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Regulating full contact martial arts and combat sports: how governmentality as an analytical framework informs practices of the governing of sports

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ABSTRACT
The governing of sport has recently shifted from self-regulation towards various forms of joint regulation. This study uses the concept of governmentality to analyse practices of governing full contact martial arts and combat sports (FCMACS) in the Netherlands to answer the question of how the concept of governmentality informs the current and future governing of FCMACS. Dean’s methodological guidelines were used in the analysis of the consensus and contradictions in the rationalities and related technologies of power (regimes of practices) expressed in the regulation of FCMACS. According to the study’s respondents, future practices of the governing of FCMACS must enact equitable restrictions for all gyms and fight events and highlight the social value of FCMACS to facilitate them gaining the same status as regular sports. Such change requires practices of governing that combine authority and mediation with a climate open to self-regulation.

Introduction
Changes in the relationship between sport organisations, commercial enterprises and local and national governments in recent years have affected the current self-regulation1 of sports. These changes are driven by a desire to implement necessary policy goals, the need to cooperate with new partners, to obtain (new) funding (Nagel et al. 2015) and/or for more compelling reasons like solving safety or ethical issues in sports such as full contact martial arts and combat sports (FCMACS)2 (Berg and Chalip 2013). This study deals with the efforts to regulate FCMACS-style kickboxing, Muay Tai and mixed martial arts (MMA) in the Netherlands. Initially, these commercialised sports regulated themselves and were mainly organised parallel to traditional sports (Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006). However, since the successes of Dutch K-1 fighters, kickboxing is now the most common and popular style of FCMACS in the Netherlands. At the same time, kickboxing is often criticised for its lack of safety and possible involvement in criminal activities. The practice of Muay Tai and MMA in the Netherlands is limited with practitioners seeming to change from one style to another or using multiple styles. This group of FCMACS faces ongoing criticism for its lack of self-regulation giving rise to the suggestion that these sports ought to be regulated by outsiders. However, given the multiplicity of backgrounds, perspectives, objectives and interests of FCMACS stakeholders, the task of joint governing of these sports increases in complexity.

This growing complexity and shift towards limiting autonomous self-regulation is the focus of the recent research on changes in the governing of sport. Gammelsæter (2010) (see also Sterning and Fahlén 2009) highlights the increased complexity occurring when commercial organisations become...
involved in the governing of sport. Other research on changes in the governing of sport also acknowledge this increased plurality and, in addition, delineate how increased government involvement in the sports management results in the loss of autonomous self-regulation (Green and Houlihan 2006, Phillpots et al. 2010). Sport organisations, once accustomed to a large degree of autonomy (Geeraert et al. 2014), currently need to deal with explicit government monitoring of the quality and results of their activities. Green and Houlihan (2006) state that government interference in sports has shown a ‘profound shift in the pattern of accountability away from traditional stakeholders and toward government and its agencies and commercial sponsors’ (p. 66). Fahlén et al. (2015) also problematise the loss of autonomy of sport organisations. They argue that sport self-regulation is at stake because sport organisations are too focused on achieving policy goals, internal organisation and conforming to governmental standards and norms. They call sport self-regulation an ‘illusory freedom’ and describe modernised practices of the governing of sport as ‘the promotion of entrepreneurial and autonomous recipients on the one hand and the ambition to control, coordinate and align recipients on the other hand’ (p. 292–293). In this setting, routines of sport self-regulation are replaced by other practices of governing and consequently the power balance in the regulation of sport shifts. The governing of FCMACS in the Netherlands is a case in point. Since 2006, local and national Dutch governmental organisations have, through implicit and ad hoc means, regulated FCMACS and disrupted the autonomy of these highly commercialised sports that have operated almost separately of local and national governments.

Taken together, the research cited to this point focuses on the increasing complexity and shifting power balances in the governing of sport. Often sport organisations seem to be perceived as ‘victims’ of recent developments like commercialisation or of the involvement of governments in their affairs. In these studies, little attention has been paid to the situated agency in adopting other rationalities and technologies of power. Given that neither the sport sector nor the government department is vying for control, it seems that the governing of sport is less bipolar than suggested in these studies. A bipolar conceptualisation of power creates a hierarchy of those who have power over those who have little or no power and where power works oppressively, with limited attention to the interplay of power. In this study, I assume that sport organisations and government both have power and are involved in an ongoing ‘interplay of power’. In this process, both stakeholders cooperate to make their rationality or ‘truth’ fit within the priority of governing towards securing preferred outcomes. By applying the concept of governmentality as an analytical framework, I intend to give insights into the complexity and interplay of power that develops when more rationalities and technologies of power become relevant in practices of governing and to investigate the dilemmas that can arise due to the incongruity between various rationalities and technologies of power. The work of Bröckling et al. (2011), Dean (2010), Miller and Rose (2008) and Walters (2012) on governmentality as an analytical framework will be used to deepen insights into the study of the current shifts in the governing of sport. Use of the more general meaning of governmentality may contribute to a further development of the use of the concept of governmentality in the governing of sport as already done inter alia by Green and Houlihan (2006), Houlihan and Green (2009), Sam (2009) and Grix and Brannagan (2016). By applying this analytical framework, I will critically question and investigate consent and contradictions into what is considered as ‘the truth’ in governing FCMACS, including how technologies of power are directed by specific rationalities.

This study analyses the effects of the shift in practices of governing FCMACS from self-regulation to joint regulation with local and national governments in the Netherlands and attempts to determine what practices of governing provide the best practices for governing. The concept of governmentality will be employed as an analytical framework to elicit insights into the complexity of the interplay of power in the practices of the joint governing of FCMACS, not as ‘the’ governmentality or ‘truth’ of FCMACS. The question that guides this
study is how can the use of the concept of governmentality as an analytical framework inform
the governing of FCMACS?

**Governmentality defined as an analytical framework to analyse the governing of sport**

Foucault’s concept of governmentality was based on his study of power and the regulation of
populations. After his death, various scholars adopted the key ideas and terminology of Foucault’s
brief writings on governmentality and developed the concept of governmentality further (Walters
2012). A general meaning and a historically specific version of the concept of governmentality can
be distinguished in the literature (Dean 2010). However, in this study, I will rely less on studies of
scholars who elaborated the historically specific version of the concept as these studies concen-
trate on a critique and the specific liberal rationality of government that Foucault relates to
‘biopolitics’. My study emphasises the analytic power of the concept of governmentality in a
more general way to evaluate complex issues in the governing of sports. I will also analyse various
ways of thinking about practices of governing (Dean 2010).

According to Walters (2012) and Dean (2010), the concept of governmentality is directed by various
rationalities and can be used as an analytical framework to examine the exercise of power that shapes
the governing of oneself and others. In this approach, power is conceptualised as multicentred and as a
multiplicity of interrelated rationalities and technologies of power that are relevant in the art of
the concept of governmentality by using the notions of technologies (practices) and rationalities
(thinking) of (self-)governing. Bröckling et al. state that ‘analyses of governmentality are centred
on the question of how practices and thinking about these practices constitute themselves mutually, or
more precisely: how they translate into each other’ (2011, p. 11). Dean also focuses his analyses on the
interrelationship between ways of reasoning and governing and elaborates on the concept of govern-
mentality using what he called ‘regimes of practices’. He explores ‘how thought operates within our
organized ways of doing things, our regimes of practices, and with its ambitions and effects’ (Dean
2010, p. 27). So, using governmentality as an analytical framework reveals various regimes of practices as a
variety of routines, consistent ways of doing things and focussing on how thinking and governing are
interrelated. A regime of practice can be analysed by exploring by what means, mechanisms, proce-
dures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies, authority is constituted and
order is achieved. These technologies of power are related to specific rationalities or ways of reasoning
that can be analysed by questioning the forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of
calculation or rationalities that are employed in practices of government (Dean 2010).

Given that governing is not a neutral activity, a critical analysis must question the history, truths
and ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions that underly the truths in reasoning and governing, including
the knowledge claims used to give credibility to specific truths. The expanded concept of govern-
mentality as a combination of regimes of practices also brings several histories, truths and assump-
tions together into a complex mixture; consequently, this study addresses the assumptions and
complexities. Furthermore, since governing is obviously normative and thus about what people
ought and ought not to do, these normative ‘truths’ are constructions and thus always circumspect.
An analysis of the governing of FCMACS is therefore about the negotiations of various ‘truths’ about
FCMACS that direct the ways of governing oneself and others in these sports. This analysis also
focuses on the attempts of governing by imposing norms or ‘truths’ on oneself and others and on
the resistance to such impositions and related forms of governing (counter-conduct). The critical
analysis of this conduct and counter-conduct is relevant as these counter-conducts reveal possibilities
for how practices of the governing of sports may evolve (Dean 2010, Walters 2012).

I elaborate on Dean’s conceptualisation of regimes of practices by using the dimensions of rational-
ities, as the specific way of thinking (reasoning) about what is considered as ‘the truth’, and of
technologies (or techniques or mechanisms) as specific ways of acting, intervening and directing (Dean
In a previous study (Dortants et al. 2016), my colleagues and I found that the three relevant regimes of practices for governing the FCMACS in the Netherlands that stakeholders of the FCMACS sector and of local and national governments drew on were the sport, economics and safety regimes. The sport regime of practices represents a way of reasoning and governing in which FCMACS are seen like all other sports in the Netherlands. Stakeholders who reason from a sport regime of practices suggest that the fragmented unorganised FCMACS need to be governed by one strong national federation, as is done in other sports. Various other stakeholders (also) use an economic regime of practices to argue that FCMACS are businesses with many people deriving their livelihood from managing their own gyms and organising fight events. FCMACS operate in an open, unregulated marketplace where the notion of the ‘survival of the fittest’ prevails. Finally, the public order and safety regime of practices constructs FCMACS as promoting dangerous activities and fostering ties with criminal organisations that are directly or indirectly involved in activities like the laundering of money, blackmail and violence. Local legislation such as permits and licences are technologies of power related to these rationalities and, until recently, although ad hoc, are relevant to the governing of FCMACS in the Netherlands. In the study that follows, these three regimes of practices partially overlap while contradictions in claims regarding ‘the truth’ about FCMACS remain in what Dean calls (2010, p. 4) an ‘inconvenient dissonance’ between the regimes. The analysis of consensus and contradiction will reveal this inconvenient dissonance and the related conflicting forces as result of practices of governing and resistance to it (Bröckling et al. 2011). Such insights can inform the future governing of FCMACS by identifying agreement on issues that must be solved including how preferred technologies of power could be recycled to develop a more informed practice for the governing of sports.

The history of the present: self-regulation of the FCMACS in the Netherlands

When using governmentality as an analytical framework, the various regimes of practices imply a situated analysis of the ‘games’ of governing where certain historical–cultural determined technologies of power are linked with specific rationalities and presented as ‘the truth’. This includes the understanding of how FCMACS have evolved over time and provides insight into the underlying processes and structures that reveal why the governing of FCMACS has become problematic. The following brief history provides a context for how the FCMACS in the Netherlands have been governed.

FCMACS, especially kickboxing, developed rapidly in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. These sports quickly commercialised and, in many cases, splitt up due to conflicts about styles, techniques and money, resulting in a mushrooming number of FCMACS gyms and federations (Bottenburg and Heilbron 1996, Dortants and Bottenburg 2013, Dortants et al. 2016). Most federations were affiliated with a promoter and engaged primarily in the organisation of fight events. These federations took on few, if any, of the traditional tasks of sport federations such as the education and training of coaches and referees and/or the organisation of national competitions. Coaches in FCMACS often had multiple conflicting roles, serving not only as a coach but also as the promoter or manager of gyms/sports centres, of fighters and/or federations, and in some cases, also as part-time civil servants. Cooperation between federations was infrequent due mostly to long-lasting conflicts and feuds between coaches (Dortants et al. 2016) and occurred mainly only in the matching of fighters. As there was no commonality in the self-regulation of FCMACS at the national level, as is typical in other sports, each federation had its own set of rules and tried to survive.

Despite conflicts and intense competition between gyms and federations, FCMACS have become popular. Kickboxing is especially popular due mainly to the global successes of the highest (K-1) class Dutch kick-boxers since 1993 and to sport participation programmes sponsored by the national government (Elling and Wisse 2010, Rana 2014). Gyms were quite successful in generating financial support using a national government programme that stimulates participation in sports (Meedoen alle Jeugd door sport, 2006–2010). One hundred FCMACS gyms participated in this programme and were able to attract a total of 8256 new members to their gyms (Hoekman et al. 2011). The FCMACS participation in government programmes meant that gyms had to meet certain
quality standards and be financially accountable for the use of grants. Consequently, by participating in these government programmes, the FCMACS became more visible to the local government, politicians and the public.

These government subsidies for FCMACS gyms were criticised mainly by right-wing political groups who assumed that these sports would teach youngsters from suspect socio-economic neighbourhoods martial arts techniques that could potentially be used in conducting criminal activities (Kamerman 2011). These criticisms were reinforced by incidents involving spectator violence during events, the use of fight techniques by (famous) kick-boxers outside the ring and by the accusation of links existing between FCMACS and criminal organisations. Such incidents and criticisms were widely reported in the media. Consequently, in 2010, the mayor of Amsterdam banned large commercial fight events from Amsterdam, contending that fight events were places where criminals met (Vugts 2010). The lack of self-regulation of FCMACS to guarantee the safety of fighters, the safety of the public, to prevent violence in public places and to disprove of its link with criminality became an issue of public discussion. In these debates, even the legitimacy of FCMACS was questioned, something which rarely happens in other sports like football or tennis. Managers and coaches from the FCMACS sector were not united, which increasingly complicated discussions about the governing of these sports and made the defences against the allegations of violence fragmented and powerless (Dortants et al. 2016). The call for national government intervention grew and by the end of 2012, individuals from both the FCMACS sector and from the (local) government called for the government to intervene and to assist the FCMACS sector in self-regulation. This call for state involvement could not be ignored, although such interference was inconsistent with Dutch government policy characterised by the decentralisation and deregulation of sports and the use of a non-interventionist sport legislation model (Chaker 2004, Siekmann and Soek 2010). Consequently, stakeholders began discuss about a form of managing the self-regulating FCMACS where the sport sector and the government would work together to solve the issues in these sports. Some stakeholders favoured a development like in the USA where stakeholders in MMA not only worked together with government in regulation of MMA (Berg and Chalip 2013) but also openly doubted whether this model of governing would work in the Dutch context.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger work in which I evaluated FCMACS using the concept of governmentality as an analytical framework and is based on an interpretative approach inspired by post-structuralism (Bevir and Rhodes 2015). I used Dean (2010), Miller and Rose (2008), Bröckling et al. (2011) and Walter’s (2012) work on governmentality to analyse various ways of reasoning used to construct problems and solutions in resolving issues in the governing of FCMACS. This theoretical framework assisted my focus on the ‘taken for granted assumptions’ or ‘rationalities’ presented as ‘truths’ about FCMACS and how these are related to the preferred ways of governing. In a previous study (Dortants et al. 2016), my colleagues and I identified the most relevant regimes of practices. In this current study, I focus on consensus or mutual agreement, on constructions of differentiation and on ambiguity in reasoning (Martin 2002). These foci provide insights into agreements, contradictions and ambiguity and into conduct and counter-conducts for current and future patterns of governing. The study revealed possibilities into thinking in alternative ways about practices of governing for these sports and exposed the difficulties that can be expected due to the persistence of contradictions. It also explained how most stakeholders would manage self-regulation.

I conducted 43 interviews with a variety of stakeholders from the FCMACS sector (coaches, fighters, promoters, managers, a referee, directors of federations), with national and local civil servants, a city mayor and alderman, a member of a local advisory commission on sport, police and a representative from the Dutch sport umbrella organisation (NOC*NSF). The snowball method was used to find individuals from different groups of stakeholders in FCMACS and governmental
organisations. During the interviews, that lasted 1–2.5 h, I asked respondents to discuss the problems and possible solutions in regulating FCMACS. I also explored with them their perception of the value of self-regulation and future practices for governing FCMACS. Cooperation in regulation of FCMACS had not yet begun at the time when the interviews were conducted.

All interviews were recorded and imported in NVivo. Documents of governmental organisations, federations and (social) media (newspapers, websites, TV, Twitter and fora) were analysed and meetings were observed to obtain further insight into the discussion on how FCMACS were governed. The data were coded along constructions of problems. The solutions, including rationalities, revealed how these stakeholders reasoned and demonstrated their historical–cultural preferred ways of governing (technologies of power). The data initially revealed three regimes of practices as described elsewhere in study 1 (Dortants et al. 2016). The examination of the consent and contradictions in the constructions of problems and suggestions for solutions appears in the section below.

Consent and contradictions in reasoning in search for new truths about FCMACS

Notwithstanding the consensus on the identification of two issues to be governed, the issues were simultaneously full of contradiction due to the conflicting truths about FCMACS and the preferred ways of governing used. An explanation of these two issues follows, including the contradictions that emerge from the dissonance of the regimes of practices employed.

Issue 1: need for balanced equitable restrictions

Although historically FCMCAS enjoyed support for their autonomy, modern stakeholders asked for various regulations restricting options in these sports. Given the inability of the FCMACS sector to guarantee the safety of fighters, protect the general public, prevent violence and refrain from associating with criminal elements, most of the respondents acknowledge that a balanced intervention from outside of the sector is essential to the continuity and development of FCMACS. The following requested restrictions are for gyms and events.

Restrictions for gyms

Because the FCMACS sector is fragmented, full of distrust and focussed on earning money, it is unable to offer training courses for coaches and to monitor or control their pedagogical qualities (see Dortants et al. 2016). Most respondents insisted that mandatory standards must be required of owners and coaches of gyms, given their instructive roles. Presently, none of the FCMACS have requirements for opening a gym. A trainer used a public order and safety rationale to contend that ‘anyone can start a gym where the boys are not taught properly, and/or maybe engage in criminal activities, so this [lack of restrictions on gyms] is very dangerous’. Here, the use of a public order and safety rationale overlaps with the sport rationale referring to the need for well-educated coaches in gyms (sport) and measures that prevent the misuse of fighting techniques outside the gym (safety).

In addition to educational requirements, some stakeholders draw on the public order and safety rationale to argue that it is necessary for coaches to also undergo a criminal records check. Respondents want coaches to be reputable and to prevent those with criminal records from coaching or owning gyms. A trainer tentatively explained, ‘Well that [criminal records check] is of course a very tricky subject … they should look for evidence of good behaviour in certain areas’. However, the sector is unable to bar coaches with a criminal record because those disqualified can simply ignore the ruling and start-up their own gym or federation. Some stakeholders are also hesitant to endorse the proposed restrictions since using only reputable, well-educated coaches requires an investment of time and money and the economic rationale suggests that avoiding the restrictions is much cheaper. All stakeholders agree that qualifications are needed but are sceptical because the gym profit margins are quite limited; so, the question of ‘who is going to pay?’ has tended to keep a solution at bay.
Restrictions for fight events

In addition to developing requirement for gyms, stakeholders also discussed necessary restrictions for the organisation of fight events for the safety of fighters and to prevent links with violence and criminality. Currently, there are no regulations for organising any fight events, regardless of whether it is a small, local event financed by a local coach/promoter or a large, international commercial event. A trainer explains how most events take place out of the publics’ sight:

Yes, I can now organise a club contest […] fight events in sport halls every weekend – two, three times each weekend throughout the year […] And nobody knows that this happens, except for the in-crowd. Nobody controls it.

Promoters seem to be motivated by economic interests and according to some interviewees tend to be ‘cowboys who want to survive’. A coach/promoter explains: ‘It’s a tour de force to cover the costs of events. Fighters are too used to getting a certain amount of money’. As Woolf et al. (2016) conclude, also in the Netherlands, most coaches and fighters need to search for additional earnings to practise their sport full time. Extra income may be generated by recreational participants who pay membership fees, by attracting sponsors for fights or by cutting the costs involved in ensuring the safety of fighters. The narrow profit margins create these and other dilemmas. According to FCMACS stakeholders, sponsors in the past were frequently involved in illegal activities and often associated with the underworld, but they were the only sponsors that were willing to support FCMACS. Ensuring the safety of fighters is costly due to both the expense of medical tests and fights-per-fighter restrictions which limited each contestant’s potential income. However, coaches and promoters also approach this issue from a long-term strategy perspective. The promoter of talented fighters guards the health, safety and longevity of fighters because ‘they are worth a lot. We want to use them for a longer period’. Such a promoter sees fighters as a product that is valuable from a commercial point of view. According to an ex-fighter/advisor ‘fighters are an important source of income for trainers’. So, coaches are eager to keep successful fighters in their gym for a longer period of time.

Most respondents use a sport rationale to compare FCMACS with other sports when they question the limited protection of fighters by federations in competitions. But there is no central register of essential FCMACS fight data – the number of fights in which an individual fighter participates, of fight knock outs and other injuries and of any misbehaviour of fighters and/or coaches. Various federations have their own registration with, at the very least, a fighter passport and receive a membership fee from each member. A trainer explained how not having registrations can lead to unsafe bouts: ‘for instance there is not even control on who was knocked out last week […] Theoretically speaking, [I could] let someone go into the ring to be punched out every week six times consecutively. No one notices that!’ Here, the safety and economic rationalities collide; the safety rationale demands that attention be paid to the well-being of the athletes while fewer limitations on matching fighters increase profits in the short term.

In general, the respondents from the FCMACS sector did not question the presence of child fighters or make it a contentious issue. Stakeholders using both sport and economic rationalities justified having children in fighting bouts depending on the rules established by the particular federation in charge of the event. Although research (Baker et al. 2009, Malina 2010, Capranica and Millard-Stafford 2011) suggests that early specialisation of child athletes could have negative consequences, it is assumed by the stakeholders and presented as a truth that children should be trained early to become successful athletes, that is full-fledged adult fighters. Some 7–9-year-old boys are so talented that trainers want to schedule them for fights to develop their skills as fighters. One of the trainers expressed concerns about the age of fighters in relation to the absence of a national registration system of fights. He explained that this means a match between two 16-year olds can be dangerous because of a vast difference in experience. An economic rationality supports bouts by children, often to support the adult programme in small and medium events. The events involving children are lucrative because they attract many extra spectators – family and friends
related to the child, who all pay an entrance to see the child perform. These organised fights by children can therefore cover costs and result in much needed extra income.

The ban of large commercial fight events in some cities can be justified from a public order and safety rationale as a means of preventing the inadvertent hosting of criminal organisations through permitting large fight events. Although promoters can move to other cities, the perceived unpredictability of local policy regarding allowing fight events has led promoters to ask for clear regulations to be applied in all Dutch municipalities. Reports are circulating about recent cancellations of fight events in cities because licences were abruptly revoked for unclear reasons causing what is considered a financial disaster for promoters. A somewhat frustrated promoter declared: ‘Each municipality has a different policy. There should be legislation, that is good, but [it should be] the same for each city’. The public order and safety rationale has become intertwined with the leading sport and economic rationale and as a result, the ways of reasoning in the FCMACS seems to be experiencing some change.

Although there seems to be agreement that restrictions are needed, a group participating in an online forum explained that they were concerned about the consequences of regulating fight events. The group’s basic fear was that the sports will diminish, as this forum participant stated:

The initiative is not bad, but I worry that the government is going to interfere seriously with the sport. All the demands will ensure that all serious money will disappear from the sport (something that has been going on for a while), and there will be no major sponsors or subsidies. So, our country will play a marginalized role instead of being a leader. (Mixfight.nl Forum 03–8–2014)

Such forum participants reason that too many rules and control from a public order and safety regime will kill the entrepreneurial spirit in these sports. However, others reason from the same rationale and conclude that rules and control will make the sports fairer, cleaner and therefore more attractive for legal sponsors. This way of reasoning is congruent with the research results of Berg and Chalip (2013) in the USA. They conclude that lobbying of the UFC for active government involvement in the regulation of MMA resulted in increased popularity of MMA and a rise of income for UFC. In summary, the stakeholders agree that a certain level of regulation with restrictions is needed, but want such regulations balanced, with all rationalities and interests taken into account.

**Issue 2: need for recognition for societal legitimacy of FCMACS**

FCMACS struggle with their societal legitimacy which, according to stakeholders, is due to negative stereotypes and prejudices about FCMACS. These stereotypes and prejudices, also known as ‘stigmatisation’, join the misconduct and malpractices in the sector itself. But many stakeholders understand that FCMACS must be valued primarily as being successful sports and recognised for their role in helping solve social issues and entertaining large groups of fans. These stakeholders plead for a reorganisation of FCMACS to justify this positive judgement of FCMACS. A young fighter summarised it well in saying that ‘FCMACS is a raw diamond that needs to be polished’.

**Reassessed as mainstream sports**

Stakeholders use a sport rationality to argue that FCMACS should be seen and valued as are the country’s regular sports because, at the moment, FCMACS are largely invisible to the general public and the media. A passionate manager exclaimed, ‘Netherlands wake up, we have the most [kickboxing] champions in the world’. Unfortunately for FCMACS athletes and supporters, they are often viewed with suspicion by those using a public order and safety rationality when both the positive and unsavoury sides of FCMACS emerge. A coach admitted that ‘we, uhm, you’ve been labelled as a criminal if you do this sport’. A coach also saw the other side to this and believed that those in FCMACS have to improve to ensure that ‘the wrong figures do not become role models’. Stakeholders long for the day that FCMACS have the same status as regular competitive sports. A fighter explained,
We would like to become more mainstream. And mainstream means that martial arts has a safe image, where you can go to an event on Saturday afternoon as a father or mother with your children. And that the whole idea of big-shouldered men involved in crime and doing negative things has disappeared. For FCMACS stakeholders, the dream of being a normal sport entails practicing at a gym, having regular events in each city, and being broadcast on mainstream TV channels, not just commercial TV channels. However, the dream hinges on public order and safety concerns being addressed.

**Sports with social value**

In spite of a few reservations, the majority of stakeholders agreed that FCMACS could be valuable for society. The promotion of participation in kickboxing could be considered as a governmental tool (Rana 2014). Some believe the basic claim that these sports are fulfilling valuable governmental and societal policy goals like disciplining young people with problems and integrating youngsters from a challenged background into mainstream society. A trainer explained it thus, ‘many children who practise these sports can’t control their emotions. Martial arts teach them to control their emotions when they adopt the norms and values of martial arts’. However, many stakeholders acknowledged, in line with work of Chalip (2006), that the value of sport depends on how it is managed. So, the value to society of FCMACS requires a stricter regulation of FCMACS and needs to include developing trainers with outstanding pedagogic skills. The research of Vertonghen and Theeboom (2010) and Theeboom (2012) also indicates that the teaching approach is relevant for the intended social–psychological outcome of practising martial arts. Many interviewees think that a limited number of coaches have these special skills.

The other argument used by stakeholders considered FCMACS as having a positive social value focuses on the entertainment aspect of the sector. These stakeholders described FCMACS events as spectacles, offering very attractive events with laser shows, strong engaging music, famous ring speakers, big screens, young women on catwalks and, of course, exciting fights. They also admit that in the past, it was impossible to organise these large showy events completely legally: ‘Look, those large galas become more difficult to organise now. That’s because, yes, at a given moment with black money and that kind of thing …. Listen, you do not have to be a financial expert to see that’. Some stakeholders worry that since sensational aspects are often associated with criminality and illegal money, a strict regulating of FCMACS might mean less emphasis on the exciting and showy elements in fight events. With large audiences needed to cover the cost of an event and generate revenue, fewer showy spectacles means that fight events are more like an ordinary sport event and, therefore, in the end, less profitable and attractive to fans. Stakeholders compared it with the development of boxing in the Netherlands that became not only strictly regulated but also less popular than kickboxing. However, the research of Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) and Berg and Chalip (2013) shows that the organisation UFC in the USA was able to balance the attention to fighting skills and safety issues with the allure of the show and spectacle associated with these events and turned them into a very lucrative business.

Becoming more like mainstream sports also means operating in the open, conforming to rules similar to those governing other sports and therefore more sensitive to criticism. Guidelines to deal with contemporary top fighters and coaches whose character and behaviour is morally suspect will need to be developed. Simply put, the full challenge is finding a balance between economic survival and being clean, that is operating in a transparent, legal and fair way as required in mainstream sports.

**Preferred ways of governing in dealing with issues**

In addition to the overlap in reasoning the various interrelated regimes of practices described in the previous sections, I also point out the tensions occurring regarding regulation, conflicting forces and ambiguities in reasoning. The data do not reveal a best way of governing of FCMACS; however, stakeholders suggest that there are two aspects of governing that are crucial in moving towards a form of joint regulation. As the first step in basic governing, an accepted authority is
needed to move towards achieving regulation and, second, a mediating approach or mutuality of intent is required to overcome any existing or latent distrust and hostility to allow for success in future governing. Authority is considered to be hierarchical and to contain clear, unambiguous rules for governing. Mediation reflects ‘subtle and interactive forms of regulation that rely on an on-going situated communication and negotiation between public authorities and all sorts of relevant stakeholders’ (Pedersen et al. 2011, p 387–388). According to the stakeholders, a combination of both authoritative and mediating forms of governing is needed to move forward towards managed self-regulation.

**In search for authority to regulate**

Many stakeholders of the sector explain that those involved in FCMACS are accustomed to authoritarian forms of conduct, meaning that in a gym ‘there’s a complete hierarchical structure’ (see also Dortants and Knoppers 2013). The structure of all FCMACS is based on the principle that the teacher or sensei is the boss and students are obligated to do what the teacher or sensei demands. Since each gym and federation has its own authority, some respondents suggest a meta-governor/authority is needed to govern all the local authorities of gyms and federations. A trainer compared the situation with France where one authority is unambiguously in charge of regulating all local authorities:

> In France, it [FCMACS] is also very well organised. There you have many different organisations that all are accountable to the Ministry for Sport and they are quite strict [...] [there is] one organisation with one set of rules that everyone must meet.

Others refered to a state athletic commission such as in the USA that is, although mainly focussed on regulation of fight events, seen as the best possible authority: ‘As a promoter you will not get far if your finances are not well organised. Fighters must always get paid, [...] the promoter has to conform to all the regulations. That is perfect’. However, some of the stakeholders also saw drawbacks in having one ruling commission. For example, a fighter argued that such a commission would have ‘too much power and they abuse that power’. Despite these objections, this search for an institutionalised meta-governing authority can be understood as part of the FCMCAS’ historical–cultural hierarchical way of governing since, as a trainer stated ‘don’t blame us, we come from a martial arts culture’.

In the past decades, the FCMACS have been unable to develop an overall self-regulating practice. Consequently, the best case scenario now would be to see them accepting a hierarchical regulatory structure in order to eventually move towards adopting self-regulation. Like many others, a coach/promoter thinks that it is an illusion to think that the sector is going to regulate itself. ‘It won’t happen without coercion, so it needs to be done top down’. Most stakeholders pointed to the government as the one and only meta-governor/authority that can govern. Even if a federation were to attempt to take the lead in governing, stakeholders stated that it would be powerless and fail without government support. The growing realisation that government regulation is needed is reflected in the demand by the respondents for not only regulation by a strong external authority but also for an authority to unite them to facilitate self-regulation, if necessary with coercion. A trainer/promoter described what this authority must do: ‘Get those people from all federations together, appoint a chair who can act decisively and who has the power to govern’.

Technologies of power that are congruent with the public order and safety regimes of practices seem to be favoured in the argument for regulation by a strong external authority. Preferred technologies of power from the sport and economic regime of practices have been shown to be inadequate in self-regulation. Although the stakeholders call for clear regulation at the national level, there is no explicit demand for national sport laws. Many stakeholders suggest that existing local legislation can be the instrument to coerce FCMACS to work towards self-regulation. A coach explained how it can work: ‘Many coaches and promoters use public buildings for their activities. So, then you [local government] can make demands [on coaches and promoters] and say “listen, we only rent to people who meet our
requirement”“. The stakeholders were aware that local legislation can provide technologies of power such as criminal and financial records checks and licencing of gyms and events that comply with all rules, but there is no agreement about the efficacy of these technologies of power in FCMACS.

Besides a loose acknowledgement that the government should intervene with authority in these sports, the respondents also agreed that there is a danger of too much government involvement or over-regulation. A coach argued that ‘there also needs to be balance, not an overkill of regulations, because there has to be a certain degree of freedom’. Although the research of Berg and Chalip (2013) shows the opposite developments in the USA, some stakeholders in the Netherlands even claimed that strict regulations would destroy FCMACS. Some of those critical voices can be heard on the internet: ‘I am unfortunately one of the few people who believe that government regulation, with a whole package of conditions and regulations, is a blow to our sports, simply because I’ve seen this in other sports. Sports may vanish in bureaucracy’ (mixfight.nl Forum 02–08–2014).

The question is whether the successes of regulation of MMA in the USA could be compared with developments in the Netherlands. The fear of over-regulation may originate from the knowledge that Dutch FCMACS sector proved to be too fragmented and weak in organisation to become a serious partner for negotiation with the government. Consequently, they could be overruled more easily by government regulation than what happened in the USA represented by a united powerful UFC organisation speaking for the FCMACS sector.

**Mediating opposing forces**

Many FCMACS stakeholders envisioned a moderate and inclusionary authority based on discussion, exchange of views, mediation and member interests governing FCMACS, such an approach would serve to overcome prejudices and result in balanced practices of governing. The respondents suggested that self-regulation should start with consultation and cooperation among the different gyms, federations, managers and promoters. A coach/promoter explained: ‘Yeah, I think you need to make sure we have a “we-feeling” … Yeah … we need to open our closed houses to show how we do things, … work together more closely and organise events together’. Some stakeholders assumed that cooperation would also enable the FCMACS to unite, facilitating cooperation with representatives of public organisations. Having a common enemy or a central authority could be helpful in uniting FCMACS, even using coercion if necessary. A trainer explained: ‘Look at what these mayors do now [ban events], well it [creating unity] has worked’. It is no surprise that the respondents ask the government to help the FCMACS sector in its efforts to create a degree of regulatory unity and uniformity.

Stakeholders not only wanted mediation and dialogue within the FCMACS to become more influential in negotiations but also to establish communication and negotiation between the FCMACS sector and the public sector. Here too, just like within the FCMACS’ sector, mutual mistrust and prejudice needs to be set aside in order to be able to govern jointly. However, stakeholders assign an important step to the public sector. A coach/promoter/civil servant explained with some frustration:

I think they [representatives of public organisations] have too little understanding, they just look at the surface, you need to go to an event, or to a gym, look at how fighters train together, how they prepare, how they deal with each other. You need to go beyond the surface; otherwise you’re just talking.

The FCMACS has often functioned in the shadow of society. Various stakeholders suggested that organising meetings with all kind of stakeholders is an important way of subtle governing. An ongoing situated communication between outsiders and insiders of FCMACS might work as what is called ‘soft power’ in regulation (Grix and Brannagan 2016). Not coercion, but technologies of power such as attraction and seduction done with credibility can result in discussion, dialogue and mutual respect thus creating a basis for agreement on issues and serving as a basis for cooperative governing of sport.
Meetings between national sport federations and (local) governments are infrequent in the Netherlands and only happen when (public order) incidents occur and large events are organised. The various federations of FCMACS had flown under the radar of government coordination until 24–01–2013 when the mayor of Amsterdam broke this deadlock by organising a meeting to discuss joint regulation with representatives of (national and local) governments and FCMACS. This was the first time those involved met and spoke to each other in an organised way; the purpose of the meeting was, according to a civil servant, ‘to raise public support for plans to intervene, step by step’. A report posted by an attendee the day after a forum for FCMACS illustrates the unique nature of this event and the urgent need for joint intervention in these sports:

The conference was in this sense a milestone and hopefully a turning point in the Dutch martial arts sector. In a few years, this will be referred to as the moment when the martial arts world, in cooperation with the government, took a new direction. (Mixfight.nl Forum, 25–01–2013)

This first full contact martial arts conference seems to symbolise the first step in mediation in the search for a renewed regulation of these sports in the Netherlands. In his closing speech of this event, the mayor asked everyone present at the conference to try to establish a committee that would help the sector to regulate the sports, and he called for a joint effort to reorganise these sports (field notes 24–01–2013).

Discussion and conclusion

This analysis of the process for an appropriate practice for the governing of FCMACS in the Netherlands revealed that changes in the context made the truths and routines of governing of these sports fluid, negotiable and adaptable. Since the number of regimes of practices relevant in regulation of FCMACS has been increased, the ‘truths’ about FCMACS and its related ways of governing started to shift and intermingle. Although stakeholders may favour one or two regimes of practices, in interviews, they appeared to use changing, varying and overlapping regimes of practices, probably to adapt to the changing circumstances in governing practices in FCMACS. This change and the emerging overlap between regimes could constitute a (partial) shared understanding or consensus on specific issues and could be compared with what Shilbury and Ferkins (2015) and Shilbury et al. (2016) describe as the need for achieving mutual understanding in collaborate forms of governing. The results also show that this agreement on issues contains different, often conflicting and ambiguous, ways of reasoning that will complicate the governing of FCMACS. However, the uncovering of these contradictions and ambiguities also informs future governing by showing potential sources of resistance or counter-conduct in the governing of FCMACS.

The use of the concept governmentality enabled me to go beyond a basic bipolar analysis of power in governing that seems to construct sport and government organisations as oppositional. Instead, the results suggest that researchers and policymakers need to take into account a multiplicity of ways of thinking about governing. The results suggest that preferred ways of governing have emerged from historical–cultural regimes of practices used in the governing of FCMACS and from governing sport in general. The use of authority relying on technologies of power of the public order and safety regime is consistent with the perceived culture of FCMACS where hierarchy and authority prevails. Mediation and dialogue seem to be more congruent with ways of organising sports in general where federations need to deal with members of a federation and other (public) organisations to find and establish common forms of regulation. Also, the current willingness to collaborate probably reflects the desire for FCMACS to be seen and recognised as regular sports.

The discussion or fear of under-regulation and over-regulation can be considered as a discussion about what regime of practices becomes dominant or ‘the truth’ in regulation. The sport and economic regimes of practices are considered as practices of self-regulation while the public order and safety regime is unavoidably understood in the realm of government regulation. Practices of self-regulation applying technologies of power from the economic and sport regimes of practices were not
as powerful and provided generous flexibility in governing. Pedersen et al. (2011, p. 379) argue that too much control, that is over-regulation, undermines the capacity and willingness to regulate the self, while under-regulation reinforces fragmentation and hinders self-regulation. The results of the current study suggest that the last few decades of freedom in self-regulation (under-regulation) contributed to the fragmentation inside the FCMACS sector (see also Bottenburg and Heilbron 1996, 2006, Dortants and Bottenburg 2013). Regulation with coercion by an authority is therefore considered by stakeholders a key to reducing fragmentation and to enhancing the capacity of self-regulation.

The application of the concept of governmentality to the question of regulation of FCMACS shows that stakeholders suggest that authority can be created by recycling current technologies of power that other regimes use to govern. The results suggest that local and national governments can use existing coercive technologies of power, such as local legislation, to impose and sanction uniform regulations. Adhering to such legislations means self-regulation can work. And, if everyone needs to conform to the same rules for organising fight events, then the corresponding costs are the same for anyone and any unfair competition is prevented. Besides coercion, more subtle ways of governing are also needed. Pedersen et al. (2011) suggest that the management of self-regulation requires a combination of the technologies of power, authority and dialogue or mediation to find the balance between under- and over-regulation.

As the concept of governmentality implies, this study is a situated analysis. The results provided context-specific knowledge of a complex situation for governing FCMACS in the Netherlands. As explained previously, each country and sport has its own history, culture and practices of governing as well as legislation and financing resulting in specific mixes of regimes of practices that are relevant in regulation. However, the use of governmentality as an analytical frame enabled an in-depth understanding of the complex regulatory issue of the governing of FCMACS and may also be a useful analytical frame for the analysis of other regulatory issues in sport. The strengths of this analytical frame are threefold. Initially, it gives insights providing a broad view of the current and possible future interplay of technologies power in governing sports. Consequently, it transcends the more commonly used bipolar analysis of changes in the governing of sport and thereby provides a more complete picture of the increasing complexity and the ongoing strategic power plays in the governing of sport. The second added value of using this analytical frame is that it relates historically–culturally preferred ways of reasoning with specific technologies of power. Since changes in the governing of sports often means an increase in the number of regimes of practices, this analytical frame is able to disentangle various related ways of reasoning and governing. Dortants et al. (2016) show that such disentanglement makes discussion on issues, solutions and future governing clearer. The third benefit of this analytical framework is its ability to allow a researcher to describe the coexistence of consensus and ambiguity in a field of study. Given that this inconvenient dissonance could give a glimpse of new and alternative ways of governing sports, this framework may therefore also be of value in the analysis of current and future forms of joint governing of other sports since it can enhance the understanding of the complexity of joint forms of governing sports.

Notes

1. In this study, I consider (self-)regulating synonymous with practices of (self-)governing sport. Although the use of ‘governing’ as noun is not common, I will use the construction ‘governing’ to emphasise the processual nature of practices in the governing of sport.

2. This study about regulation of FCMACS in the Netherlands is about kickboxing, Muay Tai and mixed martial arts. These full contact sports are organised parallel to the traditional Dutch sport movement. Although MMA seems to be the topic of debate and critique in many countries, in the Netherlands, the most popular and criticised style of FCMACS is kickboxing. Therefore, the main focus of this study will be on the regulation of kickboxing, because this style is controversial and/or problematic. But this study involves the regulation of other FCMACS like Muay Tai and MMA because these FCMACS are also regulated parallel to the traditional organised sports and face or will face the same problems as kickboxing has been experiencing in recent years.
3. K-1 is a Japanese martial arts organisation that combines techniques of Thai boxing, taekwondo, karate, kung fu, kickboxing and traditional boxing. Each year, a world K-1 tournament is held to determine which eight fighters may participate in the K-1 World Grand Prix in Japan.

4. The Ultimate Fighting Championship® (UFC®) started in 1993 as a professional mixed martial arts (MMA) organisation. UFC has revolutionised the fight business and today stands as the world’s leading MMA promoter, offering the premier series of MMA sports events that have sold out some of the biggest arenas and stadiums across the globe (http://www.ufc.com/discover/ufc/index).

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