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Why We Should Think Some More. A Response to 'When You're Boxing You Don't Think So Much': Pugilism, Transitional Masculinities and Criminal Desistance Among Young Danish Gang Members.

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Abstract

This paper forms part of a discussion with scholars working in the field of criminology and youth crime, in particular those who are interested in sport, gender, and desistance from violence. Furthermore, this paper challenges previous work into the sport of boxing and desistance from violence, and therefore argues for a more nuanced approach, by incorporating more feminist epistemologies, and inclusive masculinities into this complex phenomenon. Drawing upon contemporary research, this paper discusses prior literature on sport and desistance from violence, and further develops the concept of sport as a tool for reduction in violent youth crime.

Key Words

Introduction

Deuchar et al (2015) in their insightful article: *when you're boxing you don't think so much': pugilism, transitional masculinities and criminal desistance among young Danish gang members,* attempts to unravel the complex nature of desistance from crime and its relationship to constructions and performances of masculinity. Using boxing as a conduit, or what Giordano (2002) might refer to as a 'hook for change', Deuchar et al were interested in how pugilism might stimulate change, and form part of a desistance process for young men in Denmark. Drawing upon ethnographic methods, Deuchar et al (2015:14) states that 'boxing is a manly art, and some evidence suggests that it provides working-class men with a highly respected means of crafting the body into physical capital, while also providing a socially accepted context for channelling aggression and re-building social status'. While I would not dispute this claim, I argue that further research concerning sport as a facilitator for change has to have a more nuanced approach, and therefore consider the downsides of certain types of sport, as well as the complexities of respect, masculinity and desistance from crime. Indeed, a new perspective needs to be established; one that further encompasses feminism, inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009) and desistance from crime. In this paper, I will present arguments that draw upon

differing theories of masculinity, in particular, Inclusive Masculinity Theory (Anderson 2010) to prompt discussion among sport scholars that allows for a more refined and intersectional perspective on gender and combat sports.

A Background to Sport, Social Bond Theory, and Desistance from Violence

Over the past thirty years a number of studies have indicated that involvement in sport can be associated with reduced delinquency and violent behaviour. They argue that sustained involvement in sporting activity contributes towards an overall decrease in crime and anti-social behaviour (Landers and Landers 1978; Mahoney 2000; Langbein and Bess 2002). It is arguments such as these that lend legitimacy to delinquency prevention programmes such as Positive Futures in the United Kingdom and rehabilitation programmes such as *New Start* in Deuchar et al's (2015) research. Schemes such as those mentioned above, therefore promote sports as a means of keeping young males off the streets, while increasing participants bonds to schools, conventional peers, and also increasing self-esteem, social capital and upward mobility. And while I would not disagree with these claims, I argue for a more nuanced approach, one that is specifically targeted at unravelling the complexities and ambivalence of these social bonds, while further considering how effective combat sports actually are in promoting desistance from crime among young men.

Authors writing about the relationship between sport and delinquency continue to invoke social control perspectives - particularly Hirschi's (1969) social bonding

theory - to examine the linkages between sports participation and youth offending (Crosnoe 2001; Larson 1994; McNeal 1995). These perspectives posit that it is the constraining influence of conventional bonds that explain variations in individual's delinquent behaviour, rather than merely focusing on individual's delinquent motivations. Conventional sites such as schools, gyms, and youth centres are seen as important places for adolescent integration into conventional societal norms. Accordingly, adolescents who are tightly bonded to such sites and their peers are more likely to refrain from violent behaviour than other less bonded youths. Because school sports and extra curricular activities are institutionally sanctioned activities governed by schools, youth centres and conventional gyms, social control perspectives predict that sports participation should increase the bonds that adolescents feel towards society and thus reduce antisocial behaviour. Moreover, Hirschi's (1969) social bonding theory incorporates elements of 'attachment', 'involvement', 'commitment', and 'belief', all of which can be applied to an individual's participation in sport when considering the benefits it has to offer.

To elaborate, sports participation should increase attachments to coaches, teammates and institutions (Coleman 1961; Purdy and Richard 1983; Messner 1992), and the bonds to these influences should arguably reduce individual tendencies towards aggression and delinquency. Furthermore, the actual participation in the sport itself should allow for the athlete's commitment to conventional lines of action, as the penalties imposed for breaching the rules would result in loss of social status. Indeed, many youth sport initiatives have explicitly promoted pro-social behaviour through the learning of fair play, teamwork and conventional values (Fine 1987), and this element is considered extremely important in reducing and sustaining desistance from violence and delinquency.

Additionally, the time required to practise and be successful in the chosen sport should increase involvement, and with this, a decrease in time spent on other non-conventional/illegitimate activities (McNeal 1995). Finally, because the rules and values of sports are assumed to lie in the value system shared by conventional society, participation in sports should increase an adolescent's belief in these, and therefore promote pro-social behaviour (Larson 1994). Yet, conversely, here is the paradox, since a belief in appropriate masculine aggression may lead to both pro-social and anti-social attitudes- an argument I intend to develop in this paper- the neglect by some scholars to address the 'dark- side' of sport has been the norm.

Questioning the Efficacy of Sporting Programmes in Promoting Desistance

Sport programmes or rehabilitation programmes such as *New Start* that Deuchar et al (2015) discuss in their article, form part of the above arguments, whereby sport supposedly offers routes to pro-social identities and thus, increases the bond to conventional societal norms. Prior work by Nichols (2007) examined a host of projects not dissimilar to *New Start* to examine the processes by which participants were said to have reduced their criminal involvement. Nichols (2007:199) states that: 'In the long run, sports participation might provide a diversion from crime, in the same way that it is obvious that someone cannot be committing crime at the same time they are on a programme.' Indeed, the same long-term effect would be achieved by long-term sports participation, and in this respect, crime reduction and sports development objectives coincide.

Working to this premise, long-term sporting programmes are important as hooks to gain involvement. Having said that, certain sports will be more attractive than others,

as Scraton and Flintoff (2002) identified. Their evidence suggested that attitudes towards a specific sport are strongly linked to gender stereotypes, and that these can negatively affect girls and young women, therefore, consideration needs to be paid on how sport might reinforce a certain image of masculinity for some young men. In some cases however, this masculine concept is incorporated into the programmes 'hooking' potential, and combat sports such as boxing are generally referred to as 'male specific' (ibid).

More specifically, and more importantly for this paper, Nichols (2007:202) identified that the key characteristics of leaders on sporting projects were that they must create an atmosphere of mutual respect and most certainly not respond aggressively to aggressive outbursts. Indeed, he states: 'Staff had to be role models in the values required to live together harmoniously.' As identified by Jump (2015), the leaders and coaches within any sporting programme have to be able to be willing to be reflexive regarding their own positioning, especially regarding attitudes they may or may not hold in relation to gender stereotypes. For example, work by Messner (1992); Connell (1995); Collinson (1996) and Jump (2015) highlighted that some sport leaders, particularly those involved in hyper-masculine combat sports such as boxing, can actually reinforce negative perceptions of gendered activity, and therefore compound values that may not be conducive to more inclusive masculinities (Anderson 2010)

Additionally, there is some evidence that young people's attachments to negative role models can be negatively influenced by the coach's value system, as Collinson's (1996) analysis of young males' search for self-identities through drugs and crime attested. Thus, it may be possible that the bond that athletes develop with their coach could negatively impact upon their behaviour, and therefore *increase* their propensity for crime and delinquency. It would seem, from McGuire and Priestly's (1995)

conclusion however, that the main aim for policy makers, and indeed community leaders, is that the activity attracts the largest amount of the target group regardless of gender exclusion and potential reinforcement of gender stereotypes, as it is often assumed that diversionary activities that are attractive, and therefore attract large numbers, are satisfactory enough to combat crime.

Lastly, it is often assumed that participation in sporting activity will provide access to new peer networks, and indeed, there is some evidence that this is successful for participants on rehabilitative programmes (Nichols 2007). This was as result of participants gaining support from conforming peers, and these peers assisting in the development of new self-identities and lifestyles that are at odds with criminality. Moreover, these changes in self-concept and self-identities have also been identified as important in research by Graham and Bowling (1995) and Maruna (2001) into those who desist from offending.

In critique however, control theorists assume that the motivation to commit delinquency is a constant across individuals and that group norms supportive of crime are weak or non-existent (Hirschi 1969). This is because control theorists choose to focus on pro-social bonds and therefore omit the idea that individuals may be tightly bonded to groups or subcultures that promote antisocial behaviours, or that the possibilities of habits learned in the context of boxing gyms such as *New Start*, might point in several potentially contradictory directions beyond the gym environment. Working to this premise, violence by male athletes would be interpreted as evidence that either sport is not a conventional activity, or that violent athletes are not as fully bonded, as one would expect. Thus, considering there is a lot evidence to suggest that sport involvement is generally regarded as conventional behaviour, sport scholars are left assuming that those athletes who commit delinquent acts are somehow alienated

from institutions such as schools, peers and families, as it is this lack of association that would free an athlete to behave violently.

In summary, the concept of sport and its relationship to control theory (Hirschi 1969) is a highly intricate web of complementary and contrasting interactions that are difficult to untangle. While I would not dispute this claim, or take away from the positive aspects that control theory has to offer, I wish to push this argument further and unravel the complex gendering processes present within hyper-masculine arenas such as *New Start*.

In the context of programmes such as *New Start* and beyond, sport is often a tool to facilitate a process, much more than an end in its own right. Sport's value rests on its ability to hook young people, perhaps especially young men, followed by the ability of its programme staff to develop attachments and foster its participants through transitory periods of self-discovery. This requires an awareness of the process and an ability to match the needs of participants with the experience that sport offers. Further, it may also require an awareness of how perceptions of sport - masculine physical prowess and physical risk - may jeopardise what the programme originally set out to achieve.

The 'Dark-Side' to Sport: Discussions on Negative Learnt Behaviours

As with the potential for negative bonds to be formed with coaches, there is also the risk with certain sports, particularly those with a combative nature, that the bonds created and the lessons learnt can also have an adverse effects on an individual's behaviour and attitude. Social learning theories posit that individuals may be tightly

bonded to others while simultaneously possessing attitudes that are favourable to violence and delinquency, indeed, as Trimbur (2009: 263) in her study of boxing wrote: 'One can be an accomplished drug salesmen and an accomplished Golden Gloves champion.' It is this very idea that separates learning theories from theories of control. Work by Akers (1998) has developed this idea of differential association reinforcement theory by suggesting that individual violence and delinquency is as a result of continual and reciprocal processes of observation, attitude internalisation, and real and perceived reinforcements from demonstrations of violent behaviour.

Hughes and Coakley (1991) and Sabo (1986) apply these theories to the debate around athletic deviance, suggesting that rather than athlete's deviant behaviours resulting from social alienation or rejection of specific cultural values, they emanate directly from the normative definitions learned in the sporting environment. Indeed, as Kreager (2007:708) has attested: 'By applying lessons learned in sports, athletes may perceive violence and intimidation as acceptable means of achieving off-the-field goals and solving problems unrelated to sports.'

Additionally, peer relationships in the sporting context also play a pivotal role in the learning process, particularly during the teenage years when identity formation and status conscious processes play an important part (Coleman 1961). As Eder and Kinney (1995) highlighted, sport provides males with clear trajectories for increasing peer status, and team sports in particular, and can provide consensus to group norms. Humiliation and hierarchy all apply to group loyalty - particularly among sporting males - and ridicule and status competition serve to reinforce it (Warr 2002), therefore, for male athletes, disparaging comments can help reinforce the hierarchy with words such as 'pussy' or 'gay' that pose deep threats to their masculine status.

Seen in this light, the defence of masculine reputations both in and outside of a sporting context may see men resort to 'character contests' where violence becomes an acceptable solution to a problem (Goffman 1967; Luckenbill 1977), whereby these character contests form part of a systematic hierarchy of masculinity commonly seen in masculine peer groups (ibid). Furthermore, Curry (1998) observed in his work on athletic off-the-pitch violence, peers simultaneously encouraging retaliation through violence as a means to build cohesion and display courage. As a result, violent reactions both in and outside of the sporting context bonded teammates to exclusive peer groups based on normative expectations of honour, masculine courage, risk-taking and ridicule, whereby individuals were forced to compete for status to secure their identity and avoid humiliation at any cost.

Research into masculinity and sport suggests that not all sports are equal in terms of their relationship to violence (Messner 1992; Connell 1995; Crosset 1999; Coakley 2001). The debate from these authors is that 'hyper-masculine' combat sports such as boxing, wrestling, and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA); create conditions where violence becomes acceptable as a means of 'doing' masculinity and maintaining valued identities. Indeed, in sports such as boxing, violence is associated with superiority, prestige, status and masculinity, and the rewards and prestige placed upon athletes who demonstrate violent behaviour only serves to encourage this behaviour to reinforce these rewards (ibid).

In addition, studies by Messner (1990), Begg et al (1996) Eder et al (1997), Curry (1998) and Miller et al (2006) have all documented a positive relationship between sustained sport involvement and violent behaviour. They argue that participation in sporting activities can actually contribute to an increase in aggression and violence for participating individuals, particularly if the sport is classified as 'combative'. To

support these claims, Endreson and Olweus (2005) conducted a cross-sectional design over a two-year period to specifically analyse the effects of 'power' sports (boxing, wrestling, martial arts and weightlifting) on aggressive and antisocial behaviour in male adolescents, as there is a strong argument that those who participate in combat sports such as boxing, may have a higher probability of being involved in violence than other conforming peers and/or athletes who may choose and pursue less combative sports (Kreager 2007).

To conclude, it would seem from these above arguments that boxing would most certainly be classified as combative, therefore raising questions around its efficacy as a sport to reduce desistance from violence. Without a doubt, boxing is most certainly attractive to young men, and promoted as a way to construct a dominant form of masculinity (Messner 1990) that some young men aspire to. The work of Kreager (2007) would reinforce this argument, as the dominant forms of masculinity often seen in combat sports increased the likelihood of these forms becoming transposable to wider arenas unrelated to sports. It is arguments such as these, that need to be considered when discussing and evaluating sporting programmes such as *New Start,* and also, how as practitioners and researchers we respond to instances of violence, homophobia and misogyny. Indeed, it is these very arguments that I will develop in this paper.

Desistance from Crime and its Relationship to Sport

A critical feature of desistance, is finding an activity or change in circumstances that has the potential to engage and motivate individuals and enable them to develop alternative pro-social identities, as well as contributing to the development of positive

networks. The key to understanding desistance in this context, is the recognition that in order to abstain successfully from crime, offenders need to 'make sense' of their lives as non-offenders. The desistance literature has identified a range of factors associated with no longer being actively involved in offending, many of which are concerned with the acquisition of something meaningful to the offender which promotes a re-evaluation of their sense of self (Maruna 2001). And previous research into sport as a factor in the desistance-promoting process highlights the role that sport can play in transforming outlooks on life, and developing both social and cultural capital for those that participate (Collins and McKay 2003; Kearns 2004; Nichols 2006; Crime Concern 2006).

Contemporary research that focuses upon the role of the individual in the desistance process has tended to focus on the ways in which different individuals can negotiate familiar social factors, and how this can lead to different desistance outcomes. For example, Giordano et al (2002) have argued that 'agentic moves' (2002: 992) are the most influential aspect of the desistance process, and that an individual's commitment to change, openness to change, and ability to identify 'hooks for change' are the factors which are most likely to facilitate desistance. Similarly, Maruna and Roy (2007) have suggested that desistance is more likely to result from changes in an individual's 'self-identity and worldview' such as their commitments, concerns and needs (2007: 115), and the ways in which social and environmental factors are likely to be interpreted differently depending upon these changing worldviews. Therefore is it so outlandish to consider the fact that 'agentic moves' (ibid) might involve movements away from conventional masculinity? And consider a more inclusive perspective, championed by Anderson (2009), whereby Inclusive Masculinity Theory focuses on new modalities of theorizing, and seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic

gender order (Connell 1995).

These concepts, and in particular Giordano et al's (2002) concept of a 'hook for change' can be applied to *New Start*, as the boxing gym does have the potential to engage and successfully recruit young men from the surrounding area. In addition to acting as a 'hook', boxing also has potential to promote pro-social identities and contribute to the building of positive social networks, both identified by Farrall (2002) and Maruna (2001) as successful predictors of desisting behaviour. Most certainly, a boxing gym can be labelled as a successful 'hook'; a place that promotes positive healthy activity and subscribes towards initial engagement strategies and temporary measures of changed behaviour. However, attention needs to be paid to how successful the gym can be in maintaining these positive identities, rather than forming part of an activity that reinforces alternative identities, especially those of a hyper-masculine dominating nature that arguably take precedence in the wider communities that the majority of the participants herald from.

Why We Need to Think Some More: Reflexivity, Gender and Praxis

Programmes such as *New Start* go to a significant length in facilitating desistance from crime for young Danish gang members, and this is commendable work. Yet, we need to 'think some more' about how we as practitioners and researchers facilitate and approach such programmes, and also how these programmes achieve their desired outcomes. To achieve this, practitioners and academics working in this field, I argue, need to be mindful to issues of reflexivity, their own gender positioning and subjectivity, and therefore acknowledge not only the shortcomings of the programme under study, but their own fallibilities in the research process. It is therefore

imperative that facilitators and those evaluating programmes such as *New Start* remain respectful and considerate to all members and communities involved, regardless of whether or not these attitudes are concomitant with the wider masculine discourses of the programme under study.

Morgan (1992:87) 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 Wheaton (2002) 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. These particular authors come to mind when reading Deuchar et al's work, as it mainly offers a male-centric, and dare I say, complicit explanation of masculine discourses in the gym environment. This is evidenced in the methodological chapter, whereby Deuchar et al, explain that the female researcher affiliated to the paper played a 'minor' role in the collection of data and the ethnography as a whole. While it would be foolish to presume that this was a deliberate gendered distancing from the collection of data, I could not help but notice that there was no further mention of a female researcher in the study.

Additionally, in further work by Sogaard et al (2016:103) into desistance and 'reformed' masculinities in the *New Start* boxing gym, the programme manager actively expressed his disdain for women attending the gym, as he felt the presence of women would lead to 'flirting and unproductive competition for girls', that would ultimately hamper the desistance process among the young men. Not only do I find this disconcerting, but I also find the idea of women/girl's presence being labelled as

'unproductive' slightly offensive and misogynistic. While it would be naïve of me to presume that some young men would not use the presence of females in the gym as a further way to accomplish masculinity (Presser 2005), I feel the labelling of women as objects of men's desire and distraction deeply heteronormative, thus presuming every young man in *New Start* is heterosexual, and also dismissive of the achievements that women have accomplished in boxing.

Undoubtedly, Deuchar and colleagues acknowledge that their own subjectivity has limitations (as does every researcher's), however, the pugilistic lineage by which they claim to herald from (Wacquant 2004; Hancock 2009) reeks of male-centricity, and in some respects becomes exclusionary by postulating that only by 'deep immersion' can knowledge been attained. In other words, their 'maleness passes unquestioned' (Wheaton 2002), as their bodies become 'vectors of *gendered* knowledge' (Hancock 2009:94 Italics added) and not necessarily objective insights. And while I would agree that boxing does have a reformatory potential, I am saddened with the traditional view that 'male-orientated sports' such as boxing, are still viewed as having the ability to situate and accomplish masculinity through power and combat techniques (Deuchar et al 2015: 11). Indeed, 'the culture and symbolism in evidence there prioritized physical strength, power, aggression and male camaraderie' (ibid: 11). It also would be naïve of me, to assume that young men will not search for avenues to accomplish hyper-masculinity through combat, yet, the fact that most would not 'go between the ropes' and physically fight at the standard required for the ring, demonstrates a vulnerability and reluctance that I feel goes unnoticed by Deuchar et al (2015:11).

Indeed, the fact that most young men were reluctant to spar, or 'go between the ropes', arguably highlights the above points made regarding the fragility of hyper-masculine

sporting discourses (in particular Messner 1992; Connell 1995). For example, what if one of the young men refused or had lost in front of his peers? Is he now 'gay' or a 'pussy'? Feminizing terminology most commonly used when young men fail to adequately demonstrate courage or risk taking. And more importantly, how is this negotiated and challenged among the other young people and staff? If the ultimate aim of *New Start* is to provide alternative identity constructs which trigger self-confessed and desistance actions, and challenge attitudes favourable to crime among young Danish men 'at risk' of gang violence, then surely there is something worth unpicking in the men's reluctance to engage in legitimate controlled violence 'between the ropes'? Put simply, why are the young men afraid to lose? And do these very same discourses transpose to their communities outside the gym walls? Notwithstanding, Wacquant (2004) states that the boxing gym is often seen as transgressing the realm of sparring, and attests to the community based forum that the ring can provide; 'an island of stability and order', thus providing young disenfranchised men with a safe space to socialise and 'hang out'.

While I wholly agree with Wacquant's observation, the answer to the above questions surrounding the relationship between combat sports and male vulnerability, 'off the pitch'- out of the ropes- violence needs to be explored further, rather than just speaking to the usual trope that reiterates familiar discourses of physical aggression, power, and male camaraderie. If desistance is achieved through the renegotiation of self –identity (Maruna 2001), and the pro-social bonding elements that sport can offer (Hirschi 1969), then surely the mentors or trainer's prerogative is to facilitate a reworking of the male dominated discourses of 'win at all costs', that can, according to Kreager (2007) contribute towards persisting violent attitudes both in and outside of the gym environment. Moreover, prior work by Jump (2015) highlights that

concepts of 'respect' earned in the gym can, and do buttress the very same concepts of respect earned on the street. It is arguable, that 'win at all cost' attitudes favourable to concepts of 'respect' and violence are ingrained and rehearsed, and therefore performed across environments sporting or otherwise.

This is in part, acknowledged in Deuchar's paper, and it is evident that *New Start* goes to significant lengths to assist in the desistance process. This is more than evidenced in the discussion regarding the feminized 'therapeutic space', or 'sparring room' cynically referred to by both members and coaches. Where my concerns lie more specifically, are located in the 'othering', or feminizing, of spaces designed to facilitate the desistance process. If Deuchar et al's main foci is to elaborate on the alternative identity constructions which trigger self-confessed desistance actions, then programmes such as *New Start* need to refrain, or at least challenge the feminization of such spaces, and ultimately develop new resources for expressing wider and more pro-social masculine identities, that do not configure themselves into gendered binaries, nor 'other' the spaces that seek to untangle locally dominated versions of masculinity.

If the ultimate aim is to work with 'institutions that develop new resources for expressing wider more pro-social masculine identities' (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe and Aguilar 2008 in Deuchar et al 2015: 2), then surely, challenging constructed binaries around the feminizing of spaces that facilitate desistance is part of this wider discourse. Accordingly, imagining a world where violence is not part of masculine performativity requires the unsettling of these binary spaces and discourses. Is it possible to de-gender boxing? I would argue it is. While I appreciate that *New Start* 'made strategic use of masculinity mediated through boxing' (Deuchar et al 2015: 10), I would push this argument further and say that while I understand that overtly

masculine values and symbols can sometimes be the 'hook for change' (Giordano 2002) that attracts young men to the gym in the first instance, the real work lies in the undoing of these values and symbols and constructing alternative versions of masculinity that do not associate the accomplishment of masculinity with violent combat sports. In other words, challenge the negative aspects of hyper-masculinity that collude with heteronormative discourses and homophobia as witnessed in Deuchar et al's (2015:14) evaluation by one participant:

'Little faggot, I'm gonna fucking puke, it's not ok'

I recognise that this is not always easy, and subsequently the authors acknowledge this homophobia in the concluding discussion. However, there is no real effort to unsettle these discourses or evaluate them in a tangible way, other than an appreciative sentence in the conclusion: 'the boxing gym environment can also run the risk of excluding those young men who are deemed to be less masculine and of reinforcing homophobia' (ibid: 15). What I therefore propose, is a move away from these hyper masculine discourses that trap young men in an attendant culture that requires them to respond to homosexuality and femininity in ways that are destructive to not only themselves, but wider gendered meanings for both males and females in the sport of boxing. I therefore disagree with Carlsson's (2012) argument cited in Deuchar's et al paper that to 'find a route between the 'zig zag' path between onset and desistance can be made more available to disadvantaged young men where it is framed within a hegemonic masculine narrative (2015:15). Indeed, the therapeutic element of *New Start*, designed to allow young men to 'reflect on current situations and dilemmas' as part of the desistance process admittedly draws upon 'masculinized vocabulary' (Ibid Pp 12-13). Therefore, if the desisting literature is correct, and desistance is in part achieved through the re-writing of one's narrative into more of a

self-identity that is pro-social (Maruna 2001), then aligning with hegemonic

masculine narratives that are complicit with homophobia and none –traditional

versions of masculinity, seems counter-productive.

Thinking Some More: The De-Gendering of Boxing Programmes Through

Inclusivity

I have provided a brief overview of research conducted into hyper-masculine sports-

such as boxing- and their relationship to processes of desistance for some young men.

I have respectfully challenged work conducted in this field by Deuchar et al (2015)

and argued that, while I agree that programmes such as *New Start* are good 'hooks for

change' (Giordano 2002), and provide 'islands of stability and order' (Wacquant

2004) that can facilitate desistance from crime, I feel the argument can be further

developed, especially by disentangling concepts of dominant hyper-masculine

discourses that can actually propagate crime. This can be achieved by challenging

heteronormative and homophobic concepts of hegemonic masculinity and working

with young men to explore different more nuanced pro-social constructs of masculine

identities. This is no easy feat, and I align with Deuchar et al (2015) when citing

Abrams, Anderson-Nathe and Aguilar's (2008) argument that institutions need to

develop new resources for expressing wider and more pro-social masculine identities.

Indeed, recent work by Matthews and Channon (2015) seeks to address this issue,

when discussing how extreme combat sports such as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) are

challenging homophobia and championing Anderson's (2009) 'inclusive masculinity

theory', in the wake of the backlash directed at MMA fighter Dakota Cochrane whom recently confessed to having had gay sex. [1]

Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) focuses on a new framework and modality that seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic gender order, or what Connell (1995) refers to as the 'patriarchal dividend'; the conflation of heterosexuality and physical power, at the expense of alternative queer masculinities, and indeed, women (see also Messner and Sabo 1990). This emerging framework suggests that in contemporary Western societies, previously culturally valued male identities, are becoming less structured around hegemonic forms of power relations characteristic of early theorizing (Matthews and Channon 2015; Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). IMT therefore, argues for more inclusive forms of masculinity, ones in which the vilification of homosexuality and the denigration of women and others (LGBTQI+) are less tolerated, and whereby cultural homophobia is less accepted (Anderson 2009). Described by Anderson as 'decreasing homohysteria', these positive shifts have contributed towards the deconstruction of masculine identity validation as purely heterosexual. Hence, the felt need among the majority of men, both hetero and homosexual identified, to publically display homophobia to distance themselves from behaviours typically associated with homosexuality has decreased (Anderson 2011). The once pervasive and atypical policing of one's own masculinity; homophobia, is no longer serving as a construction to defend a gender order that distanced 'real' heterosexual men from the effeminacy and emasculation implied by being gay (Connell 1987; 1995; Kimmel 1994).

The broadening of such inclusive masculinities in the gym environments of both MMA and boxing- typical hyper-masculine combat sports- challenges the traditional

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[1] See also LGBTQ+ boxers such as Orlando Cruz and Yusaf Mack

cultural settings that once served as sites for the exclusion of gay men and women, and ultimately contributed to the reproduction of homophobia and misogyny (Dunning 1986; Messner 1992). Therefore, when considering Deuchar et al's (2015: Pp12-13) work, I feel an urgent reconsideration of the reproduced 'masculinized vocabulary' is imperative to facilitate desistance and positive male identities. This needs to start with a reassessment of the vernacular therapeutic interventions witnessed in *New Start,* and the abandoning of feminizing and homophobic discourses that speak to more traditional masculine constructs. As Anderson and McGuire (2010) attest, IMT calls for a subtle, more inclusive shift in the codes of masculinity, those that take place on a more horizontally aligned basis, indeed, those codes that do not give precedence to a heteronormative hierarchy whereby hegemonic masculinity resides at the top, and subordinated homosexuality at the bottom (Matthews and Channon 2015).

This is not to say that I expect orthodox, misogynistic or homophobia attitudes to have completely disappeared from masculine sporting cultures, but argue for a more nuanced approach to existing cultures, whereby hegemonic status does not precede over us all. I respectfully feel that Deuchar et al (2015) in their evaluation of the *New Start* programme overlook this perspective, and focus more on a structural one [2], thus providing the ability for young men to situationally accomplish their traditional masculinities to their own and others detriment. This is a concern, and a further challenge to Wright's (2006) work, wherein desistance can be achieved through the conduit, or framing of hegemonic masculine narratives.

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[2] Deuchar et al (2015) specifically discuss how structural obstacles impinge the desistance process, and this is a valuable insight, especially in relation to socio-economic factors and ethnicity.

Furthermore, evidence has shown (see Akers 1998) that those who become bonded to heteronormative, misogynistic and homophobic hegemonic discourses described by Deuchar et al's (2015) work, can actually imbibe and promulgate group norms supportive of such destructive discourse. Those very discourses that compound and reinforce the same issues- respect, hyper masculinity and retaliation- that young men face when not inside the gym (Jump 2016), and potentially 'drifting' (Matza 1964) or 'zigzagging' (Deuchar et al 2015) between persistence and desistance from crime. To really unpick and challenge young men's perceptions of crime, women and LGBTQI+ individuals involves, I believe, a rethinking- a thinking some more- of the discourses reproduced, transmitted and transposed in the gym, and indeed, the communities beyond.

Concluding Thoughts

Drawing upon the desistance literature (Maruna 2001) that argues for a rethinking of one's own self concept and self narrative, I argue for a more inclusive, yet equally attractive boxing gym that does not categorise based on gender, nor remain complicit in discourses that are not necessarily conducive to desistance from crime (Jump 2016). Deuchar et al's (2015) work while commendable, is falling short of embracing emerging scholarly work on queer and inclusive masculine theories in combat sport (Matthews and Channing 2015; Anderson 2009; 2011; Anderson and McGuire 2010), and therefore failing to consider a more transgressed modality that supersedes the orthodoxy and restrictive gender order of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, while I recognize the importance of boxing coaches and their abilities to work with young men in promoting desistance from crime, I feel more needs to be done to challenge

common misconceptions of heteronormativity and gender. Indeed, I feel that these issues were not fully explored or successfully challenged in the *New Start* programme, or at the very least, not discussed in Deuchar et al's (2015) evaluation.

My concern therefore lies in the cultural values transmitted in the gym environment, especially in relation to homophobia, hyper-masculinity, and the accomplishment of such through 'masculinized vocabulary'. As previously mentioned, the argument that involvement in sport, and attachments to role models in the form of trainers or coaches immediately reduces delinquency is a common misconception (Nichols 2006). Accordingly, it becomes imperative that the coaches and trainers on sporting programmes have the skills to develop and align participant's behaviours with more pro-social, gender inclusive worldviews, that I argue *New Start* currently offers.

Moreover, Hughes and Coakley (1991) and Sabo (1986) apply these theories to the debate around athletic deviance, suggesting that rather than athlete's deviant behaviours resulting from social alienation or rejection of specific cultural values, they emanate directly from the normative definitions learned in the sporting environment. Challenging these normative definitions therefore becomes hugely important, especially considering sport's ability to hook young people in. Hence, the ability of its programme staff to develop attachments and foster its participants through transitory periods of self-discovery becomes imperative to facilitate the desistance process. This requires an awareness of the process, and an ability to match the needs of participants with the experience that sport can offer. More importantly however, this thinking requires an awareness of how perceptions of sport – hyper masculine symbolism and performativity - may jeopardise the desistance process and ultimately diverge with what the *New Start* programme originally set out to achieve.

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