

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Allen-Baker, Georgia, Thornton, Claire and Riby, Holly (2020) 'Don't touch my bag': The Role of Superstition in Professional Male Boxing. *The Sport Psychologist*, 34 (1). pp. 35-42. ISSN 0888-4781

Published by: Human Kinetics

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2019-0107> <<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2019-0107>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/41137/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

‘Don’t touch my bag’: The Role of Superstition in Professional Male Boxing.

Submission date: 22nd August 2019

Abstract

The superstitious actions athletes undertake before competition have been well documented, yet the role of such behaviours has received little qualitative attention. The aim of this study was to explore the role of superstitious routines in professional male boxing. A descriptive phenomenological approach was adopted, and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professional male athletes in the UK. Results show that superstition is regularly used by boxers in the lead up to fights to i) aid mental preparation, ii) fulfil a need for control and iii) improve the likelihood of success. Common themes emerged such as the use of praying and engagement in acts thought to bring *good* luck and/or the avoidance of behaviours that may bring *bad* luck. Findings also indicate that despite a rational link, boxers use superstition as a coping mechanism (e.g., as a scape goat/ excuse for losing) and to gain a sense of control.

Key words: Superstitious behaviours; mental preparation, coping mechanism.

Introduction

The boxer’s job is to injure, maim and render his opponent unconscious. Indeed, if the opponent dies from his injuries, it simply means that the fighter who hit him was very good at landing punches where they are most likely to do the most damage (Patmore 1979, cited in Kerr, 2005, p. 42).

Superstitious and ritualistic acts have been persistent throughout history, with widespread irrationalities being documented in every society (for reviews, see Vyse, 2014) and the sporting domain has proved to be no different. Superstition in sport has become

commonplace, with anecdotes of certain behaviours becoming almost as famous as the sportsperson. For example, it is widely known that Michael Jordan would wear his old blue shorts under his National Basketball Association kit for 'good luck', Australian rugby union player, David Campese, would always wait to be the last man to run onto the pitch, and Serena Williams continues to bring her shower sandals to court, wears the same pair of socks throughout a tournament and ties her shoelaces in a specific way. It appears those performing at the highest levels are often the most superstitious (Schippers & Van Lang, 2006).

Superstitious rituals (SRs) are characterised by repetitive, sequential behaviours that are not related to technical performance, and are believed to bring good luck and/or control external factors (Foster, Weigand & Baines, 2006). This behaviour is not founded on knowledge or reason but is usually based on belief that there will be some consequence to either doing or not doing a certain behaviour. Such SRs often in reality, have no causal link between the behaviour and the outcome of the event (Womack, 1992). However, they can serve an important function in providing athletes with a sense of control over unpredictable situations, such as athletic competition (Brevers, Nils, Dan & Noël, 2011).

Superstitious behaviour is sometimes displayed during the pre-performance routine (PPR) or immediately prior to competition, making it difficult to differentiate what is superstition and what is part of the PPR (Domotor, Ruiz-Barquin & Szabo, 2016). PPRs and SRs share similar qualities in that they both involve formal, sequential and often repetitive elements; however, they can be distinguished by their function. PPRs principally help athletes to regulate arousal and enhance concentration (Foster et al., 2006) and they help athletes to engage with their performance prior to executing a skill (Moran, 1996). Research has shown that PPRs can have a positive effect on performance, and that those who use them consistently tend to perform better than those who do not (Gould, Eklund & Jackson, 1992). SRs on the other hand, have no technical function and serve to control luck or other external factors (Foster

et al., 2006). As stated, there is no causal link between use of SRs and performance, however they may provide some sense of comfort or control to athletes, which may be beneficial (Burke, Czech, Knight, Scott, Joyner, Benton, & Roughton, 2006). Rituals are often patterns of behaviour that regularly occur in a defined manner, such as the PPR or SR. Based on these definitions it would appear that superstitious behaviour can become ritualistic (for example, dressing in a pre-determined manner before a competition) but not all ritualistic behaviours are based on superstition (for example, bouncing a basketball three times before a free-throw to focus attention).

There are a number of factors that are proposed to influence use of SRs. These include personality factors, perceived event uncertainty and importance, and challenge states (Domotor et al., 2016). Athletes with an external locus of control (i.e. attribute success to outside factors, such as an opponent being weak) are more likely to use superstitions (Todd & Brown, 2003). This may be because these athletes wish to control unstable events which are beyond their control as much as possible (Brevers et al., 2011). It has been suggested that a “backward chaining” of random events may occur, whereby athletes reflect on success and examine the specific behavior that led up to the successful outcome (Foster et al., 2006). In doing so, athletes then feel that they must repeat these events for success to occur in the future. Therefore, SRs act as a coping mechanism and provide athletes with a sense of control within the competitive environment (Ofori, Tod & Lavalley, 2016). Essentially, then, SRs act as a placebo, and may be created by associating random events executed before performance with success. The athlete then repeats these behaviours, under the belief that success will follow if pre-performance events are consistent (Lahey, 1992).

Much of the research into superstitions has focused on team sports such as basketball or baseball (e.g., Zaugg, 1980; Ciborowski, 1997), or individual sports such as track and field (e.g., Todd & Brown, 2003). There is a paucity of research into specific individual combat

sports and as far as we are aware no studies have explored the role of SRs in the sport of boxing. By its nature, boxing is an individual sport which involves a great deal of uncertainty, not only in terms of winning or losing but also the potential level of physical and mental damage after each fight, and as such SRs may play an important role in a fighter's preparation.

In their recent review, Domotor et al., (2016) suggested that SRs be examined in a range of sports of differing skill levels to gain a more detailed understanding of the impact of ritualistic behaviours. However, little is known about the role of superstition in sport at the top level. Given the pressured environment of professional sport, whereby elite athletes are expected to win, it is argued that superstition may be a tool that athletes use as a coping or performance enhancing strategy. Understanding the use of superstition at an elite level may allow sport practitioners to support athletes to use superstitious behaviours and/or rituals effectively.

Furthermore, previous studies have tended to adopt quantitative methods to understanding the use of SRs. There has been little qualitative exploration of why athletes use superstitious routines, how they develop and exercise superstitious behaviour and how this impacts upon their sporting experiences. This study, therefore, aims to explore the SRs of a sample of elite boxers in order to understand the role of superstitious behaviours, their origins and their impact on performance by adopting a qualitative approach.

Methods

Philosophical Perspective

Previous research on superstition tends to adopt a positivistic approach (e.g., Churchill et al., 2015; Ofori et al., 2016; Schippers et al., 2006), however, it was the aim of this paper to explore the superstitious behaviours and beliefs of elite boxers using an interpretivist paradigm. This

approach was utilised in order to gain a rich and detailed understanding of how and why elite boxers use superstition.

Descriptive phenomenology aims to highlight the participant's lived experiences of a phenomenon (e.g., superstition), hence its applicability to this study. O'Halloran and colleagues argue that descriptive phenomenology develops sport psychology literature and allows "practitioners to better understand the world that their athletes live in" (2018, p. 304). The athletes in this study described their own perspectives and experiences of superstition, therefore, a relativist ontological approach (reality is socially constructed, in other words, reality is "what people perceive it to be" (Kvale & Brinkmann (2009, p. 26)) was assumed.

Whilst adopting a subjective epistemological approach (i.e., knowledge is subjective as multiple and diverse interpretations of reality exist), the attitudes and prior assumptions of the research team were consciously discussed. A bracketing process was then implemented (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008), whereby previous assumptions were deliberated and identified as part of an awareness raising exercise. Previous judgements (e.g., whether the authors thought superstitious behaviours are unfounded or irrational) regarding superstition and superstitious behaviours were suspended. This allowed the authors to provide an unprejudiced discussion of the phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Researcher Reflexivity

When adopting a phenomenological approach, the essence and the meaning of the lived 'story' is crucial (Lien, Pauleen, Kuo & Wang, 2014). Researchers must be aware of their own self-identities and values in order to remain detached and objective throughout the research process (McGannon, Schinke, Ge & Blodgett, 2019). The authors involved in this study were all female and were exploring superstitious behaviours with male athletes in a predominately masculine environment. The first and second author were academics with no connections to professional

boxing and were able to act as ‘critical friends’ throughout the process (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The third author who conducted the interviews, was in some respects an outsider (i.e., she was female and not an athlete) but had a number of connections in professional boxing. Whilst being an outsider in many senses, the third author had extensive ‘insider knowledge’ through her spouse who was immersed within the professional boxing domain. These connections were invaluable when conducting the interviews as the participants appeared to respect her level of knowledge and insight which also helped build trust and rapport.

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, a purposive-snowballing approach was used in order to recruit participants within professional boxing who could provide insight into the use of superstition. Five male athletes expressed an interest to be involved in the study and met the selection criteria (i.e., routinely used superstition). . Due the elite nature of the sample and the focus on quality over quantity (Todres, 2005), it was felt that 5 participants were sufficient to provide an in-depth insight of the phenomenon. In support, Giorgi (2008) recommends at least 3 participants, with Creswell (1998) identifying a minimum of 5 participants for a phenomenological study.

A leading UK boxing promoter responsible for a large number of athletes responded to the invitation to participate on behalf of his fighters. Using a gatekeeper in this manner, not only provided access to the professional boxing fraternity but also promoted a level of trust between the researcher and the participants. The third author then established trust further by getting to know the athlete, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality and building rapport during the recruitment process (e.g., when providing study information and gaining consent).

The participants had a mean age of 29 years (range 22-36 years). They were all registered with the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBofC), held professional status and

included members from four different boxing gyms. At the time of data collection, the oldest athlete had recently retired from competition and had retrained as a media reporter. All participants had experience of success on a National or International platform, and between them they currently had or had previously held IBF (International Boxing Federation) titles as well as various National, European and Commonwealth championships titles.

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio recorded for quality purposes. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) highlight that the use of semi-structured interviews fits well with a phenomenological approach as such interviews seek to “understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives” (2009, p. 27). The flexibility to allow participants to express their opinions and experiences and the ability to probe (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) were deemed to be the greatest strengths of using semi-structured interviews in this study. Two of the participants selected to have a face-to-face interview, which were conducted in a quiet room at the participant’s training gym, for their convenience. Although every effort was made to conduct the interviews face-to-face, the nature of the sample made this difficult. With the increasing rise of remote interviewing over recent years, three participants opted for a telephone/audio-visual interview. This was largely due to participants training schedules and geographical locations, highlighting the flexibility, and arguably, the most obvious strength of using telephone and audio-visual interviews (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019).

Time was taken to develop a rapport with each participant, this was particularly important for the telephone interviews. Research suggests that the lack of visual cues when conducting telephone interviews can compromise rapport between interviewer and interviewee (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). With this in mind, more time was taken at the start of the interview

to establish rapport. Initial questions refrained from excessive probing but instead allowed the participant to discuss their experiences and background in boxing. Audible cues and/or prompts were used more frequently with the telephone interviews, replacing visual cues and/or prompts often used in face-to-face interviews. Finally, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, both the interviewer and interviewee were in a private room at the time of the remote interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with the usual and expected information (e.g., information sheets, consent forms, confidentiality and right to withdraw). In order to ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using the four-stage approach offered by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). The first stage involved playing the audio-files and transcribing the interviews verbatim. Transcripts were checked with audio files numerous times in order to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were then read several times to ensure familiarity with the data and to gain an overall sense of the participants' experiences when using superstitious rituals. The second step involved an inductive analysis of the data in order to break down the transcripts into meaningful units of information. Initial codes were also identified at this stage, such as, using superstitious rituals for good luck or bad luck. Transforming the data by grouping related codes together to form over-arching themes was the third step of the analysis process. Each theme provided a considered representation of the data and any similarities and/or differences in the athletes' superstitious phenomenon were highlighted during this phase. The fourth step resulted in the production of a general structure and the final organisation of themes enabling the authors to provide a narrative of superstitious behaviours and the use of superstitious rituals in professional boxing.

Research Quality

In order to enhance research quality, several processes were undertaken. Whilst inter-rater reliability has been debated recently within sport research (Smith & McGannon, 2017), the authors met regularly during the analysis phase to discuss the data. This was not necessarily to ascertain reliability but rather to ensure correct data processes were followed and to debate the generation and interpretation of themes. Moreover, knowledge was co-constructed between the researchers and the participants. Each participant provided an account of their own perceived reality and the authors then made interpretations based on those discussions. To ensure interpretations made were an accurate reflection of the discussion had, transcripts, the data analysis and an overview of the findings were shared with the participants.

In addition, a member of research team acted as a 'critical friend' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) throughout the research process. The first named author did not collect data directly and as a result was able to provide detached guidance and recommendations both as a critical friend and also to aid the bracketing, and reflective and reflexive processes required when adopting phenomenological methodology. This critical dialogue allowed for the authors to challenge each other's interpretations, enhancing rigor throughout the data analysis phase (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Results

Three higher order themes and a number of second orders were generated through the analysis phase (see Table 1). The higher order themes are were identified as i) the origins and development of superstitious behaviour, ii) the role of superstition and iii) superstitious behaviour and religious beliefs.

The Origins and Development of Superstitious Behaviour

Superstitious identity and beginnings.

The athletes in this study all identified themselves as being superstitious and acknowledged that they had all developed a pre-fight routine that included the use of superstitious behaviours. When asked when and how their superstitious routine began Zak, Michael, Shane and Mitch all confirmed that their behaviour stemmed from their days in amateur boxing. Mitch acknowledged, *'I was performing well as an amateur, I then associated my routines with winning so thought if I do them again, you know, then I would perform and do well'*.

Likewise, Zak, said:

I started doing that stuff in the amateur days and once I'd done it and it worked, you know, I won, I'd think what did I do last time? Then I'd think right, I've got to do that or keep doing that because I won.

Michael highlighted a similar experience, when asked when he began to use a SR he replied: *'I suppose from the amateurs. When you're having a good little run or whatever and that and you're feeling good and all these little superstitions come in and you're still wining so its linked to that winning I suppose'*. Shane also recognised the process of backwardly chaining events together and believing that those events led to success: *'since I was an amateur, I can remember doing one thing and winning a fight, so I did it again the next fight and then I remember doing something else they just accumulated and then you know there were just certain things I did every time'*.

The participants were clearly able to identify the development of a SR during the early stages of their amateur careers. Rory, however, states his use of superstition started later in his career:

I was so superstitious at one point. I think my first professional loss was the turning point because I used to do loads of different stuff that I had to do

before I fought. I had 12 fights unbeaten and I got matched against a kid who was the former commonwealth champion for my 13th and I always had a superstition in mind about the number 13 so I wasn't looking forward to that fight anyway and a lot of things didn't go right in training, I trained too hard and was over trained. I was winning the fight easily and I sort of punched myself out, I was devastated because everyone expected me to win. It was my first loss and it was live on Sky Sports [television].

Rory then went on to explain how his superstitions developed, the impact it had on his performance and why he felt the need to stop using a SR in his pre-fight routine. He also recognised the social and cultural processes athletes experience in boxing environments:

Losing that fight made it so much easier because my superstitions got really bad before that and it was that bad I wouldn't even cross a lamppost. I wouldn't run through a road sign, like underneath it, I had to go around it and if I saw magpie I'd salute and just loads of stupid things what got in my head. Then I thought it doesn't matter because I did all that and I still lost so it made it much easier for me then. Even now if you go in the changing rooms or in the boxing gym where everyone trains, and you're surrounded by it [superstition] all the time and it's definitely more popular with the younger people. Obviously, they're wanting to achieve stuff and they have ambitions. Boxing is such as mental sport, you play so many mind games with yourself a lot of the time, and you're clutching at straws.

The use of superstition has long been recognised as a function of culture and certain types of superstitious behaviours are commonly adopted within given societies (Ofori et al., 2013). Rory acknowledged some of the everyday superstitions adopted within British culture and how he used them in his day-to-day routine. Rory went on to

openly discuss how superstition is an integral feature of boxing environments such as the gym or the changing rooms and identified the popularity of SRs with younger athletes. What is not clear from Rory's account is whether the use of superstitious behaviour is implicitly adopted due to the uncertain nature of the sport, is explicitly embraced due to the environmental culture embedded within boxing or whether it is a combination of both. Shane's account, however, suggests that although superstition is commonplace within boxing domains, athletes do not tend to converse with others about their SRs: *'All fighters have their own superstitions, but they don't tend to discuss them, don't really share them. If I speak to fighters and ask them if they are superstitious too and their answer is always yes.'* Based on these findings, we argue that further research is warranted to explore the potentially extensive and a systemic use of superstition within boxing and how athletes may be culturally and socially influenced.

Superstitious Routines.

The athletes in this study recognised that their superstitious pre-fight routine was consistent and contained aspects that had to be completed at a certain time. Some fighters used a wider range of superstitious behaviours than others. Zak, in particular, used a wide variety of superstitious behaviours:

The closer it [the fight] gets, the more intense it is. I always have to have a wax, like have a full body wax even though I want to look good in the ring anyway, but I've got to do the day before the weigh in. I won't do it earlier or later, it has to be that day otherwise you might break legs, arms or everything. I pray, and I always touch wood, I won't run over drains or anything like, I'll always run around them. You know it's just weird.

What distinguishes some of Zak's routine from a PPR is the belief that if he does not tap the canvas, touch the ropes, or have a wax the day before a fight then he may break a bone. The thought process appears irrational but forms an important part of his PPR. When asked to describe his pre-fight routine, Shane said:

There's nothing particular in what I do in the run up [to a fight] it's more on the night, more the hours before [the fight]. I'm make sure my bag is packed the same for every fight, I have rabbit tails, I have a cross, say my prayers and when John [trainer/coach] tapes up my gloves they have to be in straight lines. The boys at the gym always wind me up and mess with my gym bag because they know how it annoys me. If anybody goes near it, I'm like "don't touch my bag." It's just something I've always done.

Again, Shane has a very specific routine that he does in order to bring peace and calm, but the inclusion of several eminent *good luck* charms sets this apart from a PPR. When asked what they thought would happen if they did not do the same pre-fight routine or did not act on the superstitious behaviours they had previously, the athletes struggled to provide detailed information as it was something they had always done even if the SR had not resulted in a win, as Michael highlights:

It would play on my mind if I didn't do it. I've always put my right glove and shoe on first. I've never changed it and it would definitely play on mind if I hadn't done it. I've always done it the same way and I have lost before but I've never changed my fight routine. When it comes to superstition, it is important I follow my old superstitions, my old ones are more important. I link them to positive associations.

What differentiates the SR above from a PPR is the notion that it would continue to play on Michael's mind if he did not put his right glove and shoe on first. It appears this routine is not

just a habit or an act that helps him to mentally prepare but something that he feels is intricately linked to success.

The Role of Superstition

Generating good luck or avoiding bad luck?

There appears to be a somewhat universal belief throughout the boxing domain that superstitious behaviours are adopted by athletes in order to create good luck. Rory identified that he initially used an SR to provide luck, but he also recognised the use of superstition in the wider fraternity: *‘Fighters mainly participate in superstitions because they associate them with winning most definitely. If they have good luck or do things that they believe brings them good luck, then they’re going to get a positive mind set.’* Shane was also able to shed some light on the concept of using a superstitious routine for luck: *‘I just feel like you’ll have that luck on your side, just that extra little bit of luck.’* Whilst Shane candidly discussed his SR when preparing for a fight and the role the ritual played in promoting luck, he also conceded that an SR can also become a necessity: *‘I feel like they [SRs] have got worse, they become more important, more vital that I must do them. I guess I associate them with luck and winning.’*

Rather than using superstitious behaviours to create *good* luck, Michael discussed how he was consciously aware of applying customary superstitions in order to avoid *bad* luck: *‘I won’t do certain things, like if I was out running or something I would never run over a drain, just the little things you know, it’s supposed to bring bad luck.’*

There has been limited exploration of the function of superstitious behaviour in the literature, with most studies focusing on the outcome of superstitious behaviour. Domotor et al. (2016) suggested that wider research should be conducted to explore the mechanisms for the use of SRs. In particular, the authors suggested that locus of control, dispositional style (i.e., optimism versus pessimism) or individual differences such as personality or motivational disposition may

influence SR use. Motivational approaches such as Need Achievement Theory may provide a framework for examining such functions of SRs. For example, an athlete with a high need to avoid failure may adopt an SR that focuses on avoidance of bad luck or negative outcomes.

Preparation and need for control.

It is widely documented that athletes use superstition as a coping mechanism, particularly if the outcome of the competition is uncertain (Ofori et al., 2016). Boxing provides athletes with a unique sporting environment, where athletes are pitted against one another in order to do as much physical harm as possible. The high level of uncertainty and stressful environment often means athletes turn to superstition in an attempt to provide stability and/or a feeling of control. When asked why he had developed a superstitious routine, Michael said: *‘Why do you do it, I suppose in your head it makes you feel like they [SRs] are paying off, they are just in your head and it makes you feel good, it helps you to prepare for the fight’*. When asked the same question, Zak replied:

‘It [SRs] just helped you know; it helps me cope and when you win you’ve just got to keep doing it. It gives you a sense of confidence, do you know what I mean, and without confidence, I am nothing, I am already beaten. I don’t do anything other than when I’m fighting, all fighters do something, whatever they feel helps, they do.

Zak highlighted that the use of SRs helped him cope and increased his confidence. The notion of superstition providing control has previously been examined (Ofori et al., 2016) and was something that several participants in this study discussed as Mitch explained:

I do it these things because it controls nervous energy and helps me perform well, containing that nervous energy. The hardest thing with boxing is the mental side. Don’t get me wrong, you have to get in really good shape and

you have to be fit but if you don't battle your own demons in your head then you let nerves take over. I think it [superstition] helps mentally and if you didn't do it then it probably wouldn't affect your performance, but it plays in the back of your head and then you don't want anything in the back of your head when you're getting in the ring. Yeah, it's definitely just a control thing.

Using superstitions as a scape goat.

At the time of data collection, Rory had just recently retired from professional boxing and as a result was able to provide a reflective perspective on the function of his SR:

Gradually over time it becomes an obsession and then if you don't do something you think 'oh no I didn't do that' and then you start looking for excuses for your loss and that's when it becomes a negative thing. That's why I lost, instead of looking at the technical aspects of it [the fight]. What changes the outcome of a boxing match is what you do in the ring on the night so if you look at it like that it makes life so much easier. My Dad was sort of a straight to the point and if I ever mentioned anything like that [superstition] he would say "don't talk bollocks".

Having identified that he would use his superstitious routine (or lack of it) as a scape goat when he lost, Rory began to realise that he needed to concentrate on the technical aspects of his fight instead. He went on to discuss how he moved away from using an SR due to the negative impact he felt it was having on his performance:

If superstitions put you in the right frame of mind and it keeps you focussed, then I think that's fine but I think once you cross that line and it starts coming to the point where you're thinking 'oh if I don't do this then I'm going to lose' that's when it's crossed the boundaries because anything up to that point is really just getting you tuned in mentally for a fight. It doesn't

matter if a black cat crosses your path unless you perform on the night you won't win. The harder it gets, the more stuff you look for to give you an advantage and at that point you don't care if it makes sense or not. Before you know it you're doing four or five different things that you think are giving you luck when really, you're occupying your mind with things you don't really need to think about. I had gone through my career winning all the time and all of a sudden I lost my 30th fight, I blamed it on my superstitions, I found an excuse. I realised that those superstitions didn't really mean anything so I just sort of put them to bed and I was so much more relaxed after that. I think once you can shut the door on things like that it makes life so much easier.

Superstitious Behaviour and Religious Beliefs

Praying for a win.

Ofori and colleagues (2016) highlighted the need for future research to address the role of superstition and religious practices and the present study sought to address this gap. Several of the athletes identified themselves as followers of a particular religion or acknowledge that they believed in a God. When the boxers discussed how they applied their religious beliefs to their pre-fight routine, it became apparent that praying formed part of their superstitious routine as Shane highlights:

On fight night, I say my prayers by my bedside before I leave the house for the arena. I say them twice when I get to the arena. I like to get in the ring before anyone's there and just feel the ring out, so you know how big it is and what it's going to feel like. When I am in the changing rooms just me and James [Shane's coach], we always go out and say a prayer where nobody can

hear us. I wouldn't say I'm a very, very strict Christian however I do believe there is a God. I do believe that when we die we go somewhere and do believe that we look after those who do good things for people. I always try and do good; a good deed and I just want paying back in my boxing career. I pray each night, but I only pray close to a fight, although not when I'm fighting [laughs]. I'm guessing I use religion in a weird way. I just think as a boxer and because it's an individual sport and you don't have many teammates you try and look for as much help or as much luck as you can. You do turn to religion; you turn to superstition because it's all mentality and it feels like you have those boxes ticked. It just helps in an individual sport, and it helps your mentality to deal with the situation and upcoming fight.

It appears that the religious rituals undertaken by the participants carry an element of spirituality and faith, often creating greater holistic wellbeing but they are also often linked with superstition. There is debate as to whether superstitions and religion are complementary to one another or whether they are different (Domotor et al., 2016). A fundamental difference between the two is that a superstition may be made a scapegoat for a lack of success, whereas religion perhaps would not (Maransie, 2013). Shane feels that he needs to pray to gain support and assistance from God in order to win. Similarly, Zak links religion with the superstitious notion of creating luck:

I'm Muslim so you know I follow my own religion. I pray, you want somebody to be watching over you because you know anybody is better than just yourself in the ring. It's trying to get the most luck as possible, sometimes it's better to be lucky than talented. I pray to win.

The juxtaposition of religion and boxing.

Unlike the other participants, Rory appeared to have conflicting feelings about his own beliefs and those of other boxers. Whilst identifying himself as a Catholic, he admitted that he attends church less regularly now he is boxing less frequently but he seemed to dislike the idea of others going to church or the praying for luck in order to enhance the likelihood of winning:

I'm a catholic and I have always been brought up a Catholic but I went to church when I was boxing more. I haven't been for a while [to church], routine has took me away from it. A lot of them [boxers] do go to church and are religious but it's for reasons of asking God to sort of help them win the fight, its more to do with boxing than religion or praying to God. You should ask Him to keep you safe, not win. Fighters are not shy about what they do, they just want to win, and you can't fault them for that. That's what they're in it for but religion wasn't designed to pray to God to win fight. It's to help you be a good person and keep you on the straight and narrow and keep your family safe. You know it is what it is, but I don't think most fighters that wear Rosary beads are religious day by day, they just do it for boxing.

The fact that boxing is an individual sport and as the opening quote suggests, a highly aggressive sport, it is difficult to see where boxing fits into Holy teachings. Boxing differs from other forms of martial arts where the focus is often on spirituality and finding yourself. Even though the aims of the sports are virtually the same – hurt your opponent and apply physical force to win, it would appear that in boxing at least, the athletes may have a different approach when utilising religion and/or faith. The majority of the athletes in this study were explicit in their use of religion in order to create luck and/or enhance the likelihood of winning a fight.

Discussion

Superstition is used by athletes on a regularly basis in many different sports and it appears boxing is no different. Boxing is an individual sport that requires the athletes to fight their way to victory, often causing high levels of physical harm to each other, meaning that boxers may look to superstition as a way of trying to control the uncertainty surrounding their fights.

All five athletes were able to talk at length about the role of SRs in run up to competitive fights. Common themes included the use of superstition, particularly in the days/night immediate to competition; the role of religion in creating extra luck and/or enhancing the chances of success, and using SRs to gain control and prepare for the fight.

The present findings support the work of Ofori and colleagues in that ‘superstition may provide some very useful coping behaviours if they are a devoted part of the athlete’s worldview’ (2016: 11). We argue, as long as the athletes view their use of superstition as a constructive coping strategy, sport practitioners should seek to understand the importance of these behaviours more effectively.

The erroneous assumption of cause and effect was clearly evident in all five participants. Unambiguously, after success (typically in the early stages of their career), the athletes had backwardly-chained events together and concluded that the repetition of those events/behaviours before future fights would lead to success (Foster & Weigand, 2006). Whilst the use of an SR may have provided the athlete with a calming mechanism and instilled a feeling of control, there appears to be no rational association between superstitious behaviours and success. It seems clear that the function of an SR may be important, in that some athletes use them to bring good luck, but others may use them to avoid bad luck. This motivational style may be an important factor in how SRs are developed. At best SRs provide a placebo effect but sport practitioners need to be aware of the long-standing nature of superstitious

behaviours, the benefit they can have for many athletes but also recognise the potential for a SR to result in irrational decision making.

The debate surrounding the interaction between religion and superstition has not yet been resolved (Domotor et al., 2016). The boxers within this study linked religion to superstition in terms of using prayer to bring them luck. Devotion to religion did not seem to be a factor in how much the boxers prayed, with some classifying themselves as devout and others as lapsed. It is this faith that perhaps blurs the line between religion and superstition. Maransie (2013) argues that religious rituals are more beneficial to athletes than SRs because they are more holistic in nature and provide more meaning and well-being. This study has shown that regardless of faith, some athletes find prayer helpful as they wanted someone to “watch over them”. This is perhaps due to the nature of boxing, which is inherently painful and carries great risks. Further research could examine the role of religion in combat sports.

SRs clearly provided the boxers with a sense of control over unpredictable events. Many have argued that engaging in superstitious behaviours can help athletes to feel that they have done all they can to influence the outcome of competition (e.g., Brevers et al., 2011; Foster & Weigand, 2006; Domotor et al., 2016). In this way, SRs can act as a coping mechanism if failure occurs and can enhance confidence in the lead up to performance (Brevers et al.). Indeed, athletes in this study reported that using an SR enhanced confidence, but also provided an excuse for poor performance. As such, coaches should be aware of the attributional style of their athletes, in order to help athletes to attribute success to internal, stable, controllable factors (Weinberg & Gould, 2015).

This paper has shown that boxers use SRs in a number of different ways, and these have implications for both coaches and athletes. Most importantly, SRs appear to be used as a coping mechanism. Athletes appear to be aware that there is no rational link between using an SR and the outcome of a fight, yet they use them. This is because SRs provide athletes with a sense of

control and comfort. It should be noted however that the attributional style of the athlete is important. Some athletes may use SRs for positive, optimistic reasons whereas others may adopt them to avoid negative events or as an excuse for poor performance. It is therefore important for coaches to understand their athletes' reasons for using SRs. If the SR is not negatively impacting on the athlete's wellbeing or performance, then it is probably sensible to encourage the athlete to continue to follow the SR. However, should the SR become disruptive to an athletes' preparation for competition or used in a manner that becomes controlling, coaches may need to intervene to help the athlete to adapt his or her behaviour. In such instances, athletes may benefit from using other approaches to competition preparation, such as self-talk, relaxation or imagery. Athletes themselves should also be aware of their use of SRs and should be encouraged to discuss these with their coach. From this study, it can be concluded that SRs can help athletes to feel confident and in control of the situation, however coaches should be mindful of the reasons behind SR use.

We have also shown that religious beliefs may also help athletes to feel calm before a fight. Religious routines such as praying appear to help athletes to feel watched over or protected. This may be something unique to combat sports due to their risky nature. Coaches and athletes should feel able to discuss their religious practices and how they might impact upon performance. Understanding the effect of religious acts might help coaches to support athletes before competition. In addition, religious behaviours may carry more meaning for athletes and they may enhance feelings of well-being immediately prior to competition. Coaches and athletes should therefore make time for religious practices to occur, within reason, before a fight.

In conclusion, boxers use SRs and religious behaviours prior to competition. For the majority of the time, SRs appear to act as a placebo by providing a sense of control over the situation. The dispositional style of the athlete may be important however. Whatever the nature

of the SR, using them before a fight can help with preparation and can make athletes feel ready. Coaches and athletes should also be aware of the maladaptive use of SRs and should work to put other interventions in place should this occur.

Future directions and implications

Whilst this study has provided an insight into the use of superstitious rituals by elite sportsmen, we feel we have raised more questions which warrant further research. Superstitions have been well documented and are extensively used in sport by athletes at all levels, however the role and function of these rituals remains unclear. In particular, previous research typically adopts a positivistic approach. We argue that future studies should consider adopting an interpretivist enquiry to advance the limited understanding of superstitious rituals and their purpose as well as understanding the cultural and/or environmental factors that may lead to superstitious behaviours. The boxers in this study acknowledged their superstitious behaviour began early in the career and such behaviours were commonplace in gyms and training facilities, and as a result, we feel this warrants further exploration.

Furthermore, future research should aim to examine the function of SR use, and the difference between athletes who adopt superstitious behaviours in order to bring good luck compared to those who wish to avoid bad luck. This might be an important distinction to make and may be linked to motivational disposition or optimism versus pessimism. Those who have a high need to achieve or are optimistic may be more inclined to use SRs for good luck, whereas those who have a high need to avoid failure or are pessimistic may use SRs to avoid bad luck. This may have implications for how athletes adopt using SRs and may provide a framework for understanding if these relate to any maladaptive behaviours within sporting contexts.

Finally, attempts were made to understand how superstition is used alongside religious beliefs and behaviours by a small number of professional boxers. However, whilst we

acknowledge the information is informative, it does not allow us to make a stance on the similarities or differences between religion and superstition. Therefore, further research exploring the potential interaction and/or relationship between superstition and religion is warranted.

References

- Brevers, D., Nils, F., Dan, B. & Noël, X. (2011). Sport superstition: Mediation of psychological tension on non-professional sportsmen's superstitious rituals. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 34, 3–24.
- Burke, K. L., Czech, D. R., Knight, J. L., Scott, L. A., Joyner, A. B., Benton, S. G., & Roughton, H. K. (2006). An exploratory investigation of superstition, personal control, optimism and pessimism in NCAA Division I intercollegiate student-athletes. *Athletic Insight*, 8(2).
- Churchill, A., Taylor, J. A. & Parkes, R. (2015). The creation of superstitious belief regarding putters in a laboratory-based golfing task. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 13(4), 335-343.
- Ciborowski, T. (1997). “Superstition” in the collegiate baseball player. *The Sport Psychologist*, 11, 305–317.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Domotor Z., Ruiz-Barquin R. & Szabo A. (2016). Superstitious behavior in sport: A literature review. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 57, 368-382
- Foster, D. J., Weigand, D. A. & Baines, D. (2006). The effect of removing superstitious behavior and introducing a pre-performance routine on basketball free-throw performance. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 18, 167–171.
- Giorgi, A. (2008). Difficulties encountered in the application of the phenomenological method in the social sciences. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 8(1), 1-9.
- Giorgi, A. & Giorgi, B. (2008). Phenomenology. In J.A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 26-52). London: Sage.
- Gould, D., Eklund, R., & Jackson, S. (1992). 1988 U.S. Olympic wrestling Excellence: I. Mental preparation, precompetitive cognition, and affect. *The Sport Psychologist*, 6, 358–382.
- Kerr, J.H (2005) “New Beginnings: A reversal theory view of violence. In Kerr, J.H, *Rethinking aggression and violence in sport*, (pp. 38-45). London: Routledge.
- King, N., Horrocks, C. & Brooks, J. (2019) *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications

- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lahey, B. B. (1992). *Psychology: An introduction* (4th ed.). Dubuque, IA: C. Brown.
- Moran, A. P. (1996). *The psychology of concentration in sport performers*. East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press.
- Maranise, A. M. J. (2013). Superstition and religious ritual: An examination of their effects and utilization in sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 27, 83–91.
- O'Halloran, L., Littlewood, M., Richardson, D., Tod, D. & Nesti, M. (2018). Doing descriptive phenomenological data collection in sport psychology research. *Sport in Society*, 21(2), 302-313.
- Ofori P.K, Tod D., & Lavallee D. (2017) Predictors of superstitious beliefs, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27, 1-12
- Schippers, M. C. & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2006). The psychological benefits of superstitious rituals in top sport: A study among top sportspersons. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36, 2532–2553.
- Smith, B. & McGannon, K. R. (2018). Developing rigor in qualitative research: Problems and opportunities within sport and exercise psychology. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 11(1), 101-121.
- Sparkes, A.C. & Smith, B. (2014). *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health: From process to product*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Todd, M. & Brown, C. (2003). Characteristics associated with superstitious behavior in track and field athletes: Are there NCAA divisional level differences? *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26, 168–187.
- Todres, L. (2005). Clarifying the life-world: Descriptive phenomenology. In I. Holloway (Ed.) *Qualitative Research in Health Care* (pp. 104-124), Buckinghamshire: Open University Press.
- Vyse, S. (2014). *Believing in magic: The psychology of superstition* (Updated edn). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weinberg, R.S., & Gould, D. (2015). *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Womack, M. (1992). Why athletes need ritual: A study of magic among professional athletes. In S. J. Hoffman (Ed.), *Sport and religion* (pp. 191–202), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Zaugg, M. K. (1980). Superstitious beliefs of basketball players. Theses, Dissertations, Professional Paper 3784. Retrieved 31 May 2016 from <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3784>.