

Fair Play

REVISTA DE FILOSOFÍA, ÉTICA Y DERECHO DEL DEPORTE

www.upf.edu/revistafairplay

MMA, mental health and masculinity: an analysis of the contemporary social configuration based on an empirical case

Daniel Giordani Vasques

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Júlia Miglioretto

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Nicole Marcelli Nunes Cardoso

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Gabriel Albano de Campos

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Flávio Py Mariante Neto

Universidade Luterana do Brasil

Citar como:

Daniel Giordani Vasques-Júlia Miglioretto-Nicole Marcelli Nunes Cardoso-Gabriel Albano de Campos- Flávio Py Mariante Neto (2025): MMA, mental health and masculinity: an analysis of the contemporary social configuration based on an empirical case. *Fair Play. Revista de Filosofía, Ética y Derecho del deporte*, núm.27. Págs. 157-

FECHA DE RECEPCIÓN: 19 de Enero de 2024

FECHA DE ACEPTACIÓN: 24 de Febrero de 2025

MMA, mental health and masculinity: an analysis of the contemporary social configuration based on an empirical case

Daniel Giordani Vasques
Júlia Miglioretto
Nicole Marcelli Nunes Cardoso
Gabriel Albano de Campos
Flávio Py Mariante Neto

Abstract:

After winning a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight, the athlete Paddy Pimblett gave a speech about his friend's suicide the night before and warned about the stigma of men not talking about mental health, a performance that strains hegemonic masculinity in MMA and the sport figuration. The aim of this study was to analyze the actions of this character and the configuration that allows for tensions in masculinity within MMA. Social networks, interviews and newspaper reports were analyzed. Based on figurational sociology, three empirical-analytical categories were constructed: 1) The character and the tensioning of masculinities in MMA; 2) A masculinity of silences; and 3) Media, suicide and mental health. Contemporary figurational changes allow for this narrative in the world of fighting. The character not only fights his opponents, but also social standards, and also provides space for new processes of individual and collective construction.

Keywords: Mental Health. Masculinities. Sport. Figurational Sociology.

Resumen:

Después de ganar una pelea de artes marciales mixtas (MMA), el atleta Paddy Pimblett dio un discurso sobre el suicidio de su amigo la noche anterior y alertó sobre el estigma de que los hombres no hablen de salud mental, una actuación que tensiona la masculinidad hegemónica en MMA y la figuración deportiva. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar las acciones de este personaje y la configuración que permite tensiones en la masculinidad dentro de MMA. Se analizaron redes sociales, entrevistas y reportajes periodísticos. Con base en la sociología figuracional, se construyeron tres categorías empírico-analíticas: 1) El personaje y la tensión de las masculinidades en MMA; 2) Una masculinidad de silencios; y 3) Medios, suicidio y salud mental. Los cambios figuracionales contemporáneos permiten esta narrativa en el mundo de la lucha. El personaje no solo lucha contra sus oponentes, sino también contra los estándares sociales, y también brinda espacio para nuevos procesos de construcción individual y colectiva.

Palabras clave: Salud mental. Masculinidades. Deporte. Sociología figuracional.

1. Introduction

There's a stigma in this world that men can't talk. Listen, if you're a man and there's a weight on your shoulders and you think the only way to solve it is to kill yourself, please talk to someone. Talk to anyone. [...] I'd rather have my friend crying on my shoulder than go to his funeral next week. So please, let's get rid of this stigma and let the men start talking (ESPN, 2022).

After winning his fight at a mixed martial arts (MMA) event in London in July 2022, English fighter Paddy Pimblett gave an unusual speech in the routine interview that athletes give inside the octagon. According to him, a friend of his had committed suicide the night before. Concerned about mental health and considering it a male stigma, his speech ended up producing a contrast between the stereotypes of strength, violence and aggression linked to that sport (Mariante Neto et al., 2021a) and the associations of sensitivities and mental health as possible and desirable characteristics in male performance.

Mental health¹ seems to be an important element in shaping contemporary sport. In recent years, athletes such as Ronda Rousey, Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams have publicly shared their mental health struggles. Data indicates that the occurrence of mental disorders is among elite athletes (Colagrai et al., 2022), being aggravated by the stigma that often prevents them from seeking treatment (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2019). We understand that recent social changes have contributed, to some extent, to reducing athletes' accusations and feelings of guilt about mental health problems, making it more acceptable for them not to compete. The case of Simone Biles' withdrawal from the 2021 Olympic Games due to mental health issues is, as Vasques et al. (2022) point out, emblematic of this change in configuration.

In the case analysed in this text, mental health care seems to be crossed by masculinity. Thus, understanding hegemonic masculinity can help us understand why men hide or don't recognise mental health problems. This masculine way of performing is, according to Lavelle (2021), a concept constructed to describe a certain way of acting in a group, in order,

¹ For the World Health Organisation, mental health is a state of well-being in which a person can use their abilities, cope with stress, maintain productivity and contribute to the community. In this research, we use mental health as a native expression used by the actors in the research field. In terms of sociological analysis, we are approaching the understanding that the repression of impulses characteristic of the civilising process (Elias, 1978a; 1993) stimulates compensatory mechanisms in the form of personality traits, disorders or illnesses.

according to Connell (1995), to discredit those who do not achieve it. Trujillo (1991) described five traits of hegemonic masculinity: 1) physical strength and control, 2) occupational fulfilment, 3) family patriarchy, 4) frontier leadership and 5) heterosexuality. Professional MMA athletes who fight in major events, such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), usually display at least four of these characteristics - since it is not possible to say that they always act as a leader in defining the boundaries of male performance.

A number of studies have looked at masculinity and MMA. Bowman (2020) analysed media representations to investigate the toxic masculinity of MMA and suggested that the solution lies in the types of representations that circulate about MMA issues and subjectivities. The author questions the idea that masculinity in MMA is always toxic and associated with tough men, stating that the media presents a much more ambivalent image of masculinity in martial arts that oscillates between toughness as a façade and its complete rupture in the face of socio-economic realities.

This idea corroborates the study by Mariante Neto et al. (2021b) who, when analysing the Brazilian edition of the television show *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF), found an intentional spectacularised process of humanising the fighter, showing a variety of elements produced by human sensitivity, such as crying, suffering, worry, hugs, tears, dreams, problems, sick parents and sisters with needs, dramas and prayer. Walters (2020), for his part, believes that what is at stake in TUF is the commodification of masculinity. Although there are performances of alternative masculinities, the marginalisation of women and the use of real blood and violence have allowed for the presentation of a ‘UFC masculinity’, which, according to the author, was directly responsible for the meteoric rise of MMA and the UFC².

Although there are ambivalences and sensitivities in the contemporary construction of masculinities in MMA, it is necessary to remember that the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are present in the world of fighting, in general, and also in MMA. Furthermore, we maintain that men's difficulties in assessing and talking about their mental health are

² UFC designates both the event of fights that take place on a given night and location, and the name of the company that organises the fights, events, television programmes and hires/demits the athletes. More information can be found in Vasques (2013).

related to masculine ways of being and acting, and are even more intensely connected to the performances of what has been termed hegemonic masculinity. It is from this perspective that we understand that Paddy Pimblett's discourse and actions are at odds with the expectations surrounding the performances of male MMA athletes.

This study is based on the configurational sociology of Norbert Elias (1978b). In this way, we assume that relationships between individuals take place within the logic of a web of interdependence, which is constantly changing as a result of changes in the relationships and roles that individuals have with each other. In this theory, the actions of individuals and groups are limited and made possible by the configuration in which they are inserted and, from a social game perspective, their movements are determined by and determine the movements of other players and, therefore, by changes in the configuration they form. Social structures are not, therefore, determinant of the behaviour of individuals; thus, there is no zero or full power of the players, since power relations occur from a perspective of degree and process.

The theory of the civilising process (Elias, 1978a) understands the behaviour of individuals and social groups as the result of a process of social and psychological transformations, which is determined by an increase in the control of emotions and an increase in self-awareness. Thus, the civilising process acts in a certain direction which - imbued with tensions that sometimes modify its course - is the result of changes in the behaviour of individuals with a view to restricting impulses. Thus, in a long-term analysis, in more or less pacified social organisations, it is possible to see an increase in the sensitivities of repulsion, disgust, shame and guilt, for example. In this way, life in contemporary societies is permeated by the strong action of self-control mechanisms, which repress impulses that can no longer be manifested in social life. It's not possible to say what happens to a repressed impulse that is moved behind the curtain or under the carpet of consciousness. In terms of mental health, what can be said, thinking along the lines of Elias (1993), is that it doesn't go away, on the contrary, it can become a personality trait, a disorder or an illness.

Elias wrote little about gender relations³, yet various configurational sociologists have used his theory to discuss the relations between men and women in sport. Although feminist authors - such as Hargreaves (1992), for example - have criticised configurational sociology, there is a body of academic production that recommends its use in gender studies - by authors such as Colwell (1999) and Mansfield (2008), for example, and more recently by Liston (2017) and Delmotte (2022). The study by Ferreira et al. (2024) points to possibilities for using this sociology to analyse gender in sport, including: 1) sensitisation and reflexivity in the relationship between involvement and distancing; 2) configurational studies of/with people and groups engaged in changing the status quo; 3) studies of ‘sensitisation’ and ‘individualisation’ in gender relations in sport; and 4) the importance of configurational sociology in studies of emotions.

We believe that this epistemological path is powerful for studying the ongoing configurational transformations of masculinity and mental health in sport, given that the processes of sensitisation demarcate an important feature of the civilising process in which male performances seem to be involved. Paddy Pimblett's performance in the octagon - and later, as we will describe - tensions MMA masculinities and the sporting configuration. Therefore, analysing it helps us to understand the society in which we live and the processes of transformation of sensibilities. Other athletes have also spoken about mental health, but he spoke inside the octagon right after a fight, he is an active athlete, and his speech generated repercussions in the media and on social networks. So we asked ourselves: How did this empirical character act? How is the configuration constituted that allows masculinity to be tensioned in MMA? The aim of this study is therefore to analyse the performance of this character and the configuration that enables tensions of masculinity within MMA.

2. Methodology

In this study, we are dealing with sociological research based on configurational sociology and the civilising process, as formulated by Elias (1978a, 1978b). Our purpose is to

³ Elias is considered to have at least two studies on relations between the sexes/genders, a chapter entitled ‘Changes in attitudes in relations between the sexes’ (Elias, 1978a); and the text ‘The change in the power relationship between the sexes - a procedural sociological study: the example of the Ancient Roman State’ (Elias, 1987).

analyse an empirical character using this sociological approach, inspired by the study of characters such as Mozart (Elias, 1993) and King Louis XIV (Elias, 1983), for example. As for the type of research, this is a case study. In terms of sources, we carried out documentary research, with an emphasis on selecting, organising and analysing documents.

The data was produced from three sources of public documents: social media posts, interviews and newspaper reports. The athlete's Instagram profile (@theufcbaddy) was selected because this social network had the largest number of posts and the greatest repercussions. During this period, the athlete made practically daily posts on social media, but we only selected those related to the subject. We chose 15 posts to analyse, published between 22/07/2022 and 11/05/2023, which were related to the subject of the study, as shown in Table 1. The data was collected on 22/05/2023. After this selection, the main comments from each of these posts were considered and analysed in order to understand the repercussions of the posts on the athlete's social network.

Table 1 - Posts from the athlete's social network selected for analysis.

| n | Date | Informations | Comments |
|----|------------|--|----------|
| 1 | 23/07/2022 | 'Please talk to someone, talk to anyone' | 6920 |
| 2 | 23/07/2022 | That was for you [...] and all the men who are fighting | 34 |
| 3 | 25/07/2022 | You're not entertained | 707 |
| 4 | 25/07/2022 | Receiving this gave me goosebumps (graffiti with athlete's speech) | 2198 |
| 5 | 10/08/2022 | Rest in peace, Slick Rick | 846 |
| 6 | 03/09/2022 | I was very depressed | 151 |
| 7 | 09/09/2022 | One of the sickest mindsets I've ever encountered | 679 |
| 8 | 04/10/2022 | Get it off your chest | 818 |
| 9 | 10/10/2022 | World Mental Health Day 2022 | 134 |
| 10 | 03/11/2022 | A piece of advice [...] for people who struggle mentally | 152 |
| 11 | 02/12/2022 | Only fighters will have the necessary mental strength | 603 |
| 12 | 06/12/2022 | The Baddy Foundation's opening advert | 3710 |
| 13 | 12/12/2022 | What a special evening. Thank you to my team | 5954 |
| 14 | 20/12/2022 | Since losing a friend to suicide before the fight in July | 987 |
| 15 | 10/05/2023 | If you're facing similar struggles, you're not alone! | 62 |

Source: The authors (2024).

In addition, five of the athlete's interviews on the subject were selected for analysis. One of them is the aforementioned speech just after the fight (ESPN, 2022), but on the same night, backstage, Paddy talks about his previous speech in the octagon (BBC, 2022a). The third is a press conference two days later (JOE, 2022), while the fourth interview is a clip from a news programme with the athlete (SKY SPORT NEWS, 2022). Finally, the fifth video deals with the athlete's reaction to being asked about reaching 15 million followers on his social networks (BBC, 2022b).

In addition, we searched for news stories published by newspapers in the fighter's country, which echoed or analysed the discussion provoked by his speech. We selected eight news items published between 23/07/2022 and 03/08/2022 in two English newspapers, the Daily Mail and The Independent, which were chosen because they have published more on the subject.

The data was analysed based on the Eliasian concept of configuration, a social formation of variable dimensions, where individuals are interconnected by a specific set of reciprocal relationships, the continuity of which implies a constantly changing balance of tensions. This analysis is in line with a methodological proposal that infers that the elements 'play' (Elias, 1978b) in function of the others, making up a network of power relations. According to Elias (1983), society cannot be dissociated from the individuals who make it up, just as individuals cannot be dissociated from the society they mould. Rejecting the notion of absolute freedom and determinism, Elias argues that it is up to the researcher to examine the relationships of degree and process between the position, defined by the respective configuration, and the individual who occupies that position.

In this context, the analysis of an empirical figure must be approached considering the interaction between two perspectives: the sociogenetic approach, which aims to understand the mechanisms of formation and structuring of a configuration, and the psychogenetic approach, which seeks to outline the modelling and dynamics of the psychic habitus resulting from this configuration. Therefore, this research sought to build a sociological model that explores the connections between individuals.

Based on these elements, the research was organised in such a way as to analyse the configuration, the tensions and the social and psychogenetic constitution of the character in relation to his displacements within the configuration. Using a content analysis (Bardin, 1977) that included processes of organising, coding and categorising the data and combining it with Eliasian theory, three empirical-analytical categories were developed that contribute to answering the research question. These categories are as follows: 1) The character and the tensioning of masculinities in MMA; 2) A masculinity of silences; and 3) Media, suicide and mental health.

In this context, this text, structured in this way, aims to develop a model of interdependencies based on Elias (1978b), demonstrating, based on this specific case, how an athlete 'takes advantage, in the strategy of his personal conduct, of the decision-making space that gives him his position within a specific figuration' (Elias, 1983). More specifically, the text investigates an athlete's personal decision to tension a masculinity of silencing about mental health, considering his social position as an athlete within a specific configuration, which gave him this room for manoeuvre.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 The character and the tensioning of masculinities in MMA

Patrick, or Paddy, Pimblett is an English professional MMA fighter, born on 3 January 1995 in Huyton, Merseyside. At the age of 14, he started training at Next Generation MMA, at 17 he had his first major fight in the featherweight category (up to 66kg) and signed a contract with Cage Warriors, a London MMA organisation. In 2016, he won Cage's featherweight belt and, the following year, moved up to lightweight (70kg). After a few victories during the Covid-19 pandemic, Paddy signed a contract with the UFC.

Paddy seems to be involved in a series of conflicts, provocations with other fighters, some intrigue and possible fights. At the same time, he has taken actions that have won over the fight public. In some posts you can see how followers refer to the fighter. He calls himself Paddy the Baddy, which is also his name on his Instagram profile, and identifies himself as a fighter with a strong and charismatic personality, which suggests that his nickname is related only to the way he acts in the octagon. After the fight in July 2022, Paddy began posting on

his social media accounts about the importance of talking about men's mental health, urging men to start talking about their feelings.

His first publication on the subject deals with this moment. It's a post-fight video against Jordan Leavitt, in which he dedicates his victory to Ricky, a friend who committed suicide, and Baby Lee, a fan of the fighter who lost his life to cancer, to whom Paddy connected via social media. His speech reinforces the importance of men talking about mental health problems, as there is a stigma in society about this. The caption of this post quotes the phrase Paddy speaks in the video: 'Please speak to someone, speak to anyone' (@ufceurope and @theufcpaddy, 23 July 2022).

In the same publication, we find many accounts of men thanking the fighter for the speech, telling their stories and saying how important it is to have this positive influence. The hashtag #menstarttalking was raised: 'even as men, we are still beings of emotion. #menstarttalking' (@steel_ink6, comment on the post by @ufceurope and @theufcpaddy). There were also comments such as 'This made me an instant fan of yours!' (@keith.c.7).

The fighter's speech seems to have resonated to the point where he was honoured with a wall painting in the town of Arbroath, Scotland. In a post published two days later, Paddy commented in the caption that 'gettin sent this gave me goosebumps'. The painting features his photo and his post-fight interview speech (@theufcpaddy, 25 July 2022).

Paddy continues to give importance to this subject. On 10 August, he posted an emotional video, with the camera very close to his face, in which he talks about Rick and the need to 'break this stigma of men's mental health'. In the caption, he writes '[...] please let this not happen again fellas and let's get talking!!!' (@theufcpaddy, 10 Aug. 2022).

On 3 September, Paddy revealed that he had been through a difficult time years before, but had managed to overcome it thanks to the help of people close to him:

like I say I was very down and depressed in these times and really didn't know if I was strong enough to get through it, but I got through it thanks to the help of everyone around me and I'm now in the best position I've ever been in, so never give up ppl! Take it one day at a time your loved ones are always there for you (@theufcpaddy, 03 set. 2022).

His intention seems to be to announce that if he has managed to get through such a difficult time, other people can too, all they have to do is lean on their loved ones, not give up and believe in themselves. However, this speech requires a critical sense, because it tends to individualise and blame those who are ill for not seeking help.

Part of this story appears in the publication of 04 October, in which, in a video, he talks to a group of men after training. He reiterates the importance of speaking out because he understands that he's been there, so he defends the cause and believes that the stigma that exists for men to talk about mental health should end, because speaking out would make 'u feel 1000% better trust me' (@theufcpaddy, 10 Oct. 2022).

The following month (@theufcpaddy, 03 Nov. 2022), unlike what he had been suggesting until then about talking about his problems, he brings up the practice of fighting and physical training as strategies for those who 'fight mentally': 'When I'm on the mat, there's no weight on your shoulders and nothing to worry about'. In the comments, many accounts of people who train to 'take care of their mind': "'That's skateboarding for me man. My escape from everything" (@unholyspliff); "I agree 100%. (Kick)Boxing is also great therapy, a lifesaver, I'd even say" (@petervanderschaaf); "I've been training for 11 years and it's the best thing for mental health, physical fitness, focus and problem solving under pressure" (@richbjzr).

Here, we can establish an interesting relationship with 'Quest for Excitement' (Elias & Dunning, 1986). For the authors, social transformations regarding the relationship between psychogenesis and sociogenesis have made sports a propellant of cathartic activity, i.e. a phenomenon capable of transforming emotions. In the case cited, the fighter makes an analogy between fighting and mental health, placing it as a modulator of emotions.

Paddy reinforces the cause by creating a foundation - The Baddy Foundation - with the aim of helping food insecure children and fighting the stigma surrounding men's mental health (@theufcpaddy, 06 Dec. 2022). Despite some supportive comments, Paddy received many critical ones, such as:

Advertising a charity to help men's mental health and then the next day sending out a podcast of yourself bullying another man who was and still is nice to you. Using insults like 'maggot' and 'rodent' is unbelievable. I think you need to get some help before offering it to other people in what now looks like just a PR move (@ieuanlindsay96).

This 'intimidation of another man' concerns Paddy's criticism of journalist Ariel Helwani. Paddy's version is that he didn't agree to do an interview with Ariel because he already had another (paid) interview scheduled on the same day. Afterwards, Paddy invites UFC owner Dana White to a podcast and they criticise Ariel too. Paddy then believes that Ariel should pay MMA fighters to do interviews, while Ariel says that he's hired to do it and that it's his job (interviewing fighters for a YouTube channel). In this story, the public was more 'on Ariel's side', because he would have shown through conversations and audios that Paddy was lying. One of his supporters presents a counterpoint.

Paddy is a good man, with good intentions, like helping people with mental health. For that alone he deserves more respect than many other fighters. Don't take what he does or says too seriously, it's just for show and to sell fights (@amanuel_royo).

Criticising or intimidating other MMA professionals can indeed be a strategy of spectacularisation inherent in this medium. However, the majority of Instagram users were against criticising the journalist, even more so when he set up a foundation aimed at men's mental health. Another of Paddy's actions in this direction was to visit Jame's Place in Liverpool, a Suicide Prevention Centre: 'We need more places like this and you need government funding more than anything' (@theufcpaddy, 20 Dec. 2022).

The text by Mariante Neto et al. (2021a) shows a list of elements that make up contemporary sport. Based on ethnographic work with an MMA team, the authors describe how elements related to the sporting environment are part of the current sporting configuration. By analysing the aforementioned team, they demonstrate how expressions of anger and aggression, such as 'staring' before fights, are strategies that make up the spectacularisation of the sporting configuration.

In the case of the fighter presented in this article, there are other important elements that make up the 'outside the octagon'. One of them is the social network. More than assuming the importance of mental health, the fighter posts on his social media defending the

cause of men's mental health. There is no naivety in this process. The character is the result of an important configurational transformation: you have to know how to act virtually. His actions go in a certain direction of society's civilising process (by talking about masculinity and mental health as erased/forgotten elements) from a place - the fights - historically associated with the hegemonic masculine and the brute.

3.2 A Masculinity of silence

In all the interviews analysed, Patrick highlights the stigma that men can't talk about their problems (Espn, 2022). One interview reinforces this (Joe, 2022) by saying that women, unlike men, are not afraid of feeling like a 'little mushroom'.

Here we see an interesting relationship between the cathartic power of sport, evoked by Elias and Dunning (1986), and the construction of a masculinity of silencing. Thus, as much as bodily practices have the possibility of transforming emotions, social constructions of behaviour can curb instincts seen as 'weakness'.

In addition, the theory of the civilising process (Elias, 1978a) presents a history of controls that are related to individual psychic construction. In the case of the wrestler, this becomes more complex, as he evokes the need for men to release their emotions (cathartic function) from a possible space for dialogue, in a place of construction usually associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Thinking along the lines of Elias, it would be possible to consider that men's increased sensitivity is a feature of the civilising process. The civilising process is not always about increased controls, sometimes the increase in informality (for example, crying and talking about mental health) is also civilising, as it makes people less sick/healthier, causes fewer deaths/suicides and is a space that fulfils a psychic function of releasing previously repressed emotions.

Patrick himself says that he has been through similar situations, that he talked about his problems with his father and his coach, and felt much better (Bbc, 2022). In two (Joe, 2022; Sky Sport News, 2022) of the five interviews selected, he mentions a regionalisation of

these problems, stating that he is tired of seeing people taking their lives (Sky Sport News, 2022).

In this sense, he said that he wished he had at least a few minutes to talk to his friend before 'it', but even he doesn't know if this would be the best 'method' to deal with the situation (Sky Sport News, 2022). In an interview (Joe, 2022) with Molly McCann, a UFC fighter, Paddy says he was praised for keeping his mind focused on the fight and not letting himself be weakened by what happened.

Here we see a tension in a long-term - civilising - process caused by the construction of masculinity. In the previously mentioned case of the athlete Simone Biles (Vasques et al., 2022), there was support from a large part of society for the attitude of giving up on the Olympic finals. In the case of the wrestler, he is praised for keeping his focus on the fight and repressing his emotions, which suggests that we reflect on the construction of masculinity within the civilising process. It seems that, in this case, it was still seen as positive to put his mental health aside, at least when it came to fighting.

3.3 Media, suicide and mental health

The journalistic texts vary in length and context, but all highlight Paddy's emotional speech and the impact his words have had on raising awareness about mental health. Most of the texts report on the fight and how, after winning it by finish, the fighter made a moving appeal for men to talk about their emotional problems and seek help (Draper, 2022; Hampson, 2022; Mccarthy, 2022; Pa Media, 2022; Pattle, 2022b; Reuters, 2022).

Other texts describe the repercussions of the speech and how his words inspired a significant increase in the number of men seeking help for mental health issues. The mental health group Andy's Man Club in West Yorkshire reported a considerable 22 per cent increase in the number of participants following the fighter's speech (Mccarthy, 2022; Pattle, 2022b). This shows the impact that public figures can have when addressing sensitive issues such as mental health.

In addition, some news reports highlight how other fighters, such as Jared Gordon and Danny Garcia, also spoke about their own experiences with mental health issues after Paddy's

speeches (Griffiee, 2022; Pattle, 2022a). Gordon linked his lines directly to Paddy's speech, as he was going to face him next, and declared his support for the initiative to raise awareness of mental health.

He preaches for mental health; I preach for mental health. I think together we could raise awareness of mental health. He recently lost his friend to suicide. I lost my best friend, who was a professional wrestler, to suicide a little over a year ago as well. [...] And we share common things in our lives, and I think together we could do something to raise awareness rather than just fight.' (Griffiee, 2022).

In the case of Danny Garcia, his comments on depression and anxiety were associated with Paddy by the newspapers. This shows how the speech had a ripple effect, encouraging other athletes to open up about their emotional struggles and the importance of supporting each other. Apparently, we see a configurational change, albeit a temporary one. At the very least, a tensioning of the previous configuration.

The material also mentions the repercussions of Paddy's speech among viewers. He claims to have received thousands of messages on his social networks and those of his managers, from people thanking him and even claiming to have avoided taking their own lives after his speech (Mccarthy, 2022; Pattle, 2022b).

Another point is that Paddy didn't intend to stop at speeches and posts, as he created his mental health institution: The Baddy Foundation. An important dialogue with social class here. Like Muhammad Ali, the athlete lost defending his ideas. Not everything is marketing, not everything is regulated by money, there are other elements of affective construction involved. At the same time, there is no naivety; he publishes and publicises about the foundation. In some countries, foundations like this allow for lower taxes, which is an advantage for athletes. This doesn't take away from the merit of creating a foundation, but it does say something about the functions and interdependencies of creating a foundation.

In short, the texts present a picture of Paddy's speeches and their impact on public awareness. The fighter has positioned himself as a sincere and inspiring advocate of the importance of talking openly about emotional issues.

When analysing these statements, we should return to a discussion presented by Mariante Neto et al. (2021a) on the components of the current sociological construction process. After all, the elements involved in the social construction of contemporary sport

establish meanings related to the broader configuration in which they are inserted. In this way, this process establishes that the internal logic (Elias & Dunning, 1986) (rules, institutionalisation and a reduction in violence) are not enough for an analysis based on a configurational approach.

Thus, we understand that mental health is not the only element to guide broader social processes, as in the case of MMA. In addition, it is important that the fighter moves intensively on social networks and disseminates his ideas, building a relationship of interdependence that sustains a complex and increasingly relational configuration, in the sense that the elements intertwine and are built from a logic of transit between 'being a fighter' and 'defending men's mental health', a dynamic mediated by technology.

4. Conclusions

Firstly, it's important to realise that the character is only possible because of changes in context. In this way, he is an element that 'plays' on the basis of configurational transformations and establishes a relationship of tension with the universe of fights. Thus, it would have been very difficult for a fighter with these characteristics to be heard in earlier times, when limitations and roles were better determined, and the context of martial arts was, in a balance, closer to brave and heroic masculinities.

However, the social processes and discourses involved in the construction of 'being a man' direct a new place for the fighter. He - the being who fights - no longer just fights his opponents in the ring or octagon. His fight is more complex, and social standards about masculinity can also be combated. There is a significant change. An almost sacred place in relation to traditions and the preservation of customs seems to be opening up to a new look at processes of individual construction and collective construction.

Theoretically, what we mean is that the work on the fighter taught us a little more about theory. Norbert Elias presents a relationship between social structure - sociogenesis - and psychological structure - psychogenesis - that is in line with what we have reflected on from the fighter's actions. A tension between the tradition of fighting and the more fluid social dynamics makes it possible for the character to exist, who was made in the fight, but is made in the broader problems of the current configuration.

When reflecting on sport, it is no longer possible to think of this configuration - sport - without the use of technology. This element is so important that it supports decisions and actions based on posts, comments and likes. Almost everything is on the web. Everything is connected. This connection happens in a continuum between the individual and the social, between the fighter and the public, between traditions and contemporaneity. It seems to us that the focus should be on these connections. The direction is not one of poles, but of degrees, of unequal balances and relationships.

Furthermore, methodologically, the suggestion is to reflect on the horizontality of the elements. Based on our research, it may be a mistake to indicate a determining component, such as the social network, the market or the fighters. On the contrary, actions take place in relation to potentialities and tensions. There is a relationship of interdependence that runs horizontally.

References

- Bardin, L. (1977). *L'analyse de contenu*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Bbc. (2022a). *Paddy Pimblett makes men's mental health appeal after losing friend*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/av/mixed-martial-arts/62294354>
- Bbc. (2022b). *It's important to talk about mental health – Pimblett*. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/mixed-martial-arts/62396350>
- Bowman, P. In toxic hating masculinity: MMA hard men and media representation. *Sport in History*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2020.1756394>
- Castaldelli-Maia, J. M., Gallinaro, J. G. D. M., Falcão, R. S., Goutteborge, V., Hitchcock, M. E., Hainline, B., & Stull, T. (2019). Mental health symptoms and disorders in elite athletes: a systematic review on cultural influencers and barriers to athletes seeking treatment. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 53 (11), 707-721. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2019-100710>
- Colagrai, A. C., Barreira, J., Nascimento, F. T., & Fernandes, P. T. (2022). health and mental disorders in high performance athletes: a mapping of international scientific articles. *Movimento*, 28, e28008. <https://www.scielo.br/j/mov/a/nWM6ZfVCRLmhrHkfkjPnZrN/?format=pdf&lang=pt>
- Colwell, S. (1999). Feminisms and Figurational Sociology: Contributions to Understandings of Sports, Physical Education and Sex/Gender. *European physical Education Review*, 5 (3), 219-240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X990053004>
- Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.
- Delmotte, F. (2022). Norbert Elias and women: life, texts and new perspectives on gender issues. *Sociologia & Antropologia*, 12 (1), 81-112. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2238-38752022v12i13>
- Draper, S. (2023). Emotional Paddy Pimblett dedicates his UFC 277 victory over Jordan Leavitt to a friend who recently took his own life, with the Liverpoolian urging men to 'start talking' about mental health issues before leaving the Octagon in tears. *Dailymail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/mma/article-11042641/Emotional-Paddy-Pimblett-dedicates-victory-Jordan-Leavitt-friend-killed-themselves.html>
- Elias, N. (1978a). *The civilizing process: The history of manners*. Oxford: Blackwell; New York: Urizen Books.
- Elias, N. (1978b). *What is sociology?* London: Hutchinson.
- Elias, N. (1983). *The court society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell; New York: Pantheon Books.
- Elias, N.; Dunning, E. (1986). *Quest for excitement: Sport and leisure in the civilizing process*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, N. (1987). The changing balance of power between the sexes – A process-sociological study: The example of the ancient Roman state. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4(2–3), 287–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327687004002005>
- Elias, N. (1993). *Mozart: Portrait of a genius*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- ESPN. (2022). *Paddy Pimblett's powerful message after winning at #UFCLondon*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtW0byC28_s
- Ferreira, C. D. S.; Mariante Neto, F. P.; Vasques, D. G.; Myskiw, M. (2024). Provocations in the use of configurational sociology in the study of gender relations in sport: tracking critiques, interlocutions and possibilities. *Esporte e Sociedade*, 39. <https://periodicos.uff.br/esportesociedade/article/view/60333>
- Griffee, W. (2022). Jared Gordon relishes prospect of 'action-packed' fight with Paddy Pimblett as American aims to raise mental health awareness alongside Liverpool fan favourite ahead of December showdown. *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/mma/article-11355853/Jared-Gordon-relishes-prospect-action-packed-fight-Paddy-Pimblett.html>
- Hampson, A. (2022). Paddy Pimblett pleads for men to 'start talking' after friend's suicide. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/ufc/paddy-pimblett-ufc-london-post-fight-speech-interview-b2129946.html>
- Hargreaves, J. (1992). Sex, gender and the body in sport and leisure. In E. Dunning & C. Rojek (Eds.), *Sport and leisure in civilizing process: critique and counter-critique* (pp. 161-182). MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11191-6>
- Instagram. *Paddy THE BADDY Pimblett - @theufcbaddy*. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/theufcbaddy/>
- Joe. (2022). *Paddy 'The Baddy' Pimblett's emotional mental health message*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48s8dGCgSzw>
- Lavelle, K. L. (2021). The face of mental health: Kevin Love and hegemonic masculinity in the NBA. *Communication & Sport*, 9(6), 954-971. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479520922182>
- Liston, K. (2018). Norbert Elias, figurational sociology and feminisms. In L. Mansfield, J. Caudwell, B. Wheaton, & B. Watson (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of feminism and sport, leisure and physical education* (pp. 359-375). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53318-0>
- Mansfield, L. (2008). Reconsidering feminisms and the work of Norbert Elias for understanding gender, sport and sport-related activities. *European Physical Education Review*, 14(1), 93-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X07085711>
- Mariante Neto, F. P., Vasques, D. G., & Stigger, M. P. (2021a). "If you lose but you put up a good show, you'll fight again!" – MMA and the concept of sport. *Movimento*, 27, e27030. <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.108259>
- Mariante Neto, F. P., Vasques, D. G., & Estire, M. P. (2021b). The television construction of MMA: the TUF Brasil program and the fighter's humanization process. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte*, 43, e002820. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/rbce.43.e002820>
- McCarthy, A. (2022). Paddy Pimblett's powerful speech on mental health has 'seen a surge in men seeking help in the UK' as the UFC star reveals he's received messages thanking him for saving lives after urging people to 'start talking'. *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/ufc/article-11076217/Paddy-Pimblett's-powerful-speech-mental-health-seen-surge-men-seeking-help-UK.html>

- PA Media. (2023). Paddy Pimblett pleads for men to 'start talking' after friend's suicide. *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-11042745/Paddy-Pimblett-pleads-men-start-talking-friend-s-suicide.html>
- Pattle, A. (2022a). 'You can get out of it': Boxer Danny Garcia opens up on battling 'depression and anxiety'. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/boxing/danny-garcia-jose-benavidez-interview-b2135537.html>
- Pattle, A. (2022b). Paddy Pimblett: Helping combat mental-health issues 'means more than any win'. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/ufc/paddy-pimblett-ufc-mental-health-interview-b2136604.html>
- Reuters. (2022). Mixed Martial Arts-Pimblett makes powerful mental health call after UFC London win. *Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-11042649/Mixed-Martial-Arts-Pimblett-makes-powerful-mental-health-call-UFC-London-win.html>
- Sky Sports News. (2022). Paddy Pimblett opens up about mental health after friend's suicide. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fO6mMkzyufU>
- Trujillo, N. (1991). Hegemonic masculinity on the mound: Media representations of Nolan Ryan and American sports culture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8(3), 290-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039109366799>
- Vasques, D. G. (2013). As artes marciais mistas (MMA) como esporte moderno: entre a busca da excitação e a tolerância à violência. *Esporte e Sociedade*, 22(8). <https://periodicos.uff.br/esportesociedade/article/view/48445>
- Vasques, D. G., Mariante Neto, F. P., & Stigger, M. P. (2022). Simone Biles' "step back": mental health and performance in the civilizing process. *Movimento*, 28, e28078. <https://seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/Movimento/article/view/123674>
- Walters, J. V. (2020). "So you want to be an ultimate fighter?": The commodification of masculinity in the inaugural season of The Ultimate Fighter. *Journal of Sports Media*, 15(1), 51-73. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2020.0001>