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Sport Science, Mental Skills Training, and Ethical Dilemmas: Cultural Imposition on Irish Traveller Boxers' Norms - An Opinion Piece

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Abstract: Fighting and boxing have long been central to Irish Traveller and working-class cultures, where success brings respect, bridges divides, and offers economic opportunity. As sport has embraced science—from biomechanics and conditioning to sport psychology—boxing has adopted these methods. However, cultural values such as individualism and stoicism, particularly prominent in Irish Travellers, may clash with how sport psychologists and performance (integrated) support teams manage and address performance, motivation, and anxiety. This opinion piece explores that tension through Weber's concept of rationalisation, highlighting how some groups resist dominant norms. We argue that framing Western sport psychology as superior imposes external values and risks overlooking the unique strengths of these communities—such as resilience, self-reliance, and entrepreneurial spirit—which are deeply embedded in their approaches to combat sports and personal success. Because of this, we contend that coaches and support teams working with boxers from Irish Traveller heritage should embrace and adopt these strengths, and in so doing adopt an ethical approach that enphasises a duty of care to participants that appreciates their culture.

Keywords: social class; motivational climates; masculinity; stoicism; integrated support teams; sport coaching

Introduction

Whilst the current landscape and understanding of sport and performance is relatively ubiquitous (certainly within developed countries) in a structural and existential sense, it does, however, perhaps override/overlook certain subcultures, ethnic minorities, and even, perhaps, individuals' personal agency. This is exemplified by the increasing formalisation of integrated support teams (ISTs) in performance sport, which, while invaluable in terms of organisational management and providing multidisciplinary expertise, can inadvertently marginalise alternative ways of knowing, valuing, and achieving performance. This is especially true in terms of understanding cultural specificity, lived experience, and relational knowledge that extends beyond institutional norms.

It is in this context that our opinion piece argues that, certainly in the milieu of performance coaching within boxing and combat sports, there is an overreliance on scientific and cultural standards. This overemphasis can overlook the individual values and cultural traditions athletes bring to their training, whether in boxing (Angelova–Igova, 2016), other sports that rely on, for instance, culture, community, and camaraderie (Crisp, 2016a, 2019a), or contexts like youth sports and talent identification, where rigid adherence to scientific models might overlook the personal and cultural dimensions of athletes (Crisp, 2019b). In our opinion piece, we outline how the aforementioned personal agency, different milieus, and socio-cultural contexts, as well as individual habitus and social, emotional, psychological, and thus motivational climates, need to be acknowledged from both an understanding of cultural imposition

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and Weber's process of rationalization. As proof of our concept/argument, we outline the use of Mental Skills Training (MST, where mental techniques/strategies are used to improve performance) and imagery (a specific MST that involves mentally rehearsing skills and performances) within the sport of boxing. We use the context of boxers from areas of social deprivation and the Irish Traveller community in particular to posit that the use of a deontological ethical framework is apt in not just acknowledging individuals and different cultures, but also in how it could support performance through fostering specific (although non-conventional) motivational climates. The use of boxers from socially deprived areas, and particularly from the Irish Traveller community, serves as a rhetorical, conceptual, and evidential context to illustrate how the imposition of sport psychology may conflict with deeply held values of individualism and stoicism inherent in Irish Traveller traditions, and for working-class individuals, whose personalities may have been shaped by unique socioeconomic factors and self-reliance.

To achieve this, our opinion piece is structured as follows: first, we explicitly detail the scope and nature of the paper as an opinion piece to contextualise and justify the evidence base and overall approach. We then outline a brief history of sport and sport coaching, as well as how both are perceived in Western societies today, before focusing on imagery. The opinion piece then presents the kernel of our argument in that we query the use of imagery (in performance sport) in the context of cultural imposition on certain groups (more specifically, the Irish Traveller community). We then frame this opinion piece as an ethical dialogue and present our argument that sport coaches (and ISTs) should adhere to a deontological framework in their management, one that prioritizes moral principles over results in and of themselves. All told, by arguing that imposing Western ideals on these communities overlooks their unique strengths, particularly in combat sports and individualism, the paper explicitly illustrates, through the context of ISTs, how 'management' can incorporate cultural diversity within organisational practices.

It is important to note that, as an opinion piece, we do not present a formal method section. However, the work is not *method-free*; rather, it can be understood more broadly as the intellectual and rhetorical approach we employ to formulate a deliberate, reasoned stance in constructing and justifying our perspective. Specifically, we draw on a selection of historical and cultural evidence to support our argument, and we frame this discussion conceptually through a combination of two lenses: firstly, a Weberian perspective and secondly, ethical reasoning informed by both deontological and utilitarian frameworks. Crucially, as an opinion piece, the paper does not have a delineated set of 'findings' and subsequent discussions. Instead, it integrates an argument-driven, evidence-informed perspective throughout, culminating in the use of the aforementioned conceptual frameworks to frame a recommendation for the use of a deontological approach for coaching boxers from an Irish Traveller background.

The development of sport and sport coaching

Sport is considered a significant part of modern societies, and a perennial tentpole in terms of international competition and national pride, economic contributions, and a variety of wider social policy initiatives (for instance, health promotion, inclusion, community integration, etc.) (Coakley & Pike, 2009). At a more granular level, many participants in sport benefit from improved health (physical and mental) and interpersonal connections, and fans or consumers of sport can profit from a sense of community and purpose (Jones, 2006; Lyle, 2002). Certainly, at the level of fandom, the onus is on the consumption of elite or performance sport (Crisp & Bright, 2021; Giulianotti, 1999), and it is here that our understanding of sport and sport coaching needs to be historically contextualised, as it essentially provided the genesis for sport coaching in modernity as a whole. Whilst records show sport, indeed performance sport, within ancient societies (i.e. the Greek games), the transition of sport from folk games (traditional, local games with unwritten, simple rules, and regional variations) to modern sport (with formal, written rules, and eventually national and international

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standardisation of rules, equipment etc.) only took place during and post-industrialisation within the UK (Day, 2011; Holt, 1990; Maclean & Pritchard, 2008).

Admittedly, there were some elements and aspects of professionalism and commercialisation evident within British society before 1851, when the UK census showed that for the first time in history**,** more people lived in towns and cities than in the countryside. This milestone is often used to mark the shift to an urban, industrial society**.** These were notably in prize fighting – professional boxers, horse racing in the late 1700s and early 1800s (with paid jockeys), and the fact that even in the 1700s admission was charged to watch some cricket games' professional' players. (Birley, 1999). Yet the consensus of understanding is that the emergence of formal, codified sports came through a combination of time and space constraints effected by urbanisation, a concerted effort by the English Public School system to use sport as a means to control and motivate student populations, and – once established more so in the general populace – made popular through the press and travel and competition, facilitated by the development of railways) (Holt 1990).

Indeed, the shift from recreational activities to performance and the consumption of sport as a leisure activity and core and ancillary businesses and enterprise, can be seen in the rapidly professionalised Football League in England through the late Victorian and Edwardian eras (Hargreaves, 1986; Holt & Mason, 2000; Mangan, 1986). Here, then, the use of coaches to support sporting success and subsequently the financial success of clubs and new enterprises led to the development of game tactics and training for performance enhancement and skill development (Giulianotti, 1999). In an era that had already established sport as a worldwide phenomenon following late 19th-century British Imperialism (and the diffusion and spread of 'modern' sport that this brought), this approach was accelerated after World War II.

This was achieved through the establishment of national coaches for sports in the UK, as well as the systematic and scientific approach that the Eastern Bloc sporting system developed in the 1960s. This system, in part led by international comparisons and competition, led to archetypes of coaching and performance development based on scientific principles that widely permeated contemporary sport, both practically and in terms of a wider public consciousness and understanding (Riordan, 1978; Shneidman, 1979). Admittedly, international success was also attributable to individual pressure and political will, i.e., the best facilities available, rational selection and early talent identification systems, and the exploitation of athletes, such as through the state-sponsored doping programme in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Riordan, 1978).

Yet whilst the widespread investment in sport science and principles such as the Soviet maxim of Anthropomaximology (a Soviet term that aggregated and conceptualised an approach to maximizing human performance in the sporting realm) (Kuznecov, 1979) has diminished somewhat, in much part due to the reduced spend in international sport by previous Eastern Bloc states since German reunification and the breakup of the Soviet Union (16. Sport And Ethics: Between Public, Civil And Private Logics[1], 2009), their impact remains and the influence of these ideas endures. To be sure, these broader beliefs about sport performance persist today and are consistent with much of the academic literature on sport coaching, as well as the way contemporary culture both conceptualises and reports the discipline (Crisp, 2016b; Robinson, 2010).

Importantly, whilst some aspects of sport coaching are considered an *art* (Nash & Collins, 2006; Nash et al., 2011), particularly in terms of expertly and intuitively iterating between craft and tacit knowledge, as opposed to just adhering to the more formalised approaches of sport science, contemporary conceptions of sporting performance and the

enduring role of sport psychology in understanding human nature, inevitably persist across contexts.

From Weber to Anthropomaximology: Rationalisation and modern approaches to sport science, Mental Skills Training (MST), and imagery

Weber's concept of rationalisation helps outline the aforementioned shifts to production and the promotion of science within sport (Guttman, 1978). Observing the manner in which modern capitalism and the Calvinist (a branch of Protestantism) doctrine of predestination and wealth creation contributed to more rational-ascetic values and thus, to behaviours that favoured efficiency and capitalism, Weber's central thesis was that the shift from pre-industrial behaviours and beliefs (i.e. magic) to a more scientific culture could be explained through the process of rationalisation (Huddleston & Crisp, 2025; Rojek, 1999). Indeed, the rationalisation of sport post-industrialisation (as outlined above) essentially shifted sport from a freer, more playful (if also at times dangerous and brutal) form of recreation to one that epitomised performance.

If we combine Weber's Calvinist systemic view that frames performance, discipline, and efficiency as rooted in individual values and beliefs, and thus subsequent responsibility and rational organisation, with the aforementioned Soviet and Eastern Bloc approaches to sport science and *Anthropomaximology*, which were focused on maximising human performance through collectivist, state-driven, and scientifically rationalised systems we can reveal a dual foundation for understanding modern sporting performance. In doing so, it becomes evident that modern conceptions of sporting performance can be explained by both the individualised, ethically-infused rationality highlighted by Weber and the systematised, scientifically-driven approach developed in the Soviet and Eastern Bloc sporting context.

One widely acknowledged consequence of this, then, is the manner in which conceptualisations of sport coaching rely heavily on the disciplinary subsections of psychology, nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, and, to a lesser extent, more specialised, ancillary roles such as strength and conditioning (Crisp, 2016b). It is within this paradigm, specifically in the context of MST and imagery, that our opinion piece aims to discuss how the perennial and overriding empirical evidence base is, in fact, biased (with Western-centric values) and operates in a *culturally impositive* manner. This is evident in the way certain social groups are abstracted from their social context, which we discuss in detail after briefly summarising the rationale behind MST and, more specifically, imagery.

Essentially, MST refers to an aggregation of various psychological techniques/skills that enable athletes and sportspeople to perform more efficiently or closer to their maximum potential. Examples of MST include the use of attentional skills, stress management, pre-performance routines, imagery (visualisation), goal-setting, and self-talk, all carried out intending to positively impact factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and ultimately, performance (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). As mentioned, in this opinion piece we use imagery as the lens through which we posit that (at times) there is an overreliance on scientific and cultural standards within performance sport, certainly within the framework of imagery (sport psychology), combat sports, and participants from socio-economically deprived areas or particular cultural groups (in this instance, the Irish Traveller community).

However, we must emphasise the point that there is a broad body of work and empirical evidence that highlights how imagery is considered to be an integral tool and technique within sport psychology (Davies, 1989; Martens, 1991; Smith & Wright, 2008). To illustrate this point through an example, the work of Hall et al. (1990) in a questionnaire administered to 381 athletes across six different sports demonstrated their thoughts on the importance of imagery. Moreover, in another self-reported study, by Cumming and Hall (2002), 70-90 percent of elite athletes declared that they use imagery for improving

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their sport performance. The manner in which visualisation can improve performance is fundamentally through rehearsing activities; indeed, the neurophysiological response occurring during imagery is considered to be very similar to the neuromuscular response occurring during movement in sport (Livesay & Samaras, 1998; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). In other words, if one is to close their eyes and visualise performing a sports activity (for instance, something like a tackle in a collision sport), then the neurological pathways that are engaged will be similar to those in real life, thus supporting further performance (Mizuguchi et al., 2012). As Troy Dumais, an American Olympic diver, stated: "If you can see yourself hitting a dive, the chances of you hitting a dive increase greatly" (Peak Performance Sports, n.d.).

In addition to these rehearsal strategies, evidence strongly suggests that visualisation builds self-confidence by enabling athletes to see themselves demonstrating mastery of techniques (Moritz et al., 1996). Moreover, when athletes complete hard training sessions, it can give a sense of achievement, further invigorating this sense of mastery (Burton & Raedeke, 200Consequently, the intrinsic motivation of the athlete will increase, as this has been repeatedly shown to be conjoined with emotional factors such as confidence (Simonsmeier et al., 2020). Additionally, regarding relaxation, imagery is also established as an effective tool for reducing anxiety, for example, before an important competition. For instance, to calm nerves and ensure the best performance, athletes could/should visualise a minivacation where they would feel calm and comfortable as vividly as possible (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Conversely, yet still centred on effective execution of tasks, imagery can be used as an energisation technique to increase arousal and adrenaline levels before performance, by visualising previous positive experiences (i.e., a competition where the athlete experienced low levels of fatigue and demonstrated a high level of skill) (Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

Furthermore, imagery can be utilized when a performer reflects on a previous performance to facilitate and underpin the required improvements. For instance, athletes can visualise themselves fixing an error in their performance or imagine themselves undertaking different strategies during the game to be more successful next time (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). On the contrary, just because skill is not executed successfully, this does not mean imagery cannot be used to benefit the athlete, as imagery can also be used to increase muscle memory and solidify blueprints of skills that are already performed well (Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

All told, whilst MST and imagery cannot be used as a substitute for physical training in high-performance contexts, and some studies rely on self-assessed measures, the evidence still suggests they provide meaningful supplementary benefits. This is in the way they can be used in a complementary fashion to mitigate anxiety, reinforce training engagement (motivation), and support the development of skills and tactics (Pocock et al., 2017). There are, however, areas that remain underexplored, particularly in how practitioners seeking to use MST must respect and integrate individual and cultural values, internal psychological processes, and the lived emotional experiences of participants. While the wider interplay of various sports and cultural contexts could be further examined, this opinion piece seeks to address part of this gap by focusing on the role of social class and ethnic origin, which are discussed in the next section.

Cultural imposition: The exceptionalism of social class and Irish Traveller heritage, and avoiding bias

Despite the considerable amount of evidence supporting the implementation of imagery for athletes and how sport coaches can (and do) promote it to improve performance, there seems to be a lack of research regarding how social class and ethnic origin may impact the use and subsequent effectiveness of imagery. For example, it is probably fair to say that many articles based on imagery are inevitably focused less on the broader population in general and more specifically on participants in performance sports. Moreover, certainly within the UK context, it has been repeatedly found that class and

ethnicity influence sport access (Collins & Kay, 2014), and perceptions of sport science may be skewed through historical exclusions from formal institutions, such as talent identification and developmental pathways (Crisp, 2019c), and subsequent mistrust. It is also not a reach to consider that socioeconomic barriers may preclude some from accessing expensive sport science resources, leading to a tendency to downplay the role of external supports in favour of personal effort or community support.

Therefore, an argument could be made that imagery instructions may only enhance performance in athletes of higher social classes, as Richardson (1987) found with regards to imagery and memory performance; as our opinion piece sets out to detail, this means that coaches must be aware of potentially imposing their own cultural beliefs at the cost (or potential clash) of the beliefs of those in their charge. Whilst this may seem counterintuitive, inconsistent with, or contradictory to existing evidence, the fact remains that some individuals from certain social classes and ethnic groups actively denounce the use of sports science. For instance, current WBC lineal heavyweight boxing champion Tyson Fury, who grew up in a lower-class background and is of Irish Traveller ethnic origin, has some strong opinions on sports science in boxing, claiming that he "doesn't do any of that b*llocks on the computers and stuff, yet I always win" (JOE, 2021).

Fury's statement quite clearly reveals a distrust of sport science and modernity, and yet also rather undoubtedly clearly manifests his self-belief and individualism. These convictions and dispositions are not exceptional in the Irish Traveller community; in fact, they are far more reflective of their beliefs, rules of conduct, and moral codes. Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller communities comprise a diverse range of groups that are considered a distinct population from mainstream society. Often categorised together, whether in Europe or Britain, they profess a nomadic way of life, and often experience disadvantage, persecution, and marginalization, The Roma trace their origins to northern India and migrated across Europe, often facing persecution such as (for the Rona) during the Holocaust. Whilst Irish Traveller history is somewhat debated, genetic analysis shows Irish Travellers have Irish roots, yet they share the aforementioned similarities in their nomadic lifestyle (Gilbert et al., 2017).

More specifically, in the context of this paper, Irish Travellers move around the British Isles and Ireland (Colm, 2004). They are recognised as an indigenous minority in both north and south Ireland (Loftus & Fitzpatrick, 2012) and the UK (through the census category 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller'). Members of the Irish Traveller community face discrimination, and families and 'kinship' are highly valued and form the bedrock of much of their social groupings and behaviours. Indeed, many in the Irish Traveller community suffer from lower life expectancy than the general population (Abdalla et al., 2013), and the culture as a whole celebrates and reveres masculinity, stoicism, and physical strength. The Irish Traveller community, more specifically, demonstrates particular social mores and archetypes that promote religion, entrepreneurship, and bare-knuckle boxing as a particular form of demonstrating and establishing cultural and individual prowess, pride, and status (King & O'Riordan, 2019). It is here that we can see how their long tradition of prize fighting and bare-knuckle boxing is underpinned by a range of individualistic, entrepreneurial, and masculine traits (Woodward, 2014) that prize heroism, 'hardness', and bravery as ideal models and exemplars, and virtuous pursuits (Howarth, 2024).

In a similar manner, boxing culture as a whole draws upon many migrant communities and those from socio-economically deprived areas, in much the same fashion and understood as such, offering an opportunity to fight their way to success in both amateur and professional codes. Examples of the manner in which professional boxing has been and continues to be seen as 'savage' include the promotion of many boxers' outbursts of threats, such as Mike Tyson's ring antics (including the ear biting incident vs Evander Holyfield) and outbursts such as threatening to eat Lennox Lewis' children (Lewandowski, 2007). To be sure, there is a longstanding history of boxing within

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popular culture and mainstream media representations that overwhelmingly project what can only be construed as the 'rags to riches' story, representing how poverty and adversity can be overcome through boxing success. Indeed, it is easy to draw light upon the venerated way in which brutality, violence, and stories of overcoming poor life chances are celebrated in boxing media and even wider cultural fare, such as the Rocky movies (Crisp & Bright, 2021).

There is an incongruency, then, as evidenced above by Tyson Fury's antipathy towards sport science, in expecting those from communities that prize entrepreneurship and heroism so highly to accept help from others outside of their community. This is particularly difficult in a domain (boxing, combat) that in so many ways illustrates their masculinity and validates their status. This is because, in essence, their moral and ethical frameworks are underpinned by the foundational concepts of individualism and supporting others, and accepting others' help in the context of 'fighting' would demonstrate weakness.

'Fair Play', honour, and how sport coaches and ISTs could influence motivational climates

Quite clearly, these violent, yet rules-based, bareknuckle fights have held prominence in their culture for an extended time and have been performed across generations. They continue to create space wherein masculinity constructions are fettered by both symbolic and real demonstrations of potential or real brutality. Indeed, the in-group violence and aggressive conflict evident in the history of Irish Traveller communities who laud and use bareknuckle fights are theorised in a number of ways, including developing human moral ways and communities, and thus seen as both a way of exalting braveness as well as maintaining social equality (through challenging bullying, or culturally incongruent behaviour) (King & O'Riordan, 2019).

This cultural background, then, is central to internal Irish Traveller relations (Scott, 2016), contributes to identity constructions that favour grit and individualism. No doubt their desperation to succeed (an admirable trait in their communities) overrides the need and desire to use imagery etc., particularly as it may adversely affect belief systems of agency and intrinsic desire ('I can do it on my own, I will do it on my own'…) and even certain community group traits, i.e. Irish Traveller' hardness', that would sit at odds with their constructs of heroism, bravery, and resilience.

Indeed, the Irish Traveller concept and system of 'Fair Play', whereby bare-knuckle boxing, as a long-standing tradition that settles disputes (something crucial to a community that distrusts the Police and the criminal justice system), is entirely based on an honour system and rules, including referees, that framework the fights (Leahy, 2012). Outside help (bar the tradition of using boxing coaches), or performance-enhancing drugs (Crisp & Sims, 2019), would be frowned upon in this way. Certainly this concept of 'Fair Play', added to the spirit and dispositions of individualism, and exacerbated by the fact that men from Irish Traveller backgrounds are wary of admitting weakness or illness and their (lack of) help-seeking behaviour is curtailed by constructions of masculinity (Abdalla et al., 2013; Hodgins & Fox, 2012) would very likely further stop any idea of having others (i.e. sport psychologists) help them.

The work of Patel et al. (2016) illustrates how bare-knuckle boxing and fighting are culturally celebrated, yet seeking support for health-related problems is considered a sign of weakness. Indeed, the disproportionate mortality of male Irish Travellers includes a six to seven times higher than average suicide rate (Kennedy et al., 2023), demonstrating the manner in which they refuse outside help. From a coaching perspective, then, seeking to ask boxers from an Irish Traveller background to use imagery for sport/boxing could quite easily be classed as a means of cultural imposition, when one culture (mainstream) seeks to impose and force their practices and beliefs onto another. Moreover, there is an added complexity that needs to be disentangled – the

fact that young Irish Travellers often celebrate the careers of and aspire to be champion pugilists in their locales (History of Bareknuckle Boxing, n.d.).

Whilst we acknowledge that there is not a concerted, overt effort by boxing coaches to culturally impose science-based practice on young boxers from these communities, the fact remains that navigating the England Boxing (formerly known as the Amateur Boxing Association [ABA]) developmental pathway necessarily incorporates adhering to the sport and exercise science elements of boxers' progression and elite selection. Considered the most effective 'apprenticeship' to eventual professional status, and a highly popular route for travellers (Smallwood, 2013), whilst this avenue and the features within it cannot be contested, it is difficult to see where negotiation (where the cultural dimension could be integrated) and individual choice (framed by cultural expectations) can take place.

As mentioned, however, the Irish Traveller community does allow, appreciate, and foster coaching in and of itself. And it is here that, from an academic perspective, the concept of motivational climate for coaches could be helpful. Motivational climates are the psychological climates that coaches create to support athletes, using tasks and mastery, and/or ego and performance (Kiss & Nagy, 2024), and motivational climate for elite athletes is often used to describe how support systems and people (coaches yes, but also team-mates and others) can act as positive mediators of motivation, i.e. coaches who look to foster and support individualised psychological needs (Keegan et al., 2014).

The nuance here however is that it is the coaches and ISTs, not 'sport psychologists' per se (who would in all likelihood be ostracised or rejected by many in the Irish Traveller community for the reasons this opinion piece has shared), who would facilitate this motivational climate – and given that the very nature of any 'climate' in this regard would be to influence motivation levels positively, then coaches from non Traveller backgrounds who work with Irish (or other) Travellers (something that boxing coaches and experts do, and is accepted) could, and we argue should, embrace the positive aspects and unique fighting dispositions that many Irish Travellers embody and promote them above any need for 'imagery' or sport psychology.

This is not least because efforts to intervene with tools and techniques that have been developed (and labeled) under the banner of sport science are likely to meet resistance from Traveller communities, who would be predisposed to finding them incongruous with their own cultural view of sport. Examples of this are outlined in Figure 1, which provides a schematic depiction of the differing/incompatible pathways to performance between the traveller community and sports science-based approaches. The apparent incompatibility between these two domains is rooted in each side's belief that their approach is the correct way to develop and train the individuals participating. Rather than try to argue which of the coaching tools or cultural viewpoints on the sport is "right" or "wrong", it may be more advantageous to consider where science-based coaches could intervene without dampening the embedded norms of the Traveller communities. While this opinion piece does not claim to offer a succinct solution to the issue, we suggest that viewing it as an ethical boundary, rather than a technical one, may provide some alternative pathways where a resolution or agreement can be found.

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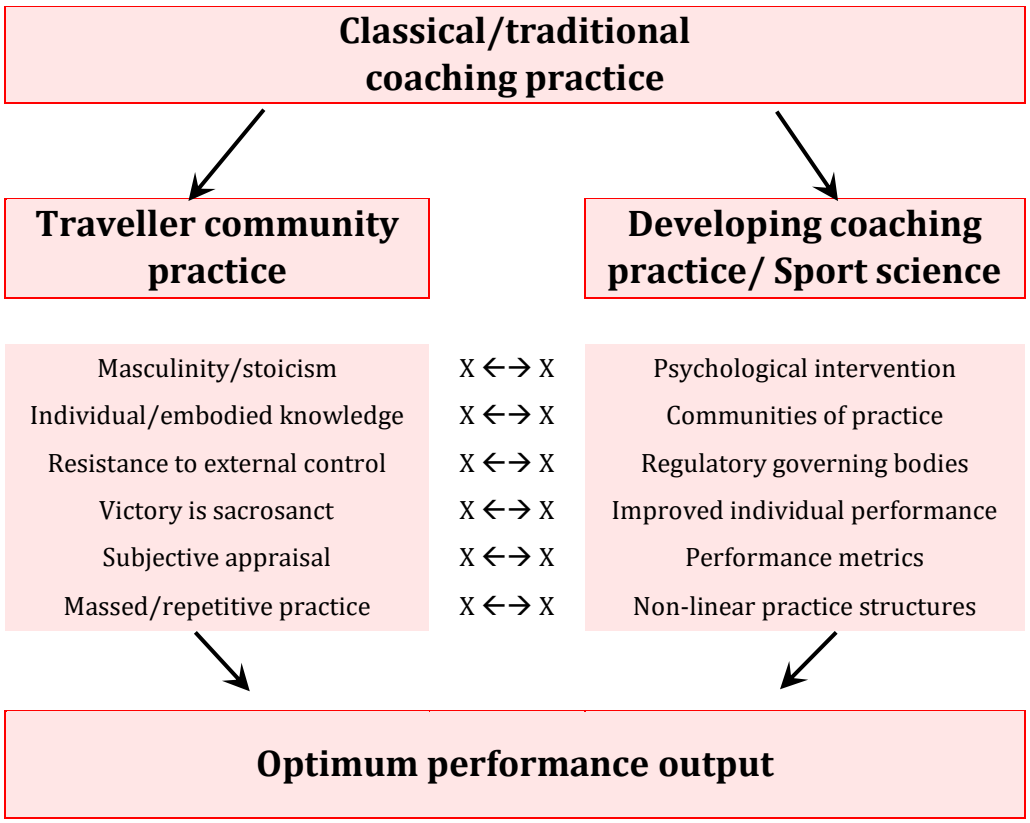

Figure 1. Schematic depiction of the differing/incompatible pathways to performance between the traveller community and sports science-based approaches

Deontology and utilitarianism

This opinion piece is then, in many respects, an ethical argument in that it could be construed as an ethical dilemma to be overcome – should the needs of the individual and their beliefs and culture be overridden by what is seen as the most rational and productive means of ensuring victory? In more specific terms, this is a question of whether individualism, stoicism, and the rejection of outside psychological help (as seen in Traveller culture and dispositions) should be overshadowed or ignored by coaches who continue to espouse psychological help and 'sport science'. This ethical dilemma can, in fact, be framed within the context of philosophy and an existing understanding of sport ethics – and here we posit that the deontological and utilitarian frameworks are particularly apt in articulating the problem at hand.

The deontological framework takes the position that moral principles must be prioritised over results in and of themselves, and that unethical means should not be justified or undertaken (Conway & Gawronski, 2013; Huddleston et al., 2024). On the other hand, the utilitarian framework, posits that when all factors are considered, it is the approach with the largest net positive outcome that is the ethical choice (Gawronski & Beer, 2017; Huddleston et al., 2024), although assigning a value to each factor is fraught with subjectivity and disagreement. In many regards, using this framework aligns us with an idiosyncratic ethical dilemma, in that there are two competing taxonomies that encapsulate discourses related to how behaviour, psychological function, and wider motivations and ethical approaches should operate. One (deontology) seeks to apply and balance an absolutist duty of care to participants through conceptualising what is right and wrong, whilst the other (utilitarian) establishes worthy objectives and relative value based on what is undertaken and the results therewith (Huddleston et al., 2024).

The ethical tension here, we believe, can and should err on the side of avoiding any cultural imposition and respecting the beliefs and dispositions of Traveller fighting men, particularly when placed in the context of youth and children, thus favouring a deontological approach. This promotion of a deontological approach is particularly apt, even more certainly so when considering the complexity of how many young people in Irish Traveller communities are strongly encouraged to follow their cultural norms related to fighting. The complexity is illustrated in much part by the fact that on the one hand Irish Traveller culture denotes adulthood at a younger age than wider society - with, for instance, lower leaving ages for school and younger marriage ages that account for six times as many Irish Travellers married between 15-29 years old compared to the general population (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023).

Yet, on the other hand, Irish Traveller youth are also still categorised as young by the UK legal system. There are also ethical issues related to how young Irish Travellers are expected, by their families, to uphold traditional values and their roles within their communities. Indeed, intergenerational conflict and the concerns of elder Irish Travellers and parents are seen to limit young Irish Travellers' contact with those from mainstream backgrounds, something that boxing coaches would need to be well aware of, at the very least, in terms of acknowledging cultural differences (Loftus & Fitzpatrick, 2012). Thus, a deontological approach, from a position of avoiding discrimination and operating in a more inclusive Irish Traveller practice for young people, recognises history, culture, customs, behaviours, and is thus more befitting. As a practical necessity, then, integrating this cultural dimension into the organisational management of ISTs and coaches becomes not only an ethical imperative but a gateway by which meaningful and equitable engagement can take place.

However, in promoting this deontological approach, while we acknowledge and support the fact that cultural differences are ethically sound, we also posit that this approach could possibly contribute to enhancing performance. Despite the at face value contradictions of sitting at odds with evidence-based practice, it (deontology) is in fact a more nuanced application that considers, and prioritises, motivational climate and personal agency, and individual motivations.

In essence, if we were to apply the utilitarian framework to an established empirical overview of imagery, it would indeed be (as we have set out to prove) culturally biased. However, it may provide the highly valued, victorious outcomes that those communities hold dear. However, it would also omit the very real and culturally distinct psychological schemas that Irish Travellers (and, to an extent, some others from socio-economically deprived areas) already have embedded and that are ideally suited to combat sports. Within those communities, individual victories, achieved through various coaching interventions, may (in the moment of each one) outweigh an encroaching loss of identity and culture. Given the preciousness of that culture, coaches adopting a philosophical and ethical approach for those with Irish Traveller heritage competing in combat sports should emphasise a deontological approach, thereby preserving the particular sovereignty and cultural identity of each individual, as well as potentially optimising their performance without compromising their beliefs.

Admittedly, where a deontological approach has been employed to explain our central thesis that the imposition of certain sport science pillars – specifically the use of sport psychology – may contrast with cultural traditions and individual psychic processes within the Irish Traveller community, using it (deontology) to explain and preserve the *identity* and *ideality* of their culture requires some careful application. This includes, but is not exhaustive of, the need to flesh out some of our previous statements related to how a utilitarian approach may well complement the interests of athletes (for instance, successful performance leading to increased financial and social success). Moreover, we also acknowledge that some notable shifts in traditional Traveller norms and conventions are taking place in more 'settled' communities, and those with Irish

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Traveller heritage; and, indeed, the Irish Traveller culture is – along with much of the rest of society – evolving and responding to broader societal shifts. Notwithstanding this, however**,** we promote the idea that a reflexive awareness of a deontological approach can support cultural identity and traditions, and also clarify how, in doing so, the relationship between evidence-based practice and maintaining a moral (ethical) imperative can be upheld.

Conclusion

As this paper has outlined, imagery has a large body of literature and a significant amount of evidence to prove that it enhances performance. This body of work and broader understanding has been thoroughly reviewed on multiple occasions and has now extended to a widespread understanding as being an essential part of a conceptual set of tools (Hardy et al., 1996; Weinberg & Gould, 2019). It has been demonstrated to increase self-confidence and intrinsic motivation (Moritz et al., 1996; Simonsmeier et al., 2020), as well as allowing athletes to improve their arousal levels to optimise their performance (Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

Nevertheless, more research needs to be conducted in lower-class athletes to see if this effectiveness translates to a wider population. Indeed, our opinion piece has used the context of Irish (and others) Traveller communities, as well as some from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, to illustrate the way in which the traditional manner of understanding the rationalisation of society and the 'scientification' of sport has, and despite the overriding empirical evidence nonetheless, omitted certain groups whose cultures do not necessarily adhere or would form party to parts of these processes.

Weber's process of rationalisation is helpful here, not just in outlining 'how' the development of sport can be conceptualised, but also as an instrument by which we can identify how the process can be seen to have 'missed' certain subsections of society. To be sure, and as we have outlined, in the context of applied coaching a problem persists - if coaches and ISTs were to insist on some of these 'scientific' practices with people from certain communities and backgrounds, particularly those related to sport psychology, then they may well be met with defiance – and also actually end up with results counterproductive to what they intended to achieve. Indeed, in summarising the paper as a whole, it has highlighted paradoxes of uniformly seeking to apply **s**ystematic and scientific approaches to training to some Irish Travellers who may prize **i**ndividualism and stoicism over outside help, in particular with admitting anxiety or mental health issues, which underline key tenets of sport psychology. Avoiding cultural imposition, then, and fostering a motivational climate based on existing social norms, has both ethical and potentially outcome related benefits.

We acknowledge that, while this paper draws from a large body of literature and knowledge base pertaining to Irish Traveller and others' cultures, this is an opinion piece and not a study per se. We are also very aware that there is a significant nuance in our proposition, in that whilst the evidence seems to strongly suggest that, 'psychological help' would be seen as antithetical and a weakness to Irish Travellers, there is also the possibility that many Irish Traveller fighting men may already use elements of MST and imagery, perhaps not presented or operationalised as such, but nevertheless similar and part of their culture. Indeed, even manifesting beliefs such as how they will 'knock out' their opponents demonstrates a relation to more widely accepted MST principles. It would also be disingenuous to assume that all Irish Travellers would not accept help from sports science (and MST in particular). Indeed, professional attitudes, personal beliefs, age, support systems, etc., would all contribute one way or another to the extent to which individuals would likely integrate or accept support. Older athletes, perhaps less susceptible to cultural constraints and pressures, might eschew traditional approaches and instead embrace sport science-related support. Future research could explore all of these areas, more firmly establishing the cultural relevance of MST and

related disciplines for Irish Travellers and other groups who have historically been underrepresented in sport science research, thus potentially identifying (through foregrounding their voices and experiences) the interface between their cultural perspectives and values, and possible practices and co-creative approaches that might contribute to a more inclusive use of MST.

Nevertheless, at the very least - as we have argued – there is a moral dilemma for (boxing) coaches and ISTs to consider in terms of expecting all of their participants to be able to use certain elements of sport psychology, and at the same time a benefit to be had from recognising the unique exceptionalism evident in Traveller communities that can lead to a positive motivational climate for combat exponents with that heritage. If nothing else, in terms of practical implications, coaches and ISTs should consider educational initiatives, research, or training that raise awareness of cultural values and norms evident within Traveller communities to help integrate MST and other training in ways that respect individual autonomy and community identity. To conclude, we posit that a deontological approach for those coaching (and the respective management teams and ISTs) boxers from Irish Traveller heritage, one that promotes human autonomy, sovereignty, and individualism, would allow coaches to more fully recognise both a person-centred approach and also avoid ethical issues related to cultural imposition.

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