

MCYS Blog

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Street corners and boxing rings

Frank Bruno the former British heavyweight champion once said of boxing “it is the toughest and loneliest sport in the world”. Some may agree with Bruno, whereas others would argue that the sport is one of kinship, loyalty, and brotherly love. Indeed, a peek into a boxing gym across the U.K would demonstrate to the viewer a space crammed with young men (and increasingly women), kindly sharing and bonding over the pugilistic Olympic sport that has been around since BC 688. Seen as a site of change, both physically and mentally, boxing has long been viewed as a sport that not only attracts and repels in equal measure, but also has the potential to harness young men and redirect them away from a life of crime. All we have to do is open a newspaper, or listen to a famous boxer, explain how with out boxing, they would either be in jail, or more likely dead (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/boxing/article-2705995/Tyson-Fury-admits-without-boxing-hed-dead-man.html>). All this considered boxing is a pretty contentious sport.

Loic Wacquant (2004) a famous sociologist and ethnographer, believes that one cannot understand the relatively closed world of boxing outside of the human and ecological context in which it is anchored. He refers to boxing as a complex and ambivalent sport, and that the gym defines itself as both a harbinger of positive change, as well as being in symbiosis to the “neighbourhood and grim realities of the ghetto” (pge 17) that it resides. Without over dramatizing, Wacquant argues that the boxing gym is a shield against the temptations and dangers of the street, and discusses how the gym offers itself up as “an island of stability and order”, therefore assisting with the sometimes chaotic and complex lives of those that attend. For my PhD research I was also interested in the complex nature of this phenomena, how does boxing- if at all- harness young people? And does it have the potential to divert them away from crime?

Undoubtedly, boxing is attractive and appealing to young men, it provides opportunities for them to accomplish masculinity (Messerschmidt 1993) in line with desired ideals, as well as allowing for the crafting of the male physique that most young men aspire to achieve. It also provides a safe space for young men to hang out in, as well as providing opportunities for these men to generate social capital through sporting achievements and training ventures. It further acts as a site of male bonding, evidenced by various films and literature dedicated to the sport. One has to only look at the plethora of films championing boxing as a way out of familial and socio-economic difficulties; Rocky, Fat City, The Fighter, to name but a few. However, does it contribute towards a process of desistance from crime for these young men? In other words, can the sport offer more than a site whereby young men achieve trophies, garner friendships and escape the realities of socio-economic hardship?

The answer is two-fold. Evidence collected over the course of my PhD, pointed towards the appealing nature of boxing being among the positives listed above, however, there are some concerns relating to what boxing actually teaches young men. It is fair to say that boxing teaches young men discipline, dedication, and respect, nevertheless, it also teaches them how to fight. Now I'm not saying that every boxer uses their skills to fight outside of the gym, but what I am arguing, is that more attention needs to be paid to those that do. The lessons learnt in the gym, while conducive to theories of change in classic desistance literature, Control theory (Hirschi 1969) being one of them, do not account for the fact that the attachments/bonds fostered within the gym environment may be criminogenic. My recent research http://www.academia.edu/11955240/Howard_League_of_Penal_Reform into this phenomenon actually highlighted that while boxing is great at incapacitating young people during periods of peak youth nuisance, or when they may otherwise be involved in criminal activity, the messages transmitted and inculcated in the gym are not always beneficial to a reduction in violent attitudes and youth crime. My data highlighted that hyper-masculine discourses such as those that advocate for *fighting through pain, no pain no gain*, and words such as chicken to emphasise cowardly behaviour as opposed to warrior and gladiator to emphasise bravery, arguably contribute towards behaviours that view violence and dominance as a practical solution to a problem. This is not to say that all boxing gyms or combat sports are conducive to violent crime, but the messages transmitted within these sporting environments need to be explored and addressed in a more systematic way.

To conclude, boxing is a great 'hook for change', to quote the criminologist Peggy Giordano (2002), and offers a myriad of opportunities for young people across the board. It provides a place to hang out, a space to generate social and cultural capital, as well as incapacitating young people when they otherwise may be involved in crime. However, we have to approach with caution in regards to some of the messages being transmitted in the boxing gym, messages that reinforce negative elements of hyper-masculine sports. These messages are ones that exclude females, promote homophobia, and speak to particular discourses that are familiar to those that could be heard on the street. Indeed, these are discourses that advocate for violent retaliation in the name of respect, and those that encourage young people to view violence as a solution to a problem unrelated to sports. With that said, boxing has come a long way, we have seen females compete in the Olympics for the first time in 2012, and we have excellent education programmes that employ boxing as a way to engage with those deemed 'hard to reach' <http://fightforpeace.net/> So while Bruno may be right; boxing maybe the toughest and loneliest sport there is, it is also a sport that has vast amounts of potential to engage with the younger generation, and therefore provide safe spaces to combat the toughness and loneliest that young people may face outside of the gym walls.

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Hirschi, T (1969) *Causes of Delinquency*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

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Wacquant, L (2004) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, New York: Oxford University Press