

THE REGULATION OF 'RISK' MARTIAL ARTS. THE CASE OF FLANDERS

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Abstract keywords

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Aim of paper

This paper discusses some of the key issues regarding the regulation of a number of harder martial arts (e.g., kickboxing, muay thai, MMA) that are considered to be problematic for (sport) authorities in Flanders. By describing the Flemish case, the paper aims to highlight the need to develop a sound martial arts policy that can provide a legitimisation base for the provision and organisation of these sports arts that have become increasingly popular in recent years.

Theoretical background

Several studies have indicated that there is a high participation rate in martial arts in a variety of countries (e.g., van Bottenburg et al., 2005). But despite its popularity, martial arts involvement is often described in controversial terms. On the one hand, it is associated with negative effects to personal and social well-being often emphasising the promotion of aggressive and violent behaviour of those involved. On the other hand however, there is a belief that martial arts practice can lead to positive socio-psychological outcomes. This paradox has resulted in an ambiguous public discourse on their value and legitimacy as socially accepted sports often leading to a dichotomisation between 'good' and 'bad' styles of martial arts. For example, there is a common view that most Asian martial arts (e.g., karate, taekwondo, aikido), with a distinct emphasis on philosophical and spiritual aspects besides physical elements, are often more associated with positive and educational outcomes. While 'harder' styles (e.g., boxing, kickboxing, MMA) are characterised by a strong emphasis on physical power and more linked to aggression, violence and health-compromising behaviour (e.g., Endresen and Olweus, 2005). To date however, there is a lack of empirical proof that this 'good versus bad' perspective runs along the lines of specific martial arts styles (Theeboom, 2012). Instead, there is a growing awareness that outcomes of martial arts involvement are more dependent on specific conditions of program delivery (e.g., in terms of organisational and guidance approach)(Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Therefore, it is interesting to note that in recent years there is an increased use of harder martial arts (or by some referred to as 'combat sports') in so-called 'sport-for-change' programs aimed at the personal and social development of disadvantaged youth (Theeboom & Verheyden, 2011).

Consequently, the distinct moral and medical concerns regarding the effects of involvement in harder martial arts combined with their increased popularity as well as their perceived positive outcomes for specific target groups have resulted in a growing demand among policy makers to develop (or rethink) their strategy towards the regulation and support of these sports.

Methodology

By means of a case-study approach in which the specific situation of the organisation of harder martial arts in Flanders is described, this paper discusses several problematic issues with which sports policy makers are confronted.

Results, discussion and implications

In 2007, the Flemish government has passed a decree regarding medically and ethically sound sport participation in which the term 'risk' martial arts was introduced to refer to those martial arts that have specific techniques allowing to punch or kick an opponent with the intention of reducing one's physical or psychological integrity. An expert committee 'Risk Martial Arts', including policy officers, martial arts representatives and physicians, has - among other things - produced a number of 'generic guidelines' providing a reference framework for the protection and prevention of serious injuries among participants. To date however, there is no formal obligation that enforces sport federations to act according to these guidelines. One of the reasons why these guidelines have not been implemented successfully at present, is linked to the fact that in Flanders there is a variety of

associations and federations that are organising these sports. In 2011, a round table which brought together all relevant stakeholders in Flanders was organised and recently resulted in the foundation of the Flemish Platform on 'Risk' Martial Arts. The platform has been set up as a knowledge, service and communication centre for harder martial arts. Its aim is to provide a more professional and qualitative offer and support of risk martial arts in Flanders and to encourage the collaboration between the various actors involved. The present paper discusses the events leading up to the foundation of the platform and reflects on its functioning and implications on the future regulation of harder martial arts in Flanders.

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