113 - *JIU-JITSU* AND *MUAY THAI*: BUILDING IDENTITIES

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Introduction

Sport experience is the space where virility is built and reinforce the bands of affinity necessary to keep the cohesion of the group considering Bourdier's (2002) presupposition that masculinity must be built in a group and acknowledged by other men. Violence which is, many times, associated to fighting may be perceived in the light of anthropological-historic interrelations which often underlay in the masculine fantasy supported by youth, by health, and by strength. (Mosse, 1996).

One phenomenon which, may be observed in martial arts, paradoxically, does not stimulate aggressiveness. It has been sought for by men quite above the usual age expected for men wanting this kind of physical activities. In spite of the interest for these activities present a close relation with health care and aesthetical needs, it is possible that the training in *jiu-jitsu* and *muay thai* combats may involve deeper motivations such as the need to recover links lost in our contemporary world due to the loosening of traditional relations (LIPOVETSKY, 1983; GUIDDENS, 2002) and consequently the loss of chances to construct one's own masculine identity (ARCHETTI, 2003).

Considering that men of mature age have singular life histories and so, for that reason, have special needs peculiar to the environment in which they live; this research aims to identify the reasons that attract these men to start practicing *jiu-jitsu* and *muay thai* when they are already over 30 years of age. The option for this profile is justified because we have recently detected a growing number of these contenders in the martial arts. It is possible to understand and consider the phenomenon significant thus opposing the usual conception, that sportive activities and fighting begin in childhood and only have a mild repercussion in adult life when we consider the theorists who support the supposition that the practice of physical activities present a space dedicated to the building of values and individual identities (LIPOVETSKY, 1983; TUBINO, 2001; GUIDDENS, 2002) becoming part of the culture itself

We postulate that the support given by the theorists who study masculinity (MOSSE, 1996; BOURDIER, 2002; MONTESINOS, 2002) may help to understand the subtly of the speeches gathered from semi-structured interviews with three contenders *jiu-jitsu* and three of *muay thai* who began to practice this sport when they were already over thirty years of age, and because we have perceived the signs mentioned by these theorists (social and family values related to masculinity; the building and the sustaining of the masculine image; and the need to go through a showdown as a form of reasserting one's masculinity). Such premiss is based on the identification of themes that have arisen from these research interviews in which the aim was to find the reasons that took men with life histories (such as physicians, engineers businessmen, teachers) scarcely related to the universe of violence which usually occupies the fantasy of martial arts contenders. We believe we can demystify or deconstruct the arguments that support the presupposition that the practice of martial arts would reinforce aggressive behaviour. Surveying the speech of men who have sought after martial arts as a valve to give flight to emotions, that are part of man's nature emotions which have been more frequently, are set free by the hectic rhythm of modern life and giving these physical activities a timely purpose we expect to find anthropological clues that may help to understand how much masculine identity seems to thrive from the bonds arisen from the martial arts.

When we structured this paper we considered three main classes which are not excluding. They put into compartments certain moments we deemed should be stated. The themes chosen may not reveal all the details that can be extracted from the text. So we focalized our attention on these main points we hope will help us understand why our interviewed subjects chose to practice *jiu-jitsu* and *muay thai* and ponder on the possible connections with the anthropological history precepts offered by our chosen theorists.

Life histories

In the case histories gathered in our research, there is room to examine the existence of the family and its influence in the building of the masculinity of our interviewed cases (MONTESINOS, 2002). In the family relation and the preservation of values found in society the struggle between the public space (where the individual cohabits with social values) and the private space (and the effort to preserve the values of the family nucleus)

The family produces the roles that are part of the social expectations. In this meanwhile, the adequate the right masculine and feminine representations that are going to be inserted in the individuals are immersed, we are not asserting that the family is giving up its normative role, but there is an absorption of masculine and feminine roles. In order to establish the functions. The boy is exposed to fights and sports. He begins to think of courage, honour, self control. The interviewed cases revealed in their life history their experience with sport was stimulated by their parents this giving clues that their families thought it was important to give adequate models for the young individuals.

"[...] I never did my training thinking to compete, also I wasn't encouraged by my parents. I began with jiu-jitsu when I was eight years old, because our physician prescribed it, and I stopped when I was 15, because I moved to another city."

In this interview Fernando, a civil employee, has practiced *muay thai* for one year and a half, he said his parents did not encourage him to compete. Our physician recommended it because I was skinny. It is possible that parents encouragement is an important factor.

"In the case of sports, my parents didn't encourage me much. Ihad the idea of competing. I had a school friend who liked to compete for the club, At the time he played handball; later when I turned 15, I stopped and began with swimming, just as a sport, not for competing."

Vladimir, a business manager, who was introduced to *jiu-jitsu* when he was 39. Today he is 42. He also says his parents did not encourage him to compete but, they exposed him to several kinds of sport. He followed on with this sport because he was encouraged by his childhood and teenage friends. This confirms Bourdier (2002) on the need of a group to help build the masculine feeling.

Other aspects must be involved such as the proximity of the sports facility

Besides, other aspects must be involved such as the proximity of the sports facility the presence of coaches and teachers and the influence of the media our interviewed cases may have been influenced by their parents, or physician and not the need from the need of fortifying a manlike stereotype behaviour associated with fighting. We believe that in fact medical

recommendation and parent encouragement have the same roots: health which is associated with a strong manlike image. Mosse (1996) says that the medical community in the XIX century associated the expectations of a growing society with the figure of a healthy strong man displaying health through a strong healthy body So European governments based their educational programs where boys would learn to be men presuming that the regular practice of physical exercises and sports activities would build this man (ibid.)

Masculinity as a base to the functioning of society was not merely dependent, however, upon proper attitudes of mind, for a healthy mind must reside in a fit body inhabit a healthy body. (...) This it was hoped would help adjust the working class to normative manliness, and aid its members in becoming more productive. (ibid., p. 136-137).

Two points may be implied in the speech of the interviewed cases. The first one refers to parent influence in the building an appropriate identity suitable for the mentality of a man guided to activities considered highly manlike such as fighting (BOURDIER, 2002) inserting the boy into a world whose society expecting to him to be suitable: a fighter, capable of achieving success on his own *"[...] he is strong, manlike but avoids unnecessary fights"*. (MOSSE, 1996, p. 138).

The second point associates the idea of good health with the idea physical complexion, and why not handsome physical appearance. Mosse (1996) refers to the XIX century hygienist medical statute linking to good health together with moral qualities to a healthy physical appearance. and a pure acceptance of the Greek physical beauty (RAMOS, 1982).

Extravasating energy: fighting as a catharsies

What we may infer from the case histories is that they believe the practice of martial arts may positively influence in the character of the future man. And this is harmonious with Mosse (ibid.).

"My father wanted me to practice some king of sport. At the time I wanted to do capoeira, I hadn't heard of jiu-jitsu it was popular at the time but I only had judô, which required much physical contact."

Andre's speech above a 45 year old salesman, who began doing *jiu-jitsu* when he was 42 says that, as *capoeira* does not require competition, it did not encourage me to carry on. Once again we should consider that there are other factors that interfere in keeping the group united. We claim that there are other aspects of virility that encourages the individual to begin with and keep with fights such as *jiu-jitsu* and *muay thai*.

"I chose this sport and because up to today, I tend to be too quarrelsome so then, this sport keeps me in control."

Such as in Fernando's speech, the other interviewed cases, make implied correlations with the practice of fighting and masculine needs. Martial arts helped them to control their aggressiveness as well as extravasated their energy. With these new abilities, codes and techniques these men earn themselves self esteem.

"[...] and today, this offers me a valuable safety valve and makes ready for the next day's work. Now I understand myself better. I've learned to relate with all sorts of people. It has broken through many frontiers. It has been very valuable. (Vladimir).

Not intending to psychologize these case histories we lack other details not perceived in the interviews we can say that competition is an engine to continue with the sport, as may be perceived in Vladimir's speech.

"I also had to learn my limitations, to learn what victory is, what defeat is, this was very interesting."

Vladimir says the challenges he had on the tatami were useful in his professional life, replicating situations which required balance to deal with his work mates. We may infer they also had an internal fighting with themselves. To face an opponent requires self accomplishment.

"What I really enjoy is the quest to learn my own limitations and then, if possible, overcoming them. I also delight in the matches at the end of the classes."

In this case Fernando shows the importance of the bouts, against others and maybe against oneself. To understand the universe of these fighting codes remits one to a preserved masculine imagery where men interact in a masculine space. The friends and the cohabitation show the potential for everyday challenge that each man endures to preserve his manly image.

Bourdier (2002) says man must confirm his masculinity all the time.

[...] the compulsory investment, sometimes in all masculine violence games and specially those, that more adequately, produce visible signs of masculinity and to show, and test these qualities, such as fighting sports (ibid., p. 65).

What these case histories let us infer is that by fighting they build their masculinity and at the same time gain from their peers, acknowledgement for their own virility. Here virility gains Bourdier's (ibid.) meaning, and joins to Mosse's (1996) premisses as to honour and to bravery. Man should not induce fighting to show his masculinity, but he should be apt to defend himself and his own if necessary and here is where we apply the fighting philosophy of non violence.

Thus, we may infer from the case histories, that manhood signs begin to be developed since childhood by the parents, in adult life, men must earn their own codes that will keep them active in a society which appreciates strength and performance.

The image of youth

Our case histories mention care for health as one of the reasons to practice physical activities. We could perceive that the signs they mentioned as a health reference were linked to strength and manliness (MOSSE, 1996). One important point that arises from this research is the need to recover youth as part of health and masculinity.

"To learn the techniques of an ancient fight with all sorts of people they will teach me new things; new tribes, young people, different thoughts, there is a different world."(Vladimir).

The idea of tribes (MAFFESOLI, 1987) mingles with the principle that people get together with others of similar tastes. The recognition of certain signs makes the approach and helps learning, and brings pleasure and new values that associate with the idea of health and clues that remit to masculinity (strength, capacity, proficiency) in precepts defended by Mosse (1996) as to the useful body of the industrial society.

"[...] my friends encouraged me because I was a fat guy. So I began to do sports to loose weight". (Alfredo, informatics technician, began doing jiu-jitsu when he was 31).

As Maffesoli (1999) says a container acquires a function itself, besides that of a wrapper.

We could almost affirm, that the body produces communication, it is actual, it occupies space, it is visible, it can be felt. Bodies are found one beside the other, whether they are people or metaphoric, natural bodies or mystic bodies (Maffesoli, 1999, p 133/134).

We may reason that social relations take place through images that affect human experience: *"[...] everyday life is organised round the sharing of images; whether the images are macroscopic or whether they deal with people and their mini groups"* (MAFFESOLI, 1999, p. 130). In a society in which healthcare reflects the need of living the present time in order to repel the anguish and uncertainty of the future (LIPOVETSKY, 1983), the price of body beauty may contain factors that reach beyond the search for health.

[...] the inclination people have of gathering with other similar people, such as beings that share the same interests. Collective narcissism: individuals assemble because they are similar, because they are touched by the same life aspirations (LIPOVETSKY, 1983, p. 15).

Fighting prototypes may attract new participants motivating them to take up fighting with the aim to acquire an

appearance like those prototypes of masculinity. Nunes (2004) examines the influence of the fighters' image on motivating individuals. If we consider this influence we will be ready to understand that the training environment is healthy for these men who pursue the appreciation for apparent good health.

Final words

The data we have collected permits us to infer that our interviewed cases find in the practice of martial arts the possibility of fulfilling some of the demands of society. The friendship that arises among the fighting participants helps them to go on practising it. This positive interaction structures their speech letting us feel the significance of the relations acquired in this space. We would risk to affirm that the idea of tribalism as mentioned by one of the interviewed cases (Vladimir) (MAFFESOLI, 1987) gains weight for us to understand our phenomenon: the jargon and the behaviour of the group keeps them united and ready to carry on.

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***JIU-JITSU* AND *MUAY THAI*: BUILDING IDENTITIES**

SUMMARY

We have tried, in this project, to identify through semi-structured interviews the reasons that took men already over thirty years of age to start practising *jiu-jitsu* and *muay thai* . This survey is justified by assumptions on the study of masculinity defended by (MOSSE, 1996; BOURDIER, 2002; MONTESINOS, 2002). These studies affirm there is relation between the need of complying with social demands as to posture and masculine image: strong and manly. We apprehend from the speech of three men who practise *jiu-jitsu* and three who practise *muay thai* that family influence was vital for them, while in their childhood, to be inserted into a recognised masculine culture: the practice of physical activities such as fighting and sport. However, in adult life other interests arose mutually justified associated interests. To keep a youthful appearance and posture seems to justify the premiss that youth is one of the foundations of masculinity. Visible youth associates with other virtues appreciated in our society talent, health and youthfulness. We consider these motivations in favour of the practice of martial arts as vital since they attempt to demystify the violence that surrounds martial arts. Our interviewed cases' subliminal message is that by practising martial arts they recovered their essential balance to deal with everyday life and they mingle with other groups while they preserve their self-esteem.

Key words: masculinity, *jiu-jitsu, muay thai.*

***JIU-JITSU* ET *MUAY THAI*: EN CONSTRUISANT DES IDENTITES**

RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce travail nous identifions les motivations des hommes qui ont commencé dans la pratique du *jiu-jitsu* et du *muay thai* après leurs trente ans à travers des interviews semi-structurées. La justification donnée à cette étude s'appuie sur les présuppositions défendues par les études sur la masculinité (MOSSE, 1996; BOURDIER, 2002; MONTESINOS, 2002). Dans les études référées, il y a la soutenance de l'idée de l'existence d'une relation entre la nécessité de répondre aux exigences sociales par rapport à la prise de position et à l'image masculines fortes et viriles. Nous comprenons dans les discours de trois hommes qui pratiquent le *jiu-jitsu* aussi que dans trois autres qui pratiquent le *muay thai* que les influences familiales ont été importantes pour que pendant leurs enfances ils aient pu s'insérés dans la vraie culture masculine: la pratique des activités phisiques comme luttes et sports. Pourtant, dans la phase adulte autres intérêts apparaissent englobés intérêts que s'associent et se justifient mutuellement. La maintenance de la jeunesse dans l'aparence aussi que dans la prise de position apparaît comme justification qui a comme l'implicite la proposition de considérer la jeunesse comme l'un des supports de la masculinité et de considérer que la jeunesse apparente sert comme lien de cohésion avec l'univers de la jeunesse des autres pratiquants en permettant l'assimilation des valeurs propagées dans notre société capacité, santé et juvénilité. Nous considérons important cette lecture des motivations pour la pratique des luttes au fur et à mesure qu'elle devient une tentative de démystifier la violence qui entoure cette pratique. Nos interviewés laissent comme message subliminal que c'est à travers les luttes qu'ils (ré)acquièrent l'équilibre essenciel au jour le jour. De cette façon, ils s'approchent d'autres groupes s'en maintenant actifs et en stimulant leur auto-estime.

Mots clés: masculinité, *jiu-jitsu*, *muay thai*.

***JIU-JITSU Y MUAY THAI*: CONSTRUYENDO IDENTIDADES**

RESUMEN

En el presente trabajo buscamos identificar las motivaciones de hombres que se iniciaron en la práctica del *jiu-jitsu* e del *muay thai* depués de los treinta años través de entrevistas semi-estructuradas. La justificativa para la investigación encontrase basada en los presupuestos defendidos por los estudios sobre la masculinidad (MOSSE, 1996; BOURDIER, 2002; MONTESINOS, 2002). En los referidos estudios se mantiene la idea de que existía una relación entre las necesidades de atender exigencias sociales en relación a la postura y la imagen masculina: fuerte y viril. Percibimos en los discursos de tres hombres practicante de *jiu-jitsu* y de tres practicantes de *muay thai* que las influencias familiares fueron importantes para se insertaren en sus infancias la cultura reconocidamente masculina: la práctica de actividades físicas como lucha y deportes. Sin embargo, en la fase adulta, otros intereses aparecen envoltos intereses que se asocian y se justifican mutuamente. Mantenerse joven, tanto en la aparencia, cuanto en la postura, mostrase como una justificativa que deja implícito la premisa

de que la juventud es uno de los pilares de la masculinidad y que la juventud aparente sirve como un lazo de cohesión con el universo de juventud de otros practicantes permitiendo la asimilación de valores propagados en nuestra sociedad capacidad, salud y jovialidad. Consideramos importante esta lectura de las motivaciones para la práctica de luchas en la medida en que se queda una tentativa de desmitificar la violencia que rodea prácticas de luchas. Nuestros entrevistados dejan como mensaje subliminar que con las luchas se (re)adquire el equilibrio esencial para tratar con el día a día y se acercan de otros grupos, manteniéndose activos y estimulados su autoestima.

Palabras claves: masculinidad, *jiu-jitsu*, *muay thai*.

JIU-JITSU E _MUAY THAI_: CONSTRUINDO IDENTIDADES

RESUMO

No presente trabalho procuramos identificar as motivações de homens que iniciaram na prática do *jiu-jitsu* e do *muay thai* após os trinta anos através de entrevistas semi-estruturadas. A justificativa para tal estudo encontra-se baseada nos pressupostos defendidos por estudos sobre a masculinidade (MOSSE, 1996; BOURDIER, 2002; MONTESINOS, 2002). Nos referidos estudos se sustenta a idéia de que exista uma relação entre a necessidade de se atender exigências sociais com relação à postura e à imagem masculina: forte e viril. Percebemos nos discursos de três homens praticantes de *jiu-jitsu* e de três praticantes de *muay thai* que as influencias familiares foram importantes para que se inserissem em suas infâncias na cultura reconhecidamente masculina: a prática de atividades físicas como lutas e esportes. No entanto, na fase adulta outros interesses aparecem envolvidos interesses que se associam e se justificam mutuamente. Manter-se jovem tanto na aparência quanto na postura aparece como uma justificativa que deixa implícito a premissa de que a juventude é um dos pilares da masculinidade e que a juventude aparente serve de elo de coesão com o universo de juventude dos outros praticantes, permitindo a assimilação de valores propagados na nossa sociedade capacidade, saúde e juvenilidade. Consideramos importante essa leitura das motivações para a prática de lutas na medida em que se torna uma tentativa de desmistificar a violência que cerca as práticas de lutas. Nossos entrevistados deixam como mensagem subliminar que, com as lutas, (re)adquirem o equilíbrio essencial para lidarem com o seu dia-a-dia e se aproximam de outros grupos, mantendo-se ativos e estimulando sua auto-estima.

Palavras-chave: masculinidade, *jiu-jitsu*, *muay thai*.

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