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Fighting for Change: Narrative accounts on the appeal and desistance potential of boxing

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Abstract

This article is based on recent ethnographic research as part of my PhD with the University of Manchester. As a result of six months ethnography into the sport of boxing, this article explores how the sport can potentially act as a hook for change, and therefore engage and incapacitate men when they otherwise may be involved in crime. Evidence from my research suggests that the appealing nature of the sport is instrumental in engaging young men. However, the masculine discourses inherent in the gym environment are not always conducive to change and desistance promoting strategies. I argue that policies surrounding sport's efficacy and desistance promoting potential need to be rethought, and that masculine discourses inherent in contact sports need to be acknowledged, before the potential that the sport has to support desistance can be realised.

1. Introduction

Boxing has been part of Western culture for millennia but has always been a contentious sport, one that attracts and repels in equal measure. Like other sports, it emerged from ancient Greece as a formalized and socially acceptable form of martial violence adapted to peacetime, and expressed the male imperative to take up arms and fight to protect citizen and polity. Boys were taught to box just as every able-bodied man was trained to fight to protect the city from foreign aggression and to uphold the prevailing ethos. Boxing was thus seen as being a *civilising* influence in society by providing an outlet for male violence, while at the same time helping to promote the masculine 'virtues' - courage, strength, ingenuity and endurance. This ethos has remained fundamental to boxing throughout its long history. Today it still forms part of the sport's appeal, motivating its institutionalisation not only in the armed services but also within civil society and professional sport.

Boxing has further formed the basis of political debates surrounding its transformative potential, with many professionals and policy makers arguing that it is a useful vehicle for engaging and reforming those involved in offending behaviour (The Guardian 2008; Laureus Report 2011). This was

evidenced very recently when Cheshire and Greater Manchester Community Rehabilitation Company published its good news letter in October 2014 titled: 'Ex offender gives crime a body blow', accompanied by a photograph of an ex-offender in boxing gloves and a smile. The Manchester Evening News (2014) subsequently followed the same story with an article discussing how 'ex convicts are helped off the streets by a former boxing pro playing it straight'.

It therefore seems that boxing is increasing in its appeal and exposure for both men *and* woman, and is being viewed by criminal justice professionals and agencies as a tool to be used in the reduction of crime and violent behaviour. In this article I begin to unravel the complex relationship between desistance from crime and sport. I do this through presenting men's narratives and exploring how they make sense of violence as a result of participating in the sport, and also how they subsequently rehearse and practice violence in their everyday lives both in and outside of the gym walls.

2. The Efficacy of Boxing: "Without the Gym I would either be in Prison or Dead"

Vague and unexamined claims surrounding sport's efficacy in addressing issues of anti-social behaviour and crime have always underpinned public investment in sport (Coalter 2007). From 19th century concerns with social order and the moral condition of the new urban working classes (Bailey 1978) right through to the establishment of the Wolfenden Committee in 1957, government bodies have sought to investigate the contribution that sports and outdoor activities might make in promoting the general welfare of society. The most significant policy debate however, was the inception of the 1975 White Paper on Sport and Recreation, as this paper outlined sport as 'part of the general fabric of the social services' (Coalter 2007:10). This paper stated that a reduction in boredom and urban frustration through participation in recreational activities contributed towards the reduction of hooliganism and delinquency among young people, therefore, establishing the idea of recreation as welfare (ibid).

Policy developments such as this occurred during a period of emerging economic crisis, as the Labour government during this time halted the period of welfare expansion previously seen in the UK. Accordingly, economic decline and rising unemployment became the norm as inner cities started to become rife with decay. As a result, there was a general shift of monies away from local government

leisure services to more urban sporting programmes that concentrated on the targeting of particular social groups in deprived areas (Henry 2001).

The more recent Labour Government of 1997 set about replicating previous ideas by bringing in a number of not dissimilar policy initiatives. Yet, under New Labour it was not just delinquency that they set out to tackle. With this government, sporting programmes came under the umbrella of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, which sought to place sport (among other social agencies) more centrally on the broader social political agenda (Coalter 2007). Key indicators such as community cohesion, pro-social development, health and fitness, housing, employment and reduction in anti-social behaviour were also added to the list, with sport in particular, becoming a source of what Putnam (2000) refers to as 'social capital'.

As a result of this link to social capital, sport policy and target-driven agendas started to appear nationally, with participation in sport becoming a requirement for all young people under the policy banner of Every Child Matters (DCSF: Department of Children School Families 2010). However, accompanying this newer more systematic emphasis on the social role of sport, there became an increased general concern with evidence for its effectiveness. In the UK especially, New Labour placed emphasis on what they termed 'evidence based policy making' and 'value for money' (Coalter 2007), therefore, focusing on 'welfare effectiveness' as a key outcome for further public expenditure (ibid). In other words, sport had to prove itself. Could it really be effective in accumulating social capital? And more importantly, could it be effective in the reduction of crime and disorder?

Although the health benefits of sport are well established, the evidence for sport's impact on education, crime, and community cohesion is limited and largely anecdotal (Collins and Kay 2003; Laureus Report 2011). Coalter (2007) argues that vague and unexamined claims about sport's ability to address issues of anti-social behaviour and crime have always underpinned public investment in sport. In the main however, sport has traditionally always been regarded as having moral components; having the ability to instil values that are transposable to other areas of life (Coalter 2007; Nichols 2006; 2007). These values often range from character building attributes to the development of self-efficacy, locus of control, self-discipline and fair play. Moreover, qualitative policy documents can often be littered with ad hominem statements of how sport 'saved me from a life of crime' (Coalter 2007:62). The main

focus of this paper however, is on the relationship between sports participation and crime reduction. Can participation actually reduce criminal activity, and if so how?

3. Methods

The methods I used to address these questions involved immersing myself in the social world of boxing for a period of six months. This was during the Olympic games of 2012, and during that period I spoke to over twenty men varying in age from 16 years to 62 years, regarding their experiences of violent crime, the appealing nature of boxing for them, and how they felt the sport could or could not contribute towards desistance from crime. I was interested in their lived experiences as opposed to their rates of violence, and therefore approached the methodology from a Biographical Narrative Interpretative approach (Wengraf 2001).

4. Findings

Having collected the men's stories and analysed the data using thematic analytical techniques, the evidence demonstrated that boxing can and does act as a 'hook for change' (Giordano 2002). Indeed, it is appealing across varying age ranges and genders, and on average the number of people registered with the Amateur Boxing Association England has tripled since 2009 (ABAE 2013). It can provide a site for incapacitating men when they otherwise may be involved in crime and anti-social behaviour and the men's narratives in the gym evidenced this:

"Boxing saved my life man, if I just had to sit at home all day being on the dole and that, then I'd go mad and get in trouble. Boxing gives me something to do, something to focus on, and I get by with what the social give me." (Baz 38 years old ex offender and amateur boxer)

The idea of the boxing gym being a place of purpose and resolve is common among those who have conducted ethnographies in them (see Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004; Trimbur 2009). In this particular study, the vast majority of the men reported that the gym was like 'family', or how they could not imagine their life without the gym and its structure:

"Can't get a job coz of my criminal record, so I help out at the gym, Marcus lets me train for free if I mop once a week and sort out the glove box and stuff, helps me save on subs and that, and I get to

work out everyday, keep myself in shape, keep myself sane" (Baz 38 years old ex offender and amateur boxer)

"*Without the gym I'd either be in prison or dead* " (Frank 32 years old amateur boxer)

"Never been nothing, never did nothing, until I started boxing. I just used to hang around on the streets with my boys causing trouble" (Ricky 20 years old semi-professional boxer)

Based on this evidence, it would be fair to state that the sport occupies one's time and provides structured activities for those whose lives may be lacking routine. As I discovered during this six months ethnography, boxing works principally by absorbing the men's time rather than as a positive restraint. During the course of this research I observed that men would attend the boxing gym whenever possible, usually in the region of three times a week for amateurs and five times a week for professionals. In fact, men would spend at least nine to ten hours a week in the gym and when there would devote their time to the sport fanatically. However, in their personal lives outside of the gym, attitudes and behaviours were less structured, as the men in this study often reported that they did exactly what they liked outside the regime and routine activity of sport:

In the gym I'm dedicated, I do what I'm told you know what I'm saying, outside I do what I like, ain't nobody out there who's gonna tell me what to do - only my trainer gets to do that. (Jonny 19 years old).

Boxing incapacitated these men on a regular basis, and taken at face value, it could be argued that their behaviour when in the gym was respectful and legal. Regardless, my interest lay in their overall understanding of violence and its rehearsal outside the gym walls, so it became imperative to assess how they understood their own behaviour both in and outside of the boxing gym:

It takes a certain kind of person to wanna get hit for fun; you know what I'm saying. I don't think you'd get many kids from posh areas taking it up. Boxing is for lads who can take a punch, none of this 'glass jaw' stuff. Growing up where I did you had to be able to look after yourself, and that set me up for boxing you know what I mean (Jonny 19 years old semi-professional boxer)

Nah, you can't ever back down, because that's seen as weak. If I back down then people are gonna think that I'm an easy target. Don't matter whether it's inside or on the streets you got to act like you won't put up with anyone coming at you. (Michael 28 years old ex offender and amateur boxer)

"*I try not to fight outside the gym, but if you get some dickheads coming at you in a bar, I'm not gonna act like a pussy am I?"* (Ricky 20 years old semi-professional boxer)

These examples from Jonny, Michael and Ricky among many others formed part of the overall ethos of the gym. Indeed, the attitudes fostered in the gym led me to believe that not only had the men not changed their attitudes towards violence, but also boxing and the gym reinforced them. The boxing gym assisted in teaching men that violence is a practical solution to a problem through its very ideologies; these being ones that represented and perpetuated images of masculinity and respect attained through violence; a win at all costs attitude. Indeed, men's sporting discourses are littered with these messages, and this has been hotly debated in the global media very recently with stories of athletes and their relationship towards violence, in particular violence against women (See Oscar Pistorious, Ched Evans and Ray Robinson)

Therefore, in some cases boxing elaborated the rehearsal of violence for the outside world, as some men attested to currently being involved in violent behaviour, or not afraid to employ it when deemed necessary, especially if threats to masculinity or ideas of respect were significantly challenged. Because of this fact, men did not consider 'walking away' as this would demonstrate a fear to engage in violence, and reduce their credible threat. This would lead to feelings of humiliation and shame, and potential exclusion from the masculine domain of the boxing gym. Accordingly, men invested in violent retaliation to avoid shame and humiliation, and to stay engaged in a hyper-masculine domain that places onus on retaliation as a way to maintain respect. All too often, the boxers could be heard talking about altercations they had been involved in over their life-course, like Eric the retired boxing trainer who often remarked:

"Done a lot of scrapping in my lifetime, both in and outside the ring, I've got grit and that's all you need to win."

It was these particular narratives and vignettes that assisted in the surmising of my theory. The discursive meanings that were entrenched in the social world of boxing saw the men finely attuned to violence, and the trajectories of these men had already demonstrated a significant relationship towards it, as Jonny stated 'It takes a certain kind of person to want to get hit for fun'.

Indeed, the habitus and significant appeal of the gym, with its emphasis on competition, muscle, and violent potential proved to be not only reflective in the bodies of these men (Bourdieu 1977) but also ingrained in their consciousness as a system to live by. Boxers are committed to violence. Violence sustains their identity as men who demand total respect, unable to compromise as this would remove the essence of their identity- their self-concept- and the gym is a reinforcing mechanism that prescribes these very discourses. Indeed, every semblance of a boxer's body is 'packed into a framework of confrontational options which are then manifested as violent potential' (Hobbs 1995:122), and the men define themselves in terms of a cultural inheritance both in and outside of the gym that gives primacy to violence. As a result, it cultivates a willingness to engage in violence wholeheartedly which makes boxers unique from the rest of the general population that generally shy away from violent reproach. Because of this, boxers command fear and respect; and their physical armour that is honed daily in the confines of the gym adds to this image.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this brief article I pay particular attention to the participant's understanding of violence, and also how the logic and discourses of the boxing gym can reinforce attitudes favourable to violence and the maintenance of respect. Moreover, this article discusses and elaborates on previous assumptions in sporting and desistance literature, and argues that while relevant, diversionary activities and sport-based programmes that incapacitate are only one element in the theory of change. In conclusion, I have argued that boxing actually traps men in an attendant culture of respect that requires them to respond in aggressive ways to maintain an image of both masculinity and respect. This attendant culture - that is transposable between gym and street – can override the pro-social incapacitating elements that the gym can offer, and reinforces the logic and discourses that evokes and traps men in habits of responding to violence, therefore in terms of future policy and practice new directions need to be sought.

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Appendix

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