

Title:

Capoeira

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Introduction:

Capoeira can be defined as a Brazilian martial art and game to be played (Jordan *et al.*, 2018). However, it is now practised globally: ‘Capoeira, the Brazilian dance and martial art, is now globalised and taught widely outside Brazil’ (de Campos Rosario *et al.*, 2010, p. 103). What was once a ‘practice of resistance is now a fashionable activity available worldwide’ (Robitaille, 2014, p.230); responses to, and experiences of, capoeira play have evolved to embrace ‘creativity, beauty, and inclusion’ (MacLennan, 2011, p.158) and the inclusive nature of capoeira is something which is celebrated (Wesolowski, 2007). Indeed, the sense of community evoked by capoeira play is a strong theme in this study. In terms of capoeira classes in England, ‘men and women train and play together in Britain, where diasporic capoeira is predominantly a non-contact sport’ (Delamont and Stephens 2008, p. 63). Capoeira play takes place in the *roda*, accompanied by music played on an instrument called the *berimbau*. Briefly, the *roda* constitutes a ring formed of multiple capoeiristas (*i.e.* players of capoeira), with two capoeiristas playing in the centre of this ring; those forming the ring also provide music on the *berimbau*, to which those in the centre of the ring play, following its rhythm (Capoeira, 2002). As Downey (2002) states, this music ‘informs players when to start and stop their matches and how to play, and ties all participants into the ongoing sequence of games’ (p. 491).

This research explored how capoeira play might be considered to facilitate connectedness amongst newly-recruited persons, plus any other ramifications of capoeira involvement. A beginners' course of capoeira was provided to participants in an English city in the West Midlands. One hour capoeira classes ran weekly, free of charge, for participants. Two capoeira leaders ran the classes. Eighteen participants joined the study. All those who attended the classes were research participants. The participant group was naturally occurring and self-selecting. Recruitment to this research occurred via traditional methods and social media routes; for example, paper flyers and a Facebook page. The study received ethical approval from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. Participant

information sheets were provided and consent forms were signed. Thirteen classes were provided. No experience of capoeira was necessary to begin the capoeira classes. Researchers attended classes to collect/construct overt non-participant observation data. In addition, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the new capoeiristas post-course. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim by an external transcription company. Pseudonyms are used in publications to ensure participants' confidentiality. The interdisciplinary research team includes expertise in the sociology of sport, social theory, humanities, medical sociology, mental healthcare service user perspective, nursing, and sociology.

As a result of the aforementioned fieldwork and team analysis, capoeira is theorised in a fresh manner that highlights social benefits of capoeira – for example as an enjoyable and supportive group endeavour which includes elements of social play and community-building – plus benefits for self that can transcend the boundaries of the class (Jordan *et al.*, 2018). Corporeal and discursive boundary-empowerment can also be experienced by capoeiristas, fostering positive identity work in the wider world (Jordan *et al.*, 2018). Capoeira can be argued to facilitate mutuality (*e.g.*, community experience and group work) and egoism (*e.g.*, an individual's identity work) concurrently (Jordan *et al.*, 2018). Within this study relevant features of Brazilian life 'such as race ... samba, and slavery' (Stephens and Delamont 2006, p. 323) were introduced to the new capoeiristas by the capoeira course leaders verbally during classes. Further, 'the regular switching of practice partners in class' (de Campos Rosario *et al.* 2010, p. 111) is an important mechanism for creating social cohesion and appropriate capoeira teaching, and this occurred in this study. Researchers focused on how newcomers to this practice of capoeira negotiated the bodily requirements of capoeira and how this produced not only sweat, but also smiles and laughter, plus elements beyond this bodily-togetherness itself during the class (*e.g.*, narrated health ramifications). It is to these health and welfare elements we now turn.

Capoeira & Health:

Participants narrate how capoeira has post-class well-being benefits related to health. Delamont (2006) highlights that 'capoeira is an energetic physical activity, and everybody sweats' (p. 171). Downey (2002) demonstrates how capoeira is used in diverse contexts including 'physical education classes' (p. 490). Fieldwork data from this study also support this claim regarding capoeira as genuine physical exercise.

“The class worked hard on their routines and many seemed out of breath at the end” (Researcher C, Obs. Data).

“The main exercise component of the class lasts approximately 30 minutes from 8pm to 8.30pm and it is clear that the participants are exhausted” (Researcher B, Obs. Data).

“Many of the students are getting too hot and stop to have breaks, go to their bags and drink water” (Researcher C, Obs. Data).

“Towards the end of the class 3 participants looked too tired, breathless” (Researcher F, Obs. Data).

Stephens and Delamont (2006) confirm that ‘these settings are noisy, full of movement; they are sweaty’ (p. 319). Nevertheless, for the participants in this study, health is neither the central purpose of the activity nor merely incidental to capoeira play, but rather a welcome *addition* – their motivation for capoeira practice is not health first-and-foremost. Further, some of the arguably unhealthy elements occasionally associated with capoeira culture (*e.g.*, tobacco use (Bedendo & Noto, 2015)) are not observed by researchers, or reported by participants, in this study. In the interviews, participants endorse this notion of healthy exercise via the capoeira classes. The perceived physical health benefits of capoeira are important for those who attend this course.

“I go as red as a beetroot by the end of it. But in a way that’s kind of the point. Because, like I say, I’m trying to lose weight” (Tanya).

“I think it’s really energetic” (Michelle).

“It is as much about looking after my health, because that’s become very important to me, I got diagnosed with X [chronic illness]” (Lucy).

“It’s kind of good to feel like you’re getting a workout” (Tanya).

What is novel here, in this study, is that there are *two* forms to this health narrative. Health reasons are, according to interviewees, both reactionary (*e.g.*, weight loss required) and proactive (*e.g.*, desire for cardiovascular workout). Capoeira as practising health at two levels; a future-focussed level and a contemporary-response level. Health is understood, verbalised, and actioned by capoeiristas at two distinct levels – both of which are perceived by participants as positive for self welfare.

If we consider the fact that capoeira has already been implemented within school curricula, specifically as physical education (Capoeira, 2002), alongside the atomistic understandings of health above, the work of Wrench (2017) becomes salient. Evidence of such an *individualised* approach to healthy living and health benefit via sport participation does not align well with the work of Wrench (2017) who argues, instead, for the adoption of health and physical education which intentionally and overtly counteracts ‘hegemonic notions of *individual* responsibility for healthy citizenship’ (p. 1). Therefore, the framing of health citizenship along individualistic lines, as participants do so in this study, is not necessarily positive when analysed at a societal-level – arguably because it removes responsibility from the state (and society as a collective) and instead places responsibility upon increasingly unsupported solitary citizens.

Another intriguing element of the data here is that the form of exercise afforded by capoeira is highlighted as positive for health yet somewhat enigmatic. Capoeira play is narrated as enjoyable exercise by the research participants in this study, but also, rather unusually, almost mystical – or at least difficult to explain.

“It feels like it’s better and more healthier than just running on a treadmill and getting nowhere” (Lindsey).

“I think it’s magic” (Elliot).

This finding complements, yet develops, some of the extant literature. This can be demonstrated via these two quotes: (1) ‘Even if [capoeira] novices are fit, capoeira uses different muscles from their normal exercise – in strange ways’ (Delamont and Stephens, 2014, p. 55, square brackets added) + (2) ‘Learners are attracted by the opportunity to experience something exotic: using their bodies differently’ (de Campos Rosario *et al.*, 2010, p. 116). In this research capoeira is described as definitely different to the more standard individualistic gym-based workout, in an awe-inspiring and mysterious sense. Accordingly, many sociological theories of embodiment recognise that actors embody knowledge that cannot be fully articulated; for example, borrowing from Bäckström (2014), it can be said that the body is ‘un/knowing’ (p. 752) and ‘knowing and not knowing simultaneously’ (p. 752). Another way of saying this is that actors become proficient through learning or practice, but are not necessarily able to express fully in words the knowledge predicating action, and the sensational experience of being in the world in this capacity. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the new capoeiristas experience an element of their mixed martial art involvement, and benefits for self welfare, that they are unable to easily articulate verbally.

Conclusion:

Capoeira's coverage in the mass media is proliferating. Brazilian martial arts (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Capoeira, and to a lesser extent Vale Tudo) are at present popular in-and-beyond sporting domains, arguably due to the increasing popularity of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in which they are practised. Capoeira now receives global media coverage. For example, Conor McGregor – a well-known practitioner of MMA – was interviewed for the popular US-based talk show Conan, during which he gave a short capoeira demonstration. This was published on YouTube on the 3rd of March 2016 and has now been viewed over 1.8 million times. A YouTube search for 'Capoeira' produces 2,180,000 results. The popularity of capoeira at present is noteworthy because it was a factor in recruitment success for this research. Several participants joined the classes due to pre-existing expectations regarding (a) the high level of physical exertion expected due to social media representations of capoeira play and/or (b) the heightened general public interest in, and appeal of, martial arts – these pull-factors made the course particularly attractive. Therefore, there exists the possibility for capoeira to be enjoyed by an increasing number of people (*i.e.*, new capoeiristas) – with its potential benefits for self and health.

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