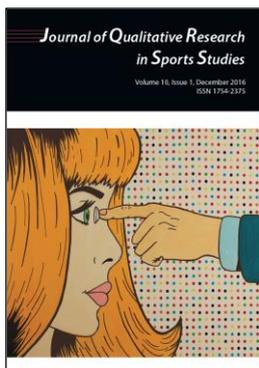


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Mind games in amateur boxing

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Keywords: *Boxing, amateur, combat psychology, behaviour modelling*

Abstract

This paper investigates how boxers play mind games to affect their opponent's confidence during the three pre-bout periods of weigh-in, warm-up and ring entrance. Perspectives from four senior male amateur boxers at three boxing gyms in the Greater Manchester region were examined using semi-structured interviews; transcribed verbatim and data coded thematically. It was found that amateurs imitated professional boxers, with the more experienced amateurs adopting a broader range of mind games. This indicated that a form of behaviour modelling may evolve with growing experience in the sport.

Introduction

Over the past 100 years, psychology has gradually increased its presence in the area of sport offering expert advice in almost all sporting activities (Jarvis, 2006; Moran, 2004) yet curiously, boxing and other combat sports appear to attract less of this kind of attention (Smit and Louw, 2011). This air of unpopularity may be due to the British Medical Association's on-going campaign to ban boxing in the United Kingdom (Unterharnscheidt and Unterharnscheidt, 2003; Loosemore, Knowles and Whyte, 2008). Even the sport itself has realised the need for better self-protection, devising new rules and equipment to safeguard its athletes (Hudson Jr, 2012). The inherent dangers of the sport and its potential to cause harm or injury seems to be highlighted from within boxing, and from expert medical advice.

Although there has been a deficit of sports psychologists working in boxing it was established by Herring (2012) that boxers and their coaches have used mind games to gain an edge over an opponent. Hennessy, Mercer and Warwick (2011) referred to mind games as mixed messages intended to confuse a recipient intentionally, affecting emotions and judgements such as confidence and aggression. Schoening (2012) identifies two strategies in which mind games can be utilised; verbal, and through the use of body language. Unlike professional boxing, amateur boxers may only have knowledge of their opponent literally hours before the bout takes place (Sugden, 1996) therefore, the opportunity to deploy mind games against



an opponent seems limited. A boxer may first encounter their opponent at the weigh-in and medical check and although professionals are assigned to different changing rooms, this is not always the case in amateur boxing and so interaction is possible before meeting in the ring (Sugden, 1996). Whilst there are numerous examples of professional boxers using their arena entrance to manipulate the atmosphere before a bout (Ogden and Rosen, 2010; Sheridan, 2010) there is limited research on amateurs doing this, possibly due to the amateur code of sportsmanship which does not look favourably upon the stage-managed side-show, that may undermine the sporting nature of the boxing contest (Cashman, 1995).

Confidence

As Moran (2004) and Smit and Louw (2011) point out, there is limited literature in combat sports, including boxing, so much of the theoretical aspects of psychology must be attained from studies in other sports. Vealey's (1986) model of sport confidence was the first to adopt a sport-specific framework in competitive sport. It predicts nine sources of sport-confidence, three of these being: achievement, self-regulation and social climate. Hays *et al.* (2009) state that an athlete's level of sport confidence will affect their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, thus determining their sporting performance. Vealey's (1986; and later revised 2001) model demonstrates that an athlete's physical skills and attributes also influence sporting performance, as well as uncontrollable factors such as environmental conditions and opponents. It is suggested that if an athlete has prior knowledge of an opponent, then they have understanding of which aspects of self-confidence to sabotage, to counteract or attack in their opponent's confidence.

Intimidation and aggression

Intimidation and aggression are linked with decreasing the self-confidence of an individual (Dubihela and Surujlal, 2012). Aggression is viewed as an integral attribute in the sport of boxing (Scott and Conover, 2008) with Kerr (2005) noting that combat sports such as boxing are actually penalised for lack of aggression. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1973) also argued that aggression is continually reinforced by positive consequences, self-rewards and gradual desensitisation to hurting others. He states that 'modelling, differential reinforcement and punishment are ways of altering aggression' (Bandura, 1977 cited in Parrish, 2010:23). Furthermore, the self-efficacy aspect of social learning theory infers that if an individual is confident about performing a task – or performing aggressively in this case, they are more likely to persist in doing it (Ashford and LeCroy, 2010).

Smit and Louw (2011) discuss how boxers perceive anger as an undesirable and indeed, unacceptable trait in their sport, that is, that only *controlled aggression* is useful. All the boxers interviewed in this study believed that performance was improved if emotions were blocked out in the ring. This appreciation that boxers

seemed to have for blocking out emotions shows they understand how aggression and intimidation can have a negative effect on confidence and performance. Given that it is something to be exploited, emotional control becomes an important aspect of the overall boxing performance which will involve the effective use of body language and verbal manipulation (Schoening, 2012).

Body language

[Non-verbal] communication through body language has an epistemological framework comprising a cognitive process of encoding, transmission and decoding (Raiola and Di Tore, 2012). Although this process can be as covert as it is cognitive, Borgomaneri, Gazzola and Avenanti (2012:70) state that ‘links have been made between covert emotional states (happiness) and overt motor behaviours (smiling)’. An aggressive and intimidating overt body language may be associated with a covert emotional state of not fearing an opponent, thus possibly resulting in a decrease in confidence. Research into football’s pressured penalty taking situation has supported this theory with Greenlees *et al.* (2008) explaining that goalkeepers have a lower expectancy to save a penalty when players adopt a prolonged and focused gaze, in contrast to those who look elsewhere. Prolonged gazes are prevalent in professional boxing, staring out your opponent, particularly during high profile weigh-ins. These pre-bout displays are becoming incorporated as part of the entertainment package, helping to sell the show (McCain, 1997). However, in amateur boxing ‘selling the show’ is largely unnecessary due to its status.

Verbal manipulation

In contrast to body language, verbal manipulation, talking, is an overt behaviour (Borgomaneri, Gazzola and Aveni, 2012). In sport, a good deal of research has focused on the anti-social trash-talking that can be used by athletes (for example see Mercury, 1995; Howell and Giuliano, 2011; McNally, Fanson, Whewell and Wilson, 2005; Rainey, 2012; Vingerhoets, Bylsma and de Vlam, 2013 and Pryle, 2014). Rainey and Granito’s (2010) study of trash-talk with 400 US college athletes revealed that they had either used, or been on the receiving end of trash-talk in approximately one third of competitions. The most popular trends identified in the study were verbal abuse, swearing, and belittling the skills and athleticism of opponents. Research into specific sports has reinforced this theory for example, in cricket, Joseph and Cramer (2011) identified ‘sledging’, in which batters are verbally insulted or intimidated by opponents. They explained how this decreases the batter’s confidence, as well as creating over arousal, intrinsically linked with an aggressive reaction, thus also decreasing batting ability. For boxers, these forms of mind games may be applied during the three phases of pre-bout encounters; weigh-in, warm-up and ring entrance.

1. [Pre-bout] Weigh-in period

As noted above, the opportunity for amateurs to deploy mind games against an opponent is limited. However, the weigh-in is the point when both fighters encounter each other at their most muscularly defined and arguably, most physically imposing form, due to dehydration to make a weight class (Stradling, 2009). This is congruent with Vealey's (2001) sport confidence model in which physical self-presentation is used as a source of sport confidence. Thus, a boxer will project their physique by 'strutting' to erode their opponent's confidence and as such, fighters may attempt to intimidate each other verbally as well during this period. In amateur boxing, as fighters weigh-in at approximately the same time (ABAE, 2009), there is a possibility that a fighter may in fact avoid their opponent at the weigh-in or, sensing the upper hand in the power struggle, stand right next to their opponent.

2. Warm-up period

The second period in which amateur boxers may encounter each other is during the warm-up, not in the ring but in a room nearby. During this period exercises are carried out in preparation for the bout (Booth, 2008). This can be a private demonstration of physical ability to the self or opponent and/or coaches and support staff, i.e. no audience to please or ring-side judges present... yet. Kingston, Lane and Thomas (2010) claim that an athlete's demonstration of ability is most important to a performer's confidence.

3. Ring entrance period

The ring entrance is the last pre-fight encounter that both boxers will have before the fight begins. Many professional boxers have used this time to play mind games. One tactic being employed is the prolonging of a ring entrance – the slow, stage-managed entrance. Prince Naseem Hamed used this tactic to full effect against Kevin Kelley at their match in Madison Square Garden in 1997, as Calcara (2015) later described,

With the song Men in Black blaring through the arena, fans could see the shadow of Hamed dancing behind a curtain. After five plus minutes of boogeying, the curtain dropped and the champion began his strut towards the ring while confetti rained on him from the sky. The extended show left Merchant to opine, 'This is so silly it's kinda great'.

Wearing leopard trunks, Hamed climbed up the steps, placed his gloves face down on the top rope, and somersaulted into the ring. The somersault led him face to face and nose to nose with an enraged Kelley who was visibly agitated with the long wait. The crowd, evenly split with both Kelley and Hamed supporters, were in a frenzy. Referee Benjy Esteves Jr. stepped between the two in an effort to gain support from each fighter's camp to separate their fighters. It worked, but only briefly.

As ring announcer, Michael Buffer, began the introductions, both men continued to meet at centre ring, jawing back and forth with one another. Hamed, who had won 18 of his 26 bouts by way of a first round knockout, promised Kelley he would fall inside of three.

The ring entrance infuriated Kelley with Hamed winning the bout in the fourth round (Gerbasi, 2000). Glitzy showmanship ring entrances have become more popular over boxing's history (Becker and Hill, 2010) for example, Chris Eubank's trademark motorcycle entrance, Ricky Hatton's *Fat Suit* (Kimball, 2011), and Hamed's 'flip' into the ring, which could all be considered attempts to alter their opponent's psychological state (Hildyard, 2001). Other boxers, such as Mike Tyson and Roberto Duran, preferred a menacing entrance in their attempt to intimidate an opponent (Ogden and Rosen, 2010), all nevertheless being ploys by boxers to exude confidence or bully their rival (Scott and Conover, 2008).

Methods, participants and approach

The participants in this research were all in the senior category (18-34 years old) because as Courtenay (2000) identified, this as the most prevalent age in males to use intimidation. Thomas (2003a) also concluded that males' intimidation and provocation starts to decrease after 33 years of age. Male boxers are the focus as there have been significant differences in self-confidence noted between males and females in sport (Short and Short, 2005; Ahmed and Ansari, 2011; Modroño and Guillen, 2011). The participants were four current amateur boxers all holding a current ME3 medical card and were registered with the ABAE (Amateur Boxing Association of England). All participants had boxed within the past 12 months and had between 10-20 bouts with one participant representing his region at national level (see figure 1).

Boxer A (BA) – Age 24, bouts 12, honours - None
Boxer B (BB) – Age 26, bouts 20, honours - Regional Representative
Boxer C (BC) – Age 19, bouts 10, honours - None
Boxer D (BD) – Age 22, bouts 10, honours - None

Figure 1: Profile of participants

The boxers were interviewed using a semi-structured approach which allowed for some further explanation of thoughts, beliefs and experiences prompted from the questions (Adams, 2010). The interview followed Thomas' (2003b) 'tight-question' approach, in which the interviewees were asked a question which prompts for a restrictive answer initially, that can be followed up with subsequent exploratory questions to probe for detail. The participants were approached via personal contacts (coaches and other boxers) at three ABA affiliated amateur boxing clubs in the Greater Manchester area (North West region of England). The 4 boxers gave informed consent to participate in the interviews which were conducted in a quiet room to provide a comfortable and confidential environment (Onwuegbuzie, Johnson and Collins, 2009). The names/situations of interviewees were altered to preserve anonymity (Polit and Beck, 2008). In relation to establishing rapport and

trust between interviewer and participant it is worth noting the interviewer is also a current amateur boxer. Due to the unique cultural domains of boxing and the cultural ethos of 'respect amongst fighters' (Herring, 2012), this can strongly support the quality and authenticity of the data obtained (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis and Sparkes, 2001). However, it is also acknowledged it can be a breeding ground for bias through self-affirmation between like-minds (Corrella, Spencer and Zannab, 2004). However, this insider position did allow for a rapid closeness with the participants in the short period of this field research and thus, some familiarisation with their responses.

Data analysis and results

In order for a basic content analysis of the interviews to be carried out the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed progressively (Humble, 2009). Direct quotations were colour coded to generate raw data themes which were then clustered to identify general dimension themes (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). From thirty-eight raw data themes, and thirteen first order themes, five general dimensions were identified (see figure 2 below).

Weigh-in period findings

Three out of four of the amateur boxers interviewed expressed using mind games to affect their opponent's confidence during the weigh-in period. Three boxers described how they tried to exude their own confidence upon the opponent with a boxer explicitly mentioning a tactic to 'give them, a like smile' with the intent to 'get across to your opponent you're not scared in any way'. Two of the boxers explained how they used body language to intimidate their opponent. One boxer expressed long periods of eye contact as well as physical self-presentation by 'tensing my muscles'. When asked why, the boxer stated 'I think it can intimidate the other boxer'. The second boxer explained that if their opponent doesn't look him back in the eye 'it means he doesn't want to challenge me'. Interestingly however, all three boxers [in this category] were unsure of its effectiveness as a tactic. Two boxers stated that they hoped it worked but 'you can never be sure unless you spoke to them', with the third saying 'sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't'.

Warm-up period findings

All four boxers reported using mind games to affect their opponent's confidence during this period. Two boxers explained how they would switch stance whilst shadow-boxing to make their opponent confused... 'wow, which way is he going to box?' There were also the negative judgements of competency made through these first impressions, for example, 'his head's messed up then', which may be a deceptive and deliberate ploy during the warm-up period. One boxer explained using imagery in their head... 'now I'm thinking, I'm going to catch him like this', but once the bout begins and the opposite stance is used 'then they're going to be

confused'. One boxer was certain of the effectiveness of his strategy for switching stances, reporting after a bout when his opponent said, 'I thought you was going to box southpaw'.

Boxer	Period	Raw Data	First Order Theme	General Dimensions
BA BB BA BB BD	Weigh Weigh Ring Ring Ring	"look straight into his eyes" "staring him out" "keep eye contact with him" "keep staring at them" "never drop eye contact"	Use of eye contact	Use of body language
BB	Weigh	"tensing my muscles"	Physical self-presentation	
BC	Ring	"do this thing that Tommy Hearn's does"	Imitating a threatening body gesture	
BA BB BA BB BC	Weigh Weigh Ring Ring Ring	"he doesn't want to challenge me" "intimidate the other boxer" "him all the time that's who I want" "other person going a bit shallower" "executioner"	Intimidation	Intimidate the opponent
BB	Ring	"got a nice dressing gown with some badges"	Self-presentation	
BA BB BB BA BB	Weigh Weigh Warm Ring Ring	"he knows that I'm not scared" "they know I'm confident" "let them know how confident I am" "I'm not scared of him" "looking very confident"	Exuding own confidence	Exuding confidence to the opponent
BD BD	Warm Ring	"confident with your smile" "giving them like you say smiles"	Smiling at opponent	
BB	Warm	"watched them warm-up...shows that I'm confident"	Watch the opponent	
BC BD BA	Warm Warm Warm	"switch my stance" "switching to southpaw" "don't let them see anything"	Switching stance Avoid opponent	Affect their opponent's physical and mental strategic preparation
BA BC BD	Warm Warm Warm	"keeps them guessing" "it will make them panic" "their mind...going to be confused"	Confuse their opponent's strategy	
BA BB BD BA BB BD BC BD	Weigh Weigh Weigh Warm Warm Warm Ring Ring	"I hope they've worked" "sometimes" "you can never be sure" "tend to stay out the way" "Have to ask the other opponent" "you can never be sure" "it's hard to tell" "unless you spoke to them...you'd never know"	Unsure of effectiveness	
BC BA BB	Warm Ring Ring	"he said...I thought you was going to come out boxing southpaw" "it definitely works" "I've heard him say...what's that badge"	Certain of effectiveness	

Figure 2: Three phases of the pre-bout period thematic data table

Ring entrance period findings

All four boxers re-counted how they used body language to affect their opponent's confidence during this entrance period. Three of the boxers used prolonged eye contact. One boxer emphasised his intimidation tactics through his demonstration of ability 'throwing punches to let him know what type of shots I can throw'. One would 'smile' to exude confidence whilst another would imitate a professional boxer, 'I always do this thing that Tommy Hearn's does' and made a threatening arm gesture – the move was referred to as the 'executioner'. Two boxers were certain their mind games worked during this period, with one stating how 'people [opponent] have looked away' to obviate what they will have to contend with... 'so he doesn't fancy this', whilst another said, 'I've heard him [opponent] saying to his corner-man, like, what's that badge? What's he won that for?' One boxer explicitly emphasised this period as being the most effective for intimidation.

Discussion

A key finding from this research was the prevalent use of body language in the three pre-bout phases. As a general dimension, this was used by all the boxers during the ring entrance with three participants practicing it during the weigh-in and warm-up periods. Interestingly, none of the boxers reported using verbal manipulation. This contradicts Rainey and Granito's (2010) study as previously mentioned and could reinforce Kerr's (2005) statement that attitudes in combat sports may differentiate from non-combat sports. This lack of verbal manipulation is also contrary to its evidently prevalent use in professional boxing (Farrar, 2012). However, a limitation may be that due to the small number of participants in the study, this aspect just did not feature in the data. Another main theme emerging was the use of prolonged eye contact. This was reported by two participants during the weigh-in, whilst three exploited it during the ring entrance. The use of prolonged eye contact to intimidate opponents supported Lumpkin's (2010) research into violence in intercollegiate football in the USA, Lumpkin (2010) even suggesting that coaches instil this in their athletes, which these findings did not indicate. One boxer explicitly referred to copying a body gesture used by a famous professional boxer, suggesting that amateur boxers are influenced by the methods professional boxers use. One boxer also referred to a kind of physical strutting or posing; intimidating his opponent during the weigh-in by 'tensing his muscles'. This kind of behaviour may be an example of Vealey's (2001) sources of sport confidence observed in professional boxers, that is, physical assertion or presentation.

Three of the four boxers interviewed explicitly refer to exuding their own confidence to their opponent during the weigh-in and ring entrance, whilst one boxer tried to do this during the warm-up. Furthermore, the most experienced participant referred to adopting a more exuberant ring entrance by using 'fancy robes with

badges on' showing their boxing accomplishments, as well as 'bouncing' around the ring and demonstrating their ability by shadow-boxing. This is comparable with professional boxers' exuberant entrances as previously mentioned; also known as 'show boating' (Cooley, 2010) as well as bringing their title belts into the ring with them (Hill, 2003). The bragging of accomplishments can also be linked with intimidation and is comparable with other combat sports such as karate and judo in which a coloured belt is worn to demonstrate experience or rank (Cooper, 2005). These outward signals do seem to have a detrimental effect on confidence as a combatant will fear the ability of their opponent through their accomplishments (Gordon, 2012).

The data also revealed that two of the four amateur boxers interviewed were certain their pre-bout methods and routines were effective during the ring entrance period. This is in contrast to the weigh-in and warm-up periods, in which they were uncertain of their effectiveness. The ring entrance is a public display of strength and courage when just before the fight, as in professional boxing, many onlookers will be making judgments about competency, preparedness and outcome (Cooley, 2010). In contrast to the other two periods studied, the ring entrance attains the highest media viewing figures (Breuer and Rumpf, 2012; Seepersaud, 2012). Therefore, if amateur boxers do emulate professional boxers, as the mind games they played also seemed to indicate, it could explain why amateur boxers use the ring entrance to assert themselves more than any other period. Amateur boxers do try to demonstrate their ability to their opponent during the warm-up period, however, somewhat like a *hustler* who wishes to deceive an opponent as to how good they actually are before a bout, they aimed to confuse their opponent by deception (switching stance). Thus, once the bout starts and the opponent realises his devised strategy is problematic, it will then decrease their confidence. Furthermore, the boxer who stated that he simply 'avoids his opponent' rationalised this method by stating that it 'will confuse his opponent if he knows nothing about him' strategically, thus he will be less prepared for the bout and less confident.

Conclusion

The premise of exuding confidence was to show their opponents they did not fear them. A common example with the eye contact theme was that participants would not break eye contact with their opponent; staring each other out. However, those who used this strategy also mentioned that if their opponent looks away it shows that they are scared. Therefore, this situation may be counter-productive if boxers are simultaneously trying to manipulate their opponent's confidence and not show they are affected by their opponent's mind games. This is supported by similar examples in other contact sports (Campo, Mellalieu, Ferrand, Martinent and Rossnet, 2012) as well as in professional boxing (Farrar, 2012). Furthermore,

examples of verbal feedback from an opponent, or cues in their opponent's body language, such as looking down, made some of the boxers interviewed more certain of their effectiveness to intimidate. This suggests that the participants could ascertain whether they had an effect on their opponent – but only if their opponent 'gave it away'.

Limitations and recommendations

A limitation of the research was the small number of participants and consequently no generalisations can reliably be made from this study (Myers, 2009). An additional limitation being the lack of research conducted into the psychology of boxing itself (Smit and Louw, 2011). Therefore, recommendations from this study include that more research into combat sport psychology could usefully be carried out to understand the mind games and inter-personal behaviour deployed by boxers in these high-pressured sports contests. Also, more investigative cultural and psychosocial research could be conducted, particularly within the UK boxing scene, to make further comparisons between amateur boxers, more elite amateur boxers and professional boxers.

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Reviewer Comments

This paper has effectively uncovered the difference, but at the same time, many similarities between amateur and professional sport. Perhaps the most striking finding from this research is that the amateur world of boxing is where the real ‘mind games’ are taking place, as there are limited opportunities for the stage-managed histrionics to take place. Yet at the same time, it is clear that in the world of sport, many amateurs have developed their skills by learning from the professional elite. There are many of these traits on show in the findings here, such as the symbolic and ego driven bragging of accomplishments or the undermining of an opponent’s abilities through verbal intimidation. The study has found that this is perhaps prevalent within all sports, with cricket as an example verbally unsettling the opponent through the act of ‘sledding’. The study used an effective and objective qualitative structure to uncover the findings in a logical way, yet there appears to be a more personal touch that could be addressed here and one that could be added, as the nature of interviews can always become rather restrictive and robotic. The ethnographic approach of Wacquant (2004) allowed the researcher to spend time amongst the boxers in their natural setting and in the context of this study could allow for further interpretation and themes to come to the fore. This method may then go some way to understanding the background and reasons behind the machismo and how the boxers have developed their confidence or psychological tactics prior to entering the ring.