, many speak directly of violent assault. Phil, an office worker, explained, “I want to know I can protect my family . . . I don’t want anybody touching my kids or my wife.” Samuel, a professor of political science, turned toward Reality Fighting after walking in on a gas station robbery. Kat stated that, as a woman in a city with high crime rates, she chose the RFA over sportive fighting because “there aren’t any rules in the situations I’m concerned with.” Another participant began training after the man who abducted and sexually assaulted his stepdaughter was released from prison. Law enforcement officers prize the unpredictable nature of the fights for mimicking street-level police work, as makeshift weapons and surprise attacks are a common reality. For this reason, Anthony, an Asian American police officer, believes the RFA is more realistic preparation for his job than sport fighting or typical police training.

The emphasis on freedom from rules and realistic self-defense training finds some ideological coherence in the group’s interest in libertarianism. According to charismatic co-founder Robert Canyon, a former attorney who had run for political office on the Libertarian Party ticket, the group is part of the “unorganized militia” alluded to in Second Amendment debates, ready to protect the nation as well as “our land, women, and children.” Although participation is open to people of all political affiliations, many participants I spoke with explicitly described themselves as libertarians, and this political dimension is a significant part of the Reality Fighting subculture. Some fighters view the RFA as a place where ideals of radical self-reliance and freedom from external authority can be put into practice, summed up in the often-repeated phrase, “only you are responsible for you.” While a minority participates in the more elaborate discussions of political economy on the Reality Fighter web forum, the rights to personal self-defense and gun ownership are frequently espoused and rarely contested beliefs among the group at large.

THE HABITUS OF RESTRAINT: “IT’S A CODE, MORE THAN RULES.”

Such a “rule-less” and “realistic” fight tournament projects an aesthetic of brutality, but empirical observation shows the violence to be highly patterned and controlled (see also [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011](#) for similar findings in cage fighting). Although no official statistics exist to contextualize self-report, fighters claim to experience bodily injury comparable to other contact sports. Many insist the “sweaty, smelly psychopaths” label is tongue-in-cheek and take the term “warrior” as an honorific signifying a refined martial artist. In contrast to the warrior ethos [Elias \(\[1971\] 1986b\)](#)

attributed to Greek pancration fighters, Reality Fighters believe that warriors are characterized by self-control as much as combative aptitude. For Andre, an African American military contractor and retired special operations soldier, the term “warrior” does not indicate regressive violence so much as a person who is “willing to go out there and fight for what’s right” and “live by a certain code or rules every single day of his life.” Many participants take pride in such a sense of self-control that they believe is best cultivated under conditions of rule-less-ness. This habitus is repeatedly put to the test in the collective ritual of the RFA, where fighters must display restraint as well as martial competence to gain status.

In place of official rules and a referee, the Reality Fighters draw on a “code” of “being friends at the end of the day,” which prescribes an evolving etiquette that both encourages and restricts violence. Although rarely articulated abstractly, I observed the Reality Fighters negotiate what “friends at the end of the day” means in interaction. In a representative example, the Asian American instructor Robbie demonstrated a stick-fighting technique that included a strike to the back of his opponent’s head. Gunnar, a white senior Reality Fighter and instructor, looked at him and said, “Well, you shouldn’t use that in a RFA. That wouldn’t really be in the spirit of friends at the end of the day.” Robbie stopped to ponder and then replied, “Well, probably not in a RFA. But in a *street fight* you could.”

Numerous other techniques that are good for “street fighting” are not “in the spirit of being friends at the end of the day,” such as thrust kicks to the front of an opponent’s extended knee, strikes to the hands with an extremely heavy staff, and attacks to the eyes. Because of this, the aura of “no-rules” combat must be generated with other forms of seeming danger. One strategy used by Gunnar, who is a naval reservist and expert in the Filipino martial arts, is to find ways to produce extreme pain without causing long-term damage. When standing above a grounded opponent with a stick in hand, for instance, he believes in attacking the stronger bones. “Hit him in the shins,” he explained to me in a training session. “You can go hard, it will scare him, and it will hurt, but you probably won’t break his shins.” While there is no concrete rule that prohibits smashing vulnerable parts of the leg, and I did witness instances of kneecap fractures, Reality Fighters aim to avoid this level of injury. What is important is not only *whether* a kneecap is broken, but also the dispositions and intentions framing the injurious action.

Such techniques and the expectation of reciprocity help to sustain a very particular kind of play, heightening the experience of pain while largely avoiding structural bodily damage. The ostensible lack of rules, along with the knowledge that fighters are working together to prevent serious injury, creates a satisfying feeling of realism, freedom, and self-mastery within a relatively predictable environment. Erving Goffman (1974) called these mock-real situations “keys,” offering the instance of animals exchanging and interpreting signals to ascertain whether a fight is real or playful. If most keying is used to prevent play from turning into violence, as in Jooyoung Lee’s (2009) analysis of rap battles, the Reality Fighters must work to keep violence from escalating too far *or* revealing itself as play. Pain is tolerable, even desirable, but dire injury or death is actively worked against. A competitor could potentially kill an opponent, and this possibility is key to making the event meaningful, but there are status rewards for control and strong moral sanctions against intentionally inflicting serious injury. Indeed, I routinely observed fighters refrain from “finishing” a downed opponent, which was met by audience applause. In one participant’s words:

Somebody will have a good shot on somebody and they’ll pull it [hold back, i.e., “pulling punches”]. They’ll know they can rack ‘em [forcefully strike in the head] but they’ll pull it, cause they’re thinking, “I don’t want to break him. If I break him, the tribe is weaker.”

For Robert Canyon, the charismatic co-founding Reality Fighter, such internalized control in a “no-rules” setting is the main difference between Reality Fighting and other realistic combat sports. “I am not a referee,” he said in a speech preceding the fights. “A referee means they [the fighters] delegate

their responsibility for self-control to the referee.” Canyon contrasted sport fighting, which he framed as “young male ritual hierarchical combat,” with the RFA, an event that aims to create tough but responsible men. Other Reality Fighters also invoked this moral distinction between self-restraint and rule enforcement by an outside actor, arguing that young male sport fighters typically lack the ability to comport themselves responsibly in an extreme “adrenal state.” This responsible masculinity is well articulated by Brad, a physically imposing, heavily-tattooed white man who had engaged in underground prize fighting and spent time in prison before converting to Christianity and becoming a drug counselor. Although still drawn to violence, he explained that he traded his youthful aggression for an identity he refers to as “the protector,”⁵ and believes the self-control required in the RFA separates it from both street fighting and prize fighting.

On two occasions I heard Reality Fighters speak with contempt for professional fighters who continued to hit opponents who were already incapacitated, waiting for the referee to declare victory. For Reality Fighters, the diffusion of moral responsibility in high stakes, big money prize fighting demonstrates that relying on authorities can compromise one’s own ideals. Robbie reiterated that Reality Fighters show dominance and honor through *not* finishing fights, telling me that after an opponent is hurt, “You *don’t* go for the knockout. You just say, ‘You’re *done*, son.’” For law enforcement officers this cultivation of self-control is especially meaningful. According to Anthony, the above-mentioned police officer, fighting in the RFA has taught him how to calmly manage unpredictable situations with the appropriate level of force. “I have 25 years on the job and have never shot anyone. It’s ‘cause I’m not scared [to fight hand-to-hand].” Where other officers might react emotionally and reach for a gun prematurely, Anthony feels that he has conditioned himself to use the appropriate level of force for the situation.

It is important, however, to further analyze the Reality Fighters’ assertion that they exhibit internalized control whereas sport fighters delegate away personal responsibility to rules and a referee. First, as I will detail later, Canyon indeed acts as an arbiter and retains the authority to stop fights when a participant is seriously hurt or has violated an informal rule. I found this out first hand when I moved to stab an opponent in the bare face and was promptly yelled down. Second, as I will also explain in the next section, Reality Fighters often glory in over-the-top “kills” when dueling with dull knives, a fantasy situation where a full-force attack will not actually kill, and rarely “pull” or look for control holds in such cases. Third, as [Steve Hoffman \(2006\)](#) has shown in the case of boxing, an integral part of a sport fighter’s training is self-mastery, gauging the appropriateness of continued attacks within various types of simulations, and engaging with a code of honor that goes beyond official rules.

What is notable about the Reality Fighters is not simply *that* they employ self-restraint, as sociologists would no doubt predict of every human group, but that they selectively deploy self-restraint as a trope central to their moral world. Here I draw on [Emile Durkheim’s \(\[1912\] 1995\)](#) definition of moral world as a set of assumptions, shared by a group and held by individuals, that describes the sacred and profane as well as desirable and undesirable courses of action (see also [Abramson and Modzelewski 2011](#)). This discourse of self-restraint in a “no-rules” setting and the practices used to cultivate control of embodied reactions are used by Reality Fighters to distinguish themselves from their sportive brethren, and like most boundary work of this kind, it can become a highly charged assertion of superiority. The pursuit of this moral superiority often comes into conflict with the intensity and action sought in extreme fighting, however, for beyond the honor discourse and habitus of restraint that mitigates violent finishes, the lack of rules can create interactional *confusion*.

5. Such a conception of masculine role is by no means novel, but it is highly specific. [Lamont \(2000\)](#) argued, for instance, that protecting family from outside danger is particularly central to the moral world of working class American men. What is notable is that Reality Fighters devote significant amounts of leisure time to preparing for these dangers, and that the protector discourse and identity is shared across the group’s class spectrum. [Carlson \(2015\)](#) recently argued that male gun carriers invoke such a discourse to negotiate their position in a context of socioeconomic decline.

DEREGULATION AS INTERACTIONAL DE-COORDINATION

The absence of rules, in tandem with the code of restraint and participants' distaste for causing serious injury, actually presents practical problems for the production of exciting fights. One of the great surprises of fighting without rules is that participants must avoid violating the social mores of the group without knowing, at first at least, what these mores are. This creates confusion and in-the-moment negotiation, in turn stalling action and curtailing the desired extremity of the fight. For the novice who lacks this knowledge of tacit norms, the ambiguity leads to hesitation. It is only when clear rules or norms and the corresponding trust are in place that fight interactions can be smoother and more predictable. Ironically, then, acknowledged norms and trust are essential to the appearance and experience of a "no-rules" encounter. In the following excerpt from one of my fights, my opponent became confused after my headgear came off. This example shows the hesitation that arises when relative beginners encounter situations that might breach the "code":

My opponent and I enter into a clinch, losing track of our sticks as I tackle him to the ground. As I begin to punch him in the head he searches for a weapon, gripping at whatever he can find on the floor. When he swings for my face he suddenly pauses, and the sting registers on my cheek. He looks up at Canyon, unsure of how to proceed. Canyon tells us to keep fighting, with an annoyed look on his face. I see a stick coming at my head, but I stand and pull myself out of the way.

As this vignette illustrates, the confusion around appropriate conduct can leave the otherwise intense fighting somewhat stilted. The absence of a clear rule regarding face protection converges with the norm of displaying concern for an opponent to slow the pace of the fight. Despite Canyon's assertions that he is not a referee, the above interaction places him in the role of arbiter, and he begrudgingly complies with fighters' non-verbal questioning in order to make the fight exciting again. He is perhaps better understood as a figure of moral authority that can adjudicate and enforce norms rather than formal rules, like the community shopkeeper in poor neighborhoods (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008).

In one example, I observed Canyon protect a fighter who had been incapacitated by a hard stick shot to the kneecap, much to the audience's relief. In another instance, he stepped in to reestablish order when I gained control of an opponent's knife and began to stab at the man's bare face. Given that there was no explicit rule against this, the crowd was cheering me on, and I had myself been hit in the bare face, I reacted with the attack. When Canyon stopped me I felt embarrassed and disturbed by my actions, but such violations and censure helped me learn the feel for the game. I remained hesitant in my next fights until I eventually gathered that, while blunt trauma to the unprotected head is acceptable at certain ranges, thrusting *penetrative* attacks with pointed objects are not, and it is best to stab an opponent's body.

Notably, the ambiguity of rules offers a certain kind of "realism," as the appropriate level of force is similarly unclear in different kinds of altercations. Some street encounters are certainly more rationalized than others, as in Martin Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991) observations of instrumental gang violence, but participants in situations like bar fights are not always sure whether and when a shoving match will escalate to punches. Starting a fight is an interactional achievement (Jackson-Jacobs 2013), and Randall Collins (2009) has in fact argued that the majority of confrontations are oriented around strategies to diffuse violence. Although some Reality Fighters have studied de-escalation and even advocate mastering such interactional techniques for avoiding street violence, this is not the type of realism they wish to engage in during the competitive ritual. I have never, for instance, heard a fighter simulate a de-escalating conversation in the middle of a fight. There is an established rhythm and timing to appropriate displays of restraint, and unlike the honorable "pulling" when an opponent is injured, negotiation due to rule confusion can disrupt action and curtail excitement.

Compared with the smooth brutality of cage fights, a rule-bound affair where the parameters of violence are clearly established, the interactional tango of novice Reality Fighters can appear rather restrained. Given this, many Reality Fighters have repeatedly expressed preference for the invite-only

“tribal RFAs,”⁶ where all of the potential opponents “know the drill.” Here the level of trust is such that fighters can go full force or experiment with flashier techniques, expecting that there is a shared understanding of “the code” and sufficient practice to cultivate it as bodily disposition, as this facilitates action that is both more predictable *and* more exciting. Even in the “tribal,” however, there are instances where norms must be renegotiated. Novel situations, such as utilizing new kinds of weapons or experimenting with multiple person fights, require new parameters that must either be formally discussed or informally accomplished through interaction.

EXTERNAL RULES AND SIMULATION IN THE “RULE-LESS” SPACE

The next factor moderating the level of violence and injury in the RFA is a rarely acknowledged theatrical element that emerges when “deadly techniques” are simulated, relying on assumptions about what constitutes a deadly attack and legally acceptable self-defense. The introduction of hidden dull knives, practice guns, and “realistic” training scenarios, used to approximate the unpredictability of street altercations while remaining in compliance with the law, illustrates the way increasing realism is predicated on rules and the imagination. That such simulation renders ostensibly unpatterned behavior comprehensible as “real” and rule-less is a defining paradox of Reality Fighting.

Given the understandable reluctance to fight with sharp knives, participants who otherwise prize the authenticity of blunt weapon or unarmed combat must learn to play along with the idea that a dull steel blade has “killed” them. Unlike being struck by a stick or fist, which may indeed incapacitate a participant as it would in “real life,” the knife requires the imagination and a fighter’s willingness to accept the idea that he or she has been vanquished. In fact, it produces the most common situation where Canyon will intervene in a fight, stopping it early to let someone know he or she is “dead.” The visually arresting and dramatized violence of bladed weapons, then, belies the actual reduction in competitive violence it produces. Consider this common fight interaction, when a hidden blade is revealed:

Two men grapple on the ground, jockeying for top position. The crowd notices one has pulled a hidden knife. “Watch the blade!” an audience member yells, but it is too late. The man on the bottom has accessed his hidden weapon and begins to repeatedly stab his opponent in his ribs. “Time!” Canyon calls out. “That’s a kill.” The man on top notices the knife in his opponent’s hand and shrugs sheepishly, acknowledging he has lost. They stand and embrace.

This excerpt demonstrates the way the hypothetical and symbolic violence of stabbing and slashing with the knife actually *reduces* violence in interaction. The man on the bottom has won the fight without doing any real damage, but unlike the celebrated “pulling” of stick strikes whereby fighters refrain from hurting an incapacitated opponent, he is precisely trying to “kill” his opponent as viciously as possible. This is only possible, of course, because the blade is not real. In return, the other fighter must accept the rules of the game and pretend that he has been “killed.” While the dull knife causes little physiological damage, to continue fighting would breach the agreement that sustains play.

Many fighters train to “respect” the knife so as not to treat it cavalierly on “the street,” but others are ambivalent about such simulation. Although some fighters enjoy wearing humorous outfits or embrace historical activities like medieval sword fighting, there is a general aversion to practices that might bring Reality Fighting too close to explicitly fantastical games like LARP (Live Action Role Play). Gunnar, recalling the early RFAs that only utilized blunt weapons, complained of dull blades: “it’s kinda like ‘my light-saber [science fiction weapon] touched you, you’d be dead.’”

6. Participants use this “tribal” language in semi-ironic fashion, but Canyon has also explicitly invoked Native American and pre-colonial Filipino societies as models for small group organization. He spoke approvingly of the movie “Dances With Wolves,” and specifically a scene where the village elder explains “no man can tell another what to do.” This interest in premodern forms of sociality in the era of “mass society” is well captured in Maffesoli’s (1996) writings on “neo-tribalism.”

While this seems overtly theatrical in description, it is important to note that this does not always *feel* like theatre. Donovan, a white fighter who has worked in law enforcement in Latin America, experienced being “stabbed” with the hidden practice blade as profoundly disturbing, and it motivated him to become a Reality Fighter. Despite experience in cage fighting and street altercations, he came to feel incredibly vulnerable after fighting in the RFA. He explained:

When I went to my first RFA, I said, “Fuck this, this guy’s way better with the stick. I’m gonna slam him on his head.” Which I did. But as soon as he hit the ground he pulled the blade and put it in my neck. If that was a real blade he’d get to go home and I’d be at the morgue.

This realization that unarmed martial arts skills may not translate to the “real world” leads some fighters to inculcate a “street” mindset with scenario training. As Donovan once coached a new fighter who couldn’t seem to commit to hitting hard, “This isn’t a game, man. This guy is trying to kill you and fuck your wife.” Many participants further simulate realism by fighting with a replica of the knife carried in everyday life, ensuring they are in compliance with state regulations of blade length.

Paradoxically, however, the use of hidden blades to introduce realism has resulted in an elaborate interactional ritual where fighters must calculate damage and pretend they have been incapacitated by a stab or slash. The use of simulated deadly weapons was taken to its logical conclusion in my second RFA, when an aging fighter pulled a training gun after being pinned and beaten by his younger, more athletically gifted opponent. According to Samuel, the aforementioned political scientist, this was an opportunity for the older man to practice both gun access and the evaluation of use of force:

If that exact exchange had happened in which he was slammed onto the blacktop he would have been, at that point in time, absolutely legally justified in at least most states to pull that gun . . . so it strikes me as being good practice. And he’s from Texas . . . the culture down there is very different than Massachusetts.

This demonstrates the way that fighters transport external codes of conduct into the fight space. Beyond questions of honorable comportment, state-specific self-defense law frames discussions of when a stick, gun, or knife is appropriate to use. While some agreed with my sport-oriented critique that training guns are a “cheap” way to win, several stated that this was a legitimate move for an older man, and that we should learn to struggle over the firearm. The gun-enthusiast Leon explained that this fight was unrealistic not because of the *fakeness* of the gun, but because an “adrenalized” person can “take rounds [survive bullet wounds]” and keep fighting in real life. Here, as in the knife fighting, the perceived limits of human physiology structure the simulation.

Despite concerns over the drawbacks of simulated violence, few have interest in fighting with more “realistic” blades or actual guns. One year into my fieldwork Leon punctured an opponent’s arm vein with a pointed practice knife, and a clip of the fight was circulated and promptly removed from a video website due to the company’s policy on “shocking and disgusting content.” The gushing blood publically affirmed the intensity and realism of the RFA, but most participants I spoke with thought this level of injury to be undesirable for either themselves or their opponents. Given the satisfaction many experience in winning with a simulated “kill,” it is notable that the average Reality Fighter did not celebrate this bloody violence. Participants debated how to mitigate knife injuries, and following a subsequent puncture wound to a fighter’s neck, Canyon has decided to monitor blade tips for roundness.⁷

7. Although nearly everyone I spoke with agreed with this decision, Kilo, the recipient of the neck puncture wound, has intriguingly argued in favor of retaining partially sharpened metal blade tips. He emphasizes that the fear is a crucial component of realistic training, and continues to declare it worth the risk of serious injury.

A final instance of the socially embedded nature of the “no-rules” space is that gender norms remain highly salient. Canyon has forbidden stick fights that pit men against women, and unlike other rules that have been collectively agreed upon, there is considerable opposition and debate on the impact of this prohibition. Some female fighters have identified this as deeply antithetical to the values of Reality Fighting and an impediment to their training. As Kat explained:

When I’m told to fight women, no, I don’t feel that’s realistic. That’s not gonna happen. (Laughs). I’d rather fight a guy. ‘Cause that’ll give me the resistance and the challenge that I can expect to see on the street.

Canyon has since explained that he is not opposed to such fights in private settings, but fears that a public display of male on female violence could bring negative exposure to the events. Although a small group of male participants agree with the female fighters’ critique and have begun fighting women outside of the official RFA, most remain uneasy with the prospect. As Robbie put it in a representative statement, “It’s a lose-lose. If you win, you beat up a girl. If you lose, you lost to a girl.” Thus, for many men, larger societal norms of honorable masculinity and the fear of physical embarrassment at the hands of a woman trump the “no-rules” and “realism” discourses. This is similar to the interactional dynamics described by Alex Channon’s (2013) work on mixed-gender MMA training, but the difference here is that while there is no expectation of mixed-gender *competition* in MMA, the espoused logic of the RFA suggests that it should be possible. Here as well, the “no-rules” space does not stand far apart from the society in which it is ensconced.

DISCUSSION

Given the desire for staging the most “realistic” fights possible, and the putative elimination of all rules and regulation, how do the Reality Fighters manage the potential for serious injury or death? I found three main mechanisms that regulate action and reduce injury in this space of potentially unmitigated violence. First is the cultivation of a habitus of restraint, with seemingly chaotic practices arranged so that participants can construct themselves as self-regulating individuals who are ready to engage in self-defense honorably. Second is the interactional confusion and hesitance that can arise when participants lack clear rules to coordinate action, resulting, rather surprisingly, in “no-rules” fights that are sometimes tamer than sport fights. Third is the use of mock deadly weapons and a corresponding fantasy mindset to simulate how altercations might play out in “the street,” a procedure that transports other rule sets—most notably self-defense law—into the competitive space. I briefly reiterate these in more detail, and explain the significance of each to the civilizing process debates.

The first mechanism patterning behavior is the cultivation of a habitus of restraint and self-governance, where rather than frame the practice with sportive identities and codified rules, the Reality Fighters proffer a warrior identity and libertarian ideal of total self-regulation. Masculinity is key, but the “gender project” (Connell [1995] 2005:72) that male fighters engage in is quite specific—participants aim to distance themselves from “young male ritual hierarchical” aggression, and cultivate a responsible “protector” identity. Unlike the masculine honor that requires immediate, impulsive retaliation to insult, such as that theorized by Spierenburg (1998) or Bourdieu (2001), this orientation aims at mastering such impulses. Law enforcement officers claim to use the RFA not only to hone violent technique, but also to replace undisciplined reactions with instrumental rationality. The informalization process posited by Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) is better understood here as an exercise in self-construction, with the group eliminating formal rules and a referee in order to forge the habitus aligned with “the code.” Far from social regression, the discourse of self-control in the face of situational lawlessness, as well as the practice geared towards a refining of this self-governance, is *precisely* civilized in the Eliasian sense.

The second mechanism controlling violence is an unexpected consequence of the “no-rules” format, namely the confusion and hesitance that arises when fighters do not know what is allowed.

Many fighters display aversion to harming others, indicative of a “civilized” habitus and the work to cultivate restraint, and are only able to escalate attacks once explicitly granted permission. Surprisingly, fights only look “no-holds-barred” when participants can trust one another to share norms and so coordinate action. Just as economic sociologists have shown free markets to be socially embedded and largely dependent on states and cultural scripts (Polanyi 1957), “no-rules” fights are socially embedded and only comprehensible when they begin to resemble rule-bound sport. In the more confused moments, fighters either slow the pace of the fight or look to the referee-like figure for instruction. Although counterintuitive, such negotiated interaction is in fact closer to what sociologists already know about other violent encounters (see Anderson 2000; Collins 2009; Jackson-Jacobs 2013; Katz 1988). If the number of codified rules is indicative of “sportization,” then the Reality Fighting events are indeed “de-sportized” in van Bottenburg and Heilbron’s (2006) terms. Yet, as evidenced by my analysis of interactional de-coordination, the elimination of behavioral guidelines may in fact reduce violence and trigger momentary reflection where a clearer rule set facilitates violent action.

The third mechanism at play is the rule-bound mindset that fighters carry into the space to simulate the deadly maneuvers that might occur in “the street.” Blunt trauma from a stick may incapacitate fighters, but in the case of surprise knife and gun attacks, fighters must rely on external rule sets such as the rule of law and the perceived limits of human physiology to predict what would be legally acceptable and survivable in a self-defense situation. The debate over how to fight realistically with a training gun, given both self-defense law and human ability to “take rounds” and keep fighting, is perhaps the clearest instance of this practical dilemma. As Hoffmann (2006) put it, “The greater the risk and consequence attached to an event or performance, the more likely one is to find an elaborate range of simulations used to prepare for it” (p. 189). For Reality Fighters, a tight coupling between simulation and reality would not be sustainable. Although fighters appreciate the simulation of the “kill,” the threshold of repugnance is such that actual puncture wounds are considered undesirable. Intriguingly, the external rule set used to pattern fight behavior is not only the “code of the street” (Anderson 2000), but also the *rule of law*. Far from a rejection of civilization, the group aims to simulate fights in compliance with it. Thus, even within a “no-rules” space of laissez-faire unpredictability, behavior is largely patterned and predictable in accordance with the existing external rules of the civilized society in which it is embedded.

CONCLUSION

This article began with a theoretical conundrum: sociological theorists are often at a crossroads when delineating whether specific cases of violence or social deregulation constitute de-civilizing processes or merely *appear* as such. Following Elias’s ([1971] 1986b) identification of a civilizing process linking the rationalization of violent sport activities to larger societal transformation, sociologists have fiercely debated whether the new extreme fight sports indicate de-civilizing (van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006, 2010) or informalizing processes (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010). Where Elias grasped the contextual contingency and the character of aggressive action, many of his followers have taken the fact of violence—whether homicide rates or injury rates in sports—as self-evident explanations of the significance of that behavior. Without detailed accounts of the practices, collective ethos, and habitus of participants, analysts risk mistaking promotional discourse for lived experience. Using the critical case study of the Reality Fighters, I aimed to illuminate this debate by asking a concrete empirical question: How do people fight without rules? Reframed in sociological terms, *how do participants produce and sustain the collective experience of a laissez-faire space of unpredictable violence while managing the practical concerns for serious injury or death?*

By focusing on the practical “how” problem of staging visually and experientially “realistic” fights without the regulations typical of modern sport, I have brought ethnographic detail to a phenomenon that social theorists have debated from afar but lacked the empirical evidence to effectively arbitrate. Unlike the injury rate data debated by Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) and van Bottenburg and

Heilbron (2010), this ethnography has focused on the dimensions of practice and lived experience Elias saw as the cornerstone of his theory. As an overarching finding I have shown that, even in abandoning the rules and referees typical of modern sport, the Reality Fighters are *precisely civilized* in the technical Eliasian sense. Beyond affirming the sociological truism that even “no-rules” spaces are rule and norm bound, I have shown that the particular norms celebrated, the dispositions cultivated, and the simulations engaged in are actually oriented toward self-control and the rule of law, rather than the chaos and lawlessness that a surface reading might suggest.

If analysts were to only take account of the promotional “no-rules” libertarian discourse or the discussions of preparation for violence we might conclude that Reality Fighting is a de-civilized activity. Indeed, a participant training to become comfortable with attack or discussing an opponent as a potential murderer or rapist suggests the practice is freeing the fighter from internal controls. My research, however, has shown the participants to be equally concerned with norms of morality and self-regulation. Even seemingly de-civilizing tendencies are, in the gestalt of practice, eventually subordinated to compliance with “the code” or the rule of law. For instance, when the law enforcement officer Anthony says he participates in order to train his emotional responses and avoid excessive force on the job, we see a practice and justification explicitly geared toward replacing affective violence with the instrumental rationality of professional use-of-force procedure.⁸

In my observations of the instances when violence and injury did in fact cross thresholds of “realism,” and subsequently thresholds of repugnance, the group’s concern with control and safety similarly overrode the seemingly anti-civilizational tendencies. Here I follow Abramson and Modzelewski’s (2011) participant observation-driven finding that fighters occupy a surprisingly conventional moral world, despite the tantalizing but decontextualized discourse offered in other studies (see Brent and Kraska 2013; Melzer 2013). After the gushing puncture wound to one fighter’s arm and another’s neck, for instance, the Reality Fighters did not simply celebrate this affirmation of “realistic” combat by pushing for sharper blades. On the contrary, they tended to their injured comrades and moved to regulate blade points for roundness, so as to preserve fighting at a “realistic” speed and intensity without serious injury or concerns for legal liability. If participants were consistently creating deep puncture wounds, even in underground consensual fights, it is likely that the state would eventually intervene. Ultimately, too much realism proves to be both untenable, given the presence in a civilized society that only sanctions certain types of violence, and undesirable, given the Reality Fighters’ code of honor predicated on friendship.

What the case of the Reality Fighters shows is that, even as actors attempt to deregulate action, they may be enfolded in, transport, and create other social norms to coordinate their activity in resonance with the morality of the larger society. In this particular case, rule-less-ness appears to signal a de-civilizing process, but in fact represents a civilized practice oriented to the ethos of American libertarianism. Many of these attempts to simulate street altercations are not truly de-regulative, but instead the implementation of rules that allow participants to cultivate and experience a sense of both toughness and self-mastery in the face of ostensible rule-less-ness. Given these empirical findings, this article makes three main contributions to literatures on the civilizing process, violence, and ostensibly deregulated conduct.

First, as Mennell (2007) has noted, commentators have consistently mislabeled new, seemingly deregulated, violent or regressive social practices as “de-civilized” since Elias first offered his theory. Serious ethnographic fieldwork is often necessary to cut through such handwringing and examine social spaces up close, distinguishing discourse and presentation from practice and meaning. In the

8. My data pertains to the ritual simulation fights of the RFA, and I do not have observations of participants’ comportment in outside conflict. Anthony, for instance, has been named in a lawsuit for excessive force on the job, but I can only speculate on the character of those events. Furthermore, the aim has not been to answer the question of how ritual fighting affects aggression in daily life. The debate addressed here is whether the extreme combat activities *themselves* indicate a break with Elias’s ([1971] 1986b) civilization of sport thesis, and the character of behavior in training and fighting is therefore the object of study. Whether Anthony indeed escalates through use of force procedure in his professional encounters as practiced in the RFA is a subject for further research.

absence of significant structural changes, as in the state retrenchment linked to “true de-civilizing processes” (Wacquant 2004b), analysts should be wary of equating violence or seeming deregulation with a regression from the rule-bound march of the civilizing process.

Second, rules, or their putative absence, must be understood as meaningful pieces of a community’s moral world, rather than numeric indicators of rationalization. Elias and Dunning (1986) insightfully noted that sport participants and fans are engaged in a “controlled de-controlling” of emotion. The Reality Fighters similarly want to experience such a constrained release, but they are further concerned with the way a decontrolled setting tests a person’s honorable self-regulation. In this case, unspoken norms are used to sustain a simulation of true rule-less-ness, which in turn enables the creation of a specific, morally valued self. Under conditions where a premium is placed on “freedom,” as in advanced liberal states with highly individualistic value systems, apparent rule-less-ness may have complex cultural meanings contrary to surface readings. Particular configurations of formal and informal rules, not their mere number, enable and constrain action differently, and must be analyzed in their concrete consequences.

Third, in the specific case of combat sports, and even the parasport of Reality Fighting, rules are entirely central to sustaining play and generating the experience of freedom. As I have shown in the instances when rules are unclear, the appearance of free action is predicated on shared understandings and expectations to coordinate behavior. The most violent, exciting, and aesthetically “no-holds-barred” fighting is not rule-less, but sportive and rule bound. The key sociological insight is that engaging in a sustainable “rule-less” activity requires rules, whether formal or informal, to be comprehensible and meaningful to modern actors.

REFERENCES

- Abramson, Corey and Darren Modzelewski. 2011. “Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters.” *Qualitative Sociology* 34:143–75.
- Anderson, Elijah. 2000. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brent, John J. and Peter Kraska. 2013. “Fighting is the Most Real and Honest Thing.” *British Journal of Criminology* 53:357–77.
- Buschendorf, Christa, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz. 2011. *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Butryn, Ted and Larry deGaris. 2008. “Johnny Rodz and the Jade Ring: Larry and Ted’s Excellent Adventure in Pro Wrestling.” Pp. 337–51 in *Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys through Sport*, edited by Michael Atkinson and Kevin Young. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing.
- Carlson, Jennifer. 2015. “Mourning Mayberry: Guns, Masculinity, and Socioeconomic Decline.” *Gender and Society* 29(3):386–409.
- Channon, Alex. 2013. “‘Do You Hit Girls?’ Some Striking Moments in the Career of a Male Martial Artist.” Pp. 95–110 in *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Combat Sports*, edited by R. Sanchez and D. Spencer. London, UK: Anthem.
- Collins, Randall. 2009. *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Connell, R. W. [1995] 2005. *Masculinities: Second Edition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crossley, Nick. 2006. *Reflexive Embodiment in Contemporary Society: The Body in Late Modern Society*. Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill International.
- Dunning, Eric. 1986. “Social Bonding and Violence in Sport.” Pp. 224–44 in *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, edited by N. Elias and E. Dunning. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Dunning, Eric, Patrick Murphy, and John Williams. 1988. *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Durkheim, Emile. [1912] 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Eisner, Manuel. 2001. “Modernization, Self-Control, and Lethal Violence. The Long-Term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective.” *British Journal of Criminology* 41:618–38.
- Elias, Norbert. [1939] 2000. *The Civilizing Process*. Revised addition. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

- . 1986a. "An Essay on Sport and Violence." Pp. 150–74 in *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, edited by N. Elias and E. Dunning. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- . [1971] 1986b. "The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem." Pp. 126–49 in *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, edited by N. Elias and E. Dunning. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert and Eric Dunning. 1986. "The Quest for Excitement in Leisure." Pp. 63–90 in *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, edited by N. Elias and E. Dunning. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Emerson, Robert, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2d. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fischer, Claude S. 2010. *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fletcher, Jonathan. 1997. *Violence and Civilization: An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1996. "Ethnomethodology's Program." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 59:5–21.
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gurr, Ted. 1981. "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence." *Crime and Justice*: 3:295–353.
- Guttmann, Allen. 2004. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoffman, Steve. 2006. "How to Punch Someone and Stay Friends: An Inductive Theory of Simulation." *Sociological Theory* 24:170–93.
- Howes, Marc. 1998. "The Civilizing of the Ultimate Fighting Challenge." Bsc dissertation, Aberdeen University, Aberdeen, Scotland.
- Jackson-Jacobs, Curtis. 2013. "Constructing Physical Fights: An Interactionist Analysis of Violence among Affluent, Suburban Youth." *Qualitative Sociology* 36(1):23–52.
- Katz, Jack. 1988. *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 2004. "On the Rhetoric and Politics of Ethnographic Methodology." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 595(1):280–308.
- . 2012. "Ethnography's Expanding Warrants." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642:258–75.
- Lamont, Michèle. 2000. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lee, Jooyoung. 2009. "Battlin' on the Corner: Techniques for Sustaining Play." *Social Problems* 56:578–98.
- Maffesoli, Michel. 1996. *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London, UK: Sage.
- Malaby, Thomas M. 2009. *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Melzer, Scott. 2013. "Ritual Violence in a Two-Car Garage." *Contexts* 12:26–31.
- Mennell, Stephen. 1990. "Decivilising Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines of Research." *International Sociology* 5:205–23.
- . 2007. *The American Civilizing Process*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Pinker, Steven. 2011. *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. New York: Viking.
- Polanyi, Karl. 1957. *The Great Transformation: The Social and Political Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Pratt, John. 2002. *Punishment and Civilization: Penal Tolerance and Intolerance in Modern Society*. London, UK: Sage.
- Sánchez García, Raul and Dominic Malcolm. 2010. "Decivilizing, Civilizing, or Informalizing? The International Development of Mixed Martial Arts." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45:39–58.
- Sánchez-Jankowski, Martin. 1991. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2008. *Cracks in the Pavement: Social Change and Resilience in Poor Neighborhoods*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sheard, Kenneth. 1998. "Book Review: John Sugden, *Boxing, and Society: An International Analysis*." *The Sport Historian* 17(1):216–19.
- Spencer, Dale. 2009. "Habit(us), Body Techniques, and Body Callusing: An Ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts." *Body & Society* 15(4):119–43.
- . 2013. *Ultimate Fighting and Embodiment: Violence, Gender, and Mixed Martial Arts*. New York: Routledge.
- Spierenburg, Pieter. 1998. *Men and Violence: Gender, Honor, and Rituals in Modern Europe and America*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- . 2012. *Violence and Punishment: Civilizing the Body Through Time*. London, UK: Polity.
- Swidler, Ann. 1979. *Organization Without Authority: Dilemmas of Social Control in Free Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Timmermans, Stefan and Iddo Tavory. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research from Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." *Sociological Theory* 30:167–86.
- Vaccaro, Christian A., Douglas P. Schrock, and Janice M. McCabe. 2011. "Managing Emotional Manhood Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74:414–37.
- van Bottenburg, Maarten and Johan Heilbron. 2006. "De-Sportization of Fighting Contests: The Origins and Dynamics of No Holds Barred Events and the Theory of Sportization." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41:259–82.
- . 2010. "Informalization or De-Sportization of Fighting Contests? A Rejoinder to Raul Sánchez García and Dominic Malcolm." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 46:125–27.
- Wacquant, Loic. 2004a. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2004b. "Decivilizing and Demonizing: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto." Pp. 95–121 in *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, edited by S. Loyal and S. Quilley. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2011. "Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on Becoming a Prizefighter." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8(1):81–92.
- Wouters, Cas. 1986. "Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes." *Theory, Culture, & Society* 3:1–18.
- Yin, Robert K. 2003. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. New York: Sage.