MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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A COMMENTARY ON AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO MACS SCHOLARSHIP: ADVANCING INDIGENOUS AND RACIALIZED WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

ABSTRACT

A growing body of martial arts and combat sports (MACS) scholarship centres on women's participation in these spaces, in particular, exploring the ways in which gender dynamics shape women's experiences. Importantly, few studies have explored the experiences of racialized and Indigenous women in MACS, and similarly, little work has been done to explore MACS participation among women in consideration of class and social background, sexuality and gender diversity, (dis)ability, and religion. This commentary paper argues for adopting a more explicitly intersectional approach to studying women's participation in MACS. Intersectionality is a conceptual and theoretical tool that draws attention to the interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, ableism), which inform a person's experiences within and access to societal systems – including access to activities like MACS. As scholar-martial artists, we share our perspectives on what a shift toward an intersectional approach to MACS scholarship might entail.

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A commentary on an intersectional approach to MACS scholarship: Advancing Indigenous and racialized women's participation

Evan Bishop & Tricia McGuire-Adams

Martial arts and combat sports (MACS) occupy a complex position within contemporary sport culture. While often celebrated as spaces of empowerment and personal transformation, these spaces are also deeply influenced by hierarchies of power, privilege, and inequity. Training environments such as dojos, boxing and Muay Thai gyms, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) academies are not neutral – they are sites where bodies are disciplined, identities are constantly negotiated, and social norms are either reproduced or resisted. To better understand participation in these settings, especially from identities that remain marginalized, attention must be directed to studying the socio-cultural factors that shape participants' access to and experiences in MACS.

Over the past two decades, a growing body of research has examined women's participation and experiences in MACS. This scholarship has highlighted how martial arts participation fosters empowerment, confidence, and well-being (Eggleton & Skea, 2024; Velija et al., 2013), while also exposing the gendered barriers many women face in these spaces (Andersen Brevig et al., 2024; Turelli et al., 2023). Other studies have also explored embodiment, showing how some women navigate gendered expectations and use MACS to cultivate new relationships with their bodies (Channon & Jennings, 2014). Collectively, this research frames MACS as potentially transformative for women, but only when these environments are safe, inclusive, and supported by coaches or instructors who embody nurturance (Maor, 2018). Despite its valuable contributions, this literature largely treats women as one homogenous category. The voices and experiences that dominate this scholarship are often those of white, cisgender, middle-class, heterosexual women, leaving other perspectives marginalized or absent. Such narrow framing risks universalizing gendered experiences in MACS, obscuring how multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., race, class, sexuality, Indigeneity, ability/disability) intersect to shape individuals' experiences. In other words, the transformative potential described in existing studies may not be equally available to all women.

Beyond gender, few studies have examined other social identities in MACS. A handful of studies have explored the roles of race and ethnicity (Chin & Andrews, 2020), Indigeneity (Ross & Forsyth, 2021), class and economic access (Hayhurst, 2013), sexuality and gender diversity (Kavoura et al., 2022), and disability (Martin, 2002). Missing from these works is an explicitly intersectional perspective. This absence of intersectionality in MACS scholarship limits our understanding of how power operates within martial arts spaces. Without addressing the intersections of race, gender, class, and other social categories, this growing body of work risks framing MACS as neutral spaces, ignoring the ways in which privilege and power entangle to shape possibilities for or limitations to Indigenous or racialized women's participation. Intersectionality provides a framework for addressing these shortcomings, which can help scholars and practitioners to better understand how systems of oppression and privilege intersect within MACS environments.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

This paper builds on existing feminist and critical research in MACS to argue for adopting a more explicitly intersectional approach to the study of MACS participation. This commentary paper is presented in four sections. First, we review the literature on women's experiences in martial arts, outlining key themes and conceptual limitations. Second, we examine research addressing other marginalized identities in MACS to illustrate the fragmented nature of this work. Third, we present and argue for intersectionality as a lens through which to study MACS participation. In this third section, we weave in our own experiences participating in and coaching MACS, focusing specifically on BJJ. Through our reflexive accounts, we connect to the applied intersectional approach to MACS scholarship and end the article with outlining our forthcoming Indigenous-led program of research on intersectionality in BJJ.

Before we begin, it is important to situate our positionalities. The first author is a white man who has 11 years of MACS experience as a BJJ competitor and instructor (black belt since 2022). He is presently the head instructor of a BJJ academy, and has some experience training in Muay Thai and MMA. As a critical sport scholar, he acknowledges his privileged social position within both academia and MACS and seeks to leverage that privilege to examine how these spaces can be made more equitable, safe, and inclusive for marginalized participants. The second author is an Anishinaabe woman who has a combined 26 years of MACS experience as a recreational-based practitioner. She has trained in Muay Thai for 20 years (earning *Khan* 2 and Khan 6 at different dojos where the prajiad system was followed) and in BJJ for six years (currently a blue belt with two stripes). As a practitioner-scholar in the socio-cultural studies of sport and as an Indigenous feminist, her Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion commitments are rooted in disrupting the systems of oppression that re-create exclusion and harm to those most marginalized.

MACS, WOMEN, AND GENDER: A HOMOGENOUS CATEGORY

A growing body of research in MACS is concerned with understanding women's participation in these mostly exclusive, patriarchal spaces. A predominate theme within this area of study centres on women's well-being and empowerment through MACS participation. Phillips (2011) found that women's engagement in martial arts has the potential to contribute to a wide spectrum of health benefits (e.g., physical fitness, stress reduction, emotional well-being). These benefits occur through embodied movement and are facilitated by community support within these martial arts settings. Beyond health-related benefits, Phillips (2011) further argued that martial arts participation can foster empowerment by giving women more agency over their bodies by developing confidence in their physical abilities, which has the power to extend beyond martial arts into everyday life. Participation in MACS has also been associated with a range of

psychosocial benefits. Eggleton and Skea (2024) found that many women reported increased psychological well-being (e.g., improved self-confidence, greater self-acceptance, stronger relationships with peers) from martial arts participation. These psychosocial outcomes were mostly linked to feelings of acceptance and belonging; however, Eggleton and Skea (2024) also noted that negative experiences – particularly with male training partners – could detract from the benefits associated with participation. Scholars have also explored how physically empowering practices, which are characteristic of MACS spaces, can positively transform self-concept. Guthrie (2014) found that participation in physically demanding activities, such as martial arts, could reshape women's sense of self, and in turn help women to develop more confidence. Similarly, Velija et al. (2013) observed how increases in physical strength contributed to feelings of empowerment and confidence, specifically with regards to women's resistance to gendered expectations. Yet, Velija et al. (2013) also highlighted the limits of individual empowerment, noting that while many women were critical of gendered expectations on a personal level, many more failed to challenge broader gender norms. Hamilton (2022) extended this critique, arguing that mixed martial arts (MMA) operate within a neoliberal postfeminist culture (i.e., emphasis on individual responsibility and autonomy with the idea that women have already achieved social equality), in which empowerment is commodified, constrained, and ultimately works to reinforce rather than challenge gender inequity.

A related cluster of research has focused on MACS participation as an activity to support mental health promotion and psychological healing (i.e., trauma). Carroll (2025) found that young women who trained in MMA described their combat sports practice as a holistic health intervention that extended beyond the methods of conventional therapy. Participants noted that connection, empowerment, and embodied movement contributed to improved mental health, heightened feelings of safety, and enhanced ability to manage effects of trauma. Pekel and colleagues (2025) found that women who engaged in martial arts reported significantly higher levels of psychological resilience, specifically with regards to stress management and embracing challenges, compared to non-practitioners. Speaking to MACS and mental health, Fullagar (2008) showed how participation in embodied leisure activities, including martial arts, helped women recover from depression, with benefits being attributed to the "creative, embodied, and connected subjectivities" (p. 35) as well as the meaning that women attributed to their identity transformations. For some women, participation in MACS has been particularly helpful for healing from trauma. Guthrie (2014) noted that survivors of physical and sexual violence experienced unique therapeutic benefits from martial arts training – benefits participants described as qualitatively different from traditional psychotherapy (i.e., embodied agency by reconnecting with one's own body, symbolic opportunities for personal transformation through martial arts traditions such as grading). In particular, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) has been framed as a practice that can help individuals recover from trauma through a blend of physical movement, self-defence, and community building (Marich & Pirkl, 2022; Weinberger & Burraston, 2022). Higgins et al. (2024) discussed how sexual assault survivors have used martial arts to reclaim autonomy, reduce vulnerability, and manage post-traumatic stress symptoms. McGuire-Adams (2025) described how Indigenous women can use BJJ and Muay Thai, among other martial arts, to confront and heal from intergenerational trauma from settler colonialism. Specifically, McGuire-Adams (2026) highlights the holistic development and growth of the mind-spirit-body that is made possible through MACS training, which has the potential to serve as a decolonizing and healing practice for Indigenous and racialized women. While there are clear movements to connect MACS to health and healing practices among some women practitioners, challenges remain, as we describe next.

Gender dynamics is a salient issue that has been explored in the MACS literature, especially as it pertains to the obstacles and challenges women experience in their sustained participation in MACS. Research in this area has consistently revealed that many women do not perceive MACS environments as safe, welcoming, or enjoyable, with these perceptions stemming from the gender-normative and heteronormative expectations that are ever-present, which privilege masculinity and sustain patriarchal hierarchies (Turelli et al., 2023). Previous work in various MACS contexts (e.g., Judo, BJJ) has described how many women face prejudice, ridicule, and shame in these male-dominated sporting environments (Turelli et al., 2023; Kavoura et al., 2018; Mierzwinski et al, 2014). Silverman et al. (2024) explored challenges faced by women training in BJJ in the United States, highlighting the difficulties many women face in navigating male-dominated training environments, including being patronized and belittled by male teammates, being treated differently because of gender, and having some male black belts abuse their power.

Other important research has discussed the ways in which women navigate being objectified, sexualized, and subjected to the male gaze in MACS spaces (Turelli et al., 2023; Channon et al., 2018). Turelli et al. (2023) articulated how, within a patriarchal MACS culture, women's "athletic performance is devalued while, contradictorily, there is an apparent valuation of them through the sensualisation and sexualization of their bodies," (p. 6). The authors underscore how this valuation is in fact not a valuation at all – it is an objectification that positions women as the Other. Unfortunately, similar observations regarding the marginalization and objectification of women are not uncommon in MACS literature. Follo's (2012) contribution to the literature on women's participation in martial arts, indicated that female martial arts practitioners continue to be marginalized, only permitted to exist within conventional hierarchical gendered norms that favour expressions of heteronormative masculinity (Turelli & Joseph, 2025). Speaking to the complex gendered socialization that occurs in MACS spaces (and sporting spaces more broadly), Follo (2012) observed "the female martial arts practitioner as walking a

tightrope between empowerment and compliance even at a young age suggesting the degree to which the feminine paradox and gendered norms lies within sport," (p. 713). More broadly, a review from Lindsay et al. (2023) showed that, while martial arts can be used as a tool for improving gender relations and for challenging societal gender norms, many barriers continue to exclude women from these spaces – namely, traditional hierarchies, gender norms, and problems with mixed-gender contact in training. Recent research (Follo, 2024) broadens the implications of gender norms that many women in MACS must also navigate including motherhood, ageing, and other caregiving responsibilities.

The ways in which gender norms are challenged and transformed constitutes another important area within MACS scholarship. Indeed, participation in MACS requires women to negotiate between resisting and reproducing dominant gender ideologies, navigating between entangled experiences of empowerment and exclusion. Hamilton (2020) interviewed professional women's MMA fighters, exploring the maintenance of femininity and relationships with intimate partners. Hamilton (2020) found that many of the heterosexual women in the study experienced "feelings of feminine insecurity due to their increased muscle size, strength, and fighting ability," (p. 352), leading these women to overdo gender in their personal lives (i.e., by seeking a hypermasculine intimate partner). Others suggested that women practitioners' expressions of femininity (e.g., wearing pink boxing gloves) may have the potential to challenge and subvert inequitable gendered norms in MACS spaces (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Davies & Deckert, 2019). Johansson and Svender (2025) explored approaches to gender across three martial arts clubs in Sweden, finding that mixed-gender training contributed to a downplaying of gender. Yet, at the same time, clubs also appeared to emphasize gender in other ways, specifically with regards to addressing issues pertaining to masculine-inspired norms in the clubs and the inclusion of women. Moving in a different direction, Channon (2014) advocated for an undoing of gender in mixed martial arts spaces, whereby activities such as mixed-gender training may allow for men and women to think and act in ways that challenge normative understandings of gender. Similarly, Maor (2018) argued that mixed-gender martial arts training environments can provide valuable opportunities for subversive gender appropriation in which women adopt performances of masculinity and men develop embodied nurturance, together queering conventional gender boundaries and conventions.

Examining this body of literature, while there are discernable valuable takeaways, it appears the experiences of women in MACS have been homogenized and generalized. This body of literature tends to portray women as a uniform group, centring the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied women while obscuring the ways in which intersecting identities (i.e., race, Indigeneity, class, gender, sexuality, ability) shape women's experiences in MACS. The following section overviews the small body of research that has explored women's participation in MACS in consideration of other social identities.

MACS AND MARGINALIZED SOCIAL IDENTITIES AMONG WOMEN

Few studies have explored the experiences of racialized women in MACS, and similarly, little work has been done to explore MACS participation among women in consideration of class and economic status, sexuality and gender diversity, (dis)ability, and religion. In this section, we review what exists from this body of scholarship.

Turning first to race and gender, Chin and Andrews (2020) examined the ways in which popular female Asian American MMA athletes (focusing on athletes such as Michelle 'Karate Hottie' Waterson) are represented with regards to the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender. The authors pointed to the "dynamic and complex processes of gendered racialization at play in MMA," stating that "with the recent growth in professional women's MMA come new spaces and opportunities to reimagine traditional images of Asian American women," (Chin and Andrews, 2020, p. 18). Building on this approach, Barco's (2021) doctoral research explored how women of colour used martial arts practice as a form of healing from psychological trauma. Findings from Barco's (2021) research showed "how martial arts facilitated transformation from fragmentation, powerlessness, and oppression to connection, identity, roots, resistance, presence, ancestral wisdom, and liberation," (p. 175). Moreover, Barco (2021) remarked how the use of feminist and decolonial frameworks illuminated the impacts of colonialism on the lived experiences of women of colour, specifically with regards to the intersection of race and gender. Extending this discussion with a focus on Indigeneity, Ross and Forsyth (2021) developed case studies to examine the experiences of Indigenous female boxers from Canada and the United States from the 1970s to the 2010s, emphasizing the intersection of race and gender in understanding these fighters' experiences. Findings from this research highlight the many challenges – historical and contemporary – that Indigenous women face in the sport of boxing, including racism, sexism, exclusion from competition, cultural erasure, media misrepresentation, and socioeconomic inequities. Collectively, these studies underscore how race and gender intersect to shape representation and lived experience for women of colour and Indigenous women in MACS.

Turning to religion and gender, Mitra (2009) interviewed female boxers in Kolkata, India, the majority of whom were Muslim and financially impoverished. The author observed how the boxers involved in the study experienced three levels of discrimination that shaped their participation in sport: discrimination based on religion, gender, and to some extent, the poverty of their families. Importantly, Mitra (2009) argued that "studies in gender and sport remain incomplete if we do not acknowledge the interrelations

between gender and ethnic or religious communities and the nation in which the particular subject resides," (p. 1849). Similarly, Kipnis and Caudwell (2015) sought to explore the barriers and challenges experienced by Muslim women boxers in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kipnis and Caudwell's (2015) research found that most women and girls in Kabul lack opportunities to box due to "widespread poverty, early marriages, endemic societal violence and insecurity" (p. 47), and that those who do participate face challenges related to Muslim dress (e.g., hijab bans), sex segregation, sexuality, conservative values, and media portrayals of Islamic women shaped by the War on Terror. Complementing these findings, Rana (2017) explored gender-segregated kickboxing in the Netherlands, focusing on Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women's experiences of empowerment in ladies-only kickboxing classes. Rana's (2017) findings showed that young Muslim women and girls participated in ladies-only kickboxing sessions for a variety of reasons, and these women and girls continued to navigate obstacles related to gender, race, and class in addition to religion within these ladies-only training spaces. Also highlighting class and immigrant background, Vertonghen et al. (2015) studied mediating factors (i.e., personal characteristics, social background, participation motives) in martial arts practice among young girls living in Belgium. Findings from this research related to social background indicated that girls participating in kickboxing/Muay Thai tended to be from a lower social class compared to peers who participated in Judo, Aikido, and Karate. In line with previous research (Vertonghen et al., 2014), the authors suggested a connection between immigrant families, social class, and a propensity to train in kickboxing/Muay Thai compared to other martial arts or combat sports. Together, these studies illustrate how religion, class, and immigrant background can compound gender inequity, emphasizing the role of culture in analyses of women's participation in MACS.

Lastly, turning to gender and sexual diversity, Kavoura et al. (2022) focused on transgender experiences in martial arts, interviewing a small sample of Finnish and British athletes. Findings from this research showed how these transgender martial artists navigated cis- and heteronormativity, as well as transphobia, by creating inclusive martial arts spaces, increasing the visibility of transgender issues, expressing trans and/or nonbinary identities openly, and challenging gender imbalances and stereotypes. Elsewhere, McGannon et al. (2019) analysed the intersecting gender and sexual identities of elite women boxers in Canada. Findings showed how these women managed their identities as boxers, negotiating empowerment and marginalization in a hyper-masculine and heteronormative sport. Furthermore, findings "showed that all women's gendered identities were not always experienced as inclusive, particularly in terms of femininity and physicality, resulting in women's literal fight for respect and resources that aligned with men's boxing," (McGannon et al., 2019, p. 181). Adding a more personal perspective, Greey and Barker-Ruchti (2019) developed an auto-ethnography of the first author's experiences navigating gender identity, sexuality, substance abuse, and a rising career as an international-level boxer fighting out of Canada. Analyses showed how the first author's journey as a volleyball player, then as a boxer, then as a retired boxer, was intertwined with evolving understandings of gender/sexual identity and self-worth, culminating in authentic expression as a gender-nonbinary athlete. This growing body of research illustrates how martial artists and combat sport athletes navigate gender and sexual diversity while working to challenge and reshape the heteronormative and gendered culture of MACS.

In sum, the literature reviewed in this section shows that, while a range of aspects of social identity (e.g., race, Indigeneity, sexual diversity) have been studied alongside gender within MACS scholarship, there remain large and significant gaps in the literature (e.g., gender and Indigeneity, gender and disability, amongst other intersectionality identities). Moreover, the existing MACS scholarship is largely organized in discrete identity categories, with mostly separate bodies of work examining gender, race, sexuality, religion, and class. While this research has generated important insights, its categorical organization reproduces additive logics that treat social identities as separate variables rather than as parts of intersecting systems of power. The fragmentation and compartmentalization of MACS scholarship limits our capacity to truly understand how MACS cultures are structured and sustained.

Supporting these observations, a scoping review from Lindsay et al. (2023) exploring gender dynamics and women's participation in martial arts noted the focus on gender in MACS research as a limitation, highlighting the need to further explore "the intersect between gender and other dimensions of an individual's identity on women's experiences in martial arts," (p. 320). In a scoping review of racialized women's experiences in sport in Canada, Joseph et al. (2022) articulated in a similar vein the need for adopting an intersectional approach to better understand the barriers to sport participation among racialized women, saying:

> Beyond narratives of inclusion versus exclusion, comparative and intersectional research on how age, language, accent, skin shade, and other characteristics may play a role in the experiences and perspectives of immigrant and racialized women on sport and physical activity can provide more insight. This requires a theoretical approach that foregrounds intersectionality, transnationality, and settler colonialism and places structural barriers (as opposed to kinds of racialized people) at the center of the analysis (p. 876).

Taken together, these reviews point to a growing recognition that gender alone cannot account for the complexity of women's experiences in MACS. To advance the field of MACS scholarship, future research must adopt an intersectional approach that considers how multiple and overlapping identities and systems of power and privilege shape experiences in MACS. The following section outlines how intersectionality can be a suitable lens through which we can expand MACS research to account for this glaring gap in the literature.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND MACS RESEARCH

Intersectionality is a theoretical and practical tool used to situate multiple overlapping systems of oppression experienced by racialized and marginalized people. The concept of intersectionality was advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to offer a nuanced understanding of how the legal system failed to consider the unique positionalities of Black women in legal theory and law (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality considers the multiple facets of oppression and marginalization experienced by racialized and marginalized people within societal structures steeped in and protective of whiteness, which creates lasting structural inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality, therefore, draws attention to the interlocking systems of oppression such as racism, classism, ableism, along with aspects of gender, sexuality, Indigeneity, body size or fatness, disability, among others, which inform a person's experience within and access to societal systems (e.g., education, law, programs, access to health care, among others). Sport is not immune from systems of oppression but reinforces systems of power such as white supremacy, systemic racism, and settler colonialism (Joseph & Kriger, 2021; McGuire-Adams et al., 2022).

Intersectionality, thus, offers a timely critical lens to advance sport-specific approaches. Within sport and physical activity, intersectionality scholarship draws attention to the inequitable access to and participation of racialized women in sport coaching (Carter-Francique, & Olushola, 2016; LaVoi, 2016; Rankin-Wright & Hylton, 2020) and in physical activity (Lim et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2025). Much of this intersectionality scholarship focuses on gender equity. LaVoi (2016) clarified that women in sport coaching face marginalization (e.g., lack of inclusion and equitable funding) and considerable intersectional barriers, especially if they live with intersectional identities. Carter-Francique and Olushola (2016) bring attention to Black women and women of colour experiences with being Othered as coaches, vis-a-vis the interlocking systems of racism and gender in sport, and call for intersectional interventions at the representational, political, and structural levels of sport coaching. Similarly, Rankin-Wright and Hylton (2020) used intersectionality to situate Black women coaches' perspectives as they provide counternarratives to the dominant ideologies about Black women across sporting landscapes (e.g., whiteness, anti-Black racism, masculinity). Lim et al.'s (2021) scoping review assessed how intersectionality was operationalized in physical activity settings, and they found that in nearly all of the assessed articles (n=45) gender/sex and race were the dominant intersectional identities operationalized within sport and physical activity research. When other intersectional identities were the focus of research, Lee et al. (2025) found that "discrimination at multiple systems of oppression continue to persist, particularly towards individuals who are denied equitable access to and opportunities for quality participation" (p. 11). Thus, while intersectionality in sport is applied to gender equity and race, the multiple layers of intricacies of intersectionality remain unaddressed, which has been critiqued as taking an additive approach.

Kriger et al. (2022) problematize how sport equity initiatives adopt an additive approach that primarily focuses on gender. The additive approach remains uncritical of the structures of oppression while simultaneously addressing inequality by adding more identities or perspectives into the structures themselves. An example of a sporting context offered by Kriger et al. (2022) pertains to the approach to gender equity in sport that consistently applies a "woman-first model of equity wherein White, non-disabled, heterosexual, cis-women are prioritised as equity-deserving in sport 'before' equity for 'other' identity groups" (p. 302). The other identity groups currently missing from intersectionality research in sport, and MACS more broadly, pertain to Indigenous peoples, Black and/or Muslim communities, or other racialized identities, or the meaningful inclusion of trans, two-spirit or non-binary people, in addition to noting the differing social classes experienced amongst such identity groups. Using gender as the only additive ensures other intersectional identities and experiences remain marginalized and leave the systems of oppression firmly in place.

Blodgett et al. (2017) focused their study on the intersectional socio-cultural identities of competitive female boxers in Canada. Boxing attracts a diverse athlete composition (e.g., many different forms of nationalities, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds) and therefore was chosen to be an important sporting context from which to explore a deepened analysis of intersectionality identities and sport. The purpose of the study was to assess how the women's intersectional identities "connect to various experiences of exclusion and marginalization" (p. 85) within the sport of boxing. Among the female boxers included in the study, it was found that they most often encountered marginalization in boxing pertaining to race and ethnicity, language and religion. Blodgett et al. (2017) suggest that by creating more inclusive sport spaces informed by an intersectional lens that create a "relational team cultures" (p. 91) within sport has the potential to disrupt the systems of oppression that reinforce exclusion and marginalization.

In the preceding sections we have explored the MACS literature to highlight the challenges and opportunities for the integration of intersectionality. We now turn to our personal reflections to explore operationalizing intersectionality from our lived experiences in MACS. As such, in the next section we deepen our engagement in intersectionality noting areas of immediate growth and provide a specific example of the importance of Indigenous representation in BJJ.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AS DISCUSSION

The personal reflections presented below are offered as reflexive accounts rather than empirical data. A goal in sharing these reflections was to make visible the authors' positionalities within martial arts culture to highlight how intersectional dynamics

manifested in the authors' martial arts experiences. These reflections function not as generalizable claims, but rather as examples of how power, privilege, identity, and inequity can intersect in specific martial arts contexts. Furthermore, these narratives note how the authors' lived experiences as martial artists are entangled with the authors' roles as scholars and researchers, complementing the literature review in building the argument for adopting more explicit intersectional approaches to MACS research and practice.

McGuire-Adams: Reflections

I started my BJJ training in 2018 and will sometimes pause my training to train Muay Thai (MT) kickboxing, as I often share that MT is my first love. Throughout my journey in both BJJ and MT, I have had outstanding professors and Krus who have guided me in gaining skilled techniques and supported my will to persevere through the strenuous physicality needed to train in MACS. I have deep respect and gratitude for all my professors and Krus, and yet by applying an intersectional lens, I recognize that they all represented whiteness or maleness. Over my 26 years in training, aside from having two Krus who were white women, all the BJJ professors I encountered were and are white men. I have had one key exception in my experience in MACS: Kru Ashley Nichols. Kru Ashley was an Anishinaabe woman from the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation with whom I had a long-standing connection with. Kru Ashley trained me for years in MT; she supported my doctoral research by agreeing to be interviewed about her experiences as a highly decorated Anishinaabe World Champion in MT; and, most recently, as a practitioner of BJJ herself, she coached me in earning my blue belt in BJJ.

When I was invited to the grading to earn my blue belt, I knew I was in for one of the most challenging physical endurance tests of my life. The process for earning higher belts at the BJJ academy where I was training involved a two-hour grind of non-stop grappling, or what the BJJ community calls 'king of the hill' and 'shark tank.' I remember feeling scared but resolved, trusting that my professors knew I was ready. Upon arriving at the academy, to my delight and surprise, I see Kru Ashely in her Gi donning her purple belt. She told me she came to support me as I was the only female grading that day. Not having seen her in a while, her showing up to support me through this grading meant the world to me. She, along with seven other female BJJ practitioners, helped me earn my blue belt by rolling with me through the king of the hill and shark tank.

What stands out to me about my grading was when I was nearing the two-hour mark of constant rolling and feeling desperately tempted to quit, I heard Kru Ashley's constant encouragement. Her voice cut through the cacophony of the multitude of voices thrumming through the mats, "Tricia, do not stop moving, you got this!" And she also offered me her constant coaching, "Great, you have the grips, move into a lumberjack sweep! Yes! Now move into side control!" In offering her support that day, she not only coached me throughout the shark tank – which we laughed about later as she wondered, "I wasn't sure I was supposed to coach you, but I did anyway!" – but we connected with each other on a different, more meaningful level: as Anishinaabe women. I believed I could finish and not quit because she believed I could. Yes, I trusted her immensely as my Kru, but I also trusted her as an Anishinaabe sister with shared beliefs, values, and connections to ancestral strengths. I will never know for sure if I would have quit had Kru Ashley not coached and encouraged me, but I believe she showed up for me that day for a reason, to make sure I earned that blue belt.

Kru Ashley's role as a MACS competitive athlete, a Muay Thai Kru, and a BJJ practitioner is also a crucial example of intersectional inclusion. Throughout this article, we have situated the complex factors as to why only one type of woman, for the most part, predominates scholarship in MACS (white women). Such analysis allows us to question why Indigenous and racialized women are missing from dojos in efforts to draw attention to the intersecting systems of oppression that may make it difficult for women to start and maintain their MACS training. Sharing my experience about Kru Ashely supports our claim that intersectional inclusion carries immense meaning for marginalized identities and how representation has the potential to bring more Indigenous and racialized women to the mats. Said another way, Kru Ashley's presence disrupted the White normativity of MACS and created a rare space for me to connect with an Anishinaabe presence on the mats.

Sharing my experience about Kru Ashley helps me continue to process the grief I still carry in my heart for her, her family and community, as she passed into the Spirit World in 2024. Her presence as an Anishinaabe woman in MACS is also a testament to the significance of Indigenous women's representation. Her enduring memory in the MACS community is held by the many people who were fortunate enough to know her, and I am sure each person has their own memory of how she supported them, too.

Bishop: Reflections

I have been training BJJ in Canada for more than a decade, and I have been an instructor in some capacity for the majority of that time. Not too long ago, I was teaching a group of forty or so students, and after a quick headcount I realized there were ten women on the mats. "Wow," I remarked to a fellow instructor, "this is the most women we've ever had on the mats for a co-ed class. Let's try to keep this trend going!" The other instructor agreed with me, but after a moment of reflection, I added to my remark. "Isn't it odd that this is remarkable?" I asked. "The ratio of men to women is still 3:1... is this really something to celebrate? Shouldn't we have made more progress with women's BJJ by now?" The other instructor shrugged and walked away.

As I continued to reflect, I could not look past the glaring lack of racial/ethnic diversity among the women in this class, which mirrored the lack of diversity present among the men practitioners as well. More than that, my reflections highlighted how few students I had encountered in my decade on the mats

who were gender/sexually diverse or who were living with a disability. What is particularly problematic, in my estimation, is the culture that maintains this lack of diversity.

The culture that drives BJJ is rooted in discourses of egalitarianism, and meritocracy, and colourblindness. Egalitarianism refers to the idea that all people deserve equal treatment (not equitable), which obscures structural and systemic barriers to participation by assuming that everyone has the same access, resources, and entry point to BJJ. Meritocracy refers to the idea that success results from individual talent and effort, thereby attributing differences in success to hard work and persistence (or lack thereof), in turn ignoring systemic conditions that shape lived experiences. Colourblindness refers to the idea that race and ethnicity should not be acknowledged and should not be considered as factors contributing to rates of participation, quality of experiences, or success in BJJ. Importantly, this idea of colourblindness (or the logic behind it) extends beyond race to describe the ways in which some people advocate for post-gender, post-colonial, and post-disability stances, in which they problematically strive to "move beyond" intersectional social differences, treating people as though they exist unaffected by intersecting systems of power and privilege. Scholars have identified how these discourses are widespread in sport more broadly, and how these discourses ultimately work to sustain historical and contemporary inequities (Fletcher & Hylton, 2016).

From my experiences training, competing, and teaching BJJ, I have observed a pervasive belief that social identities – race/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender and sexual diversity, ability/disability, religion, culture – are superfluous or irrelevant to a person's training experiences. On more than one occasion, I have heard students and instructors say things like "we don't see race, or gender, or sexual orientation; once you're on the mats, you're a BJJ student and that's it." This sentiment may be well-intentioned, in that it aims to support the creation of an environment where all are treated equally, and where (some forms of explicit) discrimination is not tolerated. However, this perspective fails to acknowledge or respond to the many ways in which women are forced to navigate systemic barriers (i.e., racism, heteronormativity, ableist sport culture) just to make it into a dojo, let alone to find a safe space where they can train and thrive. In this way, the culture of BJJ accepts implicit discrimination in that it ignores the ways in which women with marginalized intersectional identities continue to be underrepresented and disadvantaged in MACS spaces.

I have observed the presence of anti-discrimination policies at many BJJ gyms. These policies typically condemn overt displays of racism and sexism, such as discriminatory comments from students. While these policies are necessary and valuable, they demonstrate the ways in which MACS cultures create inclusive environments for some (i.e., anti-racist efforts, no mention of gender or sexual diversity, religion, class). Of course, there are also some terrifying pockets of the MACS community that embody overtly discriminatory positions attempting to advance white nationalism (Paas-Lang et al, 2025), showing a wide spectrum of MACS environments. While I have encountered some MACS environments that are more inclusive than others, there is a common thread running through MACS communities more broadly: the lack of attention to the influence of systemic inequities on women's participation.

My reflections culminate in an unavoidable question: Is BJJ really for everyone? To begin to endeavour to answer such a question, I argue that intersectionality must be foregrounded if we are to be intentional about creating diverse, representative, and inclusive spaces for all women. BJJ students certainly have a role to play in contributing to safe training spaces, but the majority of the work must come from the top. Instructors, professors, and gym owners are best positioned to explicitly develop and foster intersectional praxes. More than simply posting anti-discrimination policies or adding a women's-only class to the gym's schedule (although these are also important actions that contribute to an inclusive training environment), meaningful change will come from critically reworking BJJ culture, which includes educating a new generation of instructors and professors on the importance of relational, anti-oppressive, and intersectional approaches. Said another way, we must create a culture in BJJ that demonstrates the how of intersectional inclusion in addition to stating that everyone is welcome.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to situate an approach to intersectionality in MACS. To do so we provided a literature review of the current MACS scholarship to assess which social identities, coupled with gender, are represented. We highlighted the variety of outcomes women experience from participation in MACS (e.g., empowerment, life skills development) as well as the many barriers and obstacles to participation that continue to exist (e.g., heteronormative and hypermasculine environments). We specifically found that race and Indigeneity, religion, sexual identities are studied, but a clear gap remains pertaining to the meaningful inclusion of other marginalized identities beyond gender. Moreover, we found that women's MACS scholarship is fragmented (i.e., one body of research focusing on gender, another on race, another on sexuality), highlighting a broader epistemological trend within sport research whereby examining individual variables is often prioritized over examining broader, interlocking structures. Intersectionality was then situated to explore how overlapping identities and systems of power continue to share women's experiences in MACS to move beyond the gender additive approach currently operating in MACS. Upon analysing the few studies that take an intersectional approach to MACS, we found that gender equity remains the key focus. However, there were important considerations about the multiple systems of oppression of which intersectionality is only beginning to address in the MACS landscape.

By situating intersectionality and providing reflections based on our lived experiences, as an Anishinaabe BJJ/MT practitioner and as BJJ professor who is critically reflexive about systems of power, we begin to advance the noted limitation by Lindsay et al. (2023) to deepen the multiple intersecting identities of women in MACS. While our perspectives offer an intersectional lens, we also recognize that more research is needed. To this end, the authors of this paper are at the early stages of advancing a funded 5-year program of research to deeply explore intersectionality, inclusive of trauma-informed practices, in BJJ. Our overarching research purpose is to move beyond questioning why Indigenous and racialized women are missing from BJJ academies, but to question what are the intersecting systems of oppression that may make it difficult for women to start and maintain their BJJ training. The goal is to support more Indigenous and racialized women's presence on the mats within and beyond BJJ to advance movement towards anti-oppressive practices in MACS more broadly.

This shift toward an intersectional approach has implications for research and practice in BJJ and MACS more broadly. First, an intersectional approach to BJJ and MACS practice can enable instructors/coaches and organizers to move beyond the notion that they are doing "enough" because they have a women's-only class in their gym's schedule. Through an intersectional lens, BJJ and MACS instructors/coaches and organizers can interrogate the extent to which they offer truly inclusive training environments (or not). For future scholarship, and intersectional lens necessitates different approaches to MACS research. The growing body of research focusing on gender in MACS is incredibly valuable, but an intersectional approach urges researchers to see beyond women as a singular, homogenous group to attune to the intersecting forces of inequity that Indigenous and racialized women experience. Expanding further, future MACS research should also explore the intersections of gender and disability, sexuality, religion, and other social identities that have been historically marginalized. Last, an intersectional lens in MACS research calls for engagement with different methodological and philosophical (i.e., epistemology, ontology) orientations. For instance, intersectional methodologies (e.g., Rice et al., 2019) can potentially offer much value to MACS research, as can Indigenous (e.g., McGuire-Adams, 2020) and decolonial methodologies (e.g., Hui, 2023). The shift to an intersectional approach in MACS research and practice entails more than engagement with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept; it encompasses a different way of knowing/seeing/being with MACS. We argue that, only through this shift will we be able to endeavour to create MACS environments that are truly inclusive.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors affirm that they had no competing interests relevant to the work underpinning this manuscript.

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