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Fighting and leaving no one behind¹: promoting engagement in combat practices through phenomenology

Abstract

This paper aims to present and discuss the “Fighting and leaving no one behind” activity, as a strategy to promote engagement through the LNOB (Leave No One Behind) perspective in MA&CS (Martial Arts & Combat Sports). As a philosophical and methodological inspiration, phenomenology was chosen to comprehend each phenomenon from its own structure with strategies which are not apart from the reality of those who live it. We highlight the importance of creating strategies in both reflexive and pre-reflexive ways, as while fighting the body constantly moves and there is not much time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and doing each technique. As a reflexive tool, we present biographical storytelling from those in vulnerable groups who have succeeded in MA&CS (not only as a competitor, but also as a researcher, a coach, etc.). These stories can enable people from vulnerable groups to feel represented in this field. In order to develop pre-reflexive approaches, we consider diverse MA&CS activities in mixed groups. These practices aim to explore not only previous developed techniques in each MA&CS but also to promote corporal learning, self-expression, psychological and interpersonal abilities. The more we encourage people to practice it, the more we let them have a different kind of embodied experience in their lives, especially when respecting the way each one in each culture is able to do it.

Keywords

phenomenology; martial arts; combat sports; fight

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1 This workshop was first designed throughout the 3rdMARIE (Martial Arts Research Initiative for Experts) Program by ICM/UNESCO in 2019

1 Introduction

The expression “Leave No One Behind (LNOB)” has been used in several perspectives and fields, having in common the need to include people, especially those in minority or vulnerable groups such as youngsters, women, people with disabilities and/or with low incomes, in multicultural relationships etc. The LNOB consists in a non-discriminative agenda, which includes eliminating extreme poverty in all its forms, reducing inequalities and addressing discriminatory barriers (Stuart & Samman, 2017). From this term, we have developed the “Fighting and leaving no one behind”, a workshop focusing on reducing inequalities and discriminatory barriers through strategies in fighting practices.

When it comes to MA&CS (Martial Arts & Combat Sports), it is important to consider their historical and cultural aspects, once they have been lately seen as a way of enhancing the best fighters, setting aside those who may not be considered as well skilled. Due to a recent sportization process (Telles, 2018; Telles, Vaitinen & Barreira, 2018), MA&CS are frequently practiced as a sport, where other types of fighting practices (such as a ritual, game, exercise...) have diminished. These characteristics can lead to a lack of engagement especially to those in vulnerable groups and/or those who are not interested in becoming athletes or professional fighters in the field of MA&CS.

In addition, misleading comprehension can be derived from a lack of clarification in some concepts sometimes seen as synonyms, such as fight, self-defense, duel, brawl and play. Self-defense practices are usually taught in LNOB strategies, although they can only cover a specific aspect of a corporal fight. These ones can be considered as a way to deal with vulnerable situations usually through an anticipation or avoidance of a risk of violence, and even when this risk is unavoidable. It conveys to an idea of being more cautious and, ultimately, defending oneself physically through precautious feelings, attitudes and behaviours. On the other hand, the notion of *corporal fight* seems to broaden the perspective of fighting, focusing solely on the intention to fight. Moreover, the focal point of this concept is the embodied intentionality during a fight. By its definition:

(it) does not refer to any form of institutionalized physical confrontation regulated by external rules that control the conduct of the participants and which involves the criteria of victory and defeat. [...] The first fundamental distinction that surfaces in corporal fighting is the mutual availability of the participants: both are willing to fight, and both are aware of each other’s willingness to fight. [...] The second fundamental characteristic is that corporal fighting finds motivation in itself – namely, in the challenge of overcoming the opponent while avoiding being overcome (Barreira, 2017a, p. 357-358).

This definition of a corporal fight is based on a phenomenological comprehension in which the fighting experience is understood through the intentionality of the fighters, i. e., their conscious or aware acts towards the opponent, as well as the world and the situation surrounding them. These “body to body” relations in fighting experiences can be described through the following considerations (Telles, 2018):

1. there is a body (considered not only as an object, but also a subject, as the body is the agent of the actions and movements during the fight);
2. a body in movement, especially when considering moving bodies through cultural and embodied practices. Here we also relate motricity, perception and action, as the body does not move randomly, but it is constantly tied to something/somebody in the world and in a specific situation;
3. a “body to body” experience, i.e. a body in movement in relation with another body in movement, in a fundamental intercorporeal aspect. These bodies must be related one another in a similar rhythm and according to nuances such as time, space, otherness and situation; it is an empathic and sensible experience (Barreira, 2017b). The opponent must be recognized as such for a fight to happen;
4. these bodies are moving one towards the other related to a common situation through embodied cultural practices. Through this point of view, we can summarize that a fight happens when:
those who have an opponent’s body as their target also have, simultaneously, their own body as the target of their adversary. [...] the purpose is not just to strike or stop the opponent’s body, as the target, but also to avoid having one’s own body hit or stopped as the target of one’s adversary (Barreira, 2017a, p. 361).

Obviously, the above can happen in different ways and in distinct types of fights, as practitioners aim to restrict the movement of the opponents and frustrate their intentions by displacement, blocking, grappling, submission, holding, kicking, striking to mention a few examples. When considering the different ways of dealing with the challenge of overcoming the opponent while avoiding being overcome, we include not only the techniques of each fight modality, but also aspects like gender, age and cultural issues as part of the world and the situation where the fighter is. Each one makes the efforts to succeed in fighting the way each one can.

Then the objective of this text is to present and discuss strategies to promote engagement and diversity in fighting practices from the “Fighting and leaving no one behind” workshop. The phenomenological approach was chosen as an inspiration to understand the fighters through their own experiences (in reflexive and pre-reflexive perspective), and to promote strategies which are not apart from their realities.

2 Phenomenology: philosophical background and method

As a philosophical and methodological point of view, phenomenology aims at comprehending each phenomenon from its own structure, as well as trying to find strategies which are not apart from the reality of those who live it. It is a way to combine the structure of each MA&CS, considering the relationship between the person/body who fights it and the aspects (biological, cultural, historical ones, etc.) which are related to one’s practice. Such discussions on phenomenology as a philosophical background and method in MA&CS have already been developed in previous studies (Telles, 2018; Telles, Vaitinen & Barreira, 2018).

As discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000), phenomenology is only accessible through a phenomenological method, and it is not a theory or simply a method that we can choose to use, but it is rather a particular lens through which we can view the world and phenomena around us. In order to do this, our approach is guided by the concept of “bracketing”, which as defined by Husserl (1931), means an attitudinal stepping back from our taken for granted assumptions of the world, as a critical attitude. At its core, bracketing is about trying to grasp the structure of the things in the lifeworld, through lived experiences, an attitude and a movement to step back from what we know to go “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1931). It guides the researcher/practitioner to try to grasp the structure of the corporal fight to reach the best way to develop it in each participant.

As noted above, and in line with the phenomenological method, we consider phenomenology as a point of view and not simply a theory or a method alone. This perspective allows us to constantly ask questions about the world of the fights and the fighters, “not considering as acquired anything that men or scientists think they know” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000, p. 11). This is why the description is of fundamental importance to phenomenological studies such as this. We begin with experiences and descriptions provided by the fighters, allowing things to appear to us, instead of supposing we already know them. Then later we relate these experiences with existing research and practices. This is why we highlight the importance of practice of “bracketing” and the centrality of descriptions as guiding concepts in comprehending lived experiences and structures of experience (Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira, 2018).

Through a phenomenological approach in fighting practices we also highlight the importance of creating strategies in both reflexive and pre-reflexive ways, as while fighting the body constantly moves and there is not much time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and doing each technique. It is important to emphasize that using a phenomenological perspective in the MA&CS field requires an understanding that is based on pre-reflexive acts. When considering verbal communication, it involves trying to put these acts into language (Stelter, 2000). So this comprehension of pre-reflexive acts consists of a reflection about the unreflecting (Barbaras, 2008), which proposes that once the body is moving almost all the time, there is little time to think. As discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000; 1953/2011), a movement is not only related to what we think about the world, but also to what we can do in it (and through it).

This way of thinking highlights one of the most important aspects of phenomenology relevant to this study: the concept of intentionality, which according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000) means that subject and object are always intertwined to one another. Following this proposition, to phenomenologically comprehend the movement we must see it as an act, not only reflexively, but also as embodied and through pre-reflexive acts. This phenomenological understanding pertains that a movement is never randomly executed, but on the contrary, it is always related to an object and to the world, even if we are not conscious of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000.) We are somehow aware of it and we do it, engaged in a specific situation. Thus, we concur that a phenomenological approach can be seen as extremely relevant to activities not only in MA&CS but also in diverse situations of movement practices, where bodies are

engaged in movement considering cultural and lived experiences (Andrieu, 2017; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2018; Hogeveen, 2011; Vaittinen, 2017; Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira, 2018).

3 Fighting and leaving no one behind: presenting and discussing strategies to promote MA&CS through phenomenology

Several strategies have been created in order to address engagement and diversity through MA&CS. The “Fighting and leaving no one behind” workshop was developed from the phenomenological assumptions on the importance of considering both reflexive and pre-reflexive perspectives in movement practices.

In this activity, the targeted audience is composed by those who are willing to fight (or have already tried to) but are somehow afraid or hesitant of diving into this experience. Despite this specificity, experienced fighters are also welcome in this workshop, as they might have some psychological aspects to work on, regarding their fighting experiences. The main idea here is that everyone can participate and feel they are able to fight the way they can. This activity has been done in São Paulo (Brazil), in a single three-hour session format. It is divided in two different but integrated moments, in which: (1) is focused on a reflexive approach and (2) is aiming at pre-reflexive practices, both to be described in the following topics.

1. Reflexive approach

As an important reflexive tool, we start the workshop with a biographical storytelling, based on the idea of a corporal fight. It is asked that each one can present her/himself and tell a true story involving any kind of fighting practice: a remarkable one, and describing how it feels to share it with the group. As an example, it is common for people to mention difficult situations they have seen or experienced. They usually refer to feeling afraid to fight and fall, being hit, getting hurt, not having the right body for fighting, etc. Thus, from these descriptions we can plan the activities to the second part of the workshop, based on these difficult moves or experiences.

These stories can enable people from vulnerable groups to feel represented in this field, enhancing self-confidence and self-efficacy in their practices. In the sports psychology domain, self-efficacy can be broadly defined as a set of personal beliefs that influence people's ability to exercise control over events that affect their lives (Pesca, Cruz & Ávila Filho, 2010; Pesca, Snéz-sie, Delben, Nunes, Raupp & Cruz, 2018). This notion is also very relevant to the engagement, adhesion and maintenance of each person in a sport, exercise or physical activity. The concept of self-efficacy was first proposed by Bandura (1978), when trying to develop a theoretical framework to explain and to predict psychological changes in which people could organize and execute actions with specific achievements. It involves then how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained to face obstacles and aversive experiences. Persistence in the task and behavioural changes, especially from the sportive domain can arise from performance

accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (varying from enactive, vicarious, exhortative, and emotive sources).

The notion of self-efficacy is tied to other important concepts and it has emerged from the need of understanding how people think, feel, get motivated and behave in various situations (Pesca et al, 2010). It is a way to comprehend how adapted a person can be while facing a new challenge and also how persistent one can be not to give up on difficult situations. In short, self-efficacy is related to how good or bad people consider they are while dealing with a specific situation, and it is also about knowing how they could proceed to surpass each obstacle. When working with vulnerable groups, especially on gender issues in youth MA&CS trainings, self-efficacy can be a key concept to promote engagement from girls in such manly activities.

It is known that the MA&CS field is usually considered as male-dominated (Holthuysen, 2011; Telles, 2018). In such domain, women and girls can tend to choose other physical activities from seeing themselves apart from these kinds of practices. Relating this assumption with the self-efficacy theory, we claim that they do not frequently engage, persist or get motivated towards MA&CS once they do not frequently experience such activities. There are not many people and places where they could feel comfortable with and also feeling themselves as part of it, in order to encourage them to practice a new activity. Then, there is still a gap between recognizing the male-dominancy in MA&CS and creating effective strategies to let women and girls engage in these practices. We must consider the need of not only showing them that they can do it and that this type of activity can also be made for them, but also helping them how to do it and offering them support to try these new tasks.

When considering a phenomenological point of view, we constantly link personal to universal experiences. It is understood that there might be different life stories all over the world to be told, but they can also share a few characteristics in common in order for us to recognize structural aspects, to help us promoting a global change. We can combine specific techniques in MA&CS with different ways of doing them or explaining them, related to the life stories we have just heard, for example. These kinds of activities and discussion should be done aiming at encouraging everyone not only to practice MA&CS but also to be proud of their own life stories and their own bodies. In addition, these strategies can promote reflection and behaviour changing not only during the practices but also in everyday life.

2. Pre-reflexive approach

In a pre-reflexive approach we aim not only to explore techniques from different MA&CS but also to promote corporal learning, self-efficacy and self-expression, enhancing psychological and interpersonal abilities. In the “Fighting and leaving no one behind” workshop, this is the moment when we propose different movements to the participants, based on their necessities from the stories they have just told and heard. We let them do the basic steps from what they already know, without being too worried about the techniques. Mainly, we work on progressions starting from what and how they can do it. For example, if one is afraid to get hurt, we start with being touched and then feeling a punch. It is also a way to sensitize the body to be able to fight.

This kind of approach is probably the main contribution from a phenomenological perspective, once we tend to work with reflexive approaches very often, instead of privileging pre-reflexive ones. However, this latest aspect appears to be crucial when considering movement practices. From a phenomenological point of view, we claim that working on pre-reflexive practices can help us to develop our senses of agency and ownership. These two concepts were both described by Gallagher (2005), in which the “*sense of agency* refers to a sense of being the initiator or source of a movement, action, or thought, while the *sense of ownership* refers to a sense that it is I who am experiencing the movement” (p. 173). They are related to the sense that we do something and also that we feel something is being done with us, which are fundamental to “body to body” movement practices, such as fighting and dancing.

These aspects are intertwined and they are very relevant to the comprehension of learning processes not only in children, but also in adults. In this latter there is a special challenge when considering their bodily processes and their body schema. If they are experiencing a fighting practice for the first time, their body schema may find it very hard to find a good way to move as they are already used to different movements. In these kinds of experience, we are mostly considering awareness processes, instead of the consciousness (or reflexive) ones. From this perspective:

This performative awareness that I have of my body is tied to my embodied capabilities for movement and action. I am aware of what I can do with my hands (and I am aware of an object in the environment in terms of how I can manipulate it), but I am aware of my hands as objects to manipulate. And my knowledge of what I can do with my hands is in my body, not in a reflective or intellectual attitude that I might take toward my hand. The infant already knows how to grasp, and is performatively aware of its hand in the grasping. In the case of imitation, the performative awareness that the infant has of its face and hands is awareness in the imitating action. It is not like the perceptual awareness that I have of an object, but an awareness that comes along with knowing that I can do certain things (Gallagher, 2005, p. 74).

Through this perspective, consciousness and awareness consist of different intentional relations with the object and the situation. The notion of consciousness is here considered as more attached to the reflexive processes, while awareness can be better tied to pre-reflexive ones. Based on these discussions, the awareness processes are also related to other relevant notions, such as perception and body schema. It is important to underscore that the movement is strongly tied to a sensible perception:

The idea of an intentional motricity may have obscured this pre-intentionality by the emphasis put by representational cognitivists on the mental schemas of action. However, the movement will be for us a very general term expressing the intentional or unintentional displacement of all or even a part of the body. The body is in permanent interaction with the environment through sensible perception. This sensible perception is not necessarily conscious. [...] The body is in action before being conscious of it (Andrieu, 2017, p. 23, free translation).

We have been arguing throughout this paper that the consciousness of the action can only happen after the action itself. According to Andrieu (2016), the lived body can only be recognizable by the brain 450ms after the action happens. Through a phenomenological point of view, the key to understand this statement is related to the notion of perception, one of the most relevant topics in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. He stated that perception is our first way to access the world. When it comes to bodily practices, it is from perception that the body starts to move. It is also relevant to mention that we usually move enacted by contours, as we can never look at something entirely. Although we are not able to see the entire object, we can recognize it, as he had described in unfinished notes:

I was already spatial (= situated) before any particular perception of space, I was already geared in space. I see the relief = not as 'visual data', but as implication of a becoming of action and perception in a presence, modulation of a body gear. (Merleau-Ponty, 1953/2011, p. 82, free translation)

From this perspective, we perceive something once we can put together apparently separated information from what we see, hear or touch, for example. According to phenomenologists, we do not consider the relationship between subject and object as something related to what we "think", but also to what we "can". This involves not only perceiving the object, but also acting in a specific situation and knowing how to be able to do something in a certain time and space (and along with a certain other person as well, as in the case of MA&CS). This is how we can develop a body confidence: from perception in a learning process to the creation of a habit. Although habit is not something we prioritize in the "Fighting and leaving no one behind" workshop, it is relevant to understand the whole process, especially to encourage people to keep trying to fight.

Habit can be understood neither as an automatism nor a reflexive knowledge, but it is a way of the body to feel familiarized with its body schema in a certain situation (Saint-Aubert, 2013). It is not an automatism because habit here is not considered only as a repetition of techniques: if something changes in a certain situation, the body will know what to do because when there is a habit one knows what is capable of even when not thinking about it. Thus, the notion of habit is tied to the body confidence and enables further actions.

Another important aspect on perception in MA&CS is the role of the opponent. This is what enables each one of us to deal with unexpected situations. When fighting, even mastering a lot of techniques, we constantly face what we cannot control or predict because we are always dealing with someone else. The opponent is someone who fights with us, but is different from ourselves and pushes us to constantly deal with unpredictable situations. Then, corporal fighting consists in a dynamic process of letting the body act from previous learned movements while being presented to a perceived original situation from the opponent.

Still related to the perception, we consider the body schema as a relevant aspect in the perceptual act. To Gallagher (2005) "the concept of body schema helps to answer the question about how the body shapes the perceptual field" (p. 18) and it can be considered as a dynamic

process of body functioning, always related to a specific environment/situation. In addition, he also states that:

The body schema involves certain motor capacities, abilities, and habits that both enable and constrain movement and the maintenance of posture. It continues to operate, and in many cases operates best, when the intentional object of perception is something other than one's own body (Gallagher, 2005, p. 24).

This citation underlines the importance of the opponent in developing motor capacities and abilities. This otherness helps the body to generate something new from what one already knows how to do, challenging the body schema. The notion of body schema can also be understood as a marginal awareness of the body. It is considered as marginal because we do not usually access it, although it is always there. We do not think about our feet when walking, for example, but we walk.

Although briefly, we presented here the main concepts to promote an understanding on pre-reflexive acts through phenomenology: body, awareness/consciousness, perception, body schema, habit. This can broaden the way we usually see the learning processes, not as only a matter of explanation and repetition. In bodily practices one of the basic procedures of learning is through the phenomenon of imitation. We commonly see this action as an attempt to reproduce what the other is doing. However, through Merleau-Ponty's perspective (2001/2006), the act of imitation is more related to achieve the other's object rather than trying to reproduce exactly what the other is doing, mainly because each one has a different body schema. We tend to imitate the most experienced ones the way we can, in order to achieve the same result, not necessarily doing the same movements (Barreira, Ângelo & Telles, 2019). In this process we can identify perception and body schema working together towards a new habit through a bodily learning process.

The imitation is a very powerful way of enhancing skills and new perceptions to youngsters without a strong base in reflexive approaches. As we have said before, explaining the techniques is very important, but it is also fundamental to let people try to do them the way they can (or even better: to assume that people will try the way they can). Thus they will not only improve their abilities, but they will also be more confident and engaged to the activity. As we have seen, a practice to be embodied must be lived by the body. When we promote MA&CS to people with different features and issues, we are enabling their bodies to be challenged in different ways, not only to learn or master a technique but also to generate new perceptions of the world we are in.

4 Discussion and conclusion

There was presented a specific development on phenomenology and movement practices, especially to promote engagement through the LNOB perspective in the field of MA&CS. Previous research has shown that this point of view can be an important tool to understand the fighters and the corporal fights through their own experiences. We have followed this assumption to try

to enhance strategies which are not apart from those who are facing such vulnerable situations, as the example of “Fighting and leaving no one behind” workshop.

In addition, we highlight that promoting efficient LNOB strategies through a phenomenological point of view means that we are referring to a dynamic and critical process. There is no such thing as closed and static protocols when there is a work inspired by phenomenology. It is fundamental to know the inner purposes of each body/individual, each group and each practice (as the example of MA&CS activities), as well as in a social and cultural comprehension.

We claim that we need to refer more to MA&CS as an experience, full of different possibilities. This can promote more engagement and diversity instead of considering it only as a sport or self-defense, for example. For further investigations and actions, we encourage researchers and practitioners to feel encouraged to create similar kinds of strategies in other movement practices, such as dancing and group activities. Thus, the more we encourage people to challenge their bodies, the more we let them have a different kind of embodied experience in their lives, especially when respecting the way each one in each culture is able to do it.

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