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Dropping Your Guard

The Use of Boxing as a Means of Forming Desistance Narratives amongst Young People in the Criminal Justice System

DEBORAH JUMP AND HANNAH SMITHSON

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Dropping Your Guard: The Use of Boxing as a Means of Forming Desistance Narratives amongst Young People in the Criminal Justice System

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Abstract: This article discusses the relationship between the sport of boxing and desistance from crime. Working with young men in the English youth justice system, we co-developed a boxing workshop to explore the ways in which boxing creates avenues for the accomplishment of masculinity, and how these masculine scripts map onto desistance narratives and vice versa. We suggest that the sport of boxing is beneficial as an engagement tool, and demonstrates the power of sport in working with young men at risk of, or currently entrenched in criminal justice systems. We propose that the development of desistance narratives allowed the young men in this study to situate their masculine accomplishments in a hyper-masculine sport, and construct a narrative identity that reflected an openness to change. We propose that while boxing can be a beneficial vehicle for change, youth justice systems and funders of boxing programs need to think more strategically about the use of the sport.

Keywords: Boxing, Boxing Transformation Narratives, Sport, Desistance, Youth Justice

Introduction

Since the turn of the century there has been several studies suggesting that participation in sport is associated with reduced delinquency and antisocial behavior (see Langbein and Bess 2002; McMahon and Belur 2013; Meek 2018; Vazsonyi and Jiskrova 2018; Walpole et al. 2018). It is studies such as these that give credence to delinquency prevention programmes such as Street Games in the UK, and the Midnight Basketball Leagues in the United States of America. Very recently, in April 2019, the UK Home Office announced a drive to fund more sporting schemes over the next ten years, with an injection of £200,000,000 into the Youth Endowment Fund, aimed at tackling knife crime and serious youth violence.

A sport frequently cited as attractive and appealing to young men, is boxing. Indeed, boxing alone received £1,171,195 worth of funding from Sport England's Olympic Legacy program in 2012, thus funding numerous amateur boxing clubs across the UK (Sport England 2012). "Qualitative policy documents are often littered with ad hominem statements of how sport saved me from a life of crime" (Coalter 2007, 79), and in the boxing world, it is literally a pre-requisite statement to any major champion's success story (see McRae 2015). There seems to be an existing assumption that boxing participation correlates with criminal desistance, and boxing has long been viewed as a successful "hook for change" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002, 1001). Various scholars have written about how the gym can act as a site for both change and accruement of positive elements to offending lifestyles, (Deuchar et al. 2016; Jump 2015, 2016; Søgaard et al. 2016; Trimbur 2009; Wacquant 2004; Wright 2006), and it is often presumed that simple participation in the sport can actually reduce criminal activity (Cox 2012; McMahon and Belur 2013). As Anthony Joshua's and many other's stories (for example, "Tyson Fury: I'd be Dead or in Jail without Boxing" [Rai 2014]) seem to suggest, they merely punched their way to greatness.

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To investigate these ideas further, we draw on the work of scholars in the field of criminal desistance, in particular Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002. Desistance is often referred to as the long-term abstinence from criminal behavior among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behavior (McNeill et al. 2012). We develop Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002) arguments that offenders' cognitive transformations are crucial to successful desistance from crime, and that to achieve such transformations involves an "openness for change" as well as the ability to envision a new identity or a "replacement self" without a criminal lifestyle (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002, 992). Within this idea, we reflect on the use of desistance narratives as a way to evidence the potential transformations, and, in particular the use of "boxing transformation narratives" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 102) in the reformatory potential of young people in criminal justice systems, as they imagine a future self and desirable pro-social identities free from crime.

Working alongside twenty-eight young men in the English youth justice system, we developed a day-long boxing workshop facilitated by a professional boxing coach with a view to providing the space for young men's desistance narratives to emerge, which, in turn, allowed for an unveiling of their social practices, and their constructions and contextual versions of masculinity. In this article, we present findings that suggest that boxing is a starting point in a desistance narrative but not an end in itself. By this, we mean more work needs to be done to explore the ways in which boxing creates avenues for the accomplishment of masculinity (Messerschimdt 1998) and how these masculine scripts map onto desistance narratives and vice versa. Put simply, how does the sport of boxing facilitate, if at all, an imagined future self away from crime for young men, especially those at risk of, or currently entrenched in criminal justice systems?

Sport as a Panacea for All Social Ills

Within a contemporary UK context, it is well documented that sport, in general, is readily accepted as a tool for engaging hard to reach young people, in particular young men already involved in, or at risk of involvement in criminality and violence (Kelly 2012; Meek 2018). In a broader political sphere, sport as a tool to divert or address offending behaviors has also been a go to measure for governmental bodies and charities looking to reduce youth crime and anti-social behaviors (Audit Commission Misspent Youth 1996; Walpole et al. 2018). For instance, the Albermarle Report (1960) and its predecessor, the Wolfenden Report (1960), were commissioned by the Department of Education and are often acknowledged as watershed developments in the landscape of youth services across England and Wales (Davies 1986). Both of these reports recommended the use of sport and physical activity when working with young people, with the Wolfenden Report concluding that "if more young people had opportunities for playing games fewer of them would develop criminal habits" (Wolfenden 1960, 4).

As discussed earlier in this article, as a response to rising levels of serious youth violence across England and a 36 percent increase in recorded knife crime incidents (Home Office 018), sport has been referred to again, as a vaccine to the diverse and ever-changing social and moral ills prevalent in contemporary society (see Collins and Kay 2014). This is a recurring trend within governmental policies and priorities, with a focus on sport seemingly most widespread in the wake of a crisis, leaving some to refer to sport as a tool not for social change but for crisis management (see Green 2008).

Yet despite a sustained and recently increasing focus on the value of sport, a number of scholars have urged caution and have encouraged a discussion of the consideration of its limitations (see Coalter 2007; Massey, Meyer, and Mullen 2015). With reference to marginalized young people, Andrews and Andrews (2003) advise that the sporting space can reproduce the restrictions of institutions such as education, which many young people have become alienated from. Therefore, in some circumstances it may be possible that sport, particularly when mismanaged through inappropriate preoccupations, such as a focus on competition, can increase

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pre-existing concerns and anxieties (see also Sugden and Yiannakis 1982; Robins 1990). Such claims have been supported elsewhere by the likes of Williams and Bedward (2001), who note that many disengaged and disaffected young people may not even wish to participate in formal sporting activities. Such caution may be indicative of the struggle for evidence, as suggested by Coakley (2011). Moreover, the evidence for sport's contribution to criminal desistance has often been described as a black box problem, with little understanding of what actually happens in a sport context that promotes pro-social development (Coalter 2007; Nichols 2007; Hanson 2005). Nichols (2010) notes that sports programs aimed at reducing crime have historically lacked long-term efficacy, a limitation that could be symptomatic of a lack of post-program provision. This has been recognized as diminishing the effect on developmental outcomes, particularly in instances where young people return to rebuild and reconcile their delinquent affiliations in social spaces where anti-social norms and values are reinforced (Richardson, Cameron, and Berlouis 2017).

Desistance and Boxing: A Three-minute Round-up

Undoubtedly, boxing is a great hook for change (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). Young people are attracted to boxing gyms as they are football pitches for the image they represent and the friendships they can provide. Indeed, participation in boxing as measured by the Active People Survey has seen an increase of 15 percent since 2012 (Sport England: Active People Survey 2017). Despite these numbers, we recommend that organizations and funding bodies exercise more caution, and therefore recognize that boxing is a not a one-glove-fits-all approach (Jump and Smithson 2019). To assume that boxing will simply do the job by engaging young people at times when they may otherwise be involved in crime is not enough. More focus needs to be placed on the inherent messages and discourses perpetuated within the gym environment and by whom. Recent evidence by Jump (2017) suggests that the environment and the staff play a crucial role in promoting desistance among young pugilists, and just presuming that the sport itself will simply combat recidivistic attitudes is pernicious.

We suggest that boxing needs a re-working of the masculine discourses it represents, and we present evidence of both its transformative appeal and its ambivalent nature when it comes to desistance from crime. We develop Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002) argument that offenders' cognitive transformations are crucial to successful desistance, and that to achieve such transformations involves an openness for change, as well as the ability to envision a new identity or a replacement self without a criminal lifestyle. We do this by unveiling the stories and "boxing transformation narratives" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 102) of a group of young men in the English criminal justice system. Within this idea, we draw on the use of narratives as a way to evidence the potential transformations in the reformatory potential of young people. We propose the concept of "boxing transformation narratives," which are defined as the "utilisation of masculinised narratives to assist in the reimagining of young men's cognitions to motivate them to become active and responsible partakers in their own reformation process" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 102). In this context, masculinity is viewed as situational, interactional, and a narrative construct, whereby young men view their masculinity as an accomplishment driven by contextual discourses and norms (Messerschmidt 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987). In other words, young men behave in specific ways, in specific contexts, that can arguably propagate the hegemonic (dominant) masculine norm of that particular situation. In boxing, the contextual discourse and norms are ones of bravery, masculine pride, and fighting through pain, and this is further evidenced by historical tropes such as "no pain, no gain," and other various media and local adages supporting this norm. As Wacquant (2001) identified, boxing mythology tells the story of how marginalized men "heroically struggle, change and succeed as self-made men in the most literal sense" [Sogaard 2016, 105], and this in itself, is part of the masculine appeal. Applying these concepts to our research, we enabled the young men to situate their masculine accomplishments in a hyper-masculine sport, and further construct an honest, discursive, and

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inter-subjective narrative, that recognized their own fallibility in the desistance process (Maruna 2001).

Our Approach

The research we present in this article is part of a large knowledge transfer partnership[2] (KTP) involving Manchester Metropolitan University and each of the ten youth justice services in Greater Manchester.[3] The overall aim of the KTP is to facilitate the bi-directional transfer of knowledge between academia and practice. The KTP project itself has a specific aim of enabling young people to discuss their thoughts and views on the desistance process. We worked with twenty-eight young men[4] aged between 15 and 18 years old from across Greater Manchester, all of whom had been charged and convicted of at least one serious offence and subsequently received a court order. At the time of the project, all of the young men were working with a youth justice team in the Greater Manchester region, yet because of the requirement to attend group sessions, young people currently serving a custodial sentence in the secure estate were not involved.[5]

The criteria for involvement in the project were very broad, yet, for ethical reasons relating to informed consent, we worked with young people between the ages of 15 and 18 who had been sentenced to a prior court order or community sanction. Working with youth justice practitioners, we forged relationships with twenty-eight young men (mainly through informal conversations at Youth Justice Team offices) and established that they would like to take part in the research. We then undertook a series of semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The topics discussed included: their experiences of the youth justice system; how they felt the justice system could better understand their experiences and better meet their needs; and the sorts of personal interests they had. After having contact with the young men for approximately six months, we established with them a specific interest in boxing, or an admiration for local and national boxing role models, and some had been involved in boxing previously. Others expressed an interest in learning anger management or self-discipline skills and felt that boxing was one way they could do this. Others voiced the value they placed on the notions of respect and masculinity, which for them were strongly associated with boxing. Working with these young men, we collectively made

[2]A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme is a UK-wide government funded program that enables a business to bring in new skills and the latest academic thinking to deliver a specific, strategic innovation project through a knowledge-based partnership (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/knowledge-transfer-partnerships-what-they-are-and-how-to-apply).

[3] The Greater Manchester city region includes the boroughs of Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, and Wigan. In England and Wales, Youth justice Services are multi-agency teams, co-ordinated by the local authority and overseen by a national Youth Justice Board, that deliver youth justice services locally. They are funded by their statutory partners and also receive an annual grant from central government via the Youth Justice Board (or YJB). The YJB is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, which oversees the youth justice system in England and Wales. They are responsible for monitoring the operation of both the national youth justice system and the localized youth justice services. Their functions include making grants, commissioning research, identifying and sharing best practice, advising the Secretary of State for Justice, and providing assistance on operational matters; such as setting National Standards.

[4] After attempting to engage with young women, we took the decision to work with only young men; this was based on the small number of young women subject to orders across the region.

[5] The young people we worked with had all been sentenced to either a Referral Order (RO), Youth Rehabilitation Order (YRO), or a Detention and Training Order (DTO). Many had been subject to more than one order or had been sentenced to different types of order. A Referral Order is a community order, requiring the young person to attend a panel, made up from members of their community and a youth justice professional, at which they agree a contract containing commitments to make up for the harm caused by their offending behavior. These contracts can last between three months and a year. A Youth Rehabilitation Order is also a community sentence, consisting of one or more of eighteen different requirements with which a young person must comply; for instance, a curfew, supervision, unpaid work, and electronic monitoring. YROs can last up to three years. A Detention and Training Order is a custodial sentence available as a sentence for young people aged between 12 and 17 years of age convicted of serious offences. DTOs can last between four months and two years and aim to provide training and education with the aim of rehabilitation.

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suggestions for a day-long boxing workshop. To develop the workshop, we recruited the lead coach at a local boxing gym, who had prior experience of working with young people in the criminal justice system (the boxing workshop was just one element of a broader program of work for the KTP).

The workshop was held at a community youth center, serving as a neutral location for the session and which also had a full-size boxing ring. Fifteen of the original twenty-eight young men joined the session. It was made clear to the young men from the outset that there was no obligation to attend and for some, it proved too difficult due to personal circumstances. The workshop was jointly facilitated by the lead coach and three female academics (two of whom are the authors of this article) and was supported at points by various youth justice practitioners who had prior established relationships with the young men. Working with the suggestions made by the young people, and with guidance from the lead coach, the day-long workshop included boxing exercises interspersed with discussion of the nature and culture of boxing, masculinity, young people's experiences of the justice system, and attitudes to criminal behavior. Toward the end of the day, the young people were given an opportunity to meet with two local boxing role models—both of whom had prior involvement in the criminal justice system—and ask them questions about their life experiences, their identities as boxers, the challenges they have faced, and the role of boxing in helping them overcome these challenges.

Discussions generated during the workshop were audio recorded and fully transcribed. These transcripts, along with the interview transcripts and researcher's field notes, were analyzed thematically through the use of NVIVO (see Braun and Clarke 2017). The themes that emerged from the analysis included notions of masculinity, confidence, respect, discipline, trust, routine, defeatism, and loss. What follows is an exploration of the young people's desistance narratives as they emerged during the boxing session, as well as a discussion of young people's thoughts and views on the desistance process; what it means for them, and how they themselves, through their stories, could influence youth justice service provision and policy.

Young Men's Narratives of Desistance and Boxing

Desistance is best understood as a gradual process, or a "drifting," as coined by Matza in 1964. This process involves progression and relapse (Carlsson 2012), "as well as (inter)subjective processes such as willpower, cognitive transformations and desisters' narrative reconstructions of selves and identities" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 101). This is also indicative of Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002, 1051) work whereby reconstruction of self involves an internal shifting of one's perspective as well as structural determinants such as "hooks for change".

In recent years, desistance research has mainly focused on the importance of agency, identity changes, social structures and assisted desistance (King 2013; Rex 1999), and arguably, less attention has been devoted to how "desistance involves gendered processes and everyday negotiations of masculinity" (Sogaard et al. 2016, 101; Carlsson 2012; Gadd and Farrall 2004; Moloney et al. 2009). More specifically for the purposes of this article, Søgaard et al. (2016) and Deuchar et al. (2016) propose the idea of boxing transformation narratives. These specific boxing narratives are small attempts by young men to locate their masculinities in both micro social contexts such as the gym, and wider macro social contexts such as work, family, and leisure.

> By utilizing masculinized "boxing transformation narratives," we firstly try to alter the young men's cognitive imagining, and motivate them to become active and responsible partakers in their own reformation process. Second, we relate this institutional narrative to the young men's multiple and overlapping micro-narrative reconstructions of reformed masculinities and possible selves in the early stages of the desistance process. (Søgaard et al. 2016, 10)

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We draw on Søgaard et al's (2016, 102) idea, and propose that through the employment of "boxing transformation narratives," we are able to make small claims in our findings to young men's perceptions of desistance, and how they negotiate their masculinity in differing situational micro and macro contexts, further suggested by the likes of Messerschmidt (1998) and West and Zimmerman (1987). Our boxing workshop commenced with a discussion around the young men's understanding of boxing and perceived attributes of a boxer. We intentionally provided the space for narratives to be developed, thus allowing for an unveiling of young men's constructions of masculinity and desistance as witnessed by Søgaard et al. (2016). We present this below:[6]

> Facilitator: What do you think boxing is? What would it mean to be a boxer?
> Alex: Tough
> Marcus: Discipline
> Jason: Skill
> Danny: Respect and Confidence
> Chris: Being part of something
> Lewis: Structure in your life
> Facilitator: Like a routine?
> Jason: Yes, you need discipline to stay on track, you need commitment because you need to be committed to something or you won't get anywhere. It all builds into one thing and it helps you build as a person.

We can see from the evidence above that young people view boxing as a structuring routine in their lives, and relate the activity to respect and confidence, as well as toughness and skill. We were more interested in how these attributes manifested in their lives outside of the gym, and whether or not boxing could be used as a desistance-promoting tool. We attempted to do this by garnering their opinions on real-life situations outside of the gym, and therefore move the idea of boxing from the abstract into the real world. This allowed us to conceptualize whether boxing had any impact on their attitudes toward serious youth violence, and whether or not boxing could contribute towards an "openness to change" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002, 992) and ultimately a process of desistance.

We presented scenarios as part of the workshop and asked young people how they would respond when faced with a potential challenge, or a situation in which they felt disrespected by another. We felt that by presenting the young men with scenarios that were real to them; based on their life experiences and/or offences, we would unearth narratives that either lent themselves to the desistance process, or not. Presented below is a collection of those narratives, in response to questions about potentially walking away from a violent reproach or standing your ground and fighting back.

> Jason: I don't know because it depends on what they say to me.
> Facilitator: Ok, it depends on what they say to you…so tell me?
> Jason: If they insult my family, it's as simple as this; you're dead, you're getting fucked with. I'm going to stamp all over your head because you've brought my family into it. If you disrespect me or my family, you're fucking dead to me; I'm going to punch your head in.
> Chris: If some muppet comes up to me and says - 'I'm going to punch your head in', I will just go, "yeah right, ok- get out of my face" and walk away.
> Facilitator: Right.
> Marcus: That would be my reaction, but I know what I should say in situations like this… But I wouldn't do that though, because I don't think straight…do you know what I mean?

[6] All young people's names have been changed to pseudonyms.

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> Danny: I would punch him in his nose or something like that, because imagine if I walk away? It's one or the other isn't it?
> Facilitator: Right, ok.
> Danny: It depends how serious it is. You need to see how serious the other person is. If the person will fight you, or if you know that the person can end up fighting you, then you've got to do what you've got to do.
> Facilitator: Okay, so what do you think you would draw upon to be able to walk away?
> Jason: Confidence.
> Facilitator: So, it's having confidence to be able to walk away, and know not to get involved?
> Jason: Yes, coz I know what I could do if I wanted to, but I wouldn't need to.

As evidenced above, young peoples' narratives are by no means a panacea for social change and desistance efforts, but are rather a small if somewhat ambivalent effort, at an imagined future self. Jason was the most adamant in his worldview, yet he flitted between constructing a narrative that required a need to maintain respect in the eyes of others and having the confidence in his own abilities to walk away; safe in the knowledge that his perceived masculinity is intact. In this regard, these scenarios are small works in progress that involve both a recognition and negotiation of one's present self, as well as a negotiation and distancing from past (masculine) criminal identities. Criminological research has noted how the narrative "knifing off" (Maruna and Roy 2007, 104) of past criminal behavior, lives, and selves is central to ex-offenders' construction of new identities (Gadd and Farrall 2004; Maruna 2001). Similarly, these young men's desistance narratives often highlighted significant differences between past and present selves in terms of agency and responsibility, and we identified throughout the workshop a desire to change, but a struggle with oneself in terms of perceived masculine identity/accomplishment and walking away.

A critical feature of desistance is finding an activity or change in circumstance that has the potential to engage and motivate individuals to "enable them to develop alternative pro-social identities, as well as contributing to the development of positive networks" (Jump 2017, 6). Furthermore, as demonstrated by Jason below (who was a committed and regular boxer), boxing can assist in structuring young men's lives. This is also a critical feature of desistance (see Sampson and Laub 2003), and something we found with the young men who had previously boxed.

> Facilitator: What has boxing done for you? Has it changed anything in your life?
> Jason: If you go to bed at good times, you're waking up at good times, eating well, well that helps with everything doesn't it?
> Alex: It keeps you in a good routine.
> Danny: It's about your mind as well as your body, boxing is. If the mind is in a good place, then you're in control of everything.

We found that boxing created an environment that brought young men who in the main had never met one another before to generate an iterative discussion about their own experiences and future trajectories. We witnessed similarities in their experience and views, and empathy for what some had been through. Taking part in the physical act of boxing on the day provided a camaraderie of sorts, rather than a desire to assert their strength or skill, and those young men who were more experienced boxers used this experience to support and advise those who had not boxed before.

> Marcus: I used to box; I just gave up in the end. It's too hard. And then I started to go off track…I lost my determination and my coach left, so I thought fuck it.

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> Jason: Don't lose concentration, because if you lose concentration, and get out of the routine, then you lose everything. Boxing can get you on track, just keeping going with it.

Thus, if we locate the micro desistance narratives of the young participants in this study, we can identify that "being part of something," 'having a routine," combined with "respect and confidence" and "discipline" contributes somewhat to the self-imagined desisted self. As Wacquant (2004, 31) states, the boxing gym is an "island of stability and order," and the monastic routine of boxing itself is part of a process of desistance.

Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002, 992) have argued that "agentic moves" are the most influential aspect of the desistance process, agentic moves being the individual's willingness and openness to change, and the ability to identify hooks when offered. In the context of the boxing workshop, we found that the young men are still semi-snagged on the hook and not able to fully re-imagine or re-evaluate a sense of oneself in the desistance process (Maruna 2001), yet they did demonstrate an openness to change, which is the first step in the desistance process (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Therefore, how do we work with young people to enable them to see the ambivalence in their narratives? How do we move them forward beyond mere masculine identified boxing narratives into a space whereby they can genuinely have the confidence to walk away? For us, the purpose of our research process was to enable them to counter their own often negative, internal stereotypes of themselves.

How to Develop the Confidence to Desist through the Use of Boxing

Many themes arose through the boxing workshop. We were able to identify the masculinized narratives of young men in their desistance stories, and the relationship that these micro narratives have to wider structural contexts in which these young people live. Recent research on desistance has therefore moved towards theories which explain desistance in terms of an interaction between individual and socio-structural factors (integrated theories), whereby desistance occurs when an offender's attitudes, values, and decision-making change alongside a socio-structural context that is also changing. According to these integrated theories, one cannot happen without the other and changes in both agentic and social domains are crucial for desistance (Barry 2010; Bottoms et al. 2004; Farrall and Bowling 1999; Le Bel et al. 2008). Through the workshop, we attempted to locate the young people's attitudes, values, and decision-making in their everyday lives, while being mindful to the socio-structural context in which they live. For example, Mickey discussed how he wanted to "walk away" from male conflict but was not able due to the masculine discourses inherent in his peer group: "If you can't flight out of the situation, you've got to fight haven't you?" There seemed a real concern among the participants, that walking away left you vulnerable to further attack, and Tommy evidenced this when he stated: "I actually tried talking it out, but that's when the comments get made about you- saying this and the other. Nowadays if you laugh, if you try and walk away- you'll get hit."

If we draw upon desistance narratives and try to see the interplay between both agentic moves (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002) and structural restraints, we can see from the narrative above that the openness to change is there, but the dominant macro narrative of what "your mates" will think overrides many attempts. Thus, it became important to work with young men to overcome these masculinized constraints and impingements, and try to forge a more nuanced approach that did not locate masculine accomplishment, nor fear or emasculation in walking away from conflict and reproach.

Interestingly, when we discussed desistance scenarios with the young men, we identified a sense of defeatism among them, and a narrative of loss that underpinned most of their offending histories. We noticed how the boxing gym offered a sense of not just routine and commitment, but family and trust. When we interrogated these narratives further, we uncovered a lack of trust

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and hope in the young men's voices and journeys. We allowed the young men to create a scenario that might be present in their lives and to put it to the group:

> Marcus: A group of friends want you to get in trouble, and if he doesn't get in trouble, they're going to hurt him.
> Jason: I'd take a beating and then walk away with happiness knowing that I didn't get dragged into doing that because if they can force you into going and robbing something, they can force you into killing someone. They make you do anything.
> Male Boxing coach: It sounds never ending.
> Kai: Yes, and they'll just use you and use you. They'll send you in a house, they don't care. If you get battered, someone comes down the stairs and batters you, they'll leave you in the house and get off.
> Facilitator: Has anyone else got any thoughts on what they would do in that scenario?
> Lewis: It was a long time ago; they were bullying some kids telling him to lick spit off the floor. They kicked his teeth in. I didn't tell; I just left it, because they said they would smash my face in if I told.

The use of boxing also elicited discussion around levels of exposure to violence, a lack of trust in authority, and, to a certain extent, a lack of trust in family and peer groups, which contributed to a lack of self-esteem and confidence for these young men. As Ste clearly stated: "I have been treated like shit all my life and I don't expect myself to do well, and I don't have a good opinion of myself do I? But yet, I'm expected to be able to pick myself up."

The workshop also demonstrated the conflict the young men felt between their imagined selves and desisting selves, and a somewhat distancing from past (masculine) criminal identities and their current lives, which were in the main defined by defeatism and frustration:

> Jay: I've always been taught if you get hit by someone hit them straight back. That's what my dad always said. If someone hits you, hit them straight back but harder.
> Facilitator: And has that worked for you?
> Jay: Not really no. Because sometimes at school when I was little- he told me that all the time- I'd go into school and things would happen that got me kicked out of primary school, then high school, and now I've never been in school all my life.

While in the first instance boxing was seen as a means to an end to generate desistance narratives, it actually became central to the discussion around identity, anger-management, self-discipline, and self-respect. It moved away from the practicality of hitting pads and doing drills, and became more a conduit for discussions of marginalization, masculinity, and vulnerability. Moreover, it provided a space whereby young men could locate their masculinity in a site that valued "grit" and "determination," espoused by gladiatorial discourses of "no pain, no gain" and "be the best you can be." Accordingly, we discovered through the workshop's narratives a real sense of overcoming defeat and powerlessness through the agency and singular appeal of boxing. Take Lewis and Alex for example:

> Lewis: If you train hard you can make it. Not always as a boxer. You use those skills though- patience. You get respect for yourself, confidence and discipline.
> Alex: Another reason for getting into boxing is because I've got mental health and I need a coping method. I need to solve all the problems in my head, and all your problems you can take to the gym can't you?

In other words, the boxing itself provided an activity that championed the underdog and paved a way for young men to admit defeat without seemingly emasculating themselves. It further created a momentary fraternity that allowed them to share their narratives of loss,

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defeatism, and self-doubt without feeling the shame that often accompanies young men's divulgence of marginalisation and vulnerability (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Willis 1977).

The Final Bell: Implications and Conclusions

We appreciate that while a small study, it still provides a valid contribution to the field of sport and desistance. Building on previous international work into boxing and desistance (Wacquant 2001; Søgaard et al. 2016; Deuchar et al. 2016; Jump 2017), we have demonstrated how the sport is beneficial in "hooking" young men and developing masculinized versions of desistance stories. The use of boxing as an activity is well established among those that work with young people, and it is unique in the sense that it provides a space that allows for defeat without shame. Indeed, for all its masculine defining discourses, of which there are many, it does facilitate for narratives of loss as something that is inevitable in certain circumstances. One only has to look at the media to realize that in boxing when you lose, you lose with pride; it is all about the taking part; and taking part, the young men did.

We were able to locate young men's "boxing transformation narratives" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 102) and hopefully contribute toward their understanding of their personal responsibility when it comes to their own reformation process (Maruna 2001). Furthermore, by employing the use of boxing transformation narratives concerning comeback after defeat, and thus framing masculinity as being synonymous with walking away, we were able to mirror some of Søgaard et al's (2016) and Deuchar et al's (2016) findings. These findings suggest that one reason why many of the young men seemed to accept the boxing workshop and its strategic masculinization of desistance was that it drew on, but also redirected the expression of many of the same masculine values, such as individual will-power, autonomy, and the ability to "man up" to everyday challenges.

Moreover, by employing the sport of boxing as the hook for change (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), we were able to employ the masculine enhancing elements of the sport in a situational, interactional, and narrative way. This method therefore allowed young men to view their masculinity as an accomplishment driven by contextual discourses and norms (Messerschmidt 1998; West and Zimmerman 1987). Hence, boxing allowed the young men to situate their masculine accomplishments in a hyper-masculine sport, and further construct a narrative identity that is honest, discursive, and inter-subjective, what Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002, 992) might refer to as an "openness to change" or a small step toward a "replacement self."

Where boxing really shows its worth, evidenced in the narratives we have presented in the article, is within its potential capacity to structure young men's lives in ways that Wacquant (2004, 31) refers to as "islands of stability and order." Put simply, the boxing gym, with its monastic approach to exercise and routine, provides structure in the young men's lives where it may be lacking, thus not allowing for "drift" (Matza 1964) that can arguably occur with idle non-gloved hands. By using boxing, we were able to successfully dis-entangle concepts of hyper-masculinity, and create a more inclusive person-centered approach, allowing vulnerability to be acceptable among the young men, and something that is not to be ashamed of. This is particularly important and achievable, especially if masculinity can be framed in discourses that convey values of agency and individual responsibility that allow young men to reformulate masculinity identities in line with institutional norms.

It would be remiss and irresponsible of us not to acknowledge that boxing does have its downfalls. According to Jump (2017, 12), boxing has to be able to be reflexive, and be mindful of the "cultural values transmitted in the gym environment, especially in relation to homophobia, hyper-masculinity, and the accomplishment of such through 'masculinized vocabulary'." In other words, some discourses inherent within boxing have to be challenged; otherwise, it is entirely possible that they can become reflective of the very attitudes that boxing seeks to disrupt, especially when masculinity has been compromised through perceived lack of respect. These

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perceived incidences of disrespect can play into dominant hyper-masculine discourses that can actually propagate crime, and therefore can be counter-productive to the whole ethos of boxing as a vehicle for change (Jump 2017). However, if these incidences can be challenged and explored in ways that do not emasculate young men and locates their narratives in boxing transformational ones, whereby young men perceive walking away as another version of accomplishing masculinity (Messerschmidt 1998), then it is entirely possible to combat these recidivistic attitudes.

All this considered, we would recommend that youth justice systems need to not only think more strategically about boxing as a hook for change (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), but more widely consider the interplay between gender and serious youth violence. In other words, if boxing gyms can move away from simple incapacitation (at times when youths may be otherwise involved in serious youth violence) and invest more in unpicking the ways in which young men feel they have to respond to incidences of disrespect—both inside the gym and out—then we imagine that young men may feel more empowered to walk away from violent reproach (Jump and Smithson 2019). This can be achieved by employing the use of "boxing transformation narratives" (Søgaard et al. 2016, 102), as witnessed in the New Start Boxing Gym in Copenhagen, Denmark. However, we would take this idea one step further and suggest that while there is ambivalence around walking away from violence, especially considering the potential for emasculation, work can be done to ameliorate the effects of this and restore feelings of pride back to the individual. This needs to be foregrounded in schemes that use boxing to work with young men in the criminal justice system as, all too often, the mere virtue of young men attending gyms across the country is enough to satiate funders and policy makers. Therefore, by working closely with young men using metaphors and "boxing transformation narratives" as witnessed by Søgaard et al. (2016, 102), young men could develop an "openness to change" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002, 992), and potentially envision a new identity that locates masculinity in the act of walking away from violence, rather than a knee-jerk response to incidences of disrespect that we are witnessing in local communities and beyond.

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