

They didn't know whether to "fuck me or fight me": An ethnographic account of North Town boxing gym

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Boxing is - to borrow Goffman's terminology - 'where the action is', a universe in which the smallest of actions becomes 'fateful', which is both exciting and problematic for the individuals involved (1967: 174). Referring to my recent ethnography conducted in an inner-city boxing gym in the north of England, this chapter illustrates core observations from fieldwork in the 'North Town' boxing gym, and reflexively comments on the intricacies and personal relationships of the men in this social world. During the six months that I spent in the field of amateur and professional boxing it became increasingly evident that the gym was an important, exciting, and valuable space for the men who attended. I therefore reflect on the appealing nature and social hierarchy of boxing for the men in this study, and discuss how the gym seemingly offers routes into employment while providing status-affirming attributes for those who attend. Secondly, I examine how the structured activity of the gym environment has the potential to promote desistance from crime, by detaining and incapacitating men when they may otherwise be involved in criminal behaviour.

Drawing on classical ethnographic research techniques (see Hobbs 1995; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1996), I aim to give a strong experiential sense of the physical and social environment in which this research was situated, and of the role I played in shaping it. I aim to recreate and illustrate the habitus¹ of these men and bring alive their social world and subjective stories. Having previously worked in youth

¹ This being a set of socially learned dispositions, skills, and ways of acting that are often taken for granted, and which are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life

offending services for close to ten years I became particularly interested in how sport was being used as a vehicle for change via a diversionary activity that was being promoted to young men who found themselves constantly in contact with the youth justice system. Seeing the same young men return on a weekly basis led me to believe that ‘nothing works’ (Martinson 1974), and overcoming this cynicism became increasingly difficult. I became determined to find out why this might be the case, and therefore applied for PhD funding to explore the reason why young men seemed keen to take up the sport of boxing, and also why the authorities deemed this to be a good idea. Moreover, I wanted to understand if and how the sport of boxing could potentially contribute towards a process of desistance for young men, and whether or not it influenced the way in which they viewed and understood violent behaviour.

The basic question for any qualitatively oriented researcher is to ask how one can represent the viewpoints of the subjects he or she studies, and how to comprehend the production of social reality in and through interactive processes. In this research I sought to understand how members of the gym related to one another and what interactive processes formed their mutual understandings. In short, I was interested in the ways in which ‘legitimate’ (celebrated) violence was constructed, how it was viewed, and how it was practiced and rehearsed by men who boxed. Furthermore, I was interested in whether or not the collective and subjective meanings of those who participated in boxing contributed towards a process of desistance from ‘illegitimate’ (criminalised) violence.

In exploring these ideas I employed an ethnographic approach. This method has long been viewed as an effective and sophisticated technique for analysing social worlds from the ‘inside’ as it starts from a theoretical position of describing social realities and their making (Adler and Adler 1987). A common feature of ethnography is

participant observation and I relied upon this method to observe the climate and habitus of the boxing gym. It is the job of the ethnographer to gain access to people's everyday thinking and interpret their actions and social worlds from their point of view, therefore, adopting this method assisted in my quest to understand what the gym meant to these young men and their trainers, and also how the relationships formed could potentially influence motivations and behaviour in and outside of the boxing ring.

This method further allowed me to observe the boxers in their natural setting, while encouraging me to stay close to the field and the world it represents. More importantly, it allowed me to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts from the data collected, specifically those that related to my research ideas mentioned above. Accordingly, the theoretical framework of both ethnographic research and grounded theory assisted in the unpicking of actions and meanings for these men, and therefore allowed me to explore what elements these men assigned to specific actions. Additionally, it facilitated my understanding surrounding the culture of the boxing gym, and also, how the inherent discourses of competition and masculinity potentially transposed into the wider community when men left the premises.

Gaining Access to North Town

Woodward (2004:4) posits that: 'Men's boxing gyms are very difficult to access for women', however, previous work experience in the field of youth work gained me access to these arenas as former colleagues acted as gatekeepers. According to Coffey (1993:94) the sponsorship or use of gatekeepers in gaining access to the field 'is the

ethnographers best ticket into the community', and these were essential components in the research.

Previous ethnographies in boxing gyms have mostly been conducted by men acting as participant observers (Beattie 1997; Sugden 1996; De Garis 2002; Wacquant 2004). In fact, the small amount of boxing research that has been conducted by women (Woodward 2008; Trimbur 2009) has generally been non-participatory and focused on issues of race and ethnicity. My research, while technically non-participatory, was actually that of someone who 'hangs around', a 'researcher-participant' (Gans 1962), therefore, I did seek to embrace the overall culture of the boxing gym as I felt this was important to maintaining access and understanding the lives of these men.

Sugden (1996:201) argues that: 'It is only through total immersion that she or he can become sufficiently conversant with the formal and informal rules governing the webbing of the human interactions under investigation, so that its innermost secrets can be revealed.' While I acknowledge the benefits that 'insider' status can provide, I would also argue that full participation is not tantamount to producing knowledge and, as such, I am inclined to concur with Morgan (1992:87), when she states that: 'Qualitative research has its own brand of machismo with its image of the male sociologist bringing back news from the fringes of society, the lower depths, the mean streets', and further align with Wheaton (2002) when she suggests that very few ethnographies of boxing acknowledge gendered identity as part of their research, highlighting that maleness often passes unquestioned in these particular environments.

Notwithstanding, it was imperative that I was viewed as someone who played an active role in the gym, and I soon discovered that small amounts of participation were crucial to developing trust among the participants. Accordingly, I decided to dress in

sportswear and assist and participate in the day-to-day activities of the gym. It was during these participatory moments that I was able to forge relationships with the men, as they appreciated the effort I had made to understand their social world and the importance that the sport had to their lives. Indeed, it was during the holding of the pads/participation in light sparring, or by sweeping the floor that I was able to schedule interviews and negotiate access to their lives.

Before commencing the interviews I ‘hung around’ the boxing gym for a period of two weeks. I became familiar with the faces in attendance and spoke informally to many of the men who seemed curious by my presence. I began by interviewing the trainers as I felt it important to begin with those who ran the gym because boxing gyms have strict hierarchal structures and the trainers and professionals are classed as being at the top. It was important to be respectful to the cultural standing of the gym members and begin with those deemed to be most experienced and influential. This was a wise move on my part as other men began to follow suit after the trainers had already been interviewed, as they reported feeling ‘safer’ about talking to a researcher once the trainers had ‘checked me out’.

Most of the interviews were conducted during the day at the boxing gym, as the evening sessions were very crowded and noisy. Most men wanted to train hard and I did not want to stand in their way (literally and figuratively), therefore I organised the interviews around their training schedules and often met them after their lunchtime workouts. The changing rooms proved to be a good place for the interviews to be conducted as they were away from the ring and the deafening sound of the bell. Furthermore, the showers were housed in a different section and this allowed me access without worrying about breaching the men’s privacy. The majority of the men were responsive and found my research intriguing, whereas a few declined to ‘go on

record' but would offer me vignettes and anecdotes of their lives and boxing careers. I wrote most of these down, and incorporated them into my thinking and field-notes. These short accounts, although not on tape, offered me a chance to think deeper about my subject area and helped build a rapport with the men whose social world I had immersed myself in.

Reading books and boxing magazines helped increase boxing knowledge, as the men would often test my understanding of the weight categories or terminology used in the sport. Hence, I was able to follow the trajectory of the interview naturally as the men discussed prior champions they had defeated, or boxing techniques that they had employed in winning. I soon became a known presence and on a first name basis with gym trainers and members. They began to allocate me boxing tasks such as becoming the 'spit bucket' holder as the men spat their gum-shields into a bucket after a bout. The holding of the bucket and the passing of hand-wraps and gloves became second nature after a while; all the time offering either congratulations and condolences to bruised faces and egos, as the men often left the ring either dismayed or elated. All of this was recorded, jotted down, and memorised as I attempted to blend into the ethnographic background.

As a result of this immersion, I began to understand the gendered experience of the research context, and more importantly, how my involvement shaped the production of knowledge.² As Denzin (1989:27) has argued, 'There is no such thing as gender free knowledge' as gender is a significant factor in the research process (see also Presser 2005). Woodward (2008) argues that the sexualised positioning of a female researcher in hyper-masculine arenas such as boxing gyms is highly significant. In her

² I acknowledge that race and ethnicity does also (See Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2004; Trimbur 2009 for further discussion), but due to space restrictions I have focused mainly on my gendered experience

research, Woodward consciously adopted a subject position that was neither threatening nor complicit in masculine discourses finding the 'maternal figure' to be the most successful research persona.

Joyce Carol Oates (1987:73) states that a, 'Female boxer cannot be taken seriously - she is a parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous, and had she an ideology, she is likely to be a feminist.' This resonated with me in the context of my fieldwork, as I identify as a feminist white gay woman. I suffered sexist remarks on several occasions, and while my aim was to remain as asexual as possible this did not always prove to be successful, as one boxer stated that he did not know whether to 'fuck me or fight me'. Accordingly, a sense of distancing had to be established, as my distinction as a researcher was further constituted as an outsider particularly in terms of my class, race, and sexuality.

In total I interviewed 13 participants. Most of these were professionals - or retired professionals - at least, and were therefore serious about their sport. I spoke with nearly every member of the gym, spending significant periods of time in these men's company over a period of six months, and through the taking of ethnographic field-notes - what Emerson et al (1995) refers to as 'jottings' - an understanding began to develop. These jottings helped to shape and illuminate the particular themes in this research, and this proved to be invaluable in the analytical stages of the enquiry as they helped me to reconstruct interactions, discussions, and the general characterisation of the order of events. Furthermore, by taking extensive field-notes, I was able to recall first impressions of settings, ideas, people, relationships and elements of interaction.

The use of Biographical Narrative Interviewing (Wengraf 2001) proved very successful after a period of trying out a few different techniques. Using this method, and particularly the opening statement of: 'Tell me the story of how you became a boxer', initiated a dialogue that most men appeared to be comfortable with. The use of this particular method allowed the men to be more open regarding the nature of their stories, and some disclosed that they had 'never told anyone this before' whereas I sensed that this may have been due to the fact that nobody had previously cared to ask. In certain interviews, I felt upset at the trauma and violence experienced by some of these men, as stories of familial abuse as both victim and perpetrator jarred me, and at one point a respondent broke down as he relayed his story of manslaughter involving a fellow boxer. At other times I felt objectified by the male gaze and angered by men's often-profound misogyny.

Reflexivity from a narrative position scrutinises the researcher's process and examines how power relations are attended to both within the relationship and in the construction of the narratives. Presser (2005:2070) argues that: 'Cross gender studies of men generate unique concerns about research practice', and from a feminist perspective this argument is well known. I align with Presser, when she argues that cross gender studies simply bring the processes of gender accomplishment into plain view, as I observed men using the research situation as a further opportunity to accomplish their masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000); telling me stories of masculine accomplishments involving violence, virility, and status affirming exploits. However, I acknowledge that there is no final version, and my narrative representation and interpretations are only made possible through interpretative readings. Hence, the narrative accounts presented in this study do not resemble every boxer, nor do they resemble every man. In short, they resemble a collection of life stories. Yet, by

interviewing and facilitating the construction of these men's narratives I was able to discern and analyse what violence, masculinity and desistance meant for them, both collectively in the gym environment, and subjectively in their everyday lives.

Meeting “The Boys”: The Gatekeeper’s Introduction

I first met Rico my gatekeeper, when he arrived at a youth project I was managing as part of my time as a youth offending worker. He was recruited as a member of volunteer staff for a local mentoring project I was involved with, but overall, his disposition reflected that of the client group we worked with. He admittedly referred to himself as “street”, and said that volunteering, as part of this mentoring project was his last chance to “get out” of a troubled lifestyle. According to Rico what “saved” him was boxing. He had turned his back on gang violence after seeing his friend killed in a fight over “something stupid to do with drugs and money”. After witnessing this shooting, Rico was determined to do “something else”. The local boxing gym - North Town- overlooked the estate where Rico lived, and the boxers could often be seen ‘road running’ around the park adjacent to the housing estate and gym. “Knowing a few of the lads in there”, Rico crossed the busy road that separated the housing estate to the gym that would become his “life and love” for the next ten years.

Rico and I became colleagues, and over the course of three years of working together we became friends. As we were professionally tasked with designing diversionary programmes for young offenders, we started discussing the possibilities of boxing as a tool for reducing illegitimate violence. When the project ended, as funding dried up under a shift in government policy, Rico went on to train as a fireman. Regardless, we

kept in touch as he said that if he was ever in “need of a reference from someone who ‘got him’” then I was to be his “go to” for this. Ironically, Rico ended up being my ‘go to’ as the idea of boxing as a diversionary activity never left my sights, therefore, Rico was the first person I called when I needed access to a boxing gym.

“Meet me by North Town at 1pm and I’ll introduce you to Marcus and Eric” said Rico. He was excited by my idea and was willing to facilitate the introductions to North Town’s trainers and owners- “his boys” as he often referred to them. When I arrived Rico was already waiting for me outside, “how’s it goin’ Deb?” as was often his greeting when we worked together. We embraced and then walked towards the steel door that was the downstairs entrance to the gym. Rico did not knock nor ring any form of buzzer, “they don’t hear that shit anyway, what with the music and the bell”, thus, he merely pulled out a bank card from his pocket and slid it in between the lock and the door frame, as the door sprung open we laughed and went inside. As I climbed the stairs I started to feel anxious, the gravity of the situation began to sink in, even though this was just a boxing gym in the town I grew up in, I realised that I was about to meet the men that Rico had spoken to me about when we worked together, the same men that he grew up with; those that “changed his life for the better”.

Anyone who has walked into a boxing gym will know that it is an immediate assault on the senses. From the deafening sound of the bell instructing men to change posts from either sparring to bag-work or vice versa, or the loud music inevitably competing for space among the shouting and the rhythmic pummeling of flesh and leather. The smell is naturally one of body sweat, but intermingled with this is the faint smell of Vaseline, blood, and glue from the hand-wrapping tape. It is distinctive and indicative of most boxing gyms nationally and internationally. Necessarily, there is a weighing scale in the corner near the ring and more than likely there will be at

least one mirror close by. The apparatus are fundamental to the boxing gym as they reflect the hard work; the hard bodily-work of the men in attendance, and an orderly queue is often forming at various times of the day, as men check their weight against their fighting category- heavyweight, lightweight, bantam weight etc. The mirror is a celebratory or commiserative reflection of a pugilist's craft. "The mirror does not lie" according to Simon the professional light middleweight, and indeed, it represents the male boxing ego in its full glory.

The male boxing ego forms the fabric of the space, and the essence of physical competition pumps through the veins of the men. Conversations focus around this, and the gym is littered with posters and motivational quotes spurring on the boxers. Those with highest social status are the professionals, and among this elite group, the number of belts accrued and defended takes centre stage in the daily flow of conversation. Most of the professional's photographs sit alongside fantasy characters such as Rocky Balboa, or Raging Bull, and I often wondered whether men like Marcus, Simon, Frank, and Ricky saw themselves as action figures or movie stars. To introduce some of these men would allow a fuller picture to develop, and I will interrogate and present snapshots of their narratives of appeal and persistence/desistance throughout this piece. Initially however, they came as a group, the group of men waiting to meet me at the top of the stairs in North Town gym.

"Yes Rico man", Marcus proclaimed as he grabbed Rico's hand and quickly enacted some form of complicated hand gesture that ended with a bumped fists. "Touch" each one of the professionals said as Rico went along the group and bumped fist with Eric, Simon, and Frank. "This is Deb, who I told you about, she's safe", as I was introduced to the men by Rico. Unable to remember, or more likely through fear of embarrassing myself, I refrained from 'touching', and merely raised my hand in a

hello gesture. I explained why I was there, the aim of my research, and sought their permission to come and ‘hang out’ at North Town. It was immediately evident that Marcus called the shots, as everybody turned to him to provide the answer. “Sure, if you’re a friend of Rico’s then we trust you” Marcus answered. However, he needed additional reassurance that I was not a “fed” (police). I told them my history of youth offending work, and how Rico and I had always wanted to explore the possibility of boxing being used as a tool in the reduction of violent crime. “I’m telling you, boxing works!” said Eric, the others nodded in agreement, as Frank proclaimed that without boxing he would most certainly “have not made it”, stating jail or death as the alternatives. Simon professed that “boxing saved my life”, as Marcus chimed with “yeah man, before boxing I’d never been nothing, never seen nothing, was nothing, you know what I’m saying?” Looking to me to nod in agreement with each of the men’s sentiments.

It became clear quite quickly, that these men believed in boxing as a tool to reduce violent crime, and crime more generally, as they spoke wholeheartedly about its desisting and “life -saving” properties. I was excited to get started and told the men that I would be back on Monday with consent forms and an enthusiastic attitude, as Rico beckoned me down the stairs of the gym and out into the community that I was to live within, love, and better understand over the course of my six month ethnographic fieldwork.

First Day ‘on the Job’

Monday came around and at roughly 6pm that evening I arrived at North Town gym on my motorcycle. I parked it next to the entrance and stood with the men as they

waited for Marcus to arrive and open the shutters that protected the door. A black BMW car pulled up alongside my motorcycle and Marcus got out to let us all inside to train. “Nice bike” said one of the younger amateurs as I entered the gym, and a part of me felt relieved that I was visible - someone had actually noticed me - as most of the men initially ignored me or gave a sideways glance that seemed to infer that I was not supposed to be there. Women are not commonly seen attending boxing gyms, at least not in North Town. Indeed, during my time there I never once saw another female, nor were there any facilities such as women’s changing rooms or toilets. I initially identified as a PhD student researching boxing and men’s understanding of violence, however, this position was not proving fruitful as nobody spoke to me on that first night, and I found myself edging closer towards the periphery as I sat on a stack of mats next to the ring watching the amateurs and professionals hit the bags and each other. As a result of this, and an ensuing fear that I would not be able to collect any data, I decided to come back the next day dressed to participate. As Monaghan (2006:235) attests, “all fieldwork is dependent upon the researcher’s bodily insertion and participation in a sometimes emotionally charged social world”, hence, on Tuesday evening I climbed the stairs of North Town dressed in sport shorts, running shoes, and equipped with an attitude telling me that I *could* and *would* succeed.

“You decided to train then?” Marcus stated as I walked through the door. I felt foolish for a second but took a deep breath and told him I could do it. Regardless, some men, particularly Marcus were not as enthusiastic as I, and expressed their disapproval quite openly. “I’m not getting in the ring with a girl”, shouted a younger amateur as we lined up to spar, and one other older professional refused to hold the pads for me as I tried to ‘partner up’ and practice drills. Others were curious, and had no qualms in

partnering up, or indeed sparring with me, as it enabled them to use sport as a terrain for testing, proving, displaying and enhancing masculinity (Connell 1990).

Blinde and Taub (1992a: 38) have argued that: “women who display athleticism are perceived to be challenging the boundaries of femininity”, and when Derek the older amateur proclaimed that I was “not your average girl” it solidified this very point. When I asked Derek what he meant, he stated that: “most girls don’t ride motorbikes, and get in the ring with men”. Being female and participating in a male dominated environment was certainly challenging, and at times I was more than aware of my gender positioning and sexuality. Yet, I found that my own experiential knowledge of violent youth culture as a result of my working class upbringing, older boxing-brother, and youth work experience allowed me to ‘gender-cross’ more efficiently.

Hobbs, O’Brien and Westmarland (2007: 28) in their work on female working-class bouncers state that: “pragmatic knowledge is a deeply embedded aspect of working class life, a distinctive form of consciousness geared towards embodied performance”, therefore, I was able to adapt and embed myself in the “quintessentially masculine habitus” (Wacquant 1995a: 234) of boxing, and share a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990:62). In some respects I drew upon my habitus of ‘working class femininity’ (Skeggs 2004) to occupy and negotiate my continued access in the hyper masculine environment of the boxing gym, and construct an “alternative femininity” to confirm my gender as pure situated accomplishment (Mennesson 2000:56). This in turn helped me better understand the habitus of the boxing gym, while inhabiting a precarious space at the intersection of sexuality, race, femininity and class.

Identifying as a gay woman was something that I never openly disclosed to these men. I felt that this information was not appropriate for this setting, and more than likely

would become salacious gossip, or further reason for the men to create distance between me as a female researcher in their homosocial world of male pugilism. Goffman (1963) suggests that the control of personal information is the key to identity management among people labeled as deviant, which my lesbianism most certainly would have been in this environment, and as Blinde and Taub (1992a: 11) further identified in their research into homophobia in sport, “concealment of information, deflection of characteristics perceived as harmful, and normalization of the stigmatized behaviour is used to manage the lesbian label”.

Accordingly, my sexuality and gender positioning was blurred and confusing for the men in this study, and as I became a known presence in the gym, men often wondered: “how my boyfriend felt about me being in a gym with all these half-naked men?” I had to negotiate my way around such questions with tact and care, and most of the time I just laughed, as I found this to be the most useful defence mechanism in guarding my privacy and maintaining my access. In the main however, the men accepted me, Rico had ‘vouched’ for me after all, and as I started showing my face each week and asking how their kids were? Or ‘who won at the weekend?’ The men started to refer to me as Deb as opposed to “that girl”.

Boxing’s Appeal: Physical Capital and Social Hierarchy

The majority of the men involved in this research invested heavily into the sport of boxing. Professional trainers, professional boxers and various amateurs said boxing symbolised - to them at least – much more than a place where you went to punch a few bags and ‘let off steam’. For others, boxing was an ancillary activity to a career in the nighttime economy, providing the physical capital needed to guard the pubs and

nightclubs in a metropolitan city. For some men, the boxing gym was simply a place to come and hang out; constructed as a neutral space that remained a place of safety no matter what was happening in the community outside. Indeed, Wacquant (2004:31) referred to boxing gyms as 'islands of stability and order', in that they 'protect an individual from the street' and 'act as a buffer against the insecurity of the neighbourhood and pressures of everyday life'. In short, he believed that boxing gyms helped to regulate men's lives when disorder and delinquency threaten it, and this seemed to be the case for a significant amount of men in my sample, as those who grew up in the surrounding community disclosed how the gang-violence that engulfed the area was 'left outside the gym doors for us to pick up after training!'

Others spoke of the boxing gym as they would a lover and discussed the sensual and erotic appeal of pugilism; disclosing how the smell of sweat, and feel of skin contributed towards the seduction of the sport:

Once you get the boxing bug, you got it for life I'm tellin' you, you walk up them stairs and you can hear the music and it turns you on, gets your blood pumping, you can smell the sweat and gloves, I love that feeling. (Derek 32 years old amateur).

This is indicative of Stephen Lyng's (1998) concept of 'edgework', whereby participants combine the exhilaration and momentary integration of danger, risk and skill in the experience of boxing, and the physicality required to participate seemed to only add to the appeal. Most certainly, the physicality required to invest in the sport was a huge draw, as men honed their bodies into either moneymaking machines or defensive structures, mainly in pursuit of employment in the security industry or the professional boxing circuit.

Bouncers and professional boxers were at the top of the hierarchy in the gym, and this was quite evident in the way the gym functioned. It was not very often that those with professions such as these, had to queue for equipment or want for a parking space outside, and this was due to the respect and prestige placed upon them as a result of earning a living from the crafting of their physicality. The men in these superior positions also did favours for gym attendees, such as guest lists for nightclubs and ringside seats, therefore the regular attendees behaved in ways that maintained the bouncers and professional's exalted positions, and this hierarchy was clearly well established. Moreover, it became quite clear early on in my fieldwork, that this hierarchy was based on physicality and the participant's capacity for violence, whereby those with the highest rate of physical capital had the most power. Professions that supported or employed physical capital in the day-to-day occupations that the men inhabited merely contributed towards this omnipotence, as they existed in a habitus within which violence is a normal part of everyday life. Thus, the boxing world came to be seen as a site where implicit rules of physical capital and masculine accomplishment governed its smooth running, indeed, it was seen as a place of excitement, male companionship and ruthless violent competition, and all these factors contributed towards its appeal.

Most of the men I spoke to had a personal reason for participating, whether this was getting fit and/or losing weight, or because boxing was classified as their 'life'. Others perceived themselves as contributing to, or overcoming some form of social, economic, or academic barrier, and Simon, one of the successful professionals I spoke with, proclaimed that boxing, 'Proved I was capable of doing something, that I was worthy of something'. One of the other men, Ricky, believed that boxing was a 'good

thing to channel into' and 'if you haven't got anything to put your aggression into, it goes elsewhere - thieving, fighting or robbing'.

Simon in particular was a popular professional and many of the younger amateurs were keen to be associated with him. His posters dominated the walls, and he came from a lineage of boxers, as his father was also a professional in his time. Simon was referred to as 'junior', and the mantle of his father's success was something Simon felt he had to live up to.

"My dad was a boxer wasn't he? A good one too after he stopped pissing around as a journeyman. He turned his life around when he quit drinking and focused on boxing. He wasn't around much, but when I turned pro I would watch all his old videos hoping to replicate his style, hoping to be as good as him one day".

The men in the gym would talk about Simon's father with fondness, particularly the trainers, as they particularly enjoyed reminiscing about the "good old days" which Simon's father was evidently a part of. One story in particular that circulated around the gym, and was often referred to was the story of a violent outbreak among the spectators at one of Simon father's title fights:

"It went off. Kicked right off. Made national news, on TV and all that. Some of my dad's fans travelled to see the fight down south and wore football shirts from up north, they didn't like that down there, and what with the fight and all that, it kicked off. It got dealt with at our end as we came en masse and our firm don't fuck about when it goes off".

This was a legacy in North Town gym; 'the firm's' way of handling the situation when violence arose; the firm being Simon's father's friends who actively engage in

violence as part of their job in the night-time economy, or local men who have no qualms about rehearsing violence as part of their everyday lives. The firm's definition of 'not fucking about' according to Simon, meant retaliation and ultimately winning, and if status and televised kudos could be achieved then even better. It was never made clear whether or not the outbreak impinged on Simon's father's career, but it certainly added to his, and subsequently junior's informal status among the social world of professional boxing. Indeed, stories were important to men in the gym, especially those that spoke of triumph over hardship, or courage in the face of fear. This is likely because stories such as this confirmed and accomplished key aspects of a boxer's identity. The discourses in the gym environment supported narratives of victory, bravery and toil, and the men accomplished these attributes by relaying tales of individual and collective success, whether that was ones of legitimate violence in the ring, or illegitimate violence outside of it.

Ricky a young 'up-comer' was keen to be included in the conversation; he wanted a legacy too. He was also keen to grab at success as soon as possible, and could not wait for "the nice house and nice car". Ricky's uncle was a friend of both Marcus and Eric and was the one who introduced Ricky to the gym originally. Having problems at school for fighting Ricky was excluded and sent to a Pupil Referral Unit, yet his uncle "didn't believe in that shit" and brought Ricky to North Town instead, believing that the discipline and guidance of Marcus and Eric would be the key to "setting him straight". Ricky was a determined character and attended the gym everyday; having left school five years ago without any qualifications he believed the gym was "his only chance at success". Struggling to read, evidenced by an inability to fully comprehend the consent forms I provided, Ricky in particular disparaged any form of academic or mental labour. He was completely invested in bodily and visceral forms

of capital, and similar to other manual occupations - labouring under certain conditions of deskilling and casualization (Connell 1995:55) - boxers are largely defined in relation to their potentially forceful bodies. Indeed, the physical body is a boxer's economic asset, and for these men, 'bodily capital' (Wacquant 1995b), and acquired 'techniques of the [violent] body' (Mauss 1973) can be transmuted into forms of capital such as income and masculine-validating recognition. Ricky was acutely aware of this and trained to the point of exhaustion, and I often wondered how he maintained his energy and drive for such brutal sparring matches or bag drills:

"It's all about hard work. If you put in the graft no one can beat you. If you mess about and take days off, your opponent gets the edge, and I can't have that, I've got fuck all else."

Ricky was highly competitive, yet one Tuesday afternoon when sparring with Derek for an upcoming fight, Ricky disclosed that he was "not feeling it today". When I asked him what he meant, he started to discuss how he had not slept properly for a few days as he had been in charge of childcare and the baby had been having sleepless nights. Derek capitalised upon Ricky's mood and saw this as an opportunity to beat him physically; in the ring Ricky was up against the ropes for most of the count, taking and absorbing painful blows from Derek's gloved fist, and I distinctly remember at one point having to look away.

Prior research into the field of violence, bodily capital and hierarchical male structures (Winlow 2001) evidences that violence becomes routinised and normalized, but is also, more importantly, seductive and status enhancing (Katz 1988; Hobbs and Robins 1991). Thus, by forcefully dominating Ricky at a time of weakness, Derek demonstrated how bodily capital and the cultural 'sensual' importance of violence

enables boxers to not only ‘recognise and label others’, but to also ‘grade them hierarchically’ (Shilling 2001: 333-7; Winlow 2001). For Derek this meant having secured a place further up the pecking order as a result of having physically beaten Ricky the ‘upcoming pro’.

This lack of sympathy and consideration for others’ personal life is in line with Wacquant’s (2004:67) observations, as he also argues that very little information regarding members’ private lives is exchanged in the gym environment. There is a sense of camaraderie present, yet this is bound by competition, either through talk of football teams that the men support, or who is the most physically capable in terms of exercise regimes. For example, Eric was not pleased with Ricky for his poor performance in the ring, and I could hear him from the shower room berating him:

“You can’t let no woman get in the way of your training, get her to sort the kid you know what I’m saying son? If we don’t win the next fight, then we’re never gonna get a shot at the title next month”.

A shot at the title was always big news in the gym, as it meant payday for the trainers and kudos for the pros. Title fights are what make a boxer, and they are a series of intricately weaved accomplishments and belts that make little sense to the lay person. However, they remain at the pinnacle of boxing success, and every professional in North Town anxiously awaited a shot at a title. This is because titles and belts are tangible assets for men who box; they act as “cultural capital”, to cite Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Cultural capital comprises of a series of ideas and knowledge that people draw upon as they participate in social life and, for a social group such as boxers, the acquisition and accumulation of capital is paramount to success. Wacquant (1995a: 65) describes it as “conceiving of and caring for the use of the pugilistic body as a

form of capital”, and how they transform “abstract” bodily capital into “*pugilistic capital*”. In other words, the body of boxers is a learning machine, an instrument, a weapon, and crucially something boxers deeply invest in to enhance their ability to succeed, as it is: “liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles and income streams” (ibid: 67). Further, a participant in the gym with skill, someone with ideal-typical bodily characteristics valued in this habitus will rank higher in the social hierarchy of the field, because their appearance specifically fits with beliefs about field-specific ability.

Biography and history are also important in the gym. Your name and potential for success translated as ‘your rep’ - one’s reputation in this social world. Indeed, reputation was hugely important; “making a name” for oneself was prevalent across the sample, and the capacity to convert cultural capital into economic or ‘workplace capital’ (McDowell 1997) was significantly relevant for this social group as a whole. Interestingly, most of the men claimed to be unsuccessful in other careers outside of boxing, yet quite a few of the gym members also worked in the security industries. This was mainly the amateurs, those who supplemented their employment with boxing routines and reputations, as it enhanced their physical capital and added to reputations that relied on the ability to employ violence when necessary (Winlow 2001).

Framing Desistance: Incapacitation and the Ambivalence of the Boxer

Desistance was achieved in part by the men in the gym. It took shape in the form of incapacitation, detaining and occupying men’s time when they may otherwise be involved in criminal activity. Yet, the conversations I heard and the interactions I

detailed, did not instill me with confidence when it came to refraining from fighting outside the gym walls. Challenges to the men's identities and status diminishing comments, especially those of the emasculating kind, seemed to negate the desisting promoting potential of the gym, as men would discuss having to "defend their honour" (Ricky 20 years old professional), and not "look like a pussy" (Simon 32 years old professional) when challenged or berated. Having said that, there was a distinct difference between the desisting promoting elements of the gym in terms of the professionals and the amateurs. The professionals were certainly detained for longer in the gym environment, as the monastic nature of the gym dictated dedication and constant attendance.

The stakes in terms of status and identity seemed higher for the pro's as they had more of a reputation to defend, yet having said that the professionals generally refrained from day-to-day incidences of street violence. Professionals such as Ricky and Jonny would often talk of being involved in skirmishes after professional fights, or even backstage prior to stepping into the ring, whereas, the amateurs seemed more inclined to engage in street based violence when necessary. Indeed, the younger teen amateurs seemed intent on establishing identities based on violence, and boxing served as a status-promoting asset in this quest:

"Good thing about the gym is that people know you train, they walk past and see you in here, that's a good thing because it means you're less likely to get targeted" (Carl 16 years old amateur)

"Boxing gets me girls and respect. I love it!" (Elliot 16 years old amateur)

Stories of violence from the boxers both young and old generally focused on bravado or reclaiming respect. In addition, the potential for violence or the threat of violence

was also sufficient enough for men to be able to maintain desired identities and also ward off potential attacks. This is where boxing comes into its own- acting as a resource that allows men to achieve a semblance of violence - an outward appearance of someone “not to fuck with”. It is this attribute, as well as the ability to actually fight, which men like these base both their commercial value and social status upon. Or for young men like Carl or Elliot, it allowed for them to accomplish masculine identities based on the potential for physical violence and male virility.

Aside from men’s potential for violence and the employment of this in maintaining identities and careers in security industries, actual violence was also evident. Narratives from the likes of Jonny, Ricky and Marcus all attested to the use of violence on occasion. Ricky in particular often became involved in skirmishes after professional fights, as it was common for him and his friends to go out drinking afterwards:

“Me and the lads generally go on a bender after the fight, it’s tradition. I try and keep my head down but you get recognised and sometimes that isn’t a good thing, especially if there’s a bird involved or someone fancies a pop you know what I’m saying...?”

Jonny was slightly different in his approach, and was not one for going out drinking after his fights. He had a girlfriend and generally just “chilled with her and a few mates after a fight”. However, Jonny was known for “kicking off” prior to the fights backstage, especially if other contenders laughed at the fact he wore glasses. Jonny was slightly more reserved than Ricky, but nonetheless still concerned with his status and identity as a boxer. I would argue that Jonny’s long-term girlfriend was one of the

main reasons for his stated desistance, as the relationship proved to be another form of incapacitation not dissimilar to the gym:

“When I’m not here I’m generally at home with my girlfriend, she’s studying to be a nurse. When she works nights I come down to the gym and sometimes just hang out, I don’t really go out much to be honest it’s not massively my thing anymore...”

Marcus loved to discuss how he negotiated his way around external agencies and forms of social control. He saw himself as being ‘above the law’, and liked to think that he “saw through the system”. Indeed, Marcus liked to offer his opinion to other men on how to “cheat the law”, especially minor civil offences such as speeding tickets or parking fines, and his glee was evident when his advice paid off, as men would bob and weave their way around statutory legislation as they would gloved fists in the ring.

Mostly however, the men talked of how boxing saved them from lives of crime and how without the gym they would not be successful at their chosen professions. Yet, when framing this in context of the desistance literature, boxing did not prevent the men in this research from still engaging in illegal activity and illegitimate violence when the opportunity arose. Constructions of masculinity and competency centre upon bodily capital, whereby, techniques and embodied hierarchies of violence ultimately translate and transpose beyond gym culture and into the communities from which these men herald. It is therefore arguable that the discourses of the boxing gym reinforce the discourses of wider structural logics that require men to reaffirm masculine valour, honour and respect. Indeed, the boxing gym speaks to these discourses and therefore forms part of a broader church of masculinity, one in which legitimate/illegitimate violence is viewed as a viable solution to a problem.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed and provided a picture of my ethnography at North Town gym. I have illustrated a small part of these boxer's lives, and it was my intention to remain authentic to their narratives and also non-judgmental in my quest to paint an evocative picture of boxing and its relationship to desistance from violence. It is commonly known that ethnographic research provides the detail to analyse the wider relationship that groups and social worlds have to larger structures, and in my research I aimed to look at the context of these men's lives in relationship to the communities and circumstances they have experienced. By undertaking participant observation in the context of both gym and street, I obtained a grounded understanding of the embodied hierarchical appeal of the boxing gym and its ability to provide economic and cultural capital to disenfranchised men.

However, previous assumptions in sporting and desistance literature, argues that while relevant, diversionary activities and sport-based programmes that incapacitate are only one element in the theory of change. Accordingly, I argue that while boxing is undeniably a great tool for engaging men, it can actually trap them in an attendant culture of competition that dictates aggressive responses to maintain images of both masculinity and respect. This attendant culture - that is transposable between gym and street - can override the pro-social incapacitating elements that the boxing gym can offer, and reinforces the logic and discourses that evokes and traps men in habits of responding to violence, therefore in terms of future policy and practice new directions need to be sought.

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