

THE HURT BUSINESS: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF BOXING

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ABSTRACT

Ten boxers were interviewed individually to explore how they perceived the nature of aggression in the ring and the mental skills they employed in their sport. The interview data were subjected to thematic analysis, which elicited five dominant themes: aggression and how to deal with it; control of the arousal, especially anger that comes with the territory of the sport; and the positive aspects of discipline over mind and body that is required of boxers. A final observation relates to a relative absence in these interviews. Boxers did not speak explicitly about masculinity as a factor in the sport, unless prompted.

Key words: Boxing; Aggression; Control; Discipline; Masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years psychologists have moved confidently into the sport arena, offering expert advice on a wide range of psychological aspects in almost all forms of sporting activity. One sport seems to be the exception. Psychologists have been less enthusiastic to apply their knowledge in boxing, or combat sport in general. The reasons for this are not difficult to find, and revolve around its violent nature, and the potential to cause harm or injury. The British Medical Association for example, has asked a number of times for boxing to be made illegal, and the sport itself has recognised these concerns by introducing changes in rules and equipment over the years (Loosemore *et al.*, 2007).

Despite this reluctance, a number of sport psychologists are involved in boxing, both in the sense of research, as well as providing practical interventions to enhance performance. In the last 15 years or so a limited body of knowledge on psychological aspects involved in boxing has been building up, and the intention is to contribute to that literature.

As mentioned, it is the violence and aggression so characteristic of boxing that gives pause for thought. Aggression in sport is somewhat different from how it is perceived in general life, as it is sanctioned and provoked, in the sense that sportspeople willingly enter into agreement to compete. Aggression is acknowledged as an acceptable and even integral part of sporting behaviour (Maxwell & Moores, 2007). Parry (1998) noted how aggression in sport operates within the boundaries of the sporting institution and the freely chosen contract to contest and participate. This context legitimises and justifies sportspeople's aggression within the boundaries of the particular sport (Kerr, 2008).

Kerr (2008) contend that aggressive sporting behaviour could not automatically be presumed as either aggressive or non-aggressive but that it is the sportspeople's intention that indicates the acceptability of an aggressive action. One psychological aspect that ties directly into the ethical questions raised by boxing, is this "intention to hurt" aspect. Lane (2008) argued that indeed if the purpose of the sport is to cause injury, then it would be unethical for psychologists to be involved in it. He does not accept the notion that boxers seek to intentionally injure their opponent, and his article provides statements from boxers that supports his contention. Autobiographical accounts of boxers furthermore suggest that boxers regard their sport as much psychological and tactical, as it is physical. Mental toughness indeed is widely accepted as a major factor in the ability to compete in the sport (Uphill & Dray, 2009). Lane (2008) cites further research on what boxers think and feel during competition that reveals few indicators of aggression, and that interview data with boxers indicate that aspects of skill, emotional control and physical fitness are considered as key factors in determining performance (Devonport, 2006).

Thus, it was decided to explore further how boxers think and feel about their sport; what Wacquant (1995:491) called "the pugilistic point of view". Of particular interest in this study were the boxers' perspectives on the nature of aggression in the ring, and the mental skills that boxers employ in their sport, whether consciously or unconsciously.

To make sense of another individual's experiences and perceptions, one has to employ methods that would elicit them with sufficient depth. Individual, semi-structured interviews were utilised in the present study, in which boxers gave personal accounts of the psychological phenomena relevant to this study. The topics of interest were based on subjective interpretations on the part of the boxers, and interviews were regarded as imminently suitable to this task. Indeed, Munroe-Chandler (2005:68) argued that "subjective knowledge is therefore at the heart of sport related inquiry", and is essential when gaining knowledge about how sportspeople think and operate (Crust & Nesti, 2006).

METHODS

Participants

Five amateur and five professional male boxers were interviewed. The inclusion criteria were fairly broad, but the boxer must have fought in a refereed fight within the preceding year. All of them were older than 18, and none of them were white.

Interviews

A list of possible questions was generated from the literature, and forms the questions to be addressed in the present study. For example: How did you get into boxing? Your first fight: Can you remember it? Can you describe how you felt? Have you ever felt out of control? What do you think boxing has taught you about fighting? The interviews, however, were more akin to a purposeful conversation than a question-and-answer session, and the questions

served to maintain focus and to ensure that the central research questions were addressed (Patton, 2002). Prompts were used to explore the responses offered in greater depth.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Written notes were not taken during the interviews but possible themes and interesting points that stood out during the interviews were noted afterwards. The steps of thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) guided the exploration of the transcribed data:

- Transcribing and active reading of the transcript created the initial engagement.
- Coding roughly organised the data, allowing patterns to be identified.
- Overarching themes were produced from the coded data.
- The themes were reviewed and refined according to the appropriateness to the data, the research question, and the literature.
- The finalised themes were named and defined through the interpretation of the data semantics.

Procedure

A convenience sampling technique, followed by snowball sampling, was used to recruit participants. A website (www.boxinggymns.com/addresses/south-africa.htm), listing boxing gymnasiums in and around Cape Town, was a useful resource, providing contact details to initiate contact. E-mails were sent out to most of these gymnasiums, but few responded. Nevertheless one gymnasium provided five boxers to interview, and another two. Three further participants were recruited via these contacts and references. The interviews were conducted where it was most convenient for the boxers, and five of them took place in the actual gymnasium. The other five were interviewed at public venues (for example, coffee shops). Participation was completely voluntary, and boxers signed informed consent forms prior to being interviewed. Confidentiality was assured and an ethics review committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town approved the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Aggression

The major theme explored in this study was how these boxers think and talk about aggression. The boxers were aware of negative perceptions about boxing and were realistic about the risks and dangers of the sport. Most of them, with two exceptions, addressed the issue of aggression obliquely and indirectly:

“It’s an aggressive sport because it’s about hitting each other but for me I don’t see it as aggression because, you know, it’s about showing who’s the best.”

Instead, all of them spent a great deal of time explaining the technicalities and emphasising the ‘scientific’ nature of boxing. They talked extensively about the techniques, combinations, strategies, game plans, and objectives of the sport, and the critical importance of thinking and strategizing in the ring:

“You know lots of people, they associate boxing with like a game of chess. Lots of strategy, lots of mental planning... You know, like, he’s going to make a move, you’re going to make a move.”

The passion that the boxers have for boxing was evident and it overrode the notoriety of their sport:

“But people they just take it another way because, you know, boxing sometimes you end up with internal injuries. Some of them, they passed away out of a fight so they just think, ‘Ah, it’s a brutal sport.’ But us, as boxers, we love our sport. That’s *our* sport.”

The amateur boxers had an additional defence about aggression, namely that amateur boxing was substantially less violent and dangerous than professional boxing. They indicated how they use heavier gloves, had extra safety rules and gear, and the increased value on a points win, rather than a knockout.

“What a lot of guys, what a lot of people don’t realize is amateur boxing is completely different to the professionals... A lot of the safety rules that get administered in amateur boxing, is not present in professional boxing... I think it was somewhere in America that they did this research and out of all those sports (contact sports – note added), amateur boxing was considered the safest contact sport that you could participate in. And a lot of people don’t realize that, especially parents.”

Wacquant (2004) described how boxers are supposed to manage violence and aggression through a consideration of the other’s skill and level of aggression. Six of the boxers in our interviews mentioned this principle of reciprocal regulation: they adjusted their level of aggression in relation to their opponent. One said: “I test him the first round. The first round I fight with him, *I feel him*, how good he is.” Another said that:

“You feel him out in the first round, that’s what you do, you don’t just go in there and destroy him. You first relax, see what he’s got. Like I normally use my jab, that’s my starting, the way I start *always*.”

For five of the boxers, reciprocity extended to their sentiments about injuring the opponent; they claimed that they could not feel bad about injuries they inflict since the opponent has the same opportunity to hurt them. (The title of our paper, “The hurt business”, in fact is a quote from one of the boxers: “We are in the hurt business”). An extract explains:

Q: And do you even feel bad about injuring your opponent?

R: “Yes”

Q: You feel bad?

R: “Yes, I feel bad. I don’t, I feel bad when I watch it after that one, maybe see, when I watch it on the TV. Then I don’t feel nice.”

Q: But in the moment?

R: “In the moment I don’t feel (bad), yes, because he’s thinking about it too.”

Q: Because he also wants to hurt you?

R: “Exactly, yes.”

Reading these extracts, it is difficult to judge where one can speak on intention to hurt. Overall one's impression is that they shy away from statements that would reflect such intent, much in line with what Lane (2008) claimed. The role of the crowd in boxing is sometimes overlooked. Six boxers acknowledged the crowd as influential in a fight; they think that the spectators add an element of pressure that encourages the boxer to act more aggressively. One described the boxer's relationship with the crowd:

"Because of, you know the adrenaline and the people around, the shouting and, the crowd. It makes really some kind of, you know, force inside of you. And it's the pressure, you know."

"It (having spectators – note added) does add a different element to the boxing because sometimes – even if it's not a good punch, but you land a punch – the crowd gets behind you. You get quite psyched up and you're like 'Agh, I wanna hit the guy again'... You become a bit more focused on how you look, cause you want to look good for the crowd."

Fear of humiliation in front of the crowd was one of the major reasons one boxer gave for being so aggressive in his first fight:

"I was afraid of losing, I wasn't actually afraid of getting hurt. I was more afraid of being humiliated and losing. That was my biggest fear and because of that I jumped in the ring and just jumped all over the guy before he even knew what was happening."

Control

The self-regulation of arousal is one of the recurring themes in especially combat sport. The one emotion these sportspeople dwell on is anger. Robazza *et al.* (2006) have shown that appropriately managed anger was beneficial to the performance of judokas, wrestlers, and rugby players. In the current study, however, boxers explicitly deemed anger undesirable and unacceptable in their sport. Anger was regarded as taboo in the boxing world, and they claimed they never felt angry when they box. For example: "There's no anger. I don't feel. I mean, it's nothing personal to the other guy. Why? Who would I be angry against?" But other aspects of their talk call for some caution to take this always at face value. One boxer for example said, while referring to when an opponent hurts you in the ring:

"That's where of course, *of course*, you're going to get angry. You're gonna allow your emotions to take over. You're gonna wanna bite this guy's head off. But that's where your mentoring comes in...you're just wanna go out and not follow the game plan and wanna *kill* this guy. And that's where your corner, your staff come in. Good coach, good mentor, so he can guide you...and calm your emotions down."

Later in the interview, when asked whether he ever feels angry in the ring he said, "Never, *never*."

What is true, however, is that all of them thought that it enhanced performance if emotions were blocked out in the ring. One said that:

“When the bell goes everything just switches off and you go into automatic...You’re focusing on what you’re doing at that stage. But then emotions (are) blocked out immediately.”

Boxers face a constant struggle between automatic reactions in a fighting situation – the arousal of anger, fear, and other emotions – and the machine-like, detached, and, extraordinarily controlled response that boxers aspire to and few actually consistently achieve (Wacquant, 2004). One respondent explained the conflict between reflexively responding aggressively when being hurt and the need to control that:

“You get a big hit and you just get angry about it all of a sudden – you can’t just fly in, you’re going to be open, you know. So it’s about controlling that aggression and taking the hits.”

Thus in the boxers’ eyes, admitting to feeling anger in the ring may have indicated being out of control of one’s emotions, something comparable to being an incompetent boxer.

The boxers expressed contempt for “wild” boxers – those who do not adhere to the norms of the sport. Six of the boxers described how losing control of aggression has detrimental consequences for the boxer: “Aggression is good but it definitely has to be controlled.” Two respondents said:

“In boxing, the more you get emotional, the more you lose control and the more you get beaten. If you get angry in the ring, you lose control and you definitely can get hurt.”

“Some boxers are aggressive in the ring, they don’t stop punching – it doesn’t matter whether they get punched back. Some others, you know, they’re very smart, they don’t punch until they see the target...a boxer should be smart and, you know, know what he’s doing in the ring...He should really control (his) moves and know (his) opponent after one or two rounds.”

When a boxer loses control of his aggression or anger, he loses focus and leaves himself vulnerable to attack by his opponent – loss of control is punished in the ring (Wacquant, 2004). The findings of Lane (2008) support these boxers: success is associated with amongst other things, low scores for anger.

There is one further aspect of controlling emotions: to dominate the other person’s emotions. Power in the ring is not only exerted through physical domination. Four of the boxers emphasised psychological intimidation of the opponent. One said:

“The objective is, of course, to out-psych your opponent and to make them lose control so that you can capitalise. So you’ll try all sorts of psychological tactics.”

Another compared boxing in the ring to warfare, where what is important is the “psychological defeat of your enemy...you must overcome your enemy’s desire to wish to continue.”

Discipline

For many commentators boxing has positive effects on youth that otherwise would have gotten into trouble. Through the control of emotions referred to above, and the discipline that the practice and exercise regime installs in young people, they develop, among many things, discipline and self-confidence, and are kept off the streets. The boxers in the present study used a similar line of argument, highlighting the social benefits of boxing. Four spoke of the good that boxing does in society, especially for young boys from violent environments, and how boxing could be promoted as a positive social intervention:

“Show them (young boys in the townships – note added), talking a bit about discipline and being a good person and learning your sport and being proud of what you’re doing.”

The discipline of body, mind, and lifestyle is seen as a fundamental part of boxing, and boxers express pride in the *asceticism* they undergo for boxing (Jefferson, 1998). One of the boxers spoke with pride how he lost ten kilograms in ten days for a fight, and about his intensive training programme. Another one said he could never give up boxing:

“Because boxing is part of my life. I mean, I keep myself, I believe I’m healthy because of boxing – I control my diet because of boxing, I control my drinking habit, I don’t smoke because I’m boxing...if I do one or two weeks without training, you know, I could be sitting down and feeling like, you know, frustrated or something’s missing.”

Almost all of them spoke of sacrifices that this demanding sport requires of its followers. The extreme discipline that boxers exert over their mind and body also assists with the control of aggression, as one said: “the more you train, the more you don’t want to be aggressive.” Three of the boxers testified how boxing has made them less angry:

“Because, you know, before I was an angry guy, I was short tempered and tried to fight. But the time I was doing boxing, they were just telling me, ‘No, don’t be angry.’ So at that time, that’s when I was changing.”

Q: So it was your coaching, it taught you not to be angry?

R: “Yes. So if I am fighting – even if I am – I don’t get that anger.”

Wacquant (2004) presented this aspect of boxing as a space where pent up aggression and negative emotions can be spent in a socially sanctioned manner. All the boxers in the present sample regarded boxing as a positive outlet for frustrations, extra energy, repressed aggression, anger, and violent tendencies. These potentially destructive internal forces can be appropriately vented, positively channelled, and safely relieved, released, and expressed via boxing.

Finally, an absence

Obviously the focus was only on men in this study (for an example of a study of women boxers, see, for example, Mennesson, 2000). Nevertheless, it was surprising that there was an almost completely absence of gender considerations in the interviews, despite (?) the fact that

the interviews were conducted by a young woman. When the debate concerning women's participation in boxing was brought up explicitly in the interviews, reactions were guarded. One briefly acknowledged the debate about women's boxing being banned from the Olympics, but promptly abandoned the topic without expressing an opinion. Another boxer thought "girls" should rather do judo, since boxing "messes up the face". One interviewee described a woman boxer whom he trains: "I've got a girl that – she's been boxing with me since she was 15 years old, she's now 22. Beautiful little girl. Well she's not a little girl anymore." This description, calling her a 'beautiful little girl', seemed to underplay the seriousness of this woman's participation in boxing and can be interpreted as trivialising female boxing in general. A similar sentiment went like this:

Q: Boxing is like stereotypically a male sport. What do you think of girls doing boxing?

R: "Boxing? I don't like to see it professionally cause they really do hurt each other. But on an amateur level, ah, ja, I think it's fine."

He later justified his view that females hitting each other seem "unnatural" and unsuited to boxing:

"But it's not really a boxing perception, it's more a like life perception, I guess. Women are supposed to be a bit more dainty than guys, kind of thing. They shouldn't, they shouldn't be hurting each other like that."

In other related talk, one could discern the metaphors of masculinity as well. Five of the boxers spoke about a boxer as having 'heart', a term referring to courage and bravery. One respondent gave a visual explanation of heart as a fighter:

"Like a *lion*, you see. Like you throw me in with a lion – maybe one lion to fight – I know the lion is going to kill me but I can't leave it, you see. I have to fight to see maybe I can kill it... When I'm ready in the ring, I'm like a lion."

Having heart in boxing additionally refers to the ability to "soak up punishment as well as dish it out" (Jefferson, 1998:83). Heart is a manly quality that boxers are proud of and which they believe elicits admiration from others.

Gender considerations cannot be further explored in this paper, given the brevity of references to it. But these few references, together with the heavy silences concerning female boxing, suggests, consistent with the literature (Wacquant, 2004), that the boxers regarded boxing as a distinctly male sport.

CONCLUSION

Boxing is a unique social arena where violence and aggression are sanctioned in the assumption that these aspects of the sport are controlled and disciplined through the contract of the contest. Qualitative interviews with 10 male boxers revealed that control and discipline were indeed portrayed as not only highly valued but essential to the sport. The control and discipline were used in the boxers' discourse to justify and rationalise and it seemed at times

to lend acceptability to the violence and aggression. Through hints and inconsistencies in the boxers' talk, it became evident that control and discipline were not always easy to maintain in the emotionally arousing conditions of a fight. For many observers boxing is an intensely masculine activity, yet it barely emerged unsolicited in these interviews. One reason could simply be that it did not occur to them, as the sport is so saturated with masculinity. Only when the interviewer raised it did they talk of women as boxers, and then in a way that suggested a link between the acceptability of violence and aggression masculinity.

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