

Starting a fight: a phenomenological and comparative study among karate, capoeira and MMA athletes

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1. Introduction

This study is part of a larger project, which proposes a phenomenological comprehension of the fight in karate, capoeira and MMA among Brazilian fighters. Recent works have shown these three modalities have been studied through a phenomenological perspective, trying to understand the lived experience of the fighters (Barreira, 2013, 2014; Valério & Barreira, 2016). In sport psychology, it has been an increasingly amount of researches and practices in combat sports as a whole, but only a few is regarding to the experience of the fighters. Most of them consider each sport through a theoretical or a technical perspective. During the interviews from the larger project, it was realized these athletes described the process of the beginning of a fight differently. Thus, in order to comprehend the process of starting a fight, this study aims to investigate it and describe it through a comparative and phenomenological approach among karate, capoeira and MMA athletes.

2. Methodology

29 Brazilian adult athletes accepted to participate in this study, 11 from karate, 7 from capoeira and 11 from MMA. Only one of them was a female (karate). They must have had more than 5 years of experience in each modality and must have taught it or participated in a competition at least once. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these practitioners, asking them (1) how is his/her fighting experience; (2) when he/she realized he/she could fight; and requesting (3) a description of a remarkable fight he/she participated. The analysis of the interviews was made through a phenomenological method, which intends to set aside preconceived ideas of the fight – including literature issues – to comprehend this experience according to the practitioner understanding (Giorgi & Sousa, 2010). Later, these results are discussed, comparing to the studies found in combat sports area. In this last moment, the preconceived ideas are brought together with the lived experience of the athletes. It is important to highlight that using a phenomenological perspective in sports requires an understanding based on pre-reflexive acts (Stelter, 2000). It consists in a reflection about the unreflecting (Barbaras, 2008), once in sports the body is moving almost all the time, with a few time to think.

3. Results

The karate, capoeira and MMA fighters were able to describe their lived experiences during the combat moment and appear to express different meanings related to the beginning of the fight process. Some karate fighters reported starting a fight when they hear *hajime!* - a Japanese word, commonly used in karate fights, which means “start!” – from the main judge or when they

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compliment the opponent. Also, most of them described the distance adjustment as the beginning of the combat. They usually describe the strategy during the fight based on this distance adjustment. Among capoeira practitioners, the sound of music was described as an important feature to start the *roda* – a Portuguese word, which could be understood as “circle”, referring to the way capoeira practitioners organize themselves to start fighting. They highlighted the organization of the practitioners in a circle as an intense experience of preparing to fight, once everyone is able to see each other. Finally, MMA athletes commonly describe the beginning of the fight when they know who their opponent will be and start the *camp* – a word used by MMA athletes to emphasize a specific part of the training, a few weeks before the fight. Some of them seem to understand the day before the competition, the weighing day, as the beginning of the fight. Yet, others describe the octagon entrance as an important movement towards the start of the combat.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Results have shown that karate, capoeira and MMA practitioners describe their lived experiences towards the beginning of a fight in different ways. It seems their meanings change, according to their life history and the specificities of the modality. MMA athletes seem to understand the beginning of the fight days or weeks before it really happens. In other way, karate and capoeira practitioners appear to be more attached to the present moment when describing the start of a fight. However this happens in distinct ways, regarding to the modalities specificities. These results could broaden the recent studies in sport psychology and increase the perspective of the professionals who work in this area. If it is known the athlete understands the beginning of the fight process in a different way we used to believe, this must change the way sport psychologists study and work with combat sports, especially regarding to some aspects, such as the anxiety management. Future directions of this research include the comprehension of the fighting experience as a whole, understanding the perception of the practitioners through the entire combat. The fighters are the main characters in this role and professionals ought to comprehend the way they experience their practices to enable effective interventions and ethical researches.

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