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A Fighter's Life

Conceptualizing a Cross-Cultural Research Program

Abstract

The paper conceptualizes a cross-cultural research program on fighters' lives. Within the research context of research on athletes' careers, fighters' (auto-)biographies, disciplinary studies about fighting, and successful aging at work the authors aim at modelling typical life courses of fighters at a maximum diversity. The main data source are in-depth interviews with high- and top-level martial artists and combat sports athletes. Concerning findings, an overview is presented which can be put in the nutshell that fighters' lives are diverse, distinct, and dynamic. Against this backdrop the authors provide an outlook on further research.

Zusammenfassung

In dem Beitrag geht es um die Konzeption eines interkulturellen Forschungsprogramms zum Leben von Kämpfern. In den Forschungszusammenhängen Karriereforschung von Athleten, (Auto-)Biographien von Kämpfern, Studien verschiedener Disziplinen über Kampfsport und erfolgreiches Altern am Arbeitsplatz zielen die Autoren darauf ab, typische Lebensverläufe von Kämpfern in maximaler Vielfalt zu modellieren. Hauptdatenquelle sind biografische Interviews mit Top-Athlet*innen im Kampfsport. Die Befunde führen zur Schlussfolgerung, dass Lebensläufe von Kämpfern vielfältig, spezifisch und dynamisch sind. Vor diesem Hintergrund geben die Autoren einen Ausblick auf die weitere Forschung.

Keywords

Martial arts; combat sports; athletes' careers; cross-cultural approach; biography; in-depth interview

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1 Research Context

The research context is built on four approaches: athletes' careers, fighters' (auto-)biographies, disciplinary studies about fighting, and successful aging at work (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Research context

As for athletes' careers, we refer to the research of colleagues like Dorothee Alfermann, Natalia Stambulova, Tatiana Ryba, and Paul Wylleman. Since years they provide important information on career development, transitions and critical dimensions in which athletes have to proof themselves.

Concerning fighters' (auto-)biographies Rob Jacob (2005), for example, gives an overview in his book "Martial Arts Biographies – An Annotated Bibliography". Disciplinary studies on fighting come from psychology, sociology, ethnology, philosophy and other disciplines – some of them where already presented in the dvsKuK¹ annual conferences. Successful aging at work, interestingly, has a long tradition reaching back to the 1960s (Ouweland, de Ridder & Bensing, 2007) but – as long as we see – are not yet connected to athletes' careers research though there is a large intersection.

Within that context we have two large, important and meaningful studies: Stambulova's and Ryba's (2013) "Athletes' Careers across Cultures" and Channon's and Matthews' (2015) "Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports". Stambulova's and Ryba's work features selected experts from different continents who contributed 18 chapters on the state of the

¹ dvsKuK is the abbreviation for the [Commission of Martial Arts and Combat Sports](#) in the [German Society of Sport Science](#).

art in their countries, to attain a comprehensive integration of knowledge on athletes' careers. Throughout the various chapters the reader is provided with a clear vision of common and differing elements in the reported societies. Channon's and Matthews' book comprises the work of 29 authors on "Women Warriors around the World" who are portrayed in the context of culture, society, gender, and combat sports. From their compilation the editors draw a typology of women's combat sports, which contains the following five groupings of activities: 'combat' workouts; purposive self-defence; competitive fighting; performative combat; and 'recreational' martial arts.

2 Objective, Questions, and Method

Our objective is to model typical life courses of 'fighters' at a maximum diversity: Olympic athletes as well as professionals, any kinds of martial arts and combat sports, active fighters, coaches, teachers, sensei, sifu, bouncers, bodyguards, policemen and -women, soldiers and so on from cultures all over the planet.

And these are the questions we relate to: Why do individuals dedicate their lives to fighting? How do they become fighters? How do they shape and experience their specific life courses? Why do they drop out (if so)? How do they finish and retire? And what comes afterwards? Concerning successful aging we aim at finding out something about the factors that support smooth transitions and preferable post-career developments.

What we currently do is gathering data by using in-depth interviews supported by a guideline composed of the following sources: The Athletic and Post-Athletic Questionnaire, developed by Si Gangyan and Ulf Schmidt and firstly used and published by Zhijiang Huang (2002)², the athletes interview guide by Gläser and Laudel (2010), and additionally approaches drawn from athletes' career studies done by colleagues mentioned before.

Our sample #1 so far consists of 23 fighters, 13 women and 10 men. Among them are Olympic, World, European and national champions with around 125 medals won. Types of combat sports are boxing, fencing, judo, karate, kickboxing, MMA, muai thai, and wrestling. Our sample #2 consists of 75 wushu athletes, 10 women and 65 men, both competing in Taolu and Sanda³, which means showing forms and fighting. We still work on the data of #2, and therefore focus on sample #1 to give a few woodcut-like findings.

3 Findings

Fighters' lives in Olympic combat sports

- start in the family or by chance, are motivated through parents or peers

² Huang describes the APAQ as "developed by Schmidt and Si" (2002, p. 104). Since he does not mention the source, we personally asked his colleague Si about the genesis of the guide. Si in turn received the information from Huang that according to his memory, the questionnaire was adapted from a German study and revised according to Chinese social-cultural background. Schmidt, Huang and Si had some discussion on the questionnaire during Schmidt's visit in China 1999. The questionnaire was firstly used and published in Huang's dissertation (source: e-mail from Huang to Si of 17.10.2018). The guideline is therefore quoted with Huang (2002).

³ Wushu Sāndǎ or Sānshǒu is a martial art which was originally developed by the Chinese military based upon the study and practices of traditional Gōngfū and modern combat fighting techniques; it combines full-contact kickboxing, which includes close range and rapid successive punches and kicks, with wrestling, takedowns, throws, sweeps, kick catches, and in some competitions, even elbow and knee strikes.

- require unbroken success and opportunities to participate at senior competitions at an early age for a smooth transition to top level
- depend on relations with coaches, support by parents and federations, and successful coping with setbacks
- are highly influenced by the chosen second pillar in dual careers
- terminate planned, suddenly or in a creeping process
- lead into a comparably low diversity of lives after sports

We'd like to comment on the second pillar, which appeared to be one of the key factors of career development in amateur combat sports athletes. Within so called dual careers in Germany the second pillar can concretize as academic study, apprenticeship or service in armed forces, police, customs and fire brigade. If athletes chose an academic study or an apprenticeship they have to cope with a double burden which often leads to the decision against their sport, when reason triumphs over passion. If athletes chose to service in armed forces, police, customs or fire brigade, on the one hand they have more or less 100 percent of their time for training and competition. On the other hand, there is almost no vocational training, so when they quit their athletic career they might be left with nothing. Other key factors are higher-level competition experience at a young age, coach, federation, setbacks, and way of coping with career termination (see Behr & Kuhn, 2018). As for examples, we show two figures, one on potential problematic relations between athletes and coaches (Fig. 2), the other on how athletes in different dual careers cope with career termination (Fig. 3).

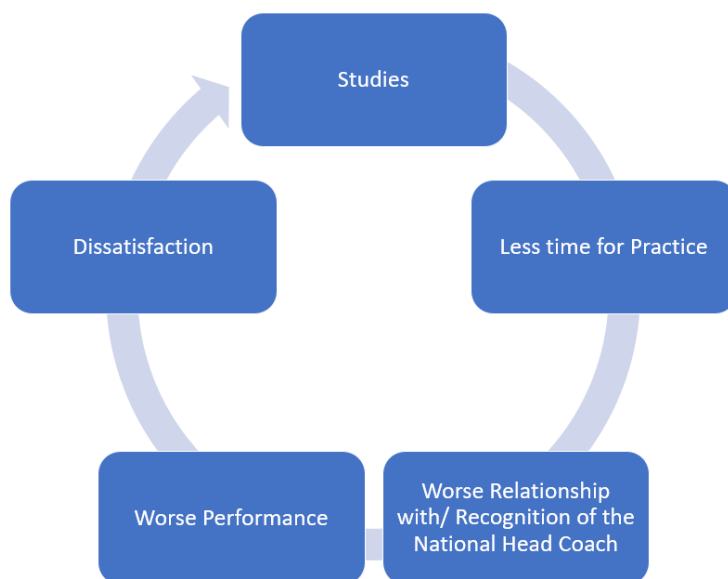


Fig. 2. Vicious cycle of relations between student-athletes and national head coaches

Potentially problematic relations between athletes and coaches become increasingly apparent especially with foreign coaches. If coaches have a different mindset in terms of training, coaching, and fighter's lives, difficulties may be the consequence. Besides comprehension problems due to language, foreign coaches reach their limits due to their unawareness of the German social and sports system with its federal elements. As a result, student-athletes, in particular, who often cannot reconcile study and training, can have enormous difficulties in establishing a relationship of trust with the national head coach and may even have to

fight for the support of the national head coach. In the worst case, this creates a vicious circle in which top athletes turn away from competitive sports (Fig. 2).

Athletes who retired already can be divided into two groups. One group determined a fix point in time for their career termination whereas it was a creeping process for the other group. The last-named group had all been student-athletes who gradually dropped out of sport due to dissatisfaction with their performance and increased importance of their occupational education. Those athletes who determined a concrete date for their career termination mentioned age, decreasing performance, injuries and missing fulfilment as reasons for their decision. Athletes who are still participating in high-class sport can be split into two subgroups as well. One subgroup represents student-athletes whereas the second subgroup consists of sports soldiers. Differences can be reported in the planning of the post-sport career. Whereas student-athletes have a concrete exit plan in mind, sports soldiers want to compete on a professional level as long as their bodies would allow it. While student-athletes are excited about the future without any commitments, the sports soldiers are more afraid of the time after competitive sports. This can be explained by the fact that student-athletes always have to decide between two options they both want to pursue, whereas sports soldiers 'lose' both their profession and passion and have no suitable alternative for the "time after" (Fig. 3).

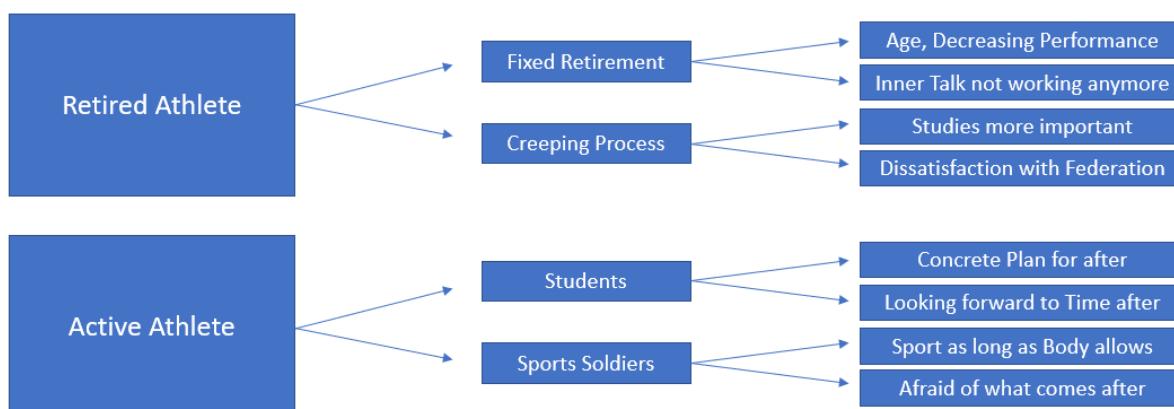


Fig. 3. Career termination in different groups of athletes

Fighter's lives in non-Olympic combat sports sometimes develop 'legendarily' – most of all in women interestingly – are more self-determined and less linear, require the decision to become a professional, and lead into a high diversity of lives after sports. To illustrate 'legendary development' here are three examples:

- Christine Theiss, the world's most successful female kick boxer so far, couldn't get the desired university place in Cologne, but took the offered one in Munich. At that time, she was a German amateur champion in kickboxing but was forced to take a break due to a shoulder injury. Looking for a place to practice in Munich, she popped into Steko's Gym and there, without asking or being allowed, stumbled into the full contact training, where the coach thought his partner had allowed her to join in. Since she was hitting so hard she was instructed to train with the men. After some rounds she was ordered to slow down a bit and they asked her what she's there for.

After the following discussion she was more or less part of the professional team at Steko's (Theiss, Behr, Macht, & Kuhn, 2018).

- Michaela 'Iron Mike' Michl suffered from a chronic disease when studying sports in Bayreuth. In sheer desperation she took a time out and traveled to Thailand. At that time, she looked back on being a wrestler's daughter, a baby on the mat and – later – a youngster in a Taekwondo class. When travelling Thailand, she didn't only want to see the landscape but wanted to get familiar with the culture and, to that end, she decided to learn Muay Thai. Standing at the gym's door watching the coach smashing the hand-pads she got pretty cold feet and was about to leave when she bumped into a girl who immediately asked her: "Are you the newcomer? Hi, nice to meet you!" And Mickey was taken into the gym, introduced to the coach, welcomed by the team and instantly became 'part of the family'. One year later she became a professional fighter and another two years later she won her first World Champion Trophy.
- Mandy 'Monster' Böhm – her story is our favorite – used to be a ballet dancer when she came to know her first great love at the age of 18. He was a mixed martial artist, and she wanted to impress him. So, she decided to become a MMA professional – just because. Now she's ranked second in Germany and 5th in Europe.

4 Discussion

More or less, fighters' lives show the same stages, transitions, and determining dimensions as other athletes' lives. Descriptive models of an athletic career define it as a succession of stages such as the initiation/sampling stage, the development/specialization stage, the perfection/mastery/investment stage, the final/ maintenance stage, and the discontinuation stage of competitive sport involvement (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté., 2009, p. 397) The analytic athletic career model by Stambulova (1994) shows six normative career transitions of an elite athletic career:

- (1) the beginning of sport specialization,
- (2) the transition to more intensive training in the chosen sport,
- (3) the transition from junior to senior/high achievement sport,
- (4) from amateur to professional sports (peak stage, even if not professional),
- (5) from peak to the final stage, and
- (6) the transition to the post-career.

Determining dimensions athletes have to deal with and within which they are constantly forced to make decisions are the academic/vocational, the psychological, the psychosocial, and the financial dimension (Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpič, 2015).

Against this backdrop we found that fighters' lives are diverse, distinct, and dynamic. We borrowed this triad from Ken Robinson (2006) who characterized intelligence by these three features. In combat sports athletes' careers 'diverse' means that – even though all athletes pass through the same stages and transitions – there's a high variety of different life courses. 'Distinct' means that – despite the comparability of their careers – athletes have to find their very special individual way to get through and to cope with challenges. And 'dynamic' means that combat sports athletes' careers are constantly developing, and there's almost

no predictability while ups and downs are chasing each other. Two aspects may help to explain these findings. One of it is that fighters can and may even want to change their type of sport – from karate to kickboxing to muay thai for instance. Another explanation could be that fighters sometimes think about becoming professionals or not – as the German wrestlers did not long ago when some of them decided to found the German Wrestling League – which is a league for professional wrestlers.⁴

The last-mentioned finding and its interpretation inspired us to our first new question: Which factors influence the decision between staying amateur and becoming professional?

Some other potential new questions could be:

- Dual careers vs. professionalism – How to consult young athletes?
- Are there natural born fighters and, if so, what kind of features are characterizing them?
- Where are the thresholds between justwonnafighters, sensation seekers and borderliners?

5 Conclusions and Outlook

Our conclusions are quite simple, because we have everything researchers are longing for – except money.

What we have is individuals to talk to, topics to dive in, and methodological knowhow. So, what could we do now? We could, for example, build a team of researchers around the world, show each other what we already have, start research about comparing combat athletes' careers from different countries and continents; especially Africa, as we know very little about the role martial arts play in African societies. We could also find collaborators in specific interests, such as bouncers or ex-bouncers. Moreover, it seems worthwhile doing content analyses on fighter's (auto-)biographies. Last but not least we could try to work together on gaining funds and grants – and there's probably even more we could do. What we are doing over here is applying for a research fund on 'Athletes' Careers in Olympic Combat Sports' – so keep your fingers crossed!

⁴ See <https://www.ringerliga.de/>.

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