Pals after Punch Ups: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Fighters, Friendships and other Relationships

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Reasons for the study

- Clients who fight
- Lack of relevant literature
- Updating skills
- Media attention, e.g. Million Dollar Baby, The Contender, February Fight Month on Bravo
Relevant Literature

- Sports publications
- Auto/biographical e.g. Beattie 1996, Twigger, 1997
- Sociological e.g. Wacquant, 2004
- Sport and Exercise psychology
The study

- Self identify as a ‘fighter’
- Have experienced fighting
- No exclusion criteria in terms of gender, age, race, sexual identity or other demographics
- IPA pilot study
- Grounded in examples, offered back to participants
Participants

- N=5
- White
- Male
- Heterosexual
- 23-30
- A level to Postgraduate education levels
- Professional fighters – trained boxers and mixed martial artists
Fighting sometimes facilitates relationships …

- ‘You are like being a team, its like being soldiers in the army, [...], you go into battle together and start forming really strong camaraderie, [...], and that’s nice, its great, [...], I LOVE that, brothers in arms, but its to the detriment to other relationships, family, home’
...and can hinder them too

- ‘Fighting is a big drain on relationships, big drain’.

- ‘its something you have to dedicate yourself to, dedicate yourself 100%’

- ‘So I have got no social life and my girlfriend has left me’
Initial relationship to the opponent

- ‘when I first started boxing, I was asking my coach everything about my opponent, I want to know how many fights he’s had, [ ] what sort of fighter is he’
In my early Thai boxing days, I used to hate the guy as much as I could. Gonna go in there, gonna kill him, gonna do this, do that’
With increased experience ...

- They are a bit of a blank non-entity’
- ‘Now I don’t really care. At the end of the day, you get in there and you can only do your best. I train and I do the best I possibly can do when I get in there’
A caveat

- You vary [your training] every time, of course you do. You have very different strategies for different opponents. [...] this guy is good ground fighter, a good grappler, so you want to not go to the ground with him, you want to work on your sprawls and stay up on your feet. [...] this guy is a good striker and his grappling isn’t very good, so get him on the ground and ground and pound him. Bash him up. Its still the same, exactly the same build-up.
Later relationships with opponents

- ‘I know it’s nothing about this guy. I know that he was doing what I was doing, we were both there through choice, we were both there to promote our clubs, […], but I haven’t formed a personal opinion about him, I don’t dislike the guy, I don’t know the guy’
Relating by fighting

- ‘I need to be hurt if you like from a punch or a kick for me to then get into that frame of mind and think I have got to do an equal amount of damage to what he’s doing to me, so they’d be quite a shift. And then it would really just be about trying to inflict as much damage to them and not get hit myself’.
A form of intense engagement

- ‘the feeling of being in 'the zone' there might be two hundred people watching but the only thing you are aware of is your opponent’
From respect to ongoing friendships

- I have a lot of friends from when I was boxing who are guys I have fought. I have met them when I fought them in the ring
Enriching other friendships

- **Protection:**
  - ‘it’s a positive thing in my male friends […] because they kind of feel better equipped as a group of people if there’s 3 or 4 who, you know, are trained in fighting because if we go out […] there is somebody who can sort other people out. So it’s very much a positive thing around male friends’

- **Bonding:**
  - ‘It is something I am interested in, its an interest of mine, it’s a hobby of mine so I do like to talk about it […] I like watching boxing, I like talking about boxing, so you know I like to discuss those things and I find some value in discussing that with my friends, my male friends’
Romance is difficult

- when we go out the girlfriends never come, [ ] my girlfriend would say, you are going to talk about fighting, I don’t know what you are talking about, I don’t know anything about it, [ ] she wasn’t involved in what I did

- … the majority aren’t interested and aren’t that impressed and certainly my partners over the time have not encouraged it’
Takes away from other relationships

- physically it’s a way of life, you have to be training constantly everyday, because of that you tend to have the people around you, are fighters as well. [

- when you are training for a fight it takes up a lot of your free time so you don’t get much chance to go and enjoy yourself really’
But then I found out when I was 12/13 [Dad] was like a army boxing champion for [his] regiment, [...] I sort of got really into it and thought I wanted to follow in his footsteps, kind of like father like son’
my partner at the moment is my mom, she’s a bloody pain in the arse. ‘I don’t like you doing that’, but she sort of accepts that I am going to do it now and she knows I am alright, I might get bashed but, she’s kind of proud, goes without saying, but she doesn’t like me doing it, her son getting in there, she knows its quite brutal’
Intimacy with other family members

- *I used to go and watch boxing at my granddad's house, my granddad used to look after me.*

- *I have a [ ] brother who was interested in combat sports and who did quite a lot of boxing when we were younger and I was the human punch bag or sparring partner for a while.*

- *I think it was something to do with the fact that I was the oldest, I always felt that I would have to be like the strongest one of the three really.*
Raises questions

- Do we understand the meaning of aggression in establishing relationships? Positive as well as negative?

- How comfortable are we in engaging with our clients aggression – metaphorically and experientially? Whether language or physicality? Can we spar with them?

- Can we resist the urge to judge their aggression? Neither demonise nor fetishise?
More about the research ...

- (2004a) Being a Fighter: It’s a whole state of being, *Existential Analysis*, 15.1. 116-130

- (2004b) Being a Fighter II: It’s a positive thing around my male friends, *Existential Analysis*, 15.2. 285-297


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