

Boxing: Exploring violence and aggression in a 'macho' male sport

Carryn Smit

University of Cape Town, Department of Psychology

Supervisor: Johann Louw

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Abstract

Boxing is a male-dominated sport, sanctioning and even encouraging violence and aggression through its rules and norms. This study investigates the significance and meaning that male boxers construct concerning the violence and aggression that they chose to express and experience in this unique setting of boxing, where such behaviour is sanctioned. Qualitative methodology was used for the data collection and interpretation. Ten male boxers, five amateurs and five professionals, from boxing clubs around Cape Town participated in a semi-structured interview, which was guided by the literature and research question but which also allowed for the unrestricted, in depth exploration of the boxers' perspectives and experiences. Thematic analysis was used to interpret and organise the findings into coherent patterns consistent with the literature. Three major themes were recognised: (a) violence and aggression, (b) power and status, and (c) masculinity. The boxers used justifications, rationalisations, and avoidance to undermine the violence and aggression in boxing, promoting the social acceptability and even benefit of their sport. The boxing image supports the hegemonic macho masculine ideal, attributing power and status to boxers. Men may be drawn to boxing though the positive, manly characteristic as well as the social admiration that the boxing inspires. Boxing through the aggressive domination of another man in the ring bolsters the male status. Boxing is a unique social context that suggests masculine power through physical aggression and violence.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, boxing, macho, male sport, aggression, violence, power, male status

240 words

Introduction

Aggression and violence are frequently subjects of psychological investigation; there exists, however, little psychological enquiry into a sport characterised by aggression and violence: Boxing. Boxing has been the subject of contentious ethical debate due to the explicit violence and physical risks involved (Lane, 2008). Psychology has actively opposed the sport, primarily due to the severe head injuries caused (Abeles, 1986). The violent context of boxing, however, where boxers voluntarily participate in aggressive interaction, is a unique setting in which to investigate aggression, violence, and masculinity.

The sanctioning violence and aggression in sport and promoting it as entertainment has been cause for much debate (Wamsley & Whitson, 1998). People, however, continue to voluntarily participate in a sport where they are subject to extreme forms of violence and aggression. Boxing continues to receive substantial support from society; the recent Hatton-Pacquiao fight drew in a sold out crowd of 16,000 fans, enormous media attention, and the support of various institutions; awarding Pacquiao, the knockout winner, over \$20 million (Herbert, 2009).

The distinctly male-dominated sport of boxing endorses and promotes refereed violence and controlled aggression through its norms and regulations. Aggression, violence, and masculinity form complexly intertwined features prominent in boxing. A critical review of these three concepts – (a) aggression, (b) violence, and (c) masculinity – allows for a preliminary understanding of boxing and boxers, guiding the psychological exploration of boxers' experiences and perceptions of their sport.

Aggression

Psychological views. The study of aggression has been popular in psychology. Many definitions and theories have emerged in an attempt to derive a comprehensive understanding and explanation of the phenomenon. Consensus as to a standard definition of aggression has, however, not been reached (Geen, 2001).

Although multiple variations and interpretations are present in the literature, a definite pattern highlights the key aspects that contribute to the understanding of aggression. One being's intention to inflict harm upon another, who is moved to avoid such harm, is how the central

themes of aggression can be assimilated (Geen, 2001; Krahé, 2001). Dominant psychological thinking and theorising portrays aggression as an internal attribute belonging to, and ultimately controlled by, the individual (Lane, 1977). Others, who believe the investigation of the broader context of aggressive behaviour to be an instrumental consideration, have challenged this assertion (Zelli, Dodge, Lochman, & Laird, 1999). Norms and legitimacy, in particular, are contested to be critical contextual considerations in the understanding of aggression.

Norms, guiding interactions, and relevant legalities, which contextualise aggressive behaviour, are contentious factors that not all researchers consider pertinent in the psychological investigation of aggressive behaviour (Tedeschi, Smith, & Brown, 1974). Some researchers, however, do believe norms and legitimacy to be integral part of aggressive expression.

Across cultures and sub-cultures, one finds that, what one culture expresses or interprets as aggressive, another may accept as appropriate behaviour. Social knowledge and information processing allows people to appraise social situations or interactions and respond appropriately according to normative beliefs (Zelli et al., 1999). This process explains differences in individual aggressive responses according to the norms and legitimacy that is crystallised, socially and cognitively.

Within the sports context. “Aggression can be seen as unprovoked hostility or attacks on another person which are not sanctioned by society” (Kerr, 1997, p. 116); in sport, however, aggression is sanctioned and provoked, in the sense that the athletes willingly enter into agreement to compete. Aggression is acknowledged as 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 athletes’ aggression within the boundaries of the particular sport (Kerr, 2008).

Kerr (2008) contended that aggressive sporting behaviour cannot automatically be presumed as either aggressive or non-aggressive but that it is the athlete’s intention that indicates the acceptability of an action. The legitimacy and acceptability of aggressive conduct, which corresponds to the particular rules and norms of the sport, are recognised as pertinent in defining and classifying aggression in sport (Maxwell & Moores, 2007). General psychological definitions

of aggression, then, are inappropriate in the sport context, where injurious behaviour is often integral to success.

Vigorous defensive and proactive forces used to gain an advantage in the game characterise aggression in sport. Parry (1998) drew attention to the distinction between reactive and instrumental aggression; an important differentiation concerning the goal towards which aggressive behaviour is attributed. If the goal is fundamentally non-aggressive, for instance winning an advantage in the game, the aggression is considered instrumental. Conversely, a hostile response, where a player's aggression is driven by their intention to inflict unnecessary harm on an opponent, is considered reactive aggression.

Harmful behaviour is often integral to sporting achievement (Maxwell & Moores, 2007); this is no more evident than in boxing. A boxer's emotional state influences the particular combination of reactive and instrumental aggression when fighting, determining whether aggression improves or hinders their fighting performance (Lane, 2008). The distinction between instrumental and reactive aggression is a useful guide in understanding boxers' experiences of aggression.

Anger, violence, and aggression in sport. It is important to understand the association and distinction between anger, violence, and aggression, which are all complexly linked to one another, in order to comprehensively explore boxers' experiences and perceptions.

Anger, defined by Campbell (2006, p. 239), is "an unpleasant or negative emotion that typically occurs in response to threat, disruption of ongoing behaviour or deliberate and unjustified harm". It is a mood state of increased psychological arousal and, although recognised as separate from aggression, it may precede aggressive behaviour (Maxwell & Moores, 2007). Kerr (1997) proposed that anger is not associated with the instrumental aggression but is likely to impel unsanctioned (reactive) aggressive behaviour. Anger is an important consideration in attempting to understand aggressive behaviour (Maxwell & Moores, 2007).

Anger, when appropriately channelled and strategically managed, could be beneficial to competitive energy (Robazza, Bertollo, & Bortoli, 2006). Combat athletes, including judokas and wrestlers, reported, through a modified version of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory, their anger as being less desirable as a means of generating and maintaining energy than rugby players did. The potentially high frequency of anger in judo and wrestling, which makes it harder

for the athlete to control, may cause the combat athletes to be more wary of anger. The key concept is the athlete's ability to exert control over their anger, rendering it advantageous, rather than allowing it to interfere with performance; control over anger may be a crucial to instrumental aggression in sport, where aggression is purposefully channelled to achieve a goal.

Violence, although associated with aggressive behaviour, is not conceptually interchangeable with it. Smith (1993, as cited in Kerr, 2008) described violence as an outcome on a continuum of aggressive behaviour. Violence, like aggression, in sport does not carry the negative connotations that it holds in society and in many circumstances, especially in combat sports such as boxing, is considered legitimate through the very nature of play (Parry, 1998). Wamsley and Whitson (1998) contended that sport not only legitimises violence but also promotes it through the naturalisation of – especially male – violence, sustaining an aggressive masculine culture in most sports.

Aggression and masculinity

Socially, aggression is associated with manliness (Mansfield, 2006). Social psychology, postulating that social norms concerning appropriate gender behaviour are internalised and conformed to by individuals, and evolutionary theory, which proposes that adaptation associated with survival and sexual selection produces sex differences in aggressive behaviour, are the dominant theoretical stances on aggression and masculinity (Campbell, 2006).

Although gender stereotypes have associated anger with men, a meta-analysis of real-world sex differences showed no difference between men and women in the tendency towards anger (Archer, 2004). Research does suggest, however, gender differences in aggressive behaviour; men express their anger more frequently, employing significantly more physical aggression in the expression of anger. The psychological mediator of fear, which inhibits aggressive behaviour, may explain the sex differences. Men feel less fear, due to the internalised norms of male behaviour, prompting angry males to act out aggressively more frequently (Campbell, 2006).

Gender norms, reinforced by social roles, prescribe appropriate behaviour for the enactment of masculinity in society. Instrumental aggression is seen as an acceptable response for males (Archer, 2004) and often has an air of functionality, serving as a means of progress and increasing power (Mansfield, 2006). Aggressive behaviour is linked to the pursuit and

maintenance of male status. Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, and Weaver (2008) depicted manhood as fragile; gender role stress, where masculinity is threatened, often leads to aggression in men, who are anxious to restore their status. Manhood is proposed to be an achievement, requiring the social validation of performance. Sport is a means of reinforcing manhood. Boxing, in particular, where, as Woodward (2004) suggested, aggression and masculinity are on display, is a context in which male status can potentially be reinforced.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the legitimizing ideology that serves to protect and maintain unequal gender power relations – a complex matter that is often reduced to stereotyping (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Amongst an intricate array of hegemonic masculinities, the “macho” male ideal – characterised by physical strength, aggression, assertiveness, confidence in the face of challenge, success, and toughness – remains an influential social standard against which men are measured (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Boxers personify this macho ideal.

Aggression and masculinity in boxing

Through its traditions and image, Woodward (2004) proposed that boxing remains a distinctive masculine space, where hegemonic macho masculinity and physical aggression flourish. Despite increasing female involvement, Delgado (2005) maintained that boxing remains a sport celebrating the physicality of men; it is fundamentally about two *men* hitting each other in a ring.

The male identity is integral to the investigation of boxing; it is a sport that represents males as physically powerful and dominant and mentally in control and tough (Jefferson, 1998). Such characteristics are particularly desirable for many males, attracting to boxing men who value these masculine qualities. The physical competition and aggressive expression directed towards other men provide a challenge of manliness and creates the potential to increase masculine power and status (Mansfield, 2006). Wacquant (2004) reiterated this link between boxing and the male status, “its [boxing] ostensible technical mission – to transmit a particular sporting competence – must not conceal the extrapugilistic functions it fulfils for those who come there to commune in the plebeian cult of virility that is the Manly Art.” (p. 14).

Masculinity in boxing ranges – corresponding significantly to the boxer’s style of boxing – from gentlemanly to more aggressive and animalistic (Delgado, 2005). Seriously injuring the opponent so that they are not able to fight back, ideally through a knockout, is, however, always the objective in professional boxing (Lane, 2008). Consequently, respect and credibility for a

boxer lies in their capacity to exhibit the most calculated violent behaviour. Displays of successful aggression solidify a boxer's status in boxing, as well as usually in the broader community (Weinberg & Arond, 1952).

Fighting another trained boxer in a ring is the ultimate exhibition of hardness, securing a sense of masculinity (Jefferson, 1998). The display of aggressive behaviour in boxing illustrates how males may attempt to restore or bolster their status. The masculine status achieved through boxing conveys domination and power defended through aggressive and violent behaviour. Performance is supremely important; Woodward (2004) likened a boxing fight to a carnival, where masculinity and aggression are on display to entertain spectators.

The agency and control that the boxer holds over his body is emphasised as a major theme in boxing (Wacquant, 2004). Muscular strength and competence are achieved through highly disciplined training regimes, forming an inspirational symbol of physical male perfection. The boxer's body becomes like a brutal machine embodying force and strength that one may compare to the social domination of hegemonic macho masculinity (Jefferson, 1998).

Strict rules and rituals govern the privilege to fight in the ring; physical, emotional, and psychological discipline and ethical adherence are critical to the boxer. In the early 19th Century amateur boxing was encouraged; believed to be an effective form of moral instruction for young men, promoting beneficial manly qualities, as well as patriotism (Wamsley & Whitson, 1998). Many continue to perceive boxing as an effective tool for social and ethical transformation (Wacquant, 2004). One has to critically consider, according to Wamsley and Whitson (1998), the promotion of such a violent sport in society. Rationalisations and justifications may serve to endorse male aggression and violence in sport, conveying support, to some extent, for such behaviour in the broader society.

Aggression in boxing

Boxing, through its nature, entails and rewards violence and aggression (Parry, 1998). It legitimises, through rules and norms, explicit violence, to the point where it is possible, within the competition boundaries, for a boxer to kill his opponent (Lane, 2008). The most violent of boxers become heroic public icons, popular and celebrated for their aggression and untamed contempt for society (Delgado, 2005).

A sociological study investigating the occupational culture of boxers found that the aggression that boxers experienced as part of their profession became largely impersonal (Weinberg & Arond, 1952). Brutal acts and severe injuries inflicted on the opponent are rationalised and justified, evading guilt and remorse that may damage the boxer's confidence and decrease aggressive performance. This process serves to distance the boxer from responsibility for violent and aggressive behaviour. Although this study is old, it provides valuable insight into how boxers make meaning of violence and aggression in boxing. Boxing trivializes the social implications of violence, resisting responsibility for its inherently violent nature; it is a rare social context, where aggression remains respected and violence endorsed (Wamsley & Whitson, 1998).

The boxer reduces violence to impassionate business; physical, psychological, and, emotional energy is directed toward achieving success as efficiently as possible (Wacquant, 2004). Boxers do draw on instinctive reactions; these reactions are, however, rigorously trained and disciplined (Delgado, 2005). Dissociation from thoughts and feelings allows for the toughness required to fight another in a ring; the physical danger, in which the body is placed in the ring, creates an almost primal space of survival (Jefferson, 1998). The fighter must know both how to suppress certain emotions at certain times and how to elicit the required emotions when the time is right – he must have complete psychological control. Boxing, then, requires a balance of raw instincts and skilled control.

Boxing has been compared to being in the military, where the boxer's body and mind are trained to be machine-like (Wacquant, 1992). 'Iron Mike' (Tyson), an iconic boxing figure, has been likened to a machine, with no compassion or remorse, both in his boxing and outside the ring (Delgado, 2005; Jefferson, 1998). This machine-like metaphor of the male boxer contributes to the macho masculine image that boxing entails, while also serving to rationalise violent and aggressive behaviour (Jefferson, 1998). Aggression in boxing is proposed to operate as a tool used by the boxer to gain a competitive advantage.

The concept of reciprocity in boxing is important; collaborative exchanges of violence and aggression between the opponents regulate the fight (Wacquant, 2004). The boxer is prepared to inflict injury on the opponent as a necessary measure to survive and ultimately win. Aggressive behaviour is, however, not the primary intention; to be successful boxers have to be able to induce the perfect balance of emotional control, confidence, and mental toughness (Lane, 2008). Through autobiographical accounts, Lane (2008) linked anger, concurrent with vigour, in

an instrumental and purposeful sense, with victorious kickboxing performances. Being in control of aggression is crucial to maintain the technical precision that the sport demands.

Latent aggression was found, by Grossarth-Matricek, Eysenck, Reider, and Rakic (1990), to be associated with poor boxing performance, while confidence and a sense of relaxation promoted good boxing. The attitudes the boxer holds as well as their ability to channel aggression and achieve optimal emotional balance are important to boxing accomplishment and are largely determined by the training environment, including the correct psychological discipline and mental preparedness.

Boxing and psychology

The physical consequences for boxers as well as the violent philosophy underlying this blood sport have caused psychology to avoid involvement (Lane, 2008; Parry, 1998). Sport psychology has begun to explore the nature of boxing in an attempt to produce performance-enhancing interventions. Controlling emotions and aggressive behaviour, rather than being angry, seems to be critical to boxers' competitive success (Lane, 2008).

Boxing was referred to, in the literature (Woodward, 2004; Wacquant, 2004; Delgado, 2005), as not only a sport but also a sociological phenomenon, where traditions and norms betray underlying ideologies of masculinity and power through violence and aggression. The social and psychological sanctioning of such a violent recreation as boxing may serve to naturalise and endorse male violence and physical domination (Wamsley & Whitson, 1998).

The study of aggression, violence, and masculinity in boxing

This study explores male boxers' subjective experiences of aggression and violence in boxing through in depth, semi-structured interviews. Understanding the boxers' perspectives of their sport moulds a coherent understanding of the violence and aggression that these men chose to express through the controlled environment of the boxing ring. The promotion of violence and the male-dominated culture of boxing make it a unique, interesting and, informative context in which to study male aggression and violence (Kerr, 2008). Looking at how aggression and violence function within boxing, a male environment rich in aggressive behaviour, understanding its nature and how it is controlled, sheds light on these psychological phenomena, as well as their

possible role in society. The research question is; how do male boxers talk about subjective experiences of aggression and violence in their sport?

Conclusion

Male aggression and violence are constructed, within the sport context, as legitimate, natural, and often necessary. Sport psychology distinguishes two variations of aggression; instrumental and reactive aggression, accounting for the boundaries of legitimacy and norms within the particular sport. Boxing is a sport that fundamentally entails aggression, endorsing and requiring explicitly violent acts. Aggression in competent boxers is proposed to be primarily instrumental while violence is, ultimately, organised and regulated. Boxing stands out as a male-dominated sport where a hegemonic macho masculine ideal is upheld and promoted. The investigation of violence and aggression in boxing is explored within the context of masculinity.

Method

Design

This research explores male boxers' understanding of aggression and violence in boxing by engaging with boxers and interpreting their personal perspectives. To make sense of another individual's experiences and perceptions, one has to engage with that individual qualitatively, making sense together through the collaborative exploration of their world. Using a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis in researching the boxers' perceptions facilitated the in depth exploration of subjective knowledge. This qualitative approach enabled the production of knowledge of the boxers' experiences and their respective meaning-making (Parker, 2005); the boxers were regarded as experts through their personal accounts of aggression and violence in boxing. A qualitative design provided an unrestricting methodological guide to explore the psychological phenomena of aggression, violence, and masculinity and facilitated the exploration of the nature and significance of these phenomena to the boxers (Patton, 2002).

The assessment of intention and classification of the mood state or related behaviour of another individual, necessary in understanding the nature of an aggressive or violent act in sport, entails subjective evaluation (Maxwell & Moores, 2007). Munroe-Chandler (2005, p. 68) argued that "subjective knowledge is therefore at the heart of sport related inquiry"; sport psychology

endorses qualitative research in achieving greater insight into the complexity of participants' experiences. Subjective knowledge, drawing on the personal perspective of the athlete, is essential to gaining knowledge about how they think and operate (Crust & Nesti, 2006).

The rules and norms of a sport are essential in the understanding of aggressive behaviour, a standard measure for aggression and violence across all sport is, therefore, not valid (Kerr, 2008). Aggressive and violent behaviour deemed legitimate and normal in boxing differs substantially even from similar sports, such as karate and judo, and should be uniquely or qualitatively considered (Kerr, 2008).

A qualitative approach, which draws on the participants' knowledge and subjective experiences, while acknowledging the researcher's role in the data interpretation, provides the appropriate method for the examination of aggression, violence, and masculinity (Parker, 2005).

Participants

Five amateur and five professional male boxers were interviewed. The research addresses boxers' experience of aggression and violence in fighting against an opponent therefore, some experience in man-to-man fighting was required. All the boxers train regularly and participate in either competitive or friendly boxing matches. The inclusion criterion was relatively broad but the boxer must have fought in a refereed boxing fight within the last year.

The investigation excludes female participants since masculinity is pertinent to this particular enquiry into violence and aggression. Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour each with ten male boxers were conducted. The purpose of this research is to explore and gather an understanding of the research topic; the sample of ten male boxers was an adequate basis to address the research question (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Materials

A list of possible questions (see Appendix A) that could guide the interview was developed to address key aspects of enquiry, ensuring the necessary information was produced. The research objective guided the formulation of the interview questions. The literature on boxing, especially Wacquant's (2004) *Body and Soul*, as well as two documentaries on boxers, *Tyson* (Jarecki, Yari, Anthony, & Toback, 2009) and *Muhammad Ali: When we were kings* (Gast, Sonenberg, & Hackford, 1996), suggested possible themes to be explored and assisted in preparing possible

questions. The interview schedule served to maintain focus and ensure that the central research question was addressed (Patton, 2002).

The semi-structured interview, which was employed, is, however, more akin to a purposeful conversation than a question and answer session (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews remained focused through the addressing of particular questions, yet was also free flowing and conversation-like. The questions were answered and explored through the conversation-like dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee. The boxers' responses were not limited or restricted in the information they disclosed. The questions guided the progress of knowledge production without hindering relevant digression. The boxers' responses were appropriately followed up with spontaneous probing questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

An audiotape recorder captured the spoken interview, forming the data that was transcribed and analysed. Written notes were not taken during the interview but possible themes and interesting points that stood out during the interview were noted afterwards. Patterns were tentatively recognised; forming an initial engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These notes provided a basic structure for thinking about the data and analysis, serving as a preliminary basis for understanding the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Procedure

The boxers were recruited according to convenience sampling. A website (www.boxinggym.com/addresses/south-africa.htm), listing boxing gyms in and around Cape Town, was a useful resource, providing contact details to initiate contact; emails were sent out to most of these gyms with relatively few responses. The Harrington Street Boxing Studio in Cape Town was the primary source of participants providing five boxers. Another Cape Town boxing gym, Panther, provided two boxers and the other three boxers were recruited independently through contacts and references.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of venues depending on the convenience for the boxer and researcher; five of the participants were interviewed at public venues (for example coffee shops) and five were conducted by the boxer's boxing gym. This meant minimal inconvenience for the boxers to become a part of the research. The settings were all informal.

The male boxers were all adults (over the age of 18) and voluntarily participated in the research. Informed consent was agreed to by the boxer to be interviewed. Before the interview

commenced, the boxers signed consent forms (see Appendix B) proving informed consent for participation and the tape recording of the interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Confidentiality was assured.

In the introduction phase, the boxer was informed as to the unstructured nature of the interview, to prepare them for an informal conversation centred on relevant questions. This was intended to make the boxers felt free to express pertinent points ad lib.

The interview conversation was guided by the prepared questions (see Appendix A) and followed, where appropriate, with probing questions to specify experiences and perceptions of pertinent issues that arose. The interview started with relatively broad questions (*How did you get into boxing?*), giving the boxer a chance to start to engage with the interview structure and topic, and moved on to more challenging questions (*Have you ever felt out of control in the ring?*). (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Before finishing the interview, the boxer was asked if he had anything more that he wanted to add or any questions he wanted to ask. Having shared the pertinent information regarding the nature of the research before the interview, debriefing was not necessary.

Interpretation method

Transcribing the data from the interview audiotape recordings afforded an informal appraisal of the information and knowledge captured in the interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Transcribing is not simply the act of writing out the verbal information but is important in shaping thematic expectations (Parker, 2005).

Qualitative analysis was used to interpret the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative tool that helps achieve a detailed and complex account of the data. The thematic analysis was theoretically based, guided by the reviewed literature and the research question.

Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six steps of thematic analysis guided the exploration of the 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.
- Finally, the themes were reported in Results and Discussion.

Qualitative research emphasises the role of reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's role in the process of data collection and the interpretation thereof (Parker, 2005). Thus, the researcher identity in relation to the research is considered.

Results and discussion

Three major themes – aggression and violence, power and status, and masculinity – that are prominent in the literature and evident in the discourse with the boxers are explored and interpreted. Violence and aggression in boxing were of significant interest in the research and were addressed as the main subject of enquiry. The boxers' experiences and perception of aggression and violence form the introductory theme of the analysis. The question of power and status in and around boxing was acknowledged as important for understanding the violence and aggression in the sport and, thus, the analysis of power and status follows on from the theme of violence and aggression. Power and status also link into the issue of masculinity in boxing. It, thus, introduces the final theme of masculinity, which is an overarching theme that provides a contextual understanding of the research.

Violence and aggression

Violence and aggression form fundamental themes in the analysis of boxers' perceptions and experiences of their sport. The meaning that the boxers attached to their violence and aggression is at the heart of this research enquiry.

Within the theme of violence and aggression, three sub-themes are salient in the boxers' discourse: the avoidance of addressing violence and aggression in boxing; the emphasis on the control of aggression and anger; and common rationalisations and justifications accounting for the violence and aggression.

Avoidance. Most of the boxers, with the exception of *P7 and P8, avoided addressing the issue of violence and aggression directly, while they all 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. They spoke of the critical importance of thinking and strategizing in the ring. An extract from P4 demonstrated this point; “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”.

Continually highlighting the technical, skilled aspects of their sport enabled the boxers to largely evade or justify the violent nature of boxing, creating a compelling picture of boxing as a good sport – as they believed it to be. By restricting their dialogue to a great extent to the objective aspects of norms and rules of boxing they could establish boxing as a legitimate game. P7: “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.”

Three of the boxers stressed the importance of defence over attacking in the ring, while only P8 and P10 admitted to being primarily attackers in the ring. This suggested the boxers’ awareness of attacking – even within the boundaries of sport – as essentially socially unacceptable, while self-defence is perceived as more acceptable. All the boxers alluded to the violence and aggression as a secondary objective in boxing, a sort of coincidental repercussion of the desire to win in boxing. P6: “I don’t think I’ll ever want to fight outside of the ring where it’s not controlled... And I don’t think that I’d ever want to hurt somebody like that *on purpose*”; P8: “You’re not getting in the ring to kill someone, you’re, you’re – well there’s a bit of that – but, eh, but it almost has a code of ethics”.

The boxers used emotionally neutralising terms to describe experiences; this may be seen as an attempt to distance themselves from the psychological and emotional side of experiencing violence and aggression. Six of the boxers employed expressions that suggested the depersonisation of the opponent. For example, two of the boxers avoided using the term opponent often replacing it with “the target”. P6 explained that in the boxing ring “ you forget more about

* The participants are referred to as P (for participant) and are identified by a number corresponding to their place in the sequence of interviews conducted.

you opponent as being a person cause actually he's a way of getting a bit of the crowd to go crazy. He's a way of getting, looking good, I guess."

Five of the boxers relayed the how emotions are blocked out in the ring. P4 and P7 talked about having authority over emotions as essential not only in boxing but also in life and deem this the most valuable thing boxing has taught them. P3 described how "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."

Four of the boxers used metaphors of being machine-like in the ring, where they described switching into an automatic mode, "operating on another level" (P8). This machine-like state in the ring ties into the military metaphor that is evident in some of the boxers' discourse. The ring was likened to a "battlefield" (P7), where survival-mode is instinctively evoked. P8, a former paratrooper in the British army explained: "when I was first on operations for the army, people were trying to kill us. You get this real sense of shit, I'm like on my own now, no one's going to look after me...It's, I mean, this is for real. Stepping into the ring is like that".

The machine and military metaphors correspond to the literature depicting the boxer as a machine, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and their training and attitudes as dispassionately militant (see Jefferson, 1998; Wacquant, 2004; Delgado, 2005). The comparisons served to shift responsibility off the individual boxer through the context in which their behaviour takes place. P4 claimed that "it's about discipline, following instructions, and carrying those instructions out." He, as well as P3 and P6, indicated that you do not have to be an aggressive person to become a boxer.

The business-like nature of boxing in the ring can be interpreted as an explanation technique used by the boxers to account for experiences and expressions of violence. P2 told how he blocks out emotions when boxing, focusing on the job he is required to do; "I'm not even scared for someone. If I get inside the ring, I just look at my opponent. So if it's like that, you can't care. If you gonna do business, do business". P4 referred to boxing as "the hurt business", excusing the violent actions that are intended to harm the opponent.

By highlighting the technicalities of boxing, as well as comparing it to socially accepted – and predominantly masculine – institutions, such as the military, machines, and business, the boxers were able to make sense of their aggressive behaviour and evade the emotional

responsibility of violence. In terms of Parry (1998)'s distinction between instrumental and reactive aggression, the boxers emphasised the exclusive use of instrumental (sanctioned) aggression; this dispassionate focus instrumental aggression additionally can be interpreted as a means of justifying and rationalising aggression and violence. While the rules and norms of boxing legitimise violence and aggression (Parry, 1998), norms and expectations train boxers to block off emotions and dissociate their experiences of violence in the ring; this instils into the boxer and the broader society an acceptability of the violent behaviour demonstrated in the boxing ring (Whamsley & Whitson, 1998).

The control of aggression and anger. The controlled environment of the boxing ring makes violence and aggression socially acceptable (Delgado, 2005). The boxers posed their sport as the appropriate setting in which the “natural” tendency toward violence and aggression could be “safely” expressed. Violence in boxing was conveyed by the boxers to be okay and sometimes even constructive primarily because of the controlled context in which it was expressed. P3 maintained that *everyone* has a certain amount of aggression and P8 declared, “I have no compulsion with going and attacking someone (in the boxing ring)...I just think it’s a release of a primal thing”. This naturalisation of aggression in all people functioned to cast the brutal sport in a good light.

All the boxers spoke of boxing as a positive outlet – for frustrations, extra energy, repressed aggression, anger, and violent tendencies. Boxing was proposed to be a space where these potentially destructive internal forces can be appropriately vented, positively channelled, and safely relieved, released, and expressed. P5 quipped that the people with real aggression issues are “the ones that sit in front of the computers all day.” Wacquant (2004) congruently noted this about boxing, posing it as a space where pent up aggression and negative emotions can be spent in a socially sanctioned manner.

Anger, if appropriately managed, was shown by Robazza et al. (2006) to be beneficial to the performance of judokas, wrestlers, and rugby players, where judokas and wrestlers were, however more cautious of their anger. Anger, however, was explicitly deemed by the boxers to be undesirable and unacceptable in their sport.

Inconsistencies in how the boxers talked about their actual experiences of anger in the ring are evident, suggesting the complexity of this issue. For example, P4 initially said, 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 guys 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, when asked whether he ever feels angry in the ring he said, "Never, *never*."

All of the boxers, except P6 and P10, were adamant that they never felt angry when they box, depicting anger as taboo in the boxing world. When asked if he ever feels angry when he boxed P8 said, "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?" This response could be interpreted as defensive. Interestingly later, he added, "There's it's probably a useful release of anger and frustration (in boxing)...but I certainly have no experience of anger at all." The boxers' strong positions often appeared inconsistent with their other accounts. Inconsistencies in the arguments made about anger may have emerged from the rhetorical context of the discourse at that particular time, evoking different responses that may seem incongruous to one another but which were all utilized by the boxers to advocate boxing (Billig, 1996).

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). P5 explained the conflict between reflexively responding aggressive 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." 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. P5 explained, "Aggression is good but it definitely has to be controlled." P6 correspondingly asserted that aggression should never take over completely. P7

explained, “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.” 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). This introduces the metaphorical thread of boxing as a type of religiosity, where the inability to control instinctive, negative reactions – as the boxers see aggression to be – is condemned and punished.

The boxers reiterated control and discipline. The discipline of body, mind, and lifestyle are seen as a fundamental part of boxing and boxers express pride in the asceticism they undergo for boxing (Jefferson, 1998). P9 talked about having to lose ten kilograms in ten days for a fight and his intensive training programme. P7 explained why 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.”

Nine boxers talked about the “suffering” (P4) and sacrifices that this demanding sport requires of its followers. The extreme control that boxers exert over their mind and body adds to the image of toughness, while making aggression and violence seem impartial and under control. P7 purported that, “the more you train, the more you don’t want to be aggressive.” In line with the military metaphor, the training was portrayed as “consuming” (P5) like that which soldiers undergo leading into a battle. P10 relayed a common saying in his gym, “the more you sweat in training, the less blood you’ll have in war.”

Three of the boxers testified how boxing has made them less angry. P2, who started boxing to defend himself on the street, said:

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. R: So it was your coaching, they taught you not to be angry? Jas. So if I am fighting – even if I am – I don’t get that anger.

This story of transformation illustrates the religious metaphor, where the boxer’s commitment to boxing effectively converts him into a better person. It also serves to promote boxing in society as an effective intervention for anger and violent tendencies.

Seven of the boxers expressed opposition to fighting outside the ring. Three indicated that a boxer's skills should not be used in a confrontational way. P3 said, "You also get taught with the boxing not to use it as a weapon outside. You've got to use it to defend yourself. If, you know, if something does go wrong, you'll need to help yourself with that." This reiterates the boxers' belief that they are not exceptionally aggressive people and that boxing has been an effective intervention, teaching them to control aggression.

Rationalisations and justifications. The boxers were aware of negative perceptions about boxing and were realistic about the risks and dangers of the sport. At times when they did acknowledge the destructiveness and brutality in boxing, they would justify and rationalise the violence, re-establishing boxing as a good sport. The passion that the boxers have for boxing was evident and they built persuasive arguments, disregarding, largely, the notorious aspects of violence and aggression and arguing for the positive, socially constructive potential of boxing. An extract with P1 highlights a boxer's passion for boxing despite the adversities of violence;

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.

Four of the five amateur boxers emphatically noted how amateur boxing is substantially less violent and dangerous than professional boxing – pointing out the heavier gloves, the extra safety rules and gear, and the increased value on a points win. P3 explained:

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), amateur boxing was considered the safest contact sport that you could participate in. And a lot of people don't realize that, especially parents.

P5 and P6, both amateurs, said how their perceptions about boxing changed after they began participating, judging it to be brutal before but now, mainly because of the regulation of violence and aggression, thinking it is a good sport.

The principle of reciprocity was used as a justificatory technique, concerning the boxers' experiences and the meaning that they attached to the violence and aggression. Six of the boxers

adjusted their level of aggression in relation to their opponent. P9 said, “I test him the first round. The first round I fight with him, *I feel him*, how good he is.” P10 said, “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*.” This reciprocal regulation of violence ties in with the principle of control and is consistent with the literature (Wacquant, 2004) where violence and aggression in boxing is proposed to be managed through exchange. For five of the boxers, reciprocity extended to their sentiments about injuring the opponent; they claimed that they cannot feel bad about injuries they inflict since the opponent has the same intention to hurt them. An extract with P9 explains:

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

P9 Yes

R: You feel bad?

P9: 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.

R: But in the moment?

P9: In the moment I don’t feel (bad), yes, because he’s thinking about it too.

R: Because he also wants to hurt you?

P9: Exactly, yes.

The boxers’ depictions of violence and aggression focused on the control and legitimacy of such behaviour in boxing. One could interpret the use of metaphors of contexts endorsing socially sanctioned violence, such as the military, as well as the justifications and rationalisations, as an attempt to build a persuasive argument about the acceptability and value of boxing. Aggression is portrayed as natural and instinctive and boxing is endorsed by the boxers as a positive environment where this aggression can be released in a controlled manner. Instrumental aggression is emphasised to establish the social legitimacy of violent actions in boxing.

Power and status

The boxers’ interpretations of power and status in relation to their boxing identity provide insight into the meaning that they attach to their sport. Three sub-themes are apparent in the boxers’ portrayals of power and status; the attribution of positive, manly qualities to boxers, increased power in relations outside of boxing, and the power dynamics in boxing performance.

Positive, manly attributions. Jefferson (1998) and Woodward (2004) proposed boxing to be a sport representing hegemonic macho masculine ideals. The participants depicted boxers positively, attributing stereotypically positive macho masculine traits to boxers. These traits corresponded to Mansfield's (2006) "manly" stereotypes, including being aggressive, tough, unemotional, seeking risks, and demonstrating power. Mansfield asserted that such manly characteristics do not automatically apply to all men. In line with this, the boxers, directly or indirectly, suggested that the masculine characteristics of a boxer did not apply to all men but were celebrated in most boxers. P4 indicated this through his description of a good boxer, "He's got the genetic ability to survive in a game like, as tough as boxing. That is he's strong, that he can take a punch, he's durable, naturally...if you haven't got that tough guy element, forget it." There is a sense of masculine elitism here, having a unique ability that sets the boxer apart from other men. P8 reiterated this point, "There's only a few who actually end up in the ring and people who start on that journey. And then only a few of those will push to continue". P5 similarly said, "Some guys don't even have that fighter in them to fight."

Five of the boxers spoke about a boxer as having "heart", a term referring to courage and bravery. P9 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, p. 83). Heart is a manly quality that boxers are proud of and which they believe elicits admiration from others.

The male instinct to protect himself through violence is implied by the boxers; four of the boxers referred to the confidence that boxing had given them to protect and defend themselves if they had to. P8 expressed being brutal in the ring as a primal thing; being in the boxing ring with your opponent "brings out a more raw side of your character". These depictions implied the celebration of male violence in sport recognised by Wamsley and Whitson (1998).

In contrast to the instinctual violent reaction in boxing, the boxers stipulated the need to be smart and in control. P10 explained, "The heart and head have to be together". P7:

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.

Calculated assertiveness was rendered superior to the more animalistic brutality of instinctive aggression. P8 described the complex contradictions that boxing holds; a significant one being the primal brutality compared to the gentlemanliness.

Discipline was regarded by the boxers as an important lesson learnt in boxing. Wamsley and Whitson (1998) illustrated the historical association of boxing with instilling morality in young boys. The boxers used a similar line of argument, highlighting the social benefits of boxing. Four boxers spoke of the good that boxing does in society, especially for young boys from violent environments. P5 promoted boxing as a positive social intervention, "Show them (young boys in the townships), talking a bit about discipline and being a good person and learning your sport and being proud of what you're doing." Three boxers from underprivileged backgrounds told their transformation stories – where boxing was credited as being a beneficial intervention.

Increased power. Five of the boxers mentioned an increase in confidence and self-esteem due to boxing. Confidence was depicted as essential in the ring, while also being a valuable life skill, developed through boxing. The ability to defending oneself gave the boxers confidence; with the strength and skill as a trained boxer they felt more powerful in external life. P1 avoided informal fights because "if I teach you the good punch – because some other street fighting technique – I only punch someone with one punch and they go down. You see, I know where to hit, I know the weakest part of the body." P7: "Most boxers don't provoke people in the street...but they're dangerous when *they* get provoked, when *they* get hit." The sense of being potentially dangerous gives the boxers a sense of power and strength.

Seven of the boxers told stories of winning in the ring without being directly asked; they were proud, almost boastful, about their performance. P9 explained the importance of winning:

I did train hard, you see. I believe in myself when I'm in the ring. The guy, you see, I must knock him out, he can't knock me out because I did train hard. I train hard for me in the ring, you see, I can say to *win the fights*.

Success in boxing is highlighted as an important aspect of the boxers' experiences, contributing to their confidence and esteem as a good boxer.

Six boxers acknowledged the crowd as influential in a fight; the audience adds an element of pressure that encourages the boxer to act more aggressively. P7 described the boxer's relationship with the crowd, "Because of, you know the adrenaline and the people around, the shoutings and, the crowd. It makes really some kind of, you know, force inside of you. And it's the pressure, you know." P6 explained:

It (having spectators) 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.

Upholding the masculine image of a tough and aggressive boxer in front of the crowd, increases the boxer's esteem and sense of power; this is consistent with Woodward (2004)'s findings of the boxing ring being a stage to display and boost male status.

Fear of humiliation in front of the crowd was one of the major reasons P4 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.

Heroic boxing figures, such as Muhammad Ali, were discussed by four of the boxers, demonstrating the boxers' perceptions about the ideal boxer image. P4 talked about a local boxer who made an immense impression on him as a young boy:

When I was living in Harfield and there was a guy living in the next door road who used to jog past our house every morning and then everyone used to say, 'Ah, he's a boxer, he's a boxer'. And I remember the respect that everybody had and the admiration for him.

P8 correspondingly recalled the awe and respect he had for boxers before he actually boxed himself. P3, a former police officer recalled, "There's a lot of privileges that go with being a big, tough sportsman." He admitted that he gained status in the force due to boxing. Many men are

attracted to boxing because of the heroic male image idealised in a boxer that purports hegemonic macho masculinity (Jefferson, 1998). The male boxer is perceived to be respected and revered by society, and especially other men.

Power dynamics in the ring. The boxing ring creates a space in which power interactions and relations are prominent. In terms of violence and aggression, the boxers' interpretations of the power dynamics in the ring are significant. The principle of reciprocity guides the physical dynamics in the ring and the supremacy of one boxer over another (Wacquant, 2004). P10 described how in one fight he was "slightly aggressive because he (the opponent) gave me aggressive, like an aggressive, like he wanted to destroy me. So I thought 'OK, I'm going to do the same thing to you and beat you with your own thing.'" P5 and P8 explained their strategy as trying to "dominate" the opponent, while P8, P6 and P10 similarly believe that you have to "own" the fight.

Power in the ring is not only exerted through physical domination; four of the boxers emphasised psychological intimidation of the opponent. P4 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." P8 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." The psychological nature of the power dynamics in boxing suggests intentional, psychologically aggressive thinking that spurs on physical violence and that is seen by the boxer as important to success.

Consistent with Delgado (2005), Woodward (2004), and Jefferson (1998), the boxers conveyed a strong sense of the power and status that they perceive boxers to have earned through the rigours and toughness of boxing. The macho image of the boxer, together with the positive, manly attributions, induces social respect and admiration for boxers. It may be this desirable image and the social response to this image that draws men to boxing. Physical and psychological power relations as well as external pressures to look good in front of the crowd are important aspects of a fight, motivating the boxer to perform aggressively.

Masculinity

Boxing was not directly referred to as an exclusively male pursuit by the boxers. There was, however, a significant absence of reference to females. When brought up P8 briefly acknowledged the current debate of female boxing being banned from the Olympics but promptly abandoned the topic sans opinion. P9 expressed his opinion that girls should rather do judo since boxing messes up the face. P3 described a female boxer who 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. P6 awkwardly expressed a similar sentiment:

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

P6: 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:

P6: 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.

These few references, together with the heavy silences concerning female boxing, suggests, consistent with the literature (see Woodward, 2004; Delgado, 2005; Wamsley & Whitson, 1998; Wacquant, 2004), that the boxers regarded boxing as a distinctly male sport. This provides a context for the meaning that the boxers make of violence and aggression in boxing and the power and status of boxers. The boxers’ discourse and perceptions are exclusively masculine in nature; they are speaking as *male* boxers. Masculinity is a salient identity in their discourse on boxing.

Integrated conclusion

Masculinity forms an overarching theme in the boxers discourse about boxing; it is within this ideological stance that the boxers talk about violence and aggression, and power and status. Violence and aggression are justified and rationalized as natural male expressions in the controlled setting of boxing, while the power and status that boxing offers a male boxer

is linked to masculine qualities and the acceptable male behaviour of aggression and domination in the ring.

Conclusion

Limitations and recommendations for further research

It is appropriate to reflect on the researcher's identity as a female. A woman conducted the interviews, the analysis, and the interpretation of the data; a female perspective, thus, influenced the research process. It would be interesting to see what data and analysis a male researcher would produce; the difference of a male and female's research on this topic could provide meaningful insight into the male boxers' experience of violence and aggression.

This research identifies and illuminates three basic themes in boxing; including violence and aggression, power and status, and masculinity, where masculinity forms an overarching theme. Further research into how female boxers experience and make meaning of violence and aggression in the sport as a comparison to the male boxers would be valuable.

The literature indicates that most sports, to various extents, sanction and promote violence and aggression. Other contact sports, such as hockey and rugby, have been deemed more dangerous – or aggressive – than amateur boxing. Violence in boxing only appears worse since it is a more direct means to success. Investigating amateur boxers' experiences of aggression and violence in contrast to other full contact sportsmen's would provide a comparison group.

Critical summary

Semi-structured interviews with ten male boxers provided insight and understanding of how these men interpret violence and aggression in their sport. Masculinity forms a frame of reference in which experiences and meaning that the boxers attribute to the violence and aggression of their sport can be understood. Male aggression is rationalised and portrayed as natural, while boxing is posed as the socially acceptable outlet for violent behaviour. Male violence is justified by the boxers, who focus on technical, impassionate aspects of boxing and the philosophy of strict control and discipline that boxing endorses. In this way the boxers explain their involvement in this brutal sport, attempting to put themselves and

their sport in a positive light. Through these arguments and explanations, boxing is supported as a social context in which male violence is acceptable.

Boxing remains popular because of 'positive' masculine values and norms entrenched in its philosophy. Boxing creates male heroes that support a hegemonic macho male ideal; boxers are constructed not only as strong and powerful inside and outside the ring but also as moral agents who are the epitome of physical, emotional, psychological, and social discipline and control. Such depictions serve to maintain a social representation of macho men as physically dominant and aggressive, powerful, and in control not only in relation to women but also – or especially – to other men.

9,981 words

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Appendix A

Interview questions:

How did you get into boxing?

The first fight. Can you remember it? And can you describe how you felt?

Do you feel that boxing in the ring is different from say a pub brawl (Like casual fighting)? How would you say it differs?

What has been a motivation for competing in boxing?

Are there any influential figures that have encouraged you in boxing?

Have you ever wanted to give up and why?

What do you think boxing has taught you about fighting?

Tell me about the role of strategy in your boxing?

What does boxing represent in society, do you think?

Have you ever knocked someone out?

Do you ever feel bad about injuring an opponent?

Do you ever feel resentment or anger towards an opponent when you are injured?

How would you describe aggression? (Does this differ from anger?)

Do you feel aggressive when you box?

Would you say that you are also angry when you box?

Can you describe the emotions or how you feel when you box?

When the first bell rings for the match how do you feel?

Do you have any fear?

Would you say your personality changes when you fight or does it stay the same inside and outside the ring?

(If they do change personality: do you feel in control of this change in personality or is it something that just happens?)

Have you ever fought a friend or family member? Was that any different to fighting someone you don't know?

Do you feel in control of your emotions in the ring?

Have you ever felt out of control?

Would you ever try and make your opponent more angry or aggressive on purpose?

What do you think separates a good boxer from an average boxer?

Appendix B

University of Cape Town
Faculty of Humanities
Consent Form

Title of research project: The subjective experience of aggression in boxers

Names of principal researchers: Carryn Smit

Department/research group address: Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch 7701
South Africa

Telephone: 083 639 3344 or (021) 650 3430

Email: carryn_smit@hotmail.com or smtcar020@uct.ac.za

Name of participant:

Nature of the research: In depth interviews where the topic of the subjective experience of aggression in boxing is explored. The interview will take place in a similar way to a conversation, guided by more specific research questions pertaining to the topic.

^sBased on the standard consent form of the British Patient database for research and training, www.patsy.ac.uk/www/Consent.doc.

Participant's involvement:

What's involved: One approximately one hour interview.

Risks: Minor discomfort or personal distress in discussing the sensitive issue of personal experiences of aggression.

Benefits: Bringing more attention to boxing in the field of psychology.

Contributing to the greater understanding of aggression.

Promoting boxing by creating an awareness and understanding of the sport in the public, should the research be published.

Costs: The only cost would be the time (the one hour) in which the interview takes place.

Payment: The participant is considered a volunteer and will not be financially compensated for the interview time.

Recording of information: The interviews will be recorded via an audiotape recorder for the purpose of transcription and analysis. This recording will be destroyed thereafter to avoid potential misuse of any kind.

- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I agree to the audiotape recording of the interview.
- I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about them.
- I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition my privacy is respected, subject to the following:
 - I understand that I will not be personally identifiable
- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

Signature of Participant: _____

Name of Participant: _____

Signature of person who sought consent: _____

Name of person who sought consent: Carryn Smit

Signature of principal researcher: _____ (Carryn Smit)

Date: _____

Name: Carryn Smit

Student Number: SMTCAR020

Course: 4000W Research in Psychology Honours Project

Declaration

1. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.
2. I have used the APA convention for citation and referencing. Each contribution to, and quotation in, this project from the work(s) of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.
3. This project is my own work.
4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.

Signature _____

Date **29 October 2009**