

**Narratives of Performance: An Interdisciplinary Qualitative  
Ethnography Investigating the Storied Lives of Amateur and  
Professional Boxers**

**Submitted by Paul Solomon Lennox, to the University of Exeter as a thesis  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Drama, August 2012.**

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## **Abstract**

**This thesis identifies the shared pool of narrative resources, which constitute the public discourses and cultural meanings of the sport of boxing, in order to examine how individual boxers engage with them when performing their narrative identities. It is argued that the shared pool of narrative resources for boxing contain myths and legends that are taken for granted and yet heavily invested in by boxers and academics alike. This project explores how individual boxers engage with these resources in order to make sense of their own experiences and to formulate their narrative identity. The thesis asks how a thorough investigation of the shared narrative resources, and their use by boxers, provides new insights into what the sport of boxing means to boxers, and how shared resources are engaged with in order to perform idiosyncratic ontological narratives.**

**This project makes a unique contribution, as it is the first project of its kind to fully consider the relationship between the individual accounts provided by boxers and the narrative resources available to them. It pays particular focus to the narrative resources as they relate to amateur and professional boxers alike. Through a performance ethnography, and qualitative inquiry approach, research data was collected and co-constructed over a period of three years. This data informed the reading of boxing texts in order to ascertain what the shared pool of narrative resources were for boxers, and how individuals used and engaged with them. This project found that the narrative resources of boxing were powerful, persuasive, and provided vocabularies of motives for individual boxers. The shared pool of resources, whilst constitutive of the cultural**

meanings of boxing, were engaged with by individual boxers to tell stories about the desire for transformation, communion, respect and generativity.

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## **Introduction**

**Boxers are rugged, near-illiterate young men who, raised in broken homes and deprivation, manage single-handedly to elevate themselves from the gutter to fame and fortune, parlaying their anger at the world and sadomasochistic craving for violence into million-dollar purses, save for those who, ruthlessly exploited by callous managers and promoters alike, end up on the dole with broken bones and hearts. (Wacquant 1992: 222)**

**The combatants, often denizens of black, colored, or Hispanic ghettos, find in this rough trade one of the few avenues out of poverty and obscurity and devote their whole energies to perfecting their power to knock out or otherwise seriously incapacitate their opponent and thus achieve victory and celebrity. (Scott 2008: xxiv)**

**We defenders of boxing like to point to the ghetto kids who could have wound up lost to the slammer but who found salvation through boxing. (Schulberg 2008: 104)**

**This thesis presents the findings of a three-year long (2009-2012) ethnographic investigation into the sport of boxing. It examines the experiences of amateur and professional boxers at two sites in the United Kingdom. With a specific focus on the relational nature of storytelling, this**

thesis identifies boxing's shared pool of narrative resources. Once identified, this thesis demonstrates how the narrative resources are presented in the 'texts' of boxing (Woodward 2008), thus creating the public narratives and cultural meanings of the sport (Satterlund 2006). Finally, this thesis demonstrates how a multiple but ultimately limited repertoire of story lines (Somers 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 1998), forms a shared pool of narrative resources (Somers 1994; Smith and Sparkes 2008), which boxers engage with and perform in order to make sense of their experiences and form their narrative identities.

This thesis argues that, to engage with boxing, is to engage with a '*matrix of cumulative narrative resources*' specific to the sport (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 16). These resources include the myths and misconceptions alluded to in the opening epigraphs, and affect the type of stories individual boxers can tell. It will be shown how the shared pool of narrative resources affects how researchers and boxers alike approach and understand boxing as they engage with, add to, resist and have imposed upon them the narrative technologies of the sport.

This thesis makes a unique contribution, as it is the first project of its kind to fully consider the relationship between the individual accounts provided by boxers and the narrative resources available to them. It will explore how the shared pool of narrative resources, which constitute the cultural meanings of the sport, are simultaneously capable of illuminating and obscuring how academics analyse the sport and the impact boxing has on its participants. Additionally, this project will argue that with a closer examination of the shared pool of narrative resources available to boxers comes a greater understanding of why individuals box, what they hope to

achieve through the sport and how they make sense of their experiences and the performance of their narrative identity.

This project will identify the narrative resources which pertain to the sport, demonstrating how meta, public and social narratives inform the presentation of the sport's origin narrative (Jackson 2006), and how in turn this enables cultural meanings to be generated. Further, this project will challenge how boxing has been understood by other academic studies on the sport. Previous projects have considered the numerous dimensions of the sport, its roots, training spaces, amateur and professional athletes, but all too often the focus has been fixed on the professional experience and understanding all boxing experience through the cultural meanings of the professional sport.

Whilst the professional sport boasts of multiple 'champions' across numerous weight categories, previous projects tend to talk of the boxing champion in the singular, adopting an outdated understanding of the sport to suggest that the heavyweight champion of the world represents the apex of the sport and something all boxers aspire to. Previous boxing projects present a pyramid of wealth and success wherein the rank and file amateur boxer, at the lower end, aspires to become wealthy, and thus successful, through a linear transition to that of professional boxing champion. The impact, and importance of boxing is understood through this paradigm, as too are the relationships between individual boxers and the sport. This thesis challenges this concept by demonstrating that individual boxers have a more complex relationship with the sport, and more complex aspirations than simply working towards becoming a wealthy champion. This thesis demonstrates that boxers seek to establish positive relationships with their

kin, they seek connection to a culture and an identity they deem positive. As such, this thesis illustrates that boxers seek communion.

### Methodology

This project is situated within the boundaries between the fields of performance studies, narrative inquiry and ethnography. The project is interested in how individuals perform a boxing identity by engaging with the narrative technologies of boxing. In this sense the project is most closely aligned to a Northwestern approach to performance studies (Jackson 2006). Narratives will be analysed in order to explore how boxers make sense of their sport; the many levels upon which they engage with their practice and the numerous sites within which narrative technologies are shared and ontological narratives are performed. A theoretical framework based upon the 'Storied Resource Perspective', outlined by narrative theorists Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes (Smith and Sparkes 2008) will be followed in order to contextualize the relational nature of narrative production and narrative identity. In addition, a combination of methodological approaches including, the Chicago School of Ethnography (1952), performance ethnography (de Garis 1999), and a holistic content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zibler 1998) informs the collection and analysis of data.

Smith and Sparkes identify a typology for conceptualizing differing theoretical perspectives on narrative identity and selves, presenting five perspectives. The perspectives operate along a continuum with a 'thick individual' and 'thin social relational' view of the self and identity at one end, and a 'thin individual' and 'thick social relational' view at the other (Smith

and Sparkes 2008: 5). Starting from the former end of the continuum the perspectives are the, *psychosocial*, *inter-subjective*, *storied resource*, *dialogic*, and the *performative*.

Through the storied resource perspective, narrative identities are understood as social actions rather than an interior-based phenomenon or cognitive structure (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Analysis of narrative from this perspective does not subscribe to (neo)realism, but understands people as largely culturally immersed and the product of social relationality. People do storytelling and the focus is on the 'habitual, rehearsed and repetitive patterns of identity work people do, and the narrative resources people cumulatively use, draw upon and weave into their embodied biography' (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 17). Whilst people can develop and tell personal stories that are 'idiosyncratic in their detail and unique to the circumstances of a particular life' they can never be 'extricated from the social' (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 20). As Smith and Sparkes state, stories are an achievement by persons in relationships who recruit from resources held in common with other people. The larger narratives in society, the public and meta narratives inform the individual's *ontological narrative*, in a way 'that all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*' (Somers 1994: 606. Emphasis in original).

Laurence de Garis's (1999) approach to performative ethnography, coupled with Jane Harrison, Lesley MacGibbon and Missy Morton's (2001) understanding of reciprocity in research and the collection of *transgressive* data was followed throughout this project. Within this approach the

hierarchy of understanding that privileges the ethnographer is challenged, the agency of the ethnographic participant is recognized, and the 'primacy of visualism, and a desire to penetrate and uncover hidden truths' is refocused in order to open 'a possibility for sensuous ethnography' (de Garis 1999: 65). The theoretical and methodological framework followed for this study adopts a feminist approach to ethnography and qualitative studies (Harrison et al. 2001). It is an approach that acknowledges the complexity of people's lives, challenges preconceived notions of what is already known and established as scientific fact, and where the author(s) does not claim to 'know better than the participants what the participants really thought and meant' (Harrison et al. 2001: 325). This approach accepts that data is co-produced by the ethnographer and the participant and that this data is transmitted, orally, kinesthetically, and sensuously.

Sparkes (2009) develops the work of Sands (2002), who in turn was building upon the work of de Garis (1999), to argue that an understanding of sporting activity has to be grounded in multi-sensory ethnographies, where the researcher experiences the culture they analyse in order to better understand how the physical experience of sport shapes an individual's sense of self. Sensuous knowledge is meaningful data (de Garis 1999; Sparkes 2009). The researcher engaged in experiential ethnography, or kinetic ethnography (de Garis 1999) is engaged in performative rather than informative data generation where emphasis is placed on ethnography as a shared experience.

This view acknowledges the element of play in human interaction and accepts that significant amounts of non-verbal communication inform human interaction, and thus identity formation. This type of ethnography is

referred to as performative ethnography by de Garis. It acknowledges that the 'ethnographer plays an active role in the performance and the subjects [sic] play an active role in the creation of the text' (de Garis 1999: 68). In doing so it accepts that the ethnographer's body informs the type of interaction that takes place. Further, it recognizes how the intimacy of interaction and the relations formed by researcher and participant build reciprocity, allowing *transgressive* data to be shared (Harrison et al. 2001). As such, a performative ethnographic approach acknowledges that the researcher cannot simply report findings from a privileged, authoritative, and removed position, 'our stories of their stories [...] are constructed through multiple perspectives and layers where the voice of the researcher is active, present and visible' (Harrison et al. 2001: 339).

A performative ethnography does not suppose that by *doing* the activity under investigation, the researcher is in a more privileged position to fully understand the culture being practiced and observed. Rather, that through experiential approaches, across different sites and multiple temporal connections, the researcher engages with the participant in the co-creation of experience, acknowledges that experience is gained and communicated in a multi-sensuous manner, shares narrative resources, co-authors self-narratives and is thus active in the stories a participant performs.

The specifics of the holistic-content approach will be outlined in greater detail in chapter five. At this juncture it is important to note that the approach adopts a phenomenological stand in interpreting life stories, taking 'the report of the teller at face value as a presentation of his or her life and world, and reads or listens to it naively, respecting the explicit

narrative as is' (Lieblich et al 1998: 76). To this end, this thesis will not seek to debunk the myths from the facts within the narrative technologies of boxing. Rather, this project will demonstrate how 'narrative truth' (Spence 1982, 1986; Lieblich et al 1998) is performed by boxers through engagement with narrative technologies, the 'building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience' (Lieblich et al. 1998: 8).

This project does not adopt a simplistic, nor didactic interpretation of sport and performance. It does not seek to perpetuate dualistic thinking, or address explicitly the concept of performance in sport. Instead the aims are to identify and explore the narrative technologies available to boxers in order to better understand how those who box make sense of what is a complicated, and at times contradictory, sport with a complicated and contradictory set of cultural meanings. Questions that are of particular interest to this project include, how are the numerous types of relationships within the sport managed through narratives? How are the complications which arise through the practice of boxing mitigated by and through narratives? How and why are narratives constructed? How are these narratives shaped by those who tell them and how do they shape the teller and receiver?

### **Research Sites**

The two research sites selected for this study shared as many similarities as they did differences. Both sites operated a membership system, whereby permission to train had to be obtained from the head coach(es). Membership fees were charged, as were 'subs' on a weekly

(Sheffield) or per session (Exeter) basis. The regular fees for sessions were minimal and a flat rate regardless of the level at which an individual wished to train (amateur or professional). Sheffield charged £6 per week and Exeter £2.50 per session. Interestingly, because of the availability of space and opening times the differences in fees, between the two clubs, affected access levels.

In Exeter, due to hostilities between the two head coaches, the training space was shared between two, very separate, factions. In addition the space was shared with a local pro-wrestling academy, a mixed martial arts group, and a kickboxing club. The result was that boxers were only able to train twice per week, for a maximum of 4 hours total, paying £5 for the privilege. Both head coaches at the Exeter site worked full-time positions outside of boxing, with only one of the coaches making any money from the sport itself. Due to family and work commitments it was not uncommon for training sessions to be conducted without any supervision. Similarly, it was not uncommon for boxers to be denied access to the space because the gym was locked and the coach not contactable.

Training sessions outside of the allotted gym times were sporadically arranged. In the lead up to competitions the boxers were encouraged to organise group sprinting sessions. Similarly there were occasional trips to a gym in Cornwall for sparring. This only happened for one half of the club. The boxers who trained with the second coach did not have access to these extra sessions.

In Sheffield, the club was united, run by the Ingle family. The space was open from 6am in the morning until around 8pm at night, Monday through Saturday. The space operated solely as a boxing club and did not

share room with any other organisations. Boxers were expected to pay their subs on Monday evening. They paid £6 regardless of whether they attended one training session or six. For £6, boxers at the Sheffield site had access to the space for 84 hours a week. In addition, the boxers at the Sheffield gym, most notably the professionals and competing amateurs, were able, and in some cases expected, to participate in group running or weight sessions first thing in the morning. Similarly, trips were organised regularly to neighbouring gyms for sparring sessions, prior to the main evening session at the Winconbank gym. For some of the boxers at the Ingle gym, they had access to, and were expected to engage with three supervised training sessions a day.

At the time of the ethnography, the gym in Exeter was almost exclusively made up of amateur boxers and beginners. There was one professional boxer resident at the gym, and just after the fieldwork was completed, another boxer turned professional. White British males aged between 8-28 were the most regular attendees of training sessions. Further, they greatly outnumbered those individuals who did not fall into this age range or racial grouping. Of the individuals who were 18 and older, some were engaged in some form of employment, most notably as manual labourers or associated with the trades. A significant number were not engaged in any form of employment, due to them just coming out of, or just going in to, prison, because they claimed benefits, or because they were in full-time education. Towards the end of the fieldwork a number of students from the University attended training sessions. They did not represent the majority but were a significant portion of the regular cohort.

Due to criminal indiscretions, a significant number of the boxers at the Exeter site were unable to train for extended periods of time. This, in addition to the fractitious nature of the club, meant that the regular cohort consisted of around 10 individuals. Not all trained weekly, but this group attended and competed at regular intervals throughout the 3 years. There were no changing facilities at the Exeter site at the time of study, meaning that the entire group of boxers changed together, in an annexed room that housed cardiovascular equipment. The room did not have a door. There was no separate or private space for people of different age groups or different genders to change.

At the Sheffield site, boxers trained between the ages of 8 - 40+. Multiple, high profile, professional boxers trained at the gym. A significant number of amateur boxers also trained at the site, many of whom had ambitions of turning professional and/or were on route to make the transition over to the professional ranks. At its busiest times (between 4-6pm) there could be in excess of 30, competitively active, boxers training in the gym. Additionally there would be a small pocket (around 10) of youths who were just learning to box. The make-up of the gym was much more diverse than Exeter. Boxers identified as white British, British Arab, British Asian, black British, and mixed-raced British. The proportion of boxers identifying with each of the racial groupings was fairly even, with perhaps a slightly higher proportion of British Asian and British Arab boxers. The proportional split meant that there were a greater number of non-white boxers than white boxers.

As will be discussed in the auto-ethnography chapter, racial identifiers played a much more significant role at the Winconbank gym

than they did at the Exeter site. Exeter, at the end of the ethnography, had only two boxers who identified as non-white. The Sheffield based boxers, generally, although not exclusively remained in kinship groups with other boxers who identified as the same racial grouping with the exception of the professional boxers who formed their own group irrespective of racial identifiers. The professionals changed together at the side of the ring. There were no explicit markings that suggested this was their space, or the exclusive changing space of the professionals, but that said, no amateurs encroached on the space. At the other end of the gym were two changing spaces with doors (although the doors were rarely shut). Who changed in these spaces seemed to fluctuate each time I visited, with age being the most significant indicator of who changed together. Within the changing rooms greater interaction occurred between the different racial groupings than on the gym floor or at the side of the ring.

Brendan Ingle, and a number of his boxers, used racial and ethnic identities as a way of goading the sparring sessions. On numerous occasions during my ethnography, Brendan would encourage people to fight by issuing racial slurs; encouraging aggression based on the fact that 'If you don't like \*\*\*\*\*, and you hit one in the street, you get arrested. But it's OK here, hit em as much as you like' (Ingle from field notes 2010). The slurs were voiced publicly and repeatedly; forming part of Ingle's approach to desensitising his boxers from the racist taunts and slurs they are likely to face in the professional arena. Despite Ingle's intention the use of racially charged language in the training space is far from unproblematic.

Boxers would use differences in race and ethnicity as an indicator of how well they, and their opponents, were performing in the ring. Racial and

ethnic identities became synonymous with the expectation of certain performances. 'He hits hard for a white guy,' 'Don't let no black man hit you like that', 'Come on Karl, do it for white power' (Field notes 2010). The slurs and taunts were issued with an air of lightness and playfulness, between, and across racial and ethnic groups. Again, whilst the nature of the delivery might have been tongue-in-cheek and playful, it was difficult to ascertain how they were received.

The epicentre for each gym was very different. At the Sheffield site the ring was where the bulk of the training session took place. The coaches, Brendan and Dominic, sat in the far corner of the gym, by the side of the ring and orchestrated the action between the ropes and on the floor. Boxers were expected to spar each night, for several rounds. Only body sparring was allowed, unless otherwise instructed by Brendan or Dominic.<sup>1</sup> Open sparring only occurred if a boxer was due to compete in the near future. The coach(es) decided when a boxer could finish the floor work and enter the ring, also, at what point the boxer could exit the ring. During sparring there were three clearly defined groups in, and around, the ring. The coaches and the boxers waiting to spar formed the two groups outside of the ring. The boxers in the ring sparring formed the third. During sparring the three groups would engage in an almost constant form of narration. There would be private discussions between boxers, ushered in low tones underneath the more public declarations from the boxers in the ring, and the side-coaching coming from Brendan and/or Dominic.

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<sup>1</sup> Body sparring, as practiced at the Sheffield site, permits blows to be struck to the torso and arms, but forbids shots to the head and face. Conversely, during open sparring sessions blows can be delivered to the body, head and face.

**At the Exeter site the majority of the work was conducted on the floor. The trainers, Gary or Mike, would assign tasks such as punch drills or circuits and the boxers would work for a predefined duration. Little to no narration was offered either in the form of side coaching, or between partners as they worked. Conversation only really occurred prior to training, as the boxers changed, and during the opening skipping sessions, which the entire group participated in. Sparring occurred infrequently, but whenever it did it was always open sparring. Boxers would usually spar for a maximum of four rounds.**

**As this thesis will demonstrate, the shared narrative resources available to boxers are evident at both sites. The difference in the narrative accounts provided by the boxers at the two sites correlates, in part, due to the different approaches to training. Similarly, the role of the head coach and the boxer's relationship with the coach has a significant impact upon the types of narratives performed. This thesis will demonstrate that narratives are relational; that boxers are able to make sense of their sport, and thus themselves, through the interaction with a shared, but limited, pool of narrative resources. Further, this thesis will argue that through the recruitment and investment in the shared pool of narrative resources, the boxers who participated in this study told generative stories. They told stories about wanting to achieve communion and a positive legacy. Through boxing, the individuals who participated in this study hoped to affect an identity transformation, establishing a publicly recognised, positive, version of self. A self able to reconnect with family and friends, a self that others would be proud of.**

## The Importance of Boxing Stories

Boxing is 'a little-known universe on which factual misconceptions are as abundant as rigorously collected data are scant' (Wacquant 1992: 224). Boxing is a highly mythologized sport with a powerful and persuasive set of public narratives, which, whilst containing grains of truth, do not fully explain the experiences of its participants (Wacquant 1992; Sugden 1996). Boxing myths are present in the everyday public stories told about the sport. These stories become taken for granted, and at times pass unquestioned (Woodward 2004). The result is that individuals who approach boxing do so with an understanding of the cultural meanings of the sport (Satterlund 2006). Further, from the moment they step into the gym, "'manly artists' are fed a steady diet of folk notions and narratives that lionize the defiant individual and portray the boxer as a lone warrior, a modern-day gladiator out to prove his mettle by seizing his own fate, as it were, with his balled fist' (Wacquant 2002: 188).

The three epigraphs, presented at the start of this thesis, are representative of the public stories told about boxing and the cultural meanings which can be derived from the sport. Meanings about the sport are circulated within the wider cultural terrain and as such, the 'personal stories [told by boxers] are situated within contexts of public narratives about the sport' (Woodward 2008: 537). In order to understand the stories individual boxers tell to make sense of their sport 'the local boxing experience must be considered by researchers in relation to the wider sporting field of boxing' (Ibid).

Stories about the sport are presented in a variety of 'texts' including academic projects, historical accounts, the press, film and television media and literary sources (Woodward 2008: 548). Between them, these texts engage with, construct and perpetuate the cultural meanings about boxing, through the provision of a 'relatively crystallized repertoire of story lines', plots, themes, and myths, enabling boxers to give shape and substance to their experiences in narrative terms (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 166).

The repertoire of story lines available to a given group forms the 'narrative resources' through which individuals are able to make sense of their experiences (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 164). Understanding the narrative resources available to a group is important as humans are essentially storytellers (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zilber 1998; McAdams 2006; McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich 2006; Smith and Sparkes 2009) and identity is narratively constructed (Smith and Sparkes 2008). We understand our lives, come to know others, and ourselves and make sense of our experiences through the stories we tell.

We have access to certain narrative resources dependent upon our socio-cultural situation. These resources shape how we are able to make sense of our experiences based upon the stories we are able to tell, because, 'people do not make up their stories by themselves' (Frank 1995: 3). Storytelling, and thus, identity production, are relational wherein socio-cultural conventions are negotiated, and inform, how individuals make sense of the world and their engagement with it.

Within the shared pool are particular story lines, categories and themes. Individuals choose boxing due to an awareness of and desire to

attain the cultural meanings associated with the sport (Satterlund 2006). Once engaged with the sport, individuals are 'fed a steady diet of folk notions and narratives' (Wacquant 2002: 188). These narratives and folk notions are the narrative technologies of boxing, laced with myths and legends. They are an 'essential ingredient of the "hidden curriculum" of the gym, teaching its members 'the lore of the game' (Wacquant 1992 231).

In the form of stories, gossip, fight anecdotes, and other street tales, they [the narrative technologies of the sport] orally impregnate the boxers with the core values and categories of judgment of the pugilistic universe, many of which are the same that anchor ghetto street culture [...] a mix of limited peer-group solidarity and defiant individualism, physical toughness and courage ("heart"), an uncompromising sense of masculine honor, and an expressive stress on personal performance and style. (Wacquant 1992: 231-2)

Boxers make sense of the sport, their experiences, who they are, were, and wish to become, through a relationship with these resources. This project identifies the narrative resources available to boxers, demonstrates how they have been used to make sense of past projects on boxing, before finally illustrating that the manner in which individuals engage with these resources and make sense of self through them is more complex and varied than previous bodies of work have acknowledged. Further, the narrative resources and the cultural meanings of boxing have shaped how previous academic projects have understood the sport and those who engage with it.

This project will analyse how individual boxers draw upon, resist and

have imposed on them particular narrative resources, and how the interaction with these resources shapes an individual's ontological narrative. Finally, this project will argue that access to a shared set of narrative resources and an understanding of the cultural meaning of those resources is crucial in order for an individual to perform a given identity; in this case that of boxer. It will be argued that greater awareness to the narrative resources available to a given group of people is required in order that researchers might better understand the types of identities people can perform, based on the stories they have access to.

Narratives are embodied and this form of embodiment is relational as 'stories are told about, in, out of, and through the body' with narrative resources *out there* in society 'inscribed or infolded onto bodies' (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 6). Stories are told through bodies (Frank 1995), and the embodied storyteller presents a narrative identity through a negotiation of psycho-socio-cultural shared narrative resources. Indeed, the stories an individual has access to and thus is able to incorporate, adjust, or reject, are dependent upon the relationship between the individual and society. As stories are told through bodies, and bodies themselves are shaped by the techniques and practices they engage with, the stories an individual is able to tell may shape and be shaped by techniques of the body.

### **Boxing Narratives Contextualized**

The origin narrative, the story of how modern boxing came into existence in the late 1800s and early 1900s, covered in the historical accounts provided by Sammons (1990), Fotheringham (1992), Horall (2001), Huggins (2004), and Boddy (2008), develops as the status of boxing changes

over time and across cultures. The origin narrative is closely linked to meta, public and social narratives, as such, origin narratives convey cultural meanings about the sport of boxing. Supporting the origin narratives are the narrative technologies of boxing, the cumulative web of narrative resources which form the shared pool of resources available to boxers.

The birth of modern boxing followed a series of regulations, Broughton's rules in 1743, the London Prize Ring rules in 1838, and the Queensberry rules in 1867. With the introduction of each set of regulations the sport of boxing changed dramatically, resembling more closely the sport we know today. The birth of modern boxing coincides with the Gilded Age in North America and the Industrial Revolution. Origin narratives for modern boxing demonstrate the relationship between the promotion of the sport and meta-narratives of industrialization, masculinity and femininity. The relationship between the sport of boxing and these narratives is important in order to understand the socio-historical context within which modern boxing emerged, and to demonstrate how engagement with these meta-narratives informs boxing discourses and establishes the web of narrative resources available to those who write, talk about, and participate in boxing.

Contextualising the meta, public, social and cultural narratives which constitute the discourses of the sport is important for two reasons. Firstly, the literature review demonstrates that analysis of the sport is conducted by and through these narrative resources. Worryingly there seems to be little critical awareness of how these narrative resources shape that analysis. Secondly, the sport of boxing is highly mythologized and under researched (Wacquant 1992; Sugden 1996; Woodward 2004). It is important to

acknowledge what types of stories are told about boxing in order to gain a better understanding of how those stories affect how participants perform their narrative identity through the narrative technologies of the sport, and how researchers analyse the sport through the same set of narrative technologies.

The epigraphs presented at the start of this introduction engage with, knowingly or not, the origin narratives of boxing, particularly those elements of the story that pertain to race, ethnicity and social class. In addition a vast number of academic projects on the sport (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Michner 1976; Sammonds 1990; Wacquant 1992; Sugden 1996; Cannon 2006; Scott 2008; Dunn 2009) recruit what Cannon refers to as the 'oft-rehearsed historical narrative' to suggest that the most successful professional boxers, at any given time, are a direct indication of which ethnic group occupies the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder in that society (Cannon 2006: 91). The prevalence and popularity of this particular narrative has led to its inclusion in the academic projects mentioned above. The most familiar format is that presented by Sugden (1996) who argues that as modern professional boxing developed from the 1800s onwards 'the fighting Irish eventually gave way to the fighting German, the fighting Jew, the fighting Italian, the fighting African and the fighting Hispanic' (Sugden 1996: 24).

The correlation between ethnicity and participation in boxing goes, largely, unquestioned, especially as boxing is understood through the narrative technology of salvation which presents the sport as a social good. To allow the origin narratives and thus the cultural meanings of boxing to pass unquestioned, so that they become taken for granted, is dangerous as

it affects reasons why individuals might choose boxing as a site for study. Indeed, the fact that this particular narrative technology has remained unquestioned might explain why ethnographer Travis D. Satterlund is so surprised to find that the boxing gym he chooses for his study is not occupied by working class males of 'color', but rather middle class white professional males and females (Satterlund 2006: 2).

The discourses of boxing contain historical narratives, stories about the sport and its evolution in the first order. Added to this are two other forms of discourse, literature and myth, which triangulate to produce the historical, social and public narratives on boxing. As Polkinghorne states

Historical narratives are a test of the capacity of a culture's fictions to endow real events with the kinds of meaning patterns that its stories have fashioned from imagined events. Thus, historical narratives transform a culture's collection of past happenings (its first-order referents) by shaping them into a second-order pattern of meaning making. (Polkinghorne 1988: 62)

The stories about a particular culture - and in this case the culture is that of boxing - are shaped by this triangulation. Further, the ontological narratives an individual is able to tell, to make sense of their experiences, as a member of the culture, is dependant upon the pool of narrative resources available to that culture. Simply stated, ontological narratives are related to historical, social and public narratives, which in turn produce cultural meanings. These narratives and cultural meanings are in turn related to the temporal, spatial and political settings under which they are constructed and transmitted.

**We make sense of our experiences by engaging with the discourses of the culture we are experiencing. We make meaning of our experiences by referencing the stories told by others to make sense of the culture we participate in and identify with. The stories we tell about our experience do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be divorced from the larger stories told throughout time, and across sites, about the culture(s) in which we participate.**

**The stories individual boxers tell about their experiences of the sport and their lives, as they make sense of them through the sport, must be considered in relation to the larger stories told about boxing. The public, historical, and cultural narratives of the sport as well as the meta-narratives which influence and shape boxing discourse must be given greater consideration. The relational nature of story telling and thus narrativity must be considered in order to examine the types of stories boxers are able to perform in order to make meaning of their culture, and thus, the types of identities they are able to perform and live by.**

### **Boxing Texts, Ethnographies and Meta narratives**

**Chapter three will explore the narrative technologies available to boxers; it will consider the texts of boxing to identify the presence of major narrative themes within the discourses of the sport. Building from the origin narratives, the following sections will identify the meta-narratives which underpin boxing stories, illustrating the relational nature of narrative technologies. A review of the academic projects on boxing, followed by a review of boxing stories in non-academic bodies of work, will demonstrate**

how the cultural meanings of boxing are relational to the narrative technologies of the sport.

### Masculinity, Femininity and Industrialization

The birth and development of modern boxing in England and North America during the 1800s and 1900s coincided with debates about what it meant to be a man during the Gilded Age and the Industrial Revolution. For Pierce Egan becoming a boxer cultivated a 'native spirit' within 'great bodies', countering the notion that the Gilded Age and Industrialisation had reduced men to 'automatons' (Egan in Whale 2008: 261). Subsequently, boxing was marketed as a way to *make* better male bodies, bodies ready for war and bodies that rejected and countered the feminine like qualities of the new middle class man.

Literary historian, Jeffery Clymer, states that Late-Victorian culture in America 'identified the boxer as an apex of manhood' (Clymer 2004: 135). Boxing appealed to an emerging middle-class, as the sport, and what it represented, was understood as counteracting a growing sense of "womanishness" in American culture (Clymer 2004: 136). Cultural historian, Mike Huggins, writing about the importance of sport in nineteenth century England, argues that modern boxing's birth and rise in popularity was, in many ways, linked to the public, social and cultural debates during the Victorian period about the 'nature of manliness, appropriate manly behaviour and the acceptable levels of sporting violence' (Huggins 2004: 74). Professor of romantic literature, John Whale, adds to the argument that modern boxing's birth and rise in popularity during the

1800 and 1900s was due to a desire to promote 'manly values against the threat of effeminacy from liberals and Evangelicals alike' (Whale 2008: 260).

The newly formed sport of modern boxing became attached to the public debates about notions of manliness in America and England, in the 1800 and 1900s. As such, the public, cultural and social narratives of boxing link to the meta-narratives of masculinity and femininity. The importance of this relationship is still felt today, and is evidenced by contemporary discourses of boxing.

Boxing, according to ethnographer, Loïc Wacquant, is underpinned by a 'hypermasculine ethos' (Wacquant 1995b: 496). In support of this notion, literary Professor David Scott argues that the sport holds a 'deep appeal for the masculine psyche' (Scott 2008: 138). Further, according to novelist Joyce Carol Oates, boxing is 'our most dramatically "masculine" sport' (Oates 1987: preface). It provides its participants with a site within which to enact the performance of a particular masculine identity (Wacquant 1995b; Sugden 1996; Anasi 2002; Smith 2002; Woodward 2004; Satterlund 2006). For sociologist, Kath Woodward, 'men's boxing invokes hegemonic masculinity' (Woodward 2004: 8). Despite regulation, in the United Kingdom and United States of America, to promote and include women in boxing, the discourse is still male-focused at the expense and exclusion of female participants and non-hegemonic masculinities (Woodward 2004). 'Women are not welcome in the gym because their presence disrupts if not the smooth material operation of the pugilistic universe then its symbolic organization' (Wacquant 2004: 50). Similarly, 'hegemonic status is afforded to heterosexual masculinity and the

subordination of other masculinities, especially those constructed as weak or fearful and lacking courage.’ (Woodward 2004: 8)

There have been a number of ethnographic boxing projects considered for this thesis (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Wacquant 1992, 1995b, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2005; Sugden 1996; Beattie 1998, 2002; Anasi 2002; Hager Cohen 2005; Satterlund 2006; Woodward 2007, 2008, 2009; MacNamara 2008; Scott 2008), produced by journalists and non-fiction writers, as well as academics. Of the more academically focused projects by Weinberg and Arond, Wacquant, Sugden, Beattie, Satterlund, Woodward and MacNamara, masculinity dominates. Besides the projects by Woodward and MacNamara, female voices are noticeably absent in a field where men write about men. Male scholars, seemingly unaware of their own performance of masculinity, participate with and analyse the sporting experiences of other men. Woodward criticizes those ethnographies by male researchers which fail to ‘acknowledge or make visible the researcher’s gendered identity’ as the result is that all too often, ‘maleness passes unquestioned’ (Woodward 2008: 548).

To allow maleness to pass unquestioned is problematic to say the least, particularly when the narrative resources recruited to talk about the sport are littered with stories about a particular version of masculinity. The gendered performance of masculinity by researchers and participants alike is important and requires greater consideration. Robert Anasi’s (2002; 2005) auto-ethnography provides multiple examples of the performance of a heroic masculinity. This performance locks Anasi, and his fellow boxers into a number of practices and narratives, such as agreeing to spar and fight heavier and more skilled males in order not to lose face, and similarly

saying yes to questions that they would rather say no to (Anasi 2002: 148).

Travis D. Satterlund's (2006) ethnographic doctoral thesis found that boxing offered its participants identity rewards,

For the men, boxing attested unequivocally to their manhood.

In the ring they were able to signify masculinity in ways the rest of their lives did not allow. Similarly, the female boxers derived rare identity rewards from participating in a male-dominated sport. In this way, they, too, could feel they were doing something special that testified to their toughness and courage, and set them apart from most women. (Satterlund 2006: 4)

If, as Woodward and Anasi's work demonstrates, the identity rewards gained privilege a particular version of masculinity over others and prohibits certain actions and responses leaving the participant feeling locked into a set of narratives and actions, this requires greater examination.

The narrative resources of boxing negotiate the performance of gender, either subtly or explicitly. The absence of female voices, participants and researchers, is problematic and limiting. This project acknowledges that it would have benefited from the inclusion of more female voices. Across the two sites, over the three years, there was a dearth of female participants. During my time at the Winconbank site in Sheffield, I only encountered a female boxer on two occasions, in the final stages of my fieldwork. The participant in question was under eighteen and so was not approached to be included in this study. At the Exeter site, Jenna, was the lone female boxer who was present for the majority of the

project. A sample of Jenna's interview transcript is provided in Chapter One. The sample demonstrates the complexity of gender performance in relation to boxing discourses which favour heroic masculinity as the hegemonic narrative. Equally, the inclusion of Jenna's transcript *in extenso* at that juncture is an acknowledgement of the limitations of this thesis.

With only one female participant a detailed analysis of gender performance was not conducted. The experiences of female boxers, other than Jenna, were not considered; therefore the findings of this project predominantly focus on the male experience. That said, as the later chapters will demonstrate, there are significant similarities between Jenna's responses and the responses of her male counterparts. The major differences, the reflections on gender illustrated by the transcript in Chapter One, were not given priority in this study. I have established contacts with a local, female boxing squad, and intend on working with this group as I move to develop the findings of the thesis, post completion.

This project accepts the arguments proposed by Woodward regarding the performance of heroic masculinity by boxers. Further, this project accepts the problems and limitations when male ethnographers allow their maleness to pass unquestioned. The auto-ethnography chapter which follows, demonstrates my performance of heroic masculinity. Similarly, the chapter reflects on this performance and the difficulties I experienced as I mitigated particular gendered performances.

Discourses on the nature of masculinity and femininity serve as one of the meta-narratives from which the shared pool of narrative resources on boxing draws. Boxing discourses address the performance of gender, particularly heroic masculinity. The discourses do so by engaging with the

languages and themes of Industrialisation, further cementing the manner in which boxing is talked about and understood. Industrial metaphors colour boxing narratives, the boxing body is understood in terms of the body-machine 'sculpted' by training (Dundee 2008: 64). Boxers are described as being 'forged' in the 'factory' of the gym (Wacquant 2005: 145), and through training boxers can expect to be transformed into 'a virtual punching machine' albeit an '*intelligent and creative machine*' (Wacquant 2004: 95. Emphasis in original).

Wacquant's ethnography addresses the boxing body, particularly the symbiosis of the physical and the mental. In doing so, Wacquant's work, more than the other boxing ethnographies, recruits industrial metaphors to describe the experiences of training and competing.

The gym, as we shall see, is the forge where the pugilist molds himself into shape; the workshop wherein is manufactured the body-weapon and shield that he intends to launch into confrontation in the ring; the crucible wherein the technical skills and strategic knowledge whose delicate assemblage makes the accomplished fighter are honed; and finally, the furnace wherein is stoked the flame of pugilistic desire and the collective belief in the validity of indigenous values without which no one would dare risk himself for very long between the ropes. (Wacquant 2004: 14)

Boxing journalists and commentators, such as Mark Kram, use the metaphors of Industrialisation to describe the boxing body in action. Kram describes Frazier as 'trying to start a cold motor inside of him' and Ali as

whipping his hands 'out and back like the pistons of an enormous and magnificent engine' (Kram 2002: 303). I argue that the metaphors of Industrialisation, which view the boxing body as a machine, and which links the body-machine metaphor to notions of labour, output and efficiency foreshadow boxing discourses.

The meta-narratives of Industrialisation, masculinity and femininity, and performance are linked to one another and to boxing. It is no coincidence that the birth and rise in popularity of modern boxing, in England and North America in the 1800s and early 1900s, occurred amidst public discussions about the nature and impact of the Industrial age and the role of men and women. Similarly, the use of the theatres and music-halls to promote the sport ensured that the languages and concepts of theatrical performance were linked to the commercialisation of the sport.

Between them, the meta-narratives of Industrialisation, masculinity and femininity shape and influence the historical, cultural and public narratives of boxing. In short, boxing discourses are related to these meta-narratives. The examples provided above demonstrate that boxing is still understood and analysed through the recruitment of elements of these meta-narratives. Boxing scholars and journalists alike draw upon these shared pools of narrative resources to make sense of the sport. A sport which, through the use of these resources, can be understood to be about heroic, heterosexual, men transforming their body-machine and developing an efficient body-weapon cable of performing for the pleasure and entertainment of others. Individual boxers do not create stories about their experiences in a vacuum, they draw upon, adapt and reject the narrative resources available to them to make sense of their sport. In the

performance of their narrative-identities, boxers engage with other stories and narrative resources about their sport; stories, which according to Sugden, Wacquant and Woodward are often mythologized, poorly understood and taken for granted. It is incumbent on researchers to understand the relational nature of story telling, to acknowledge the shared narrative resources which pertain to the discourses of boxing, and to investigate how individuals engage with, accept, adapt and reject these resources in order to perform their own narrative-identities. By understanding the types of stories available to boxers we gain a better understanding of the types of stories they are able to perform, the types of lives they are able to live, and the impact these stories have on how they make sense of their experiences. Further, by paying attention to the shared narrative resources available to them we can identify moments when individuals are able to tell new or different stories; stories which expand the repertoire available to boxers, stories which allow for the performance of alternative identities, and stories which enrich our understanding of how people make sense of their lives.

### **Boxing Ethnographies**

A significant number of the academic projects on boxing are ethnographies (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Wacquant 1992, 1995a|1995b, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2005; Sugden 1996; Beattie 1998, 2002; Satterlund 2006; Woodward 2007, 2008, 2009; MacNamara 2008). Each project, considered above, engages with, and adds to, the narrative resources about boxing. Whilst each project is unique and addresses specific lines of inquiry, there are common themes to be found in all of them, particularly in the use of

certain narrative resources. What is evident from these projects is the extent to which particular narrative resources are deeply embedded within the discourses of boxing. Between them, these projects engage with, and thus present, a series of public narratives about the sport.

Ethnographic projects have analysed the sport of boxing through one or more of its public and social narratives, adding to the cultural understanding of the sport. As demonstrated above, through the meta-narratives of Industrialization and gender boxing stories have been shaped and contextualized. Therefore, it is in part through a relationship with these meta-narratives that boxing stories, and projects on boxing are understood. The ethnographies considered by this thesis have, at times, used the testimony and narratives of individual boxers to demonstrate the extent to which boxing can be understood through one or more of the narrative resources which make up the discourses of boxing. I argue that to be a boxer requires an individual to engage with these narrative resources in order to formulate an ontological narrative that can be identified as boxer. The salient moment for analysis is the relation between the meta, public, social, cultural and the ontological narratives. Further, what is of importance is how the sport, through its narrative resources, enables or restricts individuals to tell certain stories and lead certain lives.

Weinberg and Arond's seminal study examined why certain young males become boxers. They identified the motivational factors which contribute to the decision making process. The study linked perceived socio-economic shortcomings with a desire to attain greater socio-economical capital. In doing so the study linked the desire to become a boxer to the professional side of the sport. Three key findings of the

Weinberg and Arond study inform this thesis. Firstly, through boxing, individuals form important and influential relationships with other individuals (trainers, managers, promoters, and boxers); these relationships are managed through discourse. The example cited by Weinberg and Arond demonstrates the ability of the trainer to control the boxer through the withdrawing or issuing of praise. Secondly, through the relationships established within the sport, boxers are connected to wider stories about the sport and its heroes.

[T]he boxer is involved in a scheme of relationships and traditions which focus upon building confidence. The boxing tradition is full of legends of feats of exceptional fighters. Most gymnasiums have pictures of past and present outstanding boxers on the wall, and identification with them becomes easy for the incoming fighters.

[...]

Past fights are revived in tales. (Weinberg and Arond 1952: 463).

Thirdly, the sharing of stories is what enables individual boxers to feel part of the culture of boxing. The stories, combined with the practices of the sport, shape the identity of the boxer, providing that individual with the abilities to perform certain roles, inside and outside of the ring. The aspirations of the boxer, and the roles that boxer is able to perform, are motivational and structured.

The intrinsic occupational culture of the boxer is composed of techniques, illusions, aspirations, and structured roles which every boxers internalizes in some measure and which

motivate him both inside and outside the ring. (Weinberg and Arond 1952: 462).

The realization by Weinberg and Arond that boxing offers its participants certain aspirations and structured roles, which motivate them inside and outside of the ring, requires greater consideration. I argue that it is the link individuals make between the wider boxing discourses and their ontological narratives which govern the extent to which these aspirations are fixed and the roles they are able to perform are structured.

Through their ethnographies Sugden, Wacquant and Woodward have identified key issues pertaining to the sport of boxing. Their findings demonstrate that boxing offers its participants the promise of transformation, a promise besieged by complications and contradictions. For Sugden and Wacquant notions of exploitation complicate the public stories about the sport which present it as a social good. Through the analysis of exploitation, Sugden and Wacquant focus their findings predominantly on the professional side of the sport, suggesting that the amateur side of the sport acts as a farm for the professional game. Further, whilst in pursuit of transformation, most notably socio-economical, boxers are controlled and exploited by managers, trainers, and promoters who treat the boxers like cattle or stock to trade. Within this scenario the individual boxer exerts effort, through training and fighting, conditioning a boxing body. In doing so, the boxer is subjected to pain, punishment and possible injury which, over time, has the potential to render the body incapable of earning a living from the sport.

Sugden and Wacquant's projects acknowledge that the promise of transformation, offered by the public narratives of boxing, is a draw for

young men from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The projects engage with boxing discourses, the myths and the shared stories to demonstrate why individuals might seek transformation through boxing. More attention could have been paid to the ontological narratives of individual boxers to determine why they sought transformation from the sport. Finally, greater attention could have been paid to the differences between the amateur and professional elements of the sport. More work is required to determine what type of transformation amateur boxers seek from the sport, to what extent they feel they are being exploited, and the extent to which they engage with the shared narrative resources of boxing to make sense of their desire for transformation.

Woodward's ethnography focuses on the performance of gender, particularly heroic masculinity, by male researchers and male boxers alike. Woodward recruits what she determines to be the 'traditional narrative of the sport' to state that, 'Men's boxing has traditionally involved high participation by men from black, minority ethnic and impoverished backgrounds. [...] providing a route out of the ghetto or from the wrong side of town to self-esteem and even great wealth' (Woodward 2008: 539). For Woodward, the rags to riches, or poverty to self-respect story is 'crucial to the heroic legends of boxing heroes' as portrayed on film (ibid).

Woodward acknowledges that in order to understand and interrogate the 'collusions of masculinity' within the sport, consideration has to be given to the different texts which constitute knowledge about boxing (Woodward 2008: 548). These texts include the ethnographic field notes, 'interviews, historical accounts and analysis of other texts, including the public stories that might include the press, film and television media

and literary sources' (ibid). By understanding the texts about boxing we come to understand the *bodies* involved in boxing, the individual bodies of boxers as well as the bodies that govern and produce knowledge about the sport.

For Woodward, the creation of a boxing identity is relational to the practices of boxing and the stories told about boxing. It is through the lives and stories of 'super heroes' of the sport that boxers make sense of their own lives (Woodward 2004: 5). Indeed, by telling stories, boxers connect to 'the wider narrative, to the social context' in order to make sense of their own lives (Woodward 2004: 9). The act of telling stories brings into focus the relationship between the individual, the practices they submit to, their audience (real or imagined) and the wider narratives, the social, public, cultural and meta narratives which are recruited in the performance of the ontological.

Although the body is in language, it is never fully of it. Specific bodies come into being through iterative actions and performativity. Through performativity language brings forth that which it names and which is citational, in that language cites practices that are familiar. (Woodward 2009: 35).

The stories told, by boxers, matter as they demonstrate how an individual performs their narrative-identity, how they come to make sense of their experiences and how they are able to live their lives.

Kath Woodward and I share the same research site in the Winconbank gym in Sheffield. The gym is renowned for training amateur and professional boxers in the same space, at the same time, something which is frowned upon by the regulatory bodies of British boxing. Despite

the fact that amateurs and professionals train at the gym, Woodward's ethnography, like Sugden's and Wacquant's, focuses predominantly on the professional tenants of the sport. Woodward provides an in depth analysis of the performance of heroic masculinity within the professional sport. More focus could have been given to the amateur components, to the narrative analysis of individual boxers, and to a greater interrogation of the relationship and circulation of boxing 'texts' and the manner in which an individual (researcher or boxer) makes sense of the sport.

Beattie, like Woodward and I, bases his study at the Winconbank gym in Sheffield. The head trainer, Brendan Ingle and, at the time of the study, gym superstar, Naseem Hamed take central focus. More specifically, Beattie examines the relationship between the two, the affects of fame, success and failure, and the psychological cost of boxing on these two individuals. Beattie's study demonstrates how narrative-identities are formed through relationships. Using the example of a famous Hamed story (discussed in more detail in chapter three) Beattie illustrates how narratives can be created, manipulated and reiterated with a deliberate audience and intention in mind.

Further, Beattie's study argues that narratives are powerful, particularly those told by the trainer to his boxer, and have the capability of shaping the individual boxer's outlook on life and individual narrative-identity. Beattie presents something akin to narrative transferral, where the narrative(s) of the trainer, over time, become the narrative(s) of the individual boxer. Beattie describes this act of transference as receiving the *treatment* from Ingle (Beattie 2002: 72). The term suggests a degree of cohesion and/or brainwashing is involved, something Brendan readily

admits to, 'They accuse me of brainwashing these kids. I say I do, in a positive way' (Brendan field notes 2010). To suggest that the transference of narrative is one way, or fixed, is limited. Narratives are created through dialogue and dialogue has the power to change.

I can recite all these verses in Latin, but I've no idea what any of them mean. These verses were beaten into me. One of the nuns was a right bastard with her leather strap. I was beaten because I was "tick". But this taught me a valuable lesson - you can't change people's attitudes by mentally or physically abusing them. The only way that you change people is by engaging in dialogue with them. Only dialogue. (Brendan Ingle in Beattie 2002: 31)

Satterlund's doctoral study focuses on the gendered identity rewards achieved, through boxing, by white middle-class American males.

Satterlund acknowledges that the participants in his study 'did not walk in to the gym without an understanding of the cultural meanings of boxing' (Satterlund 2006: 32). But rather, that 'gym members used these meanings as resources to construct boxing as an activity from which they could derive gendered identity rewards' (ibid). The cultural, public, and social narratives about boxing have an impact upon why boxer and researcher alike choose the sport, influencing their perception of the sport before and after participation.

In the gym chosen for his study, Satterlund does not find the low income males of 'color' he expects, but rather white participants who hold professional jobs and use boxing as a project of identity formation. Despite training in a gym with individuals who sought 'authentic' boxing

experiences, Satterlund differentiates between his gym and boxing gyms *proper*. Satterlund draws upon the cultural, public and social narratives about boxing, particularly the myths and assumptions, to demonstrate why his research site differed from an ‘authentic’ boxing gym.

Though everyone wanted and expected an authentic boxing experience, hyper-masculinity was frowned upon in the gym and noticeably absent. Rarely, if ever, were boxers boastful; there was no trash talk between boxers or misogynist locker room banter, and excess demonstrations of toughness or “show boating” were nearly non-existent. Jan and Bill [the owners and trainers] took great pride in this fact. (Satterlund 2006: 40)

Satterlund’s participants use boxing to perform a version of masculinity which is not ‘hyper-macho’ (Satterlund 2006: 39). That said, Satterlund’s account of training in the ‘psycho-squad’ suggests that gendered performance and identity rewards did at times fall into the realm of the hyper-masculine. Satterlund states how

Psycho-squad workouts consisted of two hours of boot camp-like strength exercises and pain absorbing rituals. Workouts were heavy on push-ups—narrow and wide grip, military style, one-armed and vertical—and abdominal exercises—crunches, leg lifts, and sit-ups—and interspersed with wind sprints, crab walks, wheel barrels, and a host of other movement drills. The workout always ended with “gut busters” and “killers,” both of which were drills to presumably toughen up one’s stomach muscles— by taking a constant barrage of punches and hits

from a medicine ball—often accompanied by loud grunts and groans. Butch told prospective psycho-squad recruits that the group had just two rules: (a) no slacking allowed; and (b) no puking on the gym floor. These rules suggest, on one hand, the seriousness of the undertaking, and yet, on the other hand, some tongue-in-cheek perspectives on the squad's hypermacho rituals. (Satterlund 2006: 45)

Satterlund is provided with an opportunity one night to participate in the 'psycho-squad' routine, 'Two hours later, just two men remained, myself one of them. Psycho-squad membership became purely voluntary after that night' (ibid). The right of passage described by Satterlund and its connection to the performance of a hyper-masculine identity passes without analysis or acknowledgement. The lack of analysis or reflection by Satterlund on his own performance of masculinity links to Woodward's critique of the male researcher. Further, the statements Satterlund makes regarding what types of bodies he expected to be engaged in boxing (working class non-white males), and his assumptions about the types of gender performance at 'authentic' boxing gyms demonstrates the extent to which the cultural meanings associated with boxing influence how researchers make sense of the sport.

MacNamara's auto-ethnography chronicles her two year engagement with the sport. MacNamara's account demonstrates the performance of gender within the gym and the separation of training groups based on binary gender divides. Boxing language and metaphors are used to describe MacNamara's diagnosis of MS, a diagnosis which ultimately ends her competitive training. During an early examination, and

when a doctor realizes that MacNamara is a boxer, MacNamara goes 'through the litany...how I became interested in boxing, how long I have been fighting, who I've fought. Yes, I've fought men. No, it wasn't bad. No, no major head injuries. Nope, nothing eventful. Just a boxer' (MacNamara 2008: 61). MacNamara has a familiar, and seemingly oft-repeated, set of stories about her boxing experiences.

After numerous doctors' appointments, MacNamara becomes more accustomed to the medical narratives being told about her diagnosis, so much so that she is able to 'repeat my medical-history script, practiced and polished with the inflection in the right places, the power punches where they belong. It even has a little bit of me in it - my spunk, my verve, my fighting style' (MacNamara 2008: 63). MacNamara takes the narratives that are being presented to, and about, her and makes them her own, incorporating them into her ontological narrative. MacNamara practices and polishes them ensuring that they have the right impact for the attended audience.

MacNamara's auto-ethnography raises issues pertaining to legacy and agency. As the title of the article suggests, 'Scuffmarks Left Behind' the account describes the numerous ways in which a boxer's presence in the training space is marked and remembered. From the scuffmarks, blood and sweat stains on the ring canvas to the sound of leather gloves hitting pads and bags, boxing bodies mark their presence; at times with traces of their body - their blood, their sweat - marks, that in some cases remain long after the boxer has left the space, and perhaps, even the sport. This ties to MacNamara's desire to be remembered by the consultant who diagnoses MS. 'But I think I will be remembered as that eccentric patient with the

boxing obsession. At least I will be remembered' (MacNamara 2008: 64). Being remembered offers comfort to MacNamara, it is suggestive of a legacy, of having an impact, of counting and of being important. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the desire to be remembered, particularly by those in their immediate kinship groups, is of great importance to the boxers in my study.

Finally, MacNamara describes the power balance in the relationship between trainer and boxer, suggesting that boxing itself offers little room for the assertion of agency.

When your trainer strongly recommends anything - a carrot-juice diet, jogging ten miles a day, pounding truck tires with sledgehammers - you listen. The only unbound decisions happen in the first round of a fight, and after that one round, instructions fly from the fighter's corner like wild punches.

There is no room whatsoever for personal freedom in boxing. (MacNamara 2008: 66)

Through MacNamara's auto-ethnography, and the acknowledgement of the performative nature of storytelling, the reader is presented with an interesting and complex dynamic. The sport of boxing offers its participants the opportunity to make an impact and to be remembered, to connect with a culture and to realize communion. Through the performance of ontological narratives, about the sport, the boxer is able to demonstrate agency, making the public, cultural and social stories about the sport their own, idiosyncratic to their experiences. Whilst engaged in the sport, the boxer experiences no 'personal freedom', no agency, or at least struggles to articulate how agency might be realized in the practices they commit to

and the decisions they make in training and in the ring. The experiences of participating in the sport are complex, and at times, seemingly contradictory. There is something which motivates and holds the boxer attentive - or perhaps captive - which may be something very different from what the boxer aspires to achieve as a result of, or post, boxing.

The ethnographic studies on boxing have demonstrated the powerful and relational nature of storytelling, illustrating the extent to which a shared pool of narrative resources affect the manner in which researchers and boxers alike tell stories about and make sense of the sport. The shared pool of narrative resources informs the manner in which boxing is approached and analysed, and in doing so perpetuates certain story types. In a field such as boxing, which is highly mythologized and poorly understood it is important that the shared narrative resources are not taken for granted, but that the relational nature of narrative is acknowledged.

The narratives presented in the ethnographic studies combine the ontological narratives of the researcher and the boxer, with the meta, public, cultural and social narratives which make up the discourses of boxing. The fact that certain boxing stories remain, over time, and across cultures, demonstrates the powerful influence narrative has on our understanding of a culture. Further, the fact that there are not great or significant variations in the story types presented by researchers and boxers is suggestive of the fact that, whilst narratives are multiple and liable to change, there exist certain restrictions and limitations on the narrative resources available to boxers; change may occur, but it may be minimal. Clearly the limitations of boxing narratives are important and require

greater consideration as they have a direct impact upon the type of narratives an individual can tell, and thus the type of identity that individual can perform. Similarly, a closer interrogation of the performance of shared narrative resources will add to an understanding of how minor changes have been made across cultures and over time. Finally, focus on the performance of shared narrative resources will demonstrate how individual boxers make minor changes to their ontological stories in order to make sense of their experiences and enact their lives.

### Non-ethnographic Studies

Non-ethnographic studies have focused on the historical development and significance of the sport (Fotheringham 1992; Horall 2001; Huggins 2004; Boddy 2008; Sowell 2008); the ethical and medical implications for its practitioners (Pearn 1998; Cowie 2000); the semiotics of the material culture of the sport (Scott 2008); the portrayals of boxing on screen (Elmwood 2005; Woodward 2007; Boddy 2008); the portrayal in literary fiction (Messenger 1987); and the performance of race and ethnicity (Cannon 2006; Whale 2008).

These projects, like the ethnographies, recruit, add to, alter and perpetuate the shared narrative resources about boxing. They are part of the texts that create boxing culture and thus boxing discourses. Through them we are presented with various ways in which to interpret the sport, but only in relation to meta, public, cultural and social narratives. Through these projects the sport of boxing is presented as one which, over the last hundred years, has undergone multiple changes in the manner in which it operates (i.e., the rules of the sport and the staging of amateur and

professional events), but not necessarily in the manner in which it is received and subsequently understood - through the discourses of boxing.

Wacquant's tongue-in-cheek assessment of the generally accepted misconceptions of the sport, presented at the start of this introduction, resonates with the non-ethnographic accounts of boxing. Boxing is presented, for the most part, as a social good, saving disadvantaged males who are seen as victims of low-income living, social deprivation, and the evils of crime, drugs and violence, by offering them an escape from the 'ghetto' and themselves. Boxing discourses promise salvation and transformation, not just in a material sense to those who succeed as professionals, but also to the amateurs, who through the performance of heroic masculinity and the disciplines of training and competing can establish a particular, publically recognised, identity. One area of the sport that is recognised in the discourse, particularly when describing the objective of boxing, but is suspiciously absent at other times, is the relationship between the practices of the sport and damaged or injured bodies.

#### **Narrative: Making Meaning of Experience and the Performance of Identity**

This project focuses on key events in the individual participants' boxing lives. Their earliest memory of the sport, training, competing and interactions that the participants have had with family and friends about, or because, of boxing are understood as events. As Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont assert

An "event" in the social world is not something that happens: it is made to happen. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

**It is differentiated from the surrounding stream of activity. Its structure and the observer's capacity to recognize it are essentially narrative in form. (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont 2003: 107-8)**

**The events this project will consider are presented as memories in the accounts given in interview as well as the experiences gained and observed in the training space and thus presented in the auto-ethnographic account.**

**Memory and experience are social actions and narrative is the 'primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (Polkinghorn 1988: 1). It is through the telling of stories that social actors are able to make sense of who they are, where they have been and where they are heading (Polkinghorne 1988, Somers 1994). Stories allow social actors to order events and experience into accounts which can be easily assimilated (Holloway and Jefferson in Josselson and Lieblich 1999: 191). It is through the connection of these accounts, what Margaret Somers (1994) terms *emplotment*, that events are translated into *episodes*. Emplotment occurs when social actors attempt to order their experiences into a narrative account which engages with 'a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives' available and familiar to them (Somers 1994: 614). The stories social actors tell, to make sense of and order experience, are not told in a social vacuum, 'Social life is itself storied' (Somers 1994: 613).**

**Building on from the work of Smith and Sparkes (2009), this project acknowledges that the stories we tell and the voices we use to tell them are neither completely our own nor entirely those of another (Norris and Jones 2005). Stories and voices are not simply the outward projection of an inner,**

personal subjectivity. Neither are individuals simply conduits for a set of pre-established storied actions which are detached from the property of the individual (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Narrative resources are utilised by individuals to make sense of the practices they engage in.

**‘Meaning is not inherent in an act or experience, but is constructed through social discourse’ (Josselson 1995: 32). Making meaning of experience (narrativity) is an activity, and one which is not static (Polkinghorne 1988). Further, memory and experience are social actions and are both ‘enacted’ (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont 2003: 107). In other words, ‘Social life is performed and narrated’ and as Atkinson et al. acknowledge ‘we need to recognize the performative qualities of social life and talk’ (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont 2003: 98).**

**When recruiting a particular narrative resource to make meaning of a given situation, the individual makes decisions about what to tell and how to tell it. Further, the types of stories told at any given time are dependant upon who the intended audience is (real or imagined) for that particular story. Memory is a ‘cultural phenomenon, and is therefore a collective one’ (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont 2003: 107). The enactment of memory is far from ‘(auto)biographical’ it ‘is grounded in what is tellable’ through the relationships individual social actors form in a given culture at a given time (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont: 2003: 107).**

**At the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values.**

**The stories we encounter carry the values of our culture by providing positive models to emulate and negative models to avoid. (Polkinghorne 1988: 14)**

**It is through the engagement with a repertoire of narrative resources that the experiences of social actors becomes emplotted and their identities are enacted as ontological narratives. It is through the relationship between the ontological, social, public and cultural narratives that social actors perform their identities, come to know who they are, and are guided to act in certain ways and not others (Somers 1994). This project focuses upon the process of emplotment and narrativity, the creation of a narrative identity, as a performative act. The creation of an ontological narrative is a relational performance of self. Through an analysis of boxing discourses this project considers how those who box draw upon, change and are changed by the narrative resources which are used to make sense of the routine practice that is boxing. The creation of a personal testimony leads the individual to draw upon meta, public, social and cultural narratives. Indeed, the individual has the potential to draw upon, change and be changed by these narrative resources.**

**It is posited that in order to make meanings of the personal the individual draws upon that which is public and connects it to that which is private. By communicating this meaning to another being the individual offers an amalgamation of the public and private back out, as an ontological narrative, in story form to others. In doing so the individual is able to make sense of the experiences they are describing. Further, as storytelling is a collaborative process, in that it requires an audience (real or imagined), the**

storyteller receives input on the creation of their story, their understanding of experience and thus their sense of self and identity.

Through amalgamating the public and private, the individual recruits from and takes ownership of particular narrative resources. Whilst the narrative an individual provides at any given time is dependant upon the pre-established narrative resources available to them, the story they tell is nonetheless *their story*; narrative identity is idiosyncratic. This project considers this act a performance narrative and seeks to explore the *how's*, *when's* and *why's* of this process and the relation this has to an individual's sense of self.

Personal narratives '*are people's identities*' they '*shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality*' (Lieblich et al. 1998: 7). Further, narratives are a '*psycho-socio-cultural shared resource*' (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 3), providing members of a group with a '*relatively crystallized repertoire of story lines*', plots and themes, enabling them to give shape and substance to experience in narrative terms (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 166).

Groups have access to a particular menu of story lines that individuals recruit from in order to make sense of their experience. In doing so, narrative identity is understood as being constructed through the appropriation of stories from an individual's particular cultural menu, enabling '*Self and culture [to] come to terms with each other*' through narrative (McAdams 2006: 289. Emphasis in original). Through the recruitment of shared narrative resources, the individuals who participated in this study were able to identify with the role of boxer. Further, they were able to tell stories of their boxing experiences within a framework which

would be understood and make sense to fellow boxers. These individuals recruited from and performed the shared narrative resources, available within the culture of boxing, to demonstrate that they identified as a boxer, and were, at the same time, accepted by and belonged to the world of boxing (McAdams 1996: 313).

By recruiting from shared narrative resources, the boxers who participated in this study demonstrated that certain kinds of narratives are possible for certain groups of people (Chase 1995: 20). The manner in which participants of this study recruited, ignored or struggled with particular themes demonstrated that the narrative building blocks (Lieblich et al. 1998) available within a given socio-cultural setting make the performance of a narrative identity possible and problematic in certain ways (Chase 1995). Further, the recruitment, rejection and adjustment of particular shared narrative resources shows that 'Storytellers are not mere communicative puppets of their circumstances' (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 164). Rather, storytellers engage with a web of narrative resources, adopting, rejecting and adjusting these resources in order to personalize their stories and make sense of their experiences.

Learning to box 'involves an intensive, ascetic, and strictly regulated manipulation of the body designed to inculcate through direct embodiment the set of corporeal, visual, and mental schemata immanent to pugilistic practice' (Wacquant 1992: 221).

To learn to box is to imperceptibly modify one's bodily schema, one's relation to one's body and to the uses one usually puts it to, so as to internalize a set of dispositions that are inseparably mental and physical [...] In the accomplished boxer, the

mental becomes part of the physical and vice versa; body and mind function in total symbiosis. (Wacquant 2004: 95-96)

We are our bodies and the stories we tell are shaped by and shape our bodily practices. The material embodied self of the boxer and researcher is 'recreated and lived through the experience of gender, along with body practices and other narratives of identity, in the gym, or in the ring' (Woodward 2008: 453).

Individuals may approach boxing with awareness to, and because of, the cultural meanings about the sport. Once engaged with the sport they become conversant in the *hidden curriculum* of the gym, through exposure to and engagement with the narrative technologies which support the cultural meanings of the sport (Wacquant 1992: 231). These technologies are multiple, and yet relatively crystallized and limited, forming a pool of narrative resources available to those who box. These resources enable boxers to tell stories about their experience and to perform their narrative identity. Whilst the stories told are idiosyncratic to each gym, each trainer, and each boxer, they share certain narrative themes which transcend cultural and temporal frameworks. Access to narrative resources affects the types of stories individuals can tell.

[W]hilst people tell their own stories, they do not make up, by themselves, [...]. To be able to tell a story – to get the story told and make it intelligible to others – a speaker has to use one of the available narrative resources or templates culture makes available for us. (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 7)

By focusing on the narrative resources available to a particular group, greater understanding can be garnered about the types of stories the

individuals within that group can tell, and thus the types of lives they might be able to live. Further, by understanding the relationship between the meta, grand, public, social and ontological narratives which make up discourses of boxing a greater appreciation can be achieved of how stories out *there*, in society, influence the performance of identity in the form of narratives of self. 'Narratives can do things in terms of limiting, constraining, and enabling who a person is and might become' (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 9). An examination of the shared narrative resources available to boxers will demonstrate not just what types of stories *are* told by boxers, but *why* they are told, and *how* the resources are engaged or rejected in order that an individual is able to make sense of their experiences and formulate a narrative-identity.

The dissemination of ontological narratives, between members of the same group, and across sites is important and requires greater consideration, as it is acknowledged that

given we live in and by stories expanding people's sense of who they are, and could be, may be facilitated by multiplying their narrative resources they have access to and may feel a part of. That is, the more stories a person has access to, the more flexibility and opportunities they may have to potentially live differently. (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 9)

Providing flexibility and opportunities through the sharing of narrative resources is important. Boxers are a group of individuals who, according to Sugden and Wacquant, are marginalized (Sugden 1996, Wacquant 2004), and subject to exploitation (Sugden 1996, Wacquant 2002, Cannon 2006). Increasing the pool of narrative resources available to

boxers may expand their sense of who they are and could be, and in some ways help to alleviate the marginalization and exploitation they might experience.

### Overview

This ethnographic project chronicles the author's engagement as a participant observer at two boxing clubs in England, a professional gym in Sheffield, and an amateur gym in Exeter.<sup>2</sup> The project, in its current form, grew out of an interest in the preparatory practices of actors and athletes. Initially, it was intended that the thesis would explore the similarities and differences in the approaches taken by these two groups to performance. I was interested in how actors and athletes talked about what they did, how they prepared, and how they understood their role as actor, athlete, or, perhaps, a combination of the two. This interest was sparked by my own engagement with drama, as an undergraduate and postgraduate, and as an amateur athlete, as a rugby player, and later as a boxer and *Hapkido* practitioner.<sup>3</sup> My hypothesis was that certain actors and athletes share certain functions when performing or competing, aiming to find ways to connect to the activity and remain in the moment. I was interested in how these groups of people narrated this experience(s) and wondered if there was a possibility for knowledge transfer amongst the groups, across the disciplines of sports science and the dramatic arts.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this project, 'professional' is used where the trainers and a significant number of the individuals who train make a living from boxing. 'Amateur' is used to describe a gym where a minimal number of individuals, in the case of Exeter, receive financial remuneration for their engagement with boxing.

<sup>3</sup> *Hapkido* is a Korean martial art which closely resembles *Aikido*.

As I began a literary review I started with Geoffrey Beattie's (1998) *Head to Head: Uncovering the psychology of sporting success*. The text is a collection of interview transcripts between Beattie, the psychologist, and numerous sporting personalities. The transcript that stood out was that of Sheffield based boxer, 'Prince' Naseem Hamed. Hamed, an Ingle-trained boxer, spoke at length about the performative elements of his fights, from the elaborate ring entrances, use of music and set, to his performance - both sporting and theatrical - between the ropes. In addition, Hamed alluded to Brendan Ingle's use of storytelling in order to prepare and market his professional boxers. Through research on Hamed and Ingle, boxing stood out as a site where athletes are required to engage with various forms of performance. Further, boxers face the challenge of balancing their sporting and theatrical abilities. For a professional boxer, crowd pleasing performative techniques, such as fancy footwork, showboating, and 'trash' taking, are important in order to boom fights, get bums on seats and generate revenue. However, too much focus on the theatrical elements and boxers can receive criticism from journalists and commentators for neglecting the 'athletic' elements of the sport, and for bringing boxing into disrepute.

One particular fight of Hamed's, analysed by Beattie (2002) and Woodward (2004), altered the direction of this project by highlighting the lack of attention scholars paid to the complexities of performance in relation to sport. The fight in question is the 1994 bout between Hamed and Vincenzo Belcastro. Throughout his career, Hamed was famed and heavily criticized for his elaborate and spectacular ring entrances, his somersaults over the ropes at the start of each bout, and the amount of

acrobatic flips and showboating he engaged with during each fight. Thus, he seemingly blurred the boundaries of what is 'real' and 'legitimate' sport, and that which is 'feigned', performed, and theatrical. Hamed's approach to boxing blurred the lines between the 'onstage' performance - in the ring, and the 'offstage' performance in the boxing gym.

In the Hamed-Belcastro bout, Hamed entered the final rounds ahead on the judges scorecards. Aware of this, Hamed goaded and tormented his opponent, shuffling and dancing across the canvas as he punched Belcastro at will. The criticism Hamed faced in post-fight interviews, was based on a belief that the role of entertainer and athlete should remain separate. In this fight, Hamed failed to disrobe the fantasy role of entertainer after he entered the ring (Woodward 2004). Hamed later defended his performance, declaring in interviews that he wasn't really present in the ring: "I was in Las Vegas, winning a world title" (Woodward 2004: 13). Ingle supported this claim, telling reporters that Hamed was lost in the re-enactment of a fantasy about being Sugar Ray Robinson outwitting Marvin Hagler at Caesar's Palace in 1985 (Ibid).<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Beattie, Hamed was asked whether his ring antics should be understood in theatrical terms and whether he uses character or puts on an act when boxing.

It's not an act when I'm in the ring. I can't put it on. It just comes out.

It's just me when I'm in the ring. [...] It's the way I have to perform.

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<sup>4</sup> Woodward quotes Ingle as stating that the fantasy re-enactment concerned Sugar Ray Robinson and Hagler in 1985. It is important to note that Robinson and Hagler never fought but Sugar Ray Leonard did fight Marvellous Marvin Hagler for a world title at Caesar's Palace in 1987. Comparing footage of the latter rounds of the 1987 fight with Hamed's 1994 fight it would appear that Hamed is impersonating Sugar Ray Leonard.

**It's the way that I have been brought up. It's not under my control.**

**(Hamed in Beattie 2002: 82)**

**What the quote from Hamed alludes to is the manner in which Ingle-trained boxers adopt a holistic understanding of the boxer-entertainer role, and the manner in which this is fostered through the training regime devised by Ingle. Hamed, like Ingle, does not seek to differentiate between athletic and performative practices. Having been trained by Ingle for 12 years at the time of the Belcastro fight, Hamed had been 'brought up' on the Ingle approach to boxing. He had received what Beattie terms 'the treatment' from Ingle, the combination of physical exercises and the exposure to a particular set of narrative resources (Beattie 2002: 72). Hamed's performance in the ring is habitual, having been practiced daily in training. By his own admission, the performance practices are incorporated naturally into his fights, and serve the dual purpose of psychologically disrupting an opponent's game plan whilst simultaneously being directed at the media for the promotion of future fights; "It's all about getting bums on seats" (Hamed in Beattie 2002: 81).**

**Developing into a boxer-entertainer is crucial for individuals who wish to pursue a successful professional boxing career, particularly for those who see boxing as a vehicle to improve socio-economic opportunities and sense of self. Beattie claims 'In boxing these days great boxing skill is no longer enough' (Beattie 2002: 87). The performance practices exhibited by Hamed throughout his career, the vaulting of the ropes, the handsprings across the ring, dancing, singing and combination punching, develop a boxer's athletic ability whilst ensuring they stand out and are noticed by**

promoters, the media and the public. Through the incorporation of performative practices in his training regime, Ingle does not just teach his charges boxing skills so that they might survive inside and outside the ring, he keeps the dream of social mobility and personal development alive (Beattie 2002).

The analysis of the Hamed-Belcastro event, by Beattie and Woodward, failed to explore the complexities of performance within boxing. Performance, as presented by Beattie and Woodward, is an either or. It is either the 'real' athletic performance, or the 'fake' theatrical performance. Performance, is of course, multilayered and multifaceted. The analysis of the Hamed-Belcastro event, by Beattie and Woodward, whilst flawed, demonstrates that performative elements occur in boxing both 'onstage' and 'offstage'. The relationship between Hamed and Ingle, and the manner in which Ingle trains his boxers, was the reason why the Wincobank gym was selected as one of the research sites. Upon commencing my training at the gym, it became apparent that boxers at both gyms, Exeter and Sheffield, recruited from similar story types in order to make sense of their boxing experiences. This project is interested in the manner in which the boxing experience is narrated. It argues that the narration of experience is a performance of identity.

Chapter One, *Auto-ethnography*, is composed of a series of vignettes, describing and reflecting upon my own engagement with the sport of boxing across the two sites. This chapter demonstrates my relationship with boxing's narrative resources and how this relationship has enabled me to make sense of my boxing experiences. The relational nature of narratives and experiences is considered alongside the notion that the

researcher 'in the field' co-produces experience and narratives with the participants of the study. The importance of this will be discussed in more detail below.

Chapter Two, *The Narrative Technologies of Boxing: Reviewing the Field*, examines how specific narrative resources and themes are recruited into boxing literature. It focuses predominantly on the contributions made by academics, journalists, novelists and screenwriters, who have written about the sport. Through a meta analysis of boxing discourses, this chapter identifies the pool of narrative resources that make up the discourses of boxing, establishing boxing's public, cultural and social narrative(s), and indicating why individuals might invest their time, energies, and bodies in the sport.

Chapter Three, *Tales of Becoming: The relationship between themes in boxing discourse*, demonstrates how the narrative technologies, identified in chapter three, form a matrix of cumulative narrative resources, or webs of rationality, that boxers engage with in order to tell stories about their experience of the sport. This project positions the data collected from the participants of my study in the context of other academic projects on boxing, illustrating points of convergence and contention. This chapter argues that the cumulative narrative resources available to boxers influence how they make sense of their experiences and, ultimately, how they perform self.

The fourth and final chapter, *A Generative Tale*, is a case study of one of the professional boxers who participated in this project. This chapter provides a detailed examination of the relationship between narrative resources and the storied-self. In doing so, this chapter demonstrates how

identity is performed by, and, through engagement with certain narrative resources. The chapter explores how narrative resources are personalised and become idiosyncratic when used to describe episodic memories, whilst arguing that access to certain resources affects the types of stories an individual can tell. The analysis of the case study further demonstrates the complexities of identity formation as it occurs through the performance of the storied-self. This chapter illustrates how, through engagement with the narrative technologies of boxing, this individual tells stories of redemption in the form of a generative tale. Further, that it is, in part, through the cultural meaning ascribed to the narrative technologies of boxing that this type of story is possible for this individual.

### Conclusion

This thesis examines how boxing is contextualized and interpreted by other academic projects. It compares and contrasts what is understood about boxing through these projects to the reports given by journalists and authors about boxing. Similarly, it addresses the relationship boxing has with certain screenwriters, playwrights, agents and promotional outfits. In doing so, this project triangulates stories told about boxing across England and North America and considers those story types which have remained present over time and across cultures. This project argues that these stories are what constitute the discourses on boxing. Further, that these discourses are relational to the meta, public, social and cultural narratives of the settings within which they are presented and that, in turn, they are relational to the ontological narratives presented by boxers who participated in this study.

The manner in which boxing has been, and is still, presented by those who write and talk about boxing, whether an academic, a journalist, a critic, an aficionado, a boxer, or someone with relatively no knowledge of the sport, ensures that the discourses of boxing are disseminated and thus shared. These stories form the shared pool of narrative resources available to the boxers who participated in this study. Whilst these resources are multiple and by no means fixed or static they are also limited and, at times, taken for granted. The relationship between the ontological narratives one provides about boxing and the wider narrative resources available to that individual are not always explicitly acknowledged. This project argues that greater attention needs to be paid to the relational nature of narratives in order to better understand how identity is performed.

## **Chapter I: Auto-ethnography**

**Our lives are attempts to make sense of what we are living through. Self-reflection is our curse and our possibility. (Frank 1991: 137)**

**Drawing on the work of Frank (1995) and Jennings (2010), the vignettes below provide an insight into the personal experiences of the researcher during the course of this project. Following Frank and Jennings the stories are offered without analysis in order that each may be left ‘to speak for itself’ (Frank 1995: 23). It is understood that ‘We are storytellers, and we are the stories we tell’ (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich 2006: 3). Further, ‘our narrative identities are the stories we live by’ (McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich 2006: 4). We make meaning and construct identity through the stories we tell about our experiences. Our identity is performed through what ‘we write, say and do’ (Cohler and Hammack 2006: 167).**

**The vignettes contain what McLean and Avril (2006) refer to as ‘identity-light’ and ‘identity-deep’ stories. Identity-deep stories are those which focus on trauma and significant incidences of disturbance or disruption to an individual’s life. Identity-deep stories offer ‘insight’ and draw upon McAdams’s (2006) notions of the redemptive and contaminated self. Identity-deep stories are typically drawn out in the life story interview process used by those researching narratives. Conversely identity-light stories do not indicate a dramatic turning point in the individuals’ life, but rather a ‘memorable adventure that is more pleurably entertaining than**

self-explaining' (McLean and Thorne 2006: 112). Identity-light stories are 'easy to tell, well-rehearsed, and do not require explicit meaning-making' (Ibid). Whilst it is evident that identity-deep stories are told in the training space of boxing gyms, identity-light stories are more readily shared. The accounts below focus more heavily on identity-light stories in order to make sense of the day-to-day experiences within the training space. In doing so the accounts provide an insight into the performances which occur within boxing gyms and the manner in which boxers make sense of their experiences through the stories they tell in and about the training space.

The narratives are just a small selection from the field notes made after the weekly training sessions at the Exeter Amateur Boxing Club. These entries cover the period from January 2009 to November 2011. Included are also a number of entries from my training trips to Sheffield and the St Thomas's boys and girls club in Wincobank. The visits to Sheffield occurred in June and August 2009, March and August 2010 and September 2011 respectively. They trace my first encounter with the professional gym and the first time I met head trainer Brendan Ingle. These accounts also demonstrate the transition I made from being a new or strange face at the gym to being a recognisable figure graciously permitted to train with the professional boxers there.

The accounts appear in chronological order and capture a sense of the experiences of conducting ethnographic research within two very different boxing gyms. These accounts allude to the anxiety and perceived difficulties experienced as I made my first foray into the field of ethnographic research. These narratives demonstrate the sense of the immediacy experienced when engaging with the research subject as a

participant observer. In doing so a contrast is drawn between the immediacy of speaking to and working with subjects within a field to that of writing about a field. The importance of language as a performative tool and its relationship to the bodily practices one engages with begins to be teased out in these accounts. Subsequent chapters will deal with this more explicitly. What became evident from the episodes detailed below is the need to address how one *performs self*. The what, why and how of the language used to interact with others, the impact of this interaction on the individual and the subsequent language one uses to (re)perform self to a new, or the same, audience. These notions of performance underpin this project and will be addressed in greater detail throughout subsequent chapters. Finally, these accounts demonstrate how the position of the researcher changes over time and how a world that is initially threatening and alien can become comfortable and familiar.

### J.R's Voyage to Foreign Lands

It is a cold Monday night in January 2009, roughly two weeks after New Year's Day. I shuffle along to the gym after speaking with the coach, Gary, on the phone earlier today. The building sits opposite a council run swimming pool. Fathers and mothers herd their pre-teen obese cattle out of the four-by-fours. Through the parking lot, separating the swimming pool from the boxing gym, docile dads prod and shove their reluctant offspring, mothers take mousey steps behind clusters of sulking siblings who drag kit bags along the gravel floor. Clean, dry towels flap through half closed zips. Those heading for the swimming pool avoid eye contact. They do not see their own as they pass them by. Neither do they see those alien,

chlorine dodging bodies brushing past them. The pace of the swimmers' movements is that of a lazy rush. They make an effort to move into their space, but not too much of an effort. They are working within a restricted time frame, a time frame they seem to accommodate out of obligation. As they make their way up the stairs to the swimming pool entrance they linger behind the brick wall. Heads 6ft from the ground sit atop red brick and peer at the shaven headed aliens as they make their way into their space.

Slightly more sprightly bodies cut a direct line to the white PVC double doors of the gym. They move with purpose. Those who have kit bags hold them out at waist height or have them sat snugly on their backs. The eyes of the boxers dart across the car park, make contact with others, acknowledge others, and welcome others in. Hands are slapped together, right shoulders press against right shoulders as tracksuit clad men embrace. Backs are patted as greetings are exchanged.

The men disappear up two rickety wooden steps into a back room. Weight benches and machines are used as temporary changing platforms. Hand wraps, towels, t-shirts, gloves and hoodies are strewn across the pec-deck, Romanian chair and the treadmill. This makeshift changing room has doors that are never closed. Kids run into the main space fleeing the cold outside. Those that have bags fling them to the floor below where the men change. Now bagless these kids thrust themselves into the main space. *En masse* they form a single bubbling, bristling unit chasing a football from wall to wall. The plastic yellow ball *pings* as it is belted across the space. The unit of youth hurtles after the sphere. One-by-one men slip down the shaky wooden steps and glide into the main space. They greet the coach, who is

busying himself with the radio, ring apron and heavy bags. A little routine is enacted by the majority of men upon landing on the wooden floor. After removing their outer jackets they greet the coach, they step on the scales, some privately as if hoping that no one is watching, others more publicly waiting for someone to watch and to ask the all important question. If it isn't asked they give the answer anyway to anyone whom might be interested. "5kgs over Christmas! Too much drinking and eating. Fuck me!" The men make their way over to the mirrors or the bags. They shadow box or playfully push and slap at leather. Occasionally the yellow ball pongs as it hits the head or legs of one of the men. Each time it does the rambunctious youth unit screeches to an immediate halt. There is a pause, marked by a momentary shift in the atmosphere, before a bashful solitary, "soz" is bleated by the bubble. The men either ignore the distraction or give a little stare before returning to work.

Eighties music, courtesy of the local radio station, blares from the far corner of the space. I introduce myself to Gary and remind him that we spoke earlier. He enquires about my experience of boxing and decides that I can join in with the other beginners tonight. The men finish their routine and wait. The game of football slowly draws to a close; the youths wait. The other beginners and I stand near discarded kit bags and wait. Some time passes before Gary gives the instruction to start warming-up. We jog in a circle around the rectangular hall. The wooden floor is slippery and uneven. The brick walls are coated in faded, dirty, white paint. Scuff marks, presumably from the leather of gloves and bags, or from the rubber of boots, balls and ropes randomly decorate sections of the walls. A few sorry looking heavy bags hang limply under high windows. Opposite the

makeshift changing room, at the far end, is a miniature ring. The canvas is torn and tatty and the ropes loosely sag under the weight of the coloured electrical tape wrapped around them. A rectangular sheet of reflective plastic is attached to the wall across from the heavy bags. The reflections it provides are blurry as they fight through the smudgy smears of dry sweat. A solitary black and white poster of Muhammad Ali sits on the inside wall of the gym, high above the door. Ali is wrapping his hands with white bandage. The poster is the only decoration inside the gym.

With a warm-up out of the way we get on to the skipping. The space is crammed with the bodies of males, young boys and men in their mid twenties. There is barely any room to move yet alone twirl a skipping rope. Like salmon in a fishery bodies flail in a bid for space. Legs are whipped with plastic as bodies shuffle, jostle and collide. Ropes tangle and are jerked out of relaxed hands. Even with enough space it is hard to get into the rhythm. Maintaining a tempo for two minutes is exhausting but on top of this Gary wants us to put in five to ten second bursts of high energy on his command. By round three I am gasping for air. My legs become less responsive and I start to trip over my own rope.

“Ropes away!” We move on to boxing stance and footwork. I had been watching video clips of Floyd Mayweather Jnr. earlier today. I studied his stance, his movements, and his athleticism. I have also been reading books on stance and guards. I decide to adopt a ‘Philly shell’ guard *ala* Mayweather, figuring if it worked for arguably the best active boxer in the world at present it would work for me; Gary has other thoughts. I am corrected; the ‘Classic guard’ would be mine. “What’s your name big lad?” Gary asked. “Paul.” I replied. “OK JR, well I don’t know what they teach

you where you are from but over here we don't use that guard." Maybe it was the noise of Billy Joel and *Uptown Girl* being emitted from the speakers, maybe it was my accent, or maybe it was through sheer exhaustion that I failed to pronounce my words effectively, either way the lack of clarity over my name made a few things clear. The way I talked, the way I stood and the way I moved signalled difference between me and those bodies which glided over the wooden floor, ducking and weaving before their reflections in the sweat stained mirrors. Whether Gary's 'here' was local or national, my adopted style of fighting was not taught and thus not favoured. I knew that boxing was going to change me, but I had not anticipated how much I would be required to change for it. The training space was foreign to me and I was alien to those that inhabited it.

### Sheffield: First Impressions

I've driven up and down the street three times now. I know it's the right street. I know I've got the right time and I'm almost certain that I have the right building. A large school hall stands proud amidst a row of terrace houses. Beneath the hood of the triangular roof cracked magnolia paint clings to the bricks of the building like a shabby cloak. A heavy looking blue wooden door opens occasionally as men and boys shuffle in. The sign that all the books talk about, 'St Thomas's boys and girls club', is nowhere to be seen.

Cars are tightly packed together in this little residential street. Little terrace houses line one side of the street, slightly larger semi-detached properties the other. You could drive or walk down this street and be forgiven for not recognising its significance. This is, at one and the same time, a factory successful in the production of legends, myths, tales and

bodies and a temple which offers sanctuary to them. On my first visit there are only three, maybe four, signifiers that this is the place I am looking for. There are the two four-by-fours parked close to the blue door. Not an unusual sight for most residential streets in England, but with their private number plates, tinted windows and immaculately preserved metallic finishes, they are definitely out of place on this street. Across from the gym is a semi-detached house guarded by an enormous wrought iron gate which glistens in the June sun. It is the only house on the street which has a gate, let alone a gate almost as big as the house. In front of the blue gym door is parked a silver six seat taxi. A short, stocky man in sunglasses, white shirt and black tie stands talking to those who enter. He creates the image of club bouncer, perhaps deliberately, perhaps by coincidence. It is him I approach to enquire about the gym.

“You need to speak to Carl, Brendan’s not in yet’, the taxi driver and pseudo club bouncer informs me, and so I enter through the heavy blue door. My stomach turns and flips with a mixture of excitement and nerves. Another door, this time with a sign reminding participants that subscription is to be paid promptly. With a creak and a groan the door opens only to be drowned out by the percussive pat-pat-pat, thwack-thwack-thwack, tsch-tsch, tsch-tsch, tsch-tsch, tsch-tsch, screech-squeak, clink, clunk and clang of leather on leather, leather on flesh, polyurethane on wood, rubber on wood, rubber on canvas, steel on steel. A harmony of grunts, snorts, gasps and groans are swallowed or spat. Hip-hop music blares out of crackly speakers in the far left corner of the room. The two sound scores collide, counter one another and compete. At times intertwined and in unison the sound of leather on leather synchronizes with

the base beats of the track, whilst the sounds of rubber on wood match the melodies. More often than not the two run in parallel with seemingly little consideration for one another. In one corner hangs a large four minute clock, in the opposite corner an angular man leans and bends awkwardly against the corner of the ring. Salt and pepper hair adorns his head and face. His puffy, oversized hoody serves to highlight how slender he is. The man is the trainer and the clock is his aide. Between them they orchestrate the sound scores in a continuous three-one-three-one-three-one pattern which every *body* obeys. Three minutes of combined deafening noise, one minute of the trainer talking over hip-hop music as his charges squeeze and slurp at water bottles in-between pants and puffs for air. The air is moist and warm, perfumed by the perspiration which flows from the pores of these working bodies like a flood. A cloud of testosterone lingers invitingly and tickles the nostrils of all who enter to see who is game to stay and play. Beside the clock, above the shiny glass mirrors, and close to the gym door sits a solitary black and white poster of Muhammad Ali. Ali towers over a fallen Sonny Liston. At the other end of the gym, by the trainer and the large ring are numerous fight posters advertising the forthcoming bouts of some of the boxers that train here.

Carl quizzes and questions, why this sport? Why this gym? Why travel all the way from Exeter to train? How often will I come? Do I plan on moving here? Have I boxed before? He inspects my gear, grips and tugs at my gloves. Opens them up, looks at the lining, pats and probes the outer leather. He inspects *me* once more. “Its six pounds for the week, whether you come one day or six days.” I pay him the money. “Go put your gear in the changing rooms then warm-up with a bit of rope work, alright?”

I do as I am told and begin training with the rope. Standing in front of the four-minute clock, and under the watchful gaze of boxing's one true prophet, Muhammad Ali, I work within the same time pattern as all the other bodies. I am the only person skipping. Either side of me painted yellow lines run down towards the ring. Boxers, in single file, move along the yellow tracks repeating a foot pattern and performing a variety of punches. I later learn that this is called doing "the lines." It is an exercise unique to this gym and one that I am not trained in. I watch inquisitively as the endless wave of bodies flow toward me, the mirror and the clock, before retreating towards the ring. I am not the only one watching. As they approach members of the wave lock their gaze on me. In front of me a handful of men shadow box. Silently we exchange looks. Behind me, and to my sides, are rows of heavy bags which are being worked. Punches are thrown to the bag, looks are thrown my way. Other than the occasional hello to one another none of the boxers speak. None of the boxers speak to me, nor I to them. We work and stare in silence. There are children in the gym, young boys, no girls. There is no football being kicked, no unruly mass dashing about the space. Nobody waits to be told to begin work. The boxers enter, say hello to those they are familiar with and begin their graft. They work with gusto and with focus until they are told to stop.

After three three minute rounds of skipping I approach Carl to see what I should do next. "Your skipping's shit!" Carl laughs. "When I have time I'll get one of the little kids to show you how it's done." Carl instructs me to work on the heavy bags, angered, and a little ashamed, on account of his analysis of my skipping I work with a passion slugging away at the sweat soaked leather. The bags are harder than what I am used to hitting,

perhaps they are filled with maize or sand rather than with cotton and wool. The resistance offered by the bags quickly takes the sting out of my punches. I notice three or four professional boxers training alongside me. I am in my element. Boxing must be one of the few sports where you can train alongside your heroes. In other sports, such as football, I would have to be selected, based on ability, to train alongside professionals.

### Second Day

“Time!” Yells Dominic, Brendan’s son, trainer and timekeeper.

“Everyone gather round ring.” We do as instructed and form a semicircle below the ring. Dominic is perched ringside atop a set of wooden steps. Inside the ring is a slightly overweight man in a pair of faded blue jeans and a t-shirt. The man looks sheepish and uncomfortable. “Right, questions for you.” Dominic begins, “What d’ya reckon? Is he a professional or amateur boxer?” Dominic motions toward the man in the ring. “Who thinks he’s professional?” About half of the audience raise their hands. “Who thinks he’s amateur?” The other half of the audience, including me, raise our hands. “What are ya? Professional or amateur?”

“I’m professional.” Comes the quiet response from the man in the ring. A few mutters, laughs and tuts escape the mouths of the audience.

“What’s your record?” Barks Dominic.

“Fought four. Won two, lost two.”

“Do y’s still box?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Silence fills the space. The man shuffles from foot to foot. "I got into some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Probes Dominic.

"I don't...I...I got arrested."

"What d'ya do?"

"I...I...don't want to do this Dominic."

" – Answer the question. What did ya do?"

"I robbed a post office."

Giggles ripple round the outskirts of the ring as the audience slowly fold into the now motionless heavy bags.

"Tell 'em truth."

"That is the truth."

"Tell 'em full story. You used a gun didn't ya? Beat up two pensioners and stole £40,000 didn't ya?"

The man looks like he is going to cry. "No Dom, it's not true. They got it wrong in the paper. I didn't hurt no one. I didn't even have a gun. I definitely didn't get that much money. It were just a few hundred." Sneers from the audience judge the man's failure to steel more money.

"You ruined your life for a few hundred?"

"Dom...I....I don't want to – "

"This is part of your rehabilitation. How did you get caught?"

"My girlfriend shopped me in."

Deep laughter erupts around the outskirts of the ring.

"Why d'ya do it?"

**“I had gambling debts that I had to pay off. I got addicted to online poker and lost a lot of money.” The man is red faced and looks exhausted. He keeps looking over to Dominic in the hope that his ordeal will be over.**

**“Tell ‘em about your boxing days. What were you like?”**

**A puzzled look creeps across the man’s face. “I don’t know what you mean.”**

**“Sure you do. How did you used to prepare for a fight?”**

**“No Dom, please...I don’t...I’ve had enough.”**

**“You used to cheat didn’t you? A brief pause. “Didn’t you?”**

**“Yeah.”**

**“Tell ‘em how you used to cheat.”**

**After a long silence the man responds. “I were bulimic.”**

**“Who knows what that is?”**

**The audience are stunned into silence. The young lads look at each other with puzzled faces.**

**“Tell ‘em what it is.”**

**“It’s when you make yourself be sick.”**

**Groans of repulsion spill from the mouths of the youths.**

**“So, is it good to be bulimic?”**

**“No.”**

**“Does it do you any favours when you’re fighting?”**

**“No.”**

**“Right. Give him a round of applause.” The audience clap. The man sheepishly moves out of the ring. Dominic continues. “He came to me a while back and asked if he could start training again. I told him that he had to do this if he wanted to be allowed back in the gym. He upset a lot of people at the gym, a lot of people who counted on him. If he comes back I**

told him he can't cheat, he has to lose weight the healthy way. OK, back to work everyone."

In my time at the Sheffield gym I never see the man again.

### The Brendan Effect

"You do drama?" Brendan snarls. I repeat the process of explaining myself. Why I want to train, why this gym and so on. Brendan fires a barrage of questions at me in quick succession. I have no guard for them. Each one tags and wallops me like a series of haymakers.

"What are your political beliefs?"

"Who did you vote for in the last election?"

"Who is the smartest race in the world?"

"You're surprised that I'm asking you these questions aren't you?"

"Nobody has asked you questions like this before have they?"

"If I told you the smartest race were the British, why would you think that is?"

"The Empire, that's right. But they don't have the Empire anymore so why are they still the smartest race in the world?"

"They have the commonwealth, which is? The Empire in disguise!"

Throughout my interrogation six boxers spar simultaneously in the ring. The three pairs weave in and out of one another. As they ferociously launch and land hard blows to their partner's body, they delicately and fluidly avoid colliding with any of the other pairs. Partners alternate as and when Brendan calls, which is usually a couple of times within a three minute round. A new pair is formed and the bodies continue their dance of pain. Their faces are flushed and dripping from the effort they expel. An

occasional smile slips onto the otherwise stoic mask which hides the enormous amount of pleasure they are receiving from trading in blows.

**“ALRIGHT! TIME!”** The call brings the ring activities and my interrogation to a temporary halt. Brendan calls over and questions the lads one at a time. Each is humble in his presence. Their responses are short and succinct and framed by a seemingly obligatory need to use the trainer’s name as a bookend to secure the sentence. Brendan’s recruits speak in soft, almost apologetic tones using his name as a marker of respect. Brendan asks them to describe what they were like before they started boxing, their relationship with their parents, to retell Brendan’s views on their parents and their feelings about his views. He speaks to one of the younger professional boxers and asks him to explain what he has been doing for the day. The boxer tells of a photo shoot and interview he conducted with a local newspaper. Brendan quizzes the lad about why he might have sent him on the shoot, what the perceived benefits of the shoot were and the like. Brendan’s questions include statements, **“You weren’t looking forward to the shoot today were yer?”** The responses have all been agreeable. The interaction seems to follow a familiar pattern with trainer and boxer re-enacting at least a pre-established theme if not an entirely pre-established script. These interactions between the trainer and his boxers are performed for me, just as they were for those researchers who came to this gym before me (Beattie 2002; Woodward 2007). They are also performed for the boxer and for the trainer.

**“Alright lads to yer corners. Dance off and punch off.”** The six who were sparring now stand on the edge of the ring apron, inside the ropes. One of them, a teenager, moves forward and executes a clumsy tumble

into the centre of the ring. He springs to his feet and starts shadow boxing. His punches swish and swoosh through the air, his eyes drop to his feet as he begins to sing.

**“Red and yellow and pink and green**

**Orange and purple and blue**

**I can sing a rainbow**

**Sing a rainbow**

**Sing a rainbow too.”**

He chews and mumbles his way through the words, his punches become less concentrated, less energized. His eyes dart around the room to his training partners and to those, like me, at ring side watching. His face is flush again, this time from embarrassment. **“Alright, can we have a clap?”**

**Brendan chirps in beckoningly, “What would yer give yerrself outta ten?”**

**“Brendan, eight Brendan.”**

**“Why eight?”**

**“Brendan, because I got all the words right and my punches were OK, but I could have done better Brendan.”**

**“Brendan!” a nasal voice interrupts, “Brendan, shall I go next? I’ll show him how it’s done.”**

**“Alright then, off you go.”**

Two clumsy rolls and an attempted flip onto the feet are followed by a howling rendition of the ‘Rainbow Song’, belted out straight from the belly of the young boxer.

**“RED ‘UN YELLOW ‘N PINK ‘N GREEN**

**ORANGE ‘N PURPULE ‘N BLUE**

**I CAN SING RAINBOW**

**SING RAINBOW**

**SING RAINBOW TOO.”**

**“Can we have a clap? What would yer give yerself outta ten?”**

**“Brendan, twenty Brendan, because I’m the bees knees. I was dead confident and dead loud.”**

**Brendan chuckles and instructs his charges to resume sparring. He turns to me.**

**“Drama, yer want drama? That’s all boxing is, drama. I tell y’a I’ve got somebody you can meet. An absolute gem. He’s about 6ft 7, 6ft 8 and about 16 1/2 , 17 stone. He’s going to be the next big thing out of here. He’s name’s Richard Towers. He used to come here about six or seven year ago, then he disappeared. No matter what enquiries I made I couldn’t find out what had happened to him. So a few months ago, who walks in here but big Richard.**

**“I says, ‘I can’t believe it.’**

**“He says, ‘Well I’m a bit embarrassed.**

**“I says, ‘Well what’s up?’**

**“Well he says, ‘I’ve just done six, seven year of a t’irteen year sentence.’**

**“I says, ‘What? How many people did you kill?’**

**“He says, ‘Well I didn’t kill anyone. I kidnapped a drug dealer and held him hostage.’**

**“So I says, ‘Well alright then you can train.’”**

**In-between stories Brendan instructs me to watch the action in the ring. A few minutes later a large, athletic figure strolls into the gym and over to Brendan and I.**

**“Alright Brendan?”**

**“Alright big Richard. Richard, listen. This guy here (pointing towards me) has come all the way up from Exeter to meet you. He’s heard all about you and thinks you’re nothing special. He says he’s come up here to do a number on you. He’s asked me if he can open spar with you and I’ve said yes. Says he wants a real war with you Richard.”**

**Standing over me, Richard smiles as he looks down, “Alright pal. I’m up for that.”**

**“Go get your sparring gear on Paul and get in the ring.”**

**Stunned into silence I do as I’m told. Baffled I offer no correction to Brendan’s version of events. As I make towards the changing rooms the three of us exchange wry smiles as Richard and I shake hands. The smiles offer some assurance that this is in part a joke. Similarly, Brendan’s mention of open sparring, hitting to the head, supports the notion that I am being tested as this type of sparring is something which Brendan is widely recorded as frowning upon.**

**After collecting my sparring gear I return to see Richard already in the ring with seven others. I approach Carl who checks over my gear before he puts my gloves on me. Using a large roll of duct tape Carl straps me in to my gloves. Tapped up I am limited in how I can use my hands. I cannot hold a water bottle adequately, I cannot adjust my shorts or headgear properly and, unless I chose to use my teeth to release the tape around my wrists, I cannot remove my gloves. I am trapped in my sparring gear and am at the mercy of the trainers to release me from it as and when they see fit.**

**I have sparred before at the gym in Exeter. The Exeter gym favours open sparring with a maximum of three, or four, two-minute rounds. Only**

two people spar at any one time. In Brendan's gym the rules differ. I am instructed to go and stand on the outside of the ring, against the wall. This is a balancing act and an exercise in overcoming claustrophobia rolled into one. Eight boxers line up with their backs to the wall. Metal holders for water bottles prevent the boxers from leaning against the wall. The space between the wall and the ropes is minimal, maybe a foot at most. The bit of the ring that we are asked to stand on is maybe 6 inches in width. We stand with our shoulders pressed against one another, our faces and bodies towards the ropes. We have to make constant, slight adjustments as and when the boxers in the ring spar close to the ropes, or during the rest periods when they lean past us to get to their water bottles. The experience is frustrating and tiring. This is the only time any of the boxers in Brendan's gym are waiting, and yet, unlike their counterparts in Exeter this waiting is active, not passive. Eventually I am called on to enter the ring.

Eight of us walk around the ring in an anti-clockwise circle. Some of the men that have been sparring for some time drop out of the circle to drink water. In a cluster, seven of us walk behind Richard. Richard walks ahead of the pack, on his own.

"There's nobody here. Look at all this space." Richard sweeps his hands around him in a circle. "Look at it. They're all scared of me. No one dares come near me." He calls out to me. "Don't you be hiding in that pack big lad. You're mine."

"Off you go." Calls Brendan.

I receive a blow to my ribs from someone behind me. I quickly learn that this is the signal to let someone know that they are sparring with you. "No you don't." Yells Richard from the other side of the ring. He quickly

makes his way over and lands two blows to my side. The blows communicate to the other lad, and me, that Richard and I are now sparring partners. Richard plants himself down in front of me. He adopts a 'Philly Shell' guard. "Come on big lad, let's have you." He waves me towards him. I land a jab and follow up quickly with a one-two. "Come, on!" He teases. "Harder!" I respond with a double jab right combination. "Come on!" Left, right, hook. Each combination is followed by a taunt from Richard. "Don't go easy on me, hit me properly. I'm a big lad, I can take it." I throw shot after shot with as much power as I can muster. Only a small minority of the punches slip past his guard. Those that connect don't move him. "What's your tattoo of on your arm?" Richard asks.

"It's a -" I'm cut off by a jab from Richard. We exchange smiles. "Sorry pal. Let's touch gloves." I extend my left hand out towards him. Instead of returning the favour Richard fires a straight rear hand to my exposed chest. "Ohhh, can't believe you fell for that. Rookie mistake pal, rookie mistake!" I'm exhausted, but laughing. Richard dances around me and picks me off at will. He beckons me to return fire but I have nothing left to give.

"Change over." Brendan calls out from ringside. I make to find another sparring partner, grateful that my encounter with Richard is over.

"Nah pal, we ain't done." Richard thwarts my attempts to leave and signals to the over boxers that we are still sparring with a double hook combination to both my sides. After several rounds with Richard, Brendan instructs Richard to let me work with someone else. Immediately two youths jump in and land shots on me. The shots rain down at the same time. The signal is clear, both are my sparring partners. I look to the corner in

the hope that Brendan will instruct one of them to find another partner.

‘Please choose the larger of the two to leave Brendan,’ I silently pray.

“Right you are. Go easy on them Paul, they’re only small.”

I look in protest towards Brendan as the two ant like boxers back me into the corner and wail on me. They take turns picking me off. I try to defend myself but end up taking repeated blows to the arms, chest, ribs and kidneys.

Partners change again. I am selected by Adnam, a professional boxer.

“Hit him like you hit me Adnam. He’s a big lad, he can take it.”

“Thanks Richard.” I scoff as Adnam lunges at me with a flying right hook to the chest. I make a move towards him, to get into range, and before I know it I have been spun and thrown against the ropes. I nearly lose my balance but quickly regain my footing. Just as I am getting back into stance Adnam flies at me with another blistering combination and spins me again. “You need to teach me how to do that.” I implore. Adnam is more than happy to show me. Similarly, after landing several rear hooks to my throat I ask him to show me how to defend against it, which he does.

“Time!” Comes the call from ringside; a welcome call that allows me to rest and take on fluids. I go to grab my water bottle but struggle to open the cap. My arms ache from the amount of punches I’ve thrown and the amount of punches which have landed on them. It is difficult to get the amount of water I crave from the bottle. Being taped into my gloves means that I can’t release a hand to squeeze the bottle fully. Exhaustion makes titling the bottle at a high enough angle to drink from painful. I feel empty and have nothing left to give but my ordeal is not over. I respond to calls of “Time,” and “Change over” that come from ringside. I exit and enter the

ring only when told. I watch other boxers being told to stop and finish for the night by Brendan and Carl. I pray that my name will be called out soon so that I might be released from the ring and cut free of my gloves. It is impossible for me to keep track of how many people I have sparred, how many rounds I have fought, or the number of rest periods I have taken. I fight back an urge to vomit as an acidic taste fills my mouth. Drained I go through the motions trying to defend against attacks whilst giving the impression that I am still capable of fighting back. Eventually Brendan tells me I'm done. Relieved I crawl out of the ring and make my way to the showers. All I can think about is the need to take on fluids and food.

Changed and ready to leave I make my way over to Brendan to say my goodbyes. "What are you up to now? Do you have time to come to the sauna?" Brendan enquires. My stomach aches and I desperately want food but I don't feel like I can pass up this opportunity. I have read in great detail about how Brendan often takes his boxers to the sauna after training. Beattie's (2002) account chronicles the extent to which Brendan uses this time to work the minds of his boxers, giving them 'the treatment' (Beattie 2002: 72). I accept and travel with Brendan and Richard cross-town, to a hotel with a sauna. En-route I share a story with Brendan about my family and the trouble my younger brother is having with money. I explain how, in my possession, I have a suit and CV for him. My intention is to secure him a job whilst here, in a bid to alleviate the worry he is causing his parents. A smile creeps across Brendan's face; he does not comment; it is not necessary; we enter the hotel in silence. Upon greeting the receptionist at the sauna, Brendan immediately and effortlessly starts to tell a story about the two lads that are with him today, Richard and I. "You see, I have these

lads with me and I'm trying to teach them right. They've not had the best in life but they're doing good now and trying to make amends. I just wondered if I could let them use the sauna as a bit of a treat." The receptionist pays little attention to the contents of the story. She seems to have heard versions of it time and time again. Her mind was made up the minute she saw Brendan approach. We are handed three towels and waved towards the changing room. I reach into my pocket to draw out my wallet. Richard and Brendan discourage me and off we go, free of charge, to use the sauna.

The changing rooms are well-maintained, clean and high spec, and as such, are in stark contrast with the facilities at the gym. As we change Richard asks me about Exeter, the make-up of the population and the like. Upon hearing that there is little diversity in Exeter, and that it is mostly rural, Richard wants to know what they would make of him. "Do you reckon they'd look at me and think, 'Not sure about this big negro?'" He laughs as he contemplates it. "Have you heard Brendan's opinions on race? Have you heard him talk about race? Like when he uses the word Paki and what he means by it? He means it as a term of respect, because...because. Hey Brendan, tell Paul about the word Paki, about how you use the word Paki, what it means."

"Pakistani means people of god, so when I say Paki I'm saying person of god." Through my silence I accept the usage of the term, allowing it to pass unchallenged.

During our time in the sauna, Richard and I sit and listen. Brendan covers a range of topics, mostly about boxing history. He shares memories of his past, about how the sport has mistreated him, how he has been

conned by promoters and managers and how he had been asked to throw fights when he was a boxer. Brendan concludes the session by reminding us that we didn't have to pay to come to the sauna. He declares that the story he told to the receptionist made her feel like she was doing something good by letting us in. Brendan explains that you can get a lot out of life if you can make other people feel good about what they are doing for you.

I spend the next day with Richard, at his request and with Brendan's approval. I meet him for an early morning weight session, run errands with him around town, have lunch with him at one of his favourite restaurants, and spend the afternoon watching videos of his amateur fights. Richard tells numerous stories throughout the day and I learn about his criminal past and his desire to make amends through boxing. Richard concludes a number of his darker stories by laughing as he says, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, I just feel I can. It seems weird to me now, I can't imagine it."

### Feeling Out the New Guy

Sparring is somewhat of a trial by fire. Whilst it is important to demonstrate what you can do offensively it is equally important to demonstrate what you can withstand. Does a boxer look to give up after being hit for the first time? Does he complain about the punishment he is receiving? Does he turn from the onslaught or stand and face it? Sparring, once it becomes part of your training, is about developing your skills, but when you spar for the first time in a new gym it is about showing heart. Dominic Ingle is recorded as saying that the established boxers at the

Wincobank gym always want to 'feel out the new guy' the same could be said for the gym in Exeter.

I had travelled up to Sheffield for the second time. The greeting I received from Richard, Adnam and Carl was fantastic; it was like greeting old friends. Dominic and I had not properly been introduced and as such we did not speak to one another. After sorting out my subs with Carl and warming-up with the lines (a skill Brendan had taught me during my training day with Richard last time), skipping and some light bag work I was eager to get in the ring. Richard and Adnam were both calling me out as Carl looked on and smiled. The sparring followed the same pattern with Richard and Adnam demonstrating that they were far more experienced than I. Sometime into the sparring Dominic gloved up and climbed through the ropes. He started working with some of the lighter boxers, taunting and teasing as he pushed them around the ring and wrestled them to the ground. He caused enough irritation and disruption that several boxers wanted to quit sparring. After a while his sights set on me. "You and me big lad, come on."

With his head down and hands up and swinging, Dominic charged at me. Our bodies collided as I jolted back slightly. Dominic slugged away at my ribs as I jabbed his chest. A little space opened up between us as I threw a combination. Dominic responded by charging again. This time I resisted, pushing him back with a shoulder charge. I reverted to a 'Philly shell' guard and braced myself. "It's like boxing wit' me Kell. It's like boxing wit' me." Dominic called out to a professional boxer Kell Brooks as he tried again to push me around.

**“You’re not very good.” I taunted back, “I could take this all day Dom, all day. It’s like a massage.” Dominic laughed as he slammed a triple shot combo home. Back peddling I made Dominic follow as he tried to grab me and push me into the ropes. Fighting back I turned him and pinned him against the ropes, leaning my weight onto him in an attempt to wear him down. As I released Dominic and moved away, happy that he had not had the chance to wrestle me to the ground, Dominic’s left shoulder dropped and he started to make another charge. I responded in kind by putting my weight behind my left shoulder and ramming it into his chest. Our bodies made a dull slapping sound as contact was made. Dominic jolted back; his gum shield flew from his mouth. “Look at that! He’s hit me so hard me gum shield flew out.” A few of the boxers stopped and stared unaware that it was my shoulder and not a punch that Dominic was referring to. Carl sniggered as he rinsed and refitted Dominic’s shield. The break in action provided me with a welcome moment of respite. The session continued in much the same way as I brawled my way through round after round.**

**When the session was over I slipped through the ropes and made my way over to the corner to be cut from my gloves. Carl had a huge smile on his face. One of the aides, a face I hadn’t seen before today, cut me lose. “You’re one tough bastard.” He complimented as his scissors sliced through the duct tape.**

**“Thanks man, I appreciate it.”**

**“Yeah, Carl and I were talking while you were in there. You can take a lot of punishment man. You’re one tough bastard.”**

**After showering and changing I introduced myself to Dominic. On my way out of the gym, having said my goodbyes to Adnam, Richard, Carl**

and now Dom I was approached by a young boxer. “What were you in prison for?” The young lad asked.

“I wasn’t ever in prison.” I replied, “Why did you think that?”

“I thought y’knew Richard?”

“I do.”

“From prison?”

“No from here.”

### March 2010

The excitement I felt on the drive up to Sheffield quickly drains as I approach the gym. My body begins to remember the pain and exhaustion felt during the last visit. The exterior of the gym has been treated to a new coat of paint. The interior, the heart and furnace, remains unchanged. The mirror is still cracked; flakes of old dry paint still cling to moist walls.

Familiar bodies traverse the faded lines on the floor. The rhythm, tempo and atmosphere of the space still indicates that this is a serious place of work.

“You’re back are you? You with us for a little while then?” Carl quizzes as I pay my £6 fees and £35 membership. His smile is kind, if not a little surprised to see me again. I am given permission to train and advised to continue with what I was doing last time. A number of the boxers shadow box past me steeling glances to assess whether I am an amateur or professional, a competent or novice boxer, they clearly do not recognise me from my previous visits.

I put on my sparring gear and go to see Carl. He’s surprised that I want to spar. “Are you sure you want to today?” I confirm that I do and he

allows it, asking the lads to take it easy with me, “even though he’s a big lad.” Richard enters and recognizes me straight away.

“Yes Paul. Nice to see you pal.” I am greeted with a hand grasp and a chest-to-chest/shoulder-to-shoulder clinch. “I’m not sparring tonight,” he states, “It’s because you’re here!” A big smile opens up across his face and he lets out a little laugh. “No it’s not really,” just in case I believed him.

Ringside Richard provokes the sparring, shouting out words of encouragement to me and goading my partners to hit me as hard as they hit him. “Hey Manny!” Richard calls to an Iranian professional boxer. “You know where Paul’s just come from don’t you? He just got out of prison. You know what he was in for? Beating up little Arab lads. He hates Arabs you know Manny. Get him back for all those Arab lads he hurt!” Manny smiles, laughs and pats my glove to show he gets the joke as we circle the ring. The sparring is supported by a number of narrations, most notably from Richard who talks to all the boxers but pays particular attention to my sparring partners and I. Sparring partners exchange playful verbal shots between one another. The exchange of banter is jovial and teasing, the exchange of blows possesses a slightly more aggressive quality but both elements demonstrate performances in practice.

Barry, Adnam, Mohmad, Mo, Jono and Adam are all in the ring. I jump in and immediately Barry sizes me up. “Fuck me!” He looks me up and down. “It wasn’t me that said you were ugly you know?...But you are ugly!”

“Am I?”

“Yeah, real ugly!”

**“Time” yells Richard and Barry turns and fires off two quick jabs and a straight right. I bully him around the ring a little, holding him off with jabs. He dives in with swinging lefts hooks which connect with my collar bone, kidneys, arm, and occasionally when I’m quick enough my gloves. I spar a number of rounds with different opponents, losing count of how many partners or rounds I have had. Adnam, Mo, and Barry all take turns pummeling me. Mo does it silently, Barry does it with constant talk, “I ain’t running from you. I’m right here. You want to go toe-to-toe, we’ll go toe-to-toe.”**

**Richard chants encouragement mixed in with his usually taunts to me and my opponents. “Does he hit hard for a white lad? Hit him like you hit me Adnam. Don’t let him bully you around like that.”**

**I fire a punch off at Barry. He moves back to get out of the way and stumbles over the back leg of an unseen body. As his back hits the canvas Richard lets out a roaring “BOOM! Seven-Eight-Nine, He’s out”. Light laughter ripples through the ropes and over the canvas. Barry springs back up and looks considerably annoyed. He comes at me with vengeance, launching his compact 140lbs frame through the air and connecting with numerous hooks.**

**Whilst sparring with Adnam he steps on my toe “Come on, you should be able to beat me without cheating, what’s wrong?” I jest. “I’m teaching you. You need to learn these tricks, how to deal with them” “Oh I see. Cheers!” I step on his foot and hit him. “Oh so you know it?” “You’re a good teacher!” “TIME!”**

As we circle the canvas Adnam calls out. **“New rule. Anything I teach you you can’t do to me, OK?”** We both laugh.

**“Time!”**

Adnam, Mo and Barry all turn to face me. Each throws a jab to signal that they are sparring with me. I look in amazement. All three close in on me and push me back to the corner. More shots rain down on me. I have no choice but to close my guard tight and defend as many as I can. Carl and Richard call to my three attackers to decide which one is sparring. All three call out in unison, **“I am!”** Pugilistic logic prevails; whoever can land the most shots is able to claim to be my sparring partner. I weather the storm and finish sparring.

Richard and Carl both chuckle as I go over to thank them for the session. Richard smiles, **“It used to be like that when I first started here”** referring to everyone wanting to spar with him, **“and of course with me coming straight out of prison I thought I was a big tough guy. My confidence was like that”** Richard holds out his finger and thumb and squeezes them shut. **“But you’re a good guy. You know how to take it.”**

As I change I chat to Mo about his style in the ring. I comment on how fast and agile he is. He looks at me and smiles, **“Yeah but we have to be against people like you, you just don’t hurt do you? Do you even feel the punches?”** I smile a little and don’t say anything. My ribs and chest wail in pain. Mo continues, **“You’ll see it in all of us we copy...well not copy, but just have a bit of Hamed in us...we all want to be like him...we box like him.”** It is certainly true that the ring performance, the movement, the banter and the tempo and confidence with which each is delivered is a close approximation of that exhibited by Naseem Hamed. Many of the young

boxers move around the ring with their hands low to the ground, their chins thrust out and swinging side to side. The lads perform the 'Ali shuffle' and switch stances on numerous occasions. They talk to and goad their opponents and bounce as if dancing to some internal music, a beat that only they can hear.

I walk through the Meadowhall shopping complex after training. I have bought a Mother's Day gift and as I return to my car a soap and lotion salesman stops me. He tries to convince me to buy some hand lotion for my mother. I politely refuse stating that I already have a gift. "Just try it, give me your hand." I do and he starts to lather my hand with the cream. I immediately recoil, feel embarrassed and emasculated. I am very aware of how public this act is as the lotion booth is situated in the middle of the shopping centre just below one of the main sets of escalators. I feel a strong contradiction between the act that I am engaging in now and that which I have just come from. The two acts require two very different performances of masculinity and I am suddenly aware of how uncomfortable I am with the less hegemonic version. My response shocks and upsets me. Had I not just come from the boxing gym, had I not been in Sheffield then the act of having my hands moisturized would not have felt problematic to me. My relationship towards my own notion of masculinity and identity is open to change dependent upon the acts I am engaged in the people I am 'performing' for.

As I leave the shopping centre ashamed at the severity of my reaction. It crosses my mind how boxers are renowned for treating the skin around their knuckles with various ointments to toughen it and here I was having moisturizer rubbed into my hands to soften them.

In a lot of pain I enter the gym a little after 4pm tonight. Upon returning to Exeter I discover that I have a broken rib. I expect to be late and for the gym to be already full of sweaty working bodies working out to the thumping sounds of garage and grime music. The gym is deadly silent. Val, the only female who works at the gym, is sat in a white plastic chair in an outdoor coat and texting someone on her phone. A few young boxers are lying on their kit bags with the hoods of their jackets pulled tight around their faces. No music plays. The lights over the ring are not on. Apart from two small boys (maybe aged 8/9) nobody else is working. In total there are 6 bodies in the gym, including mine. I start to change and wonder where everyone is. Mo enters and informs me that there is an amateur fight card on tonight and that the professional fight card is on the following night in Liverpool. Nobody is here because they are either fighting on the amateur card or having a day off before fighting professionally. "I'm just gonna work the bags a bit then head off", me too I think. Each right I throw sends a shooting pain through my rib cage. I feel winded and short of breath. I'm relieved that nobody is here so that I don't have to make my excuses and dodge sparring. Val has received the required response from the text she sent. She picks up her gear and is off with the lads in hoods. She informs Mo that Brendan is on his way. My ears prick up. Maybe I'll stay a little to speak to Brendan again. I work the lines and am surprised at how much I remember. The gym starts to fill up a little now. Jono enters, so do Adnam and Mohmad. As I pace up and down Mo calls out to Brendan. "Brendan! See him there" gesturing towards me, "guess where he's just come from?...Prison. He has honest Brendan. Look at the size of him. He's been pumping some iron. He's here to rob the ring. Honest Brendan, he

told me himself. He's gonna rob the ring when nobodies looking. In't that right?" Brendan looks at me with a wry smile. I smile too, a little embarrassed. I shake my head in protest. Brendan seems unsure. I finish with the line running and decide to work the speed bag. It is the first time I have ever attempted to punch one. I build up a little rhythm with each hand and can make the bag move slowly and with little impact upon the backboard. Brendan comes over and gives me coaching. "One, catch, two, catch, three, catch, four, catch, one catch, two, catch. Keep going like that then your voice, eyes, brain, hands, body and feet are all working together. And then..." Ratatatatatatatatatatatatatata. Brendan hammers the speed bag making it dance back and forth numerous times. I continue with slight success, hitting, catching, hitting, catching. All the time counting.

Mohmad approaches me. "Do you want to spar tonight?" I agree, I get my gear and jump into the ring.

Brendan asks if I have sparred before. I remind him of who I am. He smiles and then asks where I travel from. When he hears Exeter he smiles, laughs, grimaces and turns away closing his eyes.

"Everyone to yer corners" Brendan commands.

"Alright, and now entering the ring all the way from Pakistan we have..."

"Which one Brendan?" Small laughter ripples around the ropes. I am the only white boxer in the ring. The other four lads are of Asian or Middle Eastern decent. Brendan gestures to Mohmad. Mohmad performs a somersault then goes into a handspring before throwing a few punches and retreating back to the corner. Applause and laughter are offered by the four of us stood in the ring and Brendan.

**“And now entering the ring all the way from India we have...” Mohmad does a forward roll, stands, throws a few punches and then retreats.**

**“And now all the way from Prussia we have...” Adnam does a cartwheel, throws his punches and retreats.**

**“And now all the way from Arabia we have...” Another lad flips into the centre of the ring, performs a handstand, does his punches and retreats. It is my turn.**

**“And now all the way from Russia we have...” I perform a martial roll into standing. I throw a four punch combination and retire. Brendan applauds as do the others. Sparring now commences as I accept the Russian identity given to me by Brendan. As I spar Adnam he reports to Brendan, “You know he doesn’t hit hard for a Russian Brendan.”**

### **August 2010**

**I start to feel like a familiar face in the gym. I am recognized and greeted by a number of the boxers and coaching staff. The welcome is warm and I feel accepted and comfortable in the space. I have acquired a basic comprehension of the exercises specific to this gym, enough to enable me to train without guidance in conjunction with the other boxers here. My commitment to training has seen my reflexes get sharper and my technical standard improve. Whilst I am still unable to land any meaningful blows against the professional boxers my defense is sufficient enough to avoid serious injury. Against the amateur boxers I do much better. My power and speed is, at times, superior allowing me to control sparring sessions and hurt my opponents. Being able to control and dominate the exchange is exhilarating.**

**August 22, 2011: Wincobank, Sheffield**

Brendan enters the gym ahead of me. I take a book he lent me some 12 months ago back to him. Brendan's face lights up upon seeing the book. He might not remember my name, and he might not have remembered my face, but he remembers the book and is able to recall that I am at University and keen on learning about the gym.

**"Do you have a pen and paper on you?"**

**"In the car I do, yes Brendan."**

**"Go get um. I've got a story for you."**

Upon my return with pen and paper Brendan asks me to write down the name Brigante, telling me how they were an English tribe (later discovered to be Celtic) who established a fort at the top of Wincobank. Brendan confesses that he knows little about the tribe, but is keen to know more.

**"What you're going to do for me, you're going to buy two books that tell you all about the Brigante in Wincobank; one for you and one for me. The club'll pay you for them both."** Brendan goes on to explain how 'old-timers' in the area have told him tales of how the Brigante were a vicious, fearless people who fought the Normans and Romans despite being outnumbered and without sufficient resources to win. As punishment the Romans chopped off the hands, feet and heads of all the Brigante in Wincobank.

**"Now I'm not saying I'm going to make something out of nothing, but you can see what I'm thinking can't you?"**

I imagine that Brendan wants to incorporate the Brigante history into the Wincobank gym story. I picture headlines that start describing

**Brendan's boxers as descendants of the fearless, vicious Brigante warrior tribe, or how Brendan brings out the Brigante in his boxers.**

**Brendan goes on to retell his life history, particularly his move from Ireland to Sheffield. Meeting Alma and deciding to stay in England.**

**Brendan's story is abridged in places, extended in others. A comment he made when I interviewed him, about the English being the biggest shower of bastards has been softened. This he tells me was what Irish nationalist teachers used to say. He thought, and still thinks that "the English are as crafty and as tricky as a bag of monkeys."**

**Brendan uses a familiar story frame to tell of the troubles he is currently facing with the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBofC). The key figures in the story are new, but the plot and trajectory are the same as the story he told about the judges 'robbing' his amateur boxers of victories. In both stories, Brendan and his boxers are up against structures and governing bodies that seek to penalize the club, jealous of the success they are able to achieve. To support his story, Brendan retires, momentarily to his house across the street, he returns with a copy of the August 2011 edition of *Boxing Monthly*, an editorial heavily criticizes the BBBofC.**

**On a tangent from his main story, Brendan tells of how Richard Towers had to get an Irish boxing license when he first turned professional because the BBBofC refused to license a boxer who was on remand from prison (Richard had to serve 3 ½ yrs of probation following his release from prison). Richard eventually was granted a British license much to the anger of the Irish boxing council, who were aggrieved to learn that Richard wasn't fully Irish (his Grandmother had some Irish connection).**

Present now are **Brendan, Richard Towers and Barry ‘Kid Galahad’.**

**Brendan begins to recite the lines of a song:**

**A little of reading and writing was all they taught me at school  
But plenty of funning and fighting by my school Master Mr. O’Toole  
I was taught to be cunning and crafty  
And know the best things in life  
And with all of your funning and fighting  
Still I had no tail to me coat.**

**Richard and Barry join in with sections as Brendan sings. “Now imagine,” Brendan offers, “It sounds great with just us, with Richard singing in a lower tone to me. But you imagine – get a record of it and hear three or four guys singing it together. It’s smashing.” The song is a new addition to the repertoire of the gym. It is longer in duration and slightly more poignant than the nursery rhymes usually sung.**

**Brendan introduces me to a professional boxer, Lee ‘Liquorice All Sorts Kid’ Duncan. Brendan has spoke at length to me before about the boxer and his family, explaining how, after Lee was brought to the gym as a teenager, Brendan intervined and demanded that he move out of home, away from his parents, particularly his father who Brendan described as a ‘negative influence’ on Lee. Lee is present as Brendan retells the story; about the conditions he placed on Lee to find somewhere else to live and to attend college if he wanted to box. Lee agrees with all that Brendan is saying and concludes Brendan’s story by stating that whilst he is now a third year University student his two younger brothers, who did not leave home, are serving custodial sentences.**

In total I spend about thirty minutes with Brendan before Carl comes over and interrupts. “Get your gear on Paul so you can train.” I do as instructed and a little later Brendan leaves for his scheduled five o’clock dinner. “You got trapped there Paul didn’t you? Thought I’d rescue you.” Carl laughs.

August 29, 2011

“What’s happening with your movement?” Brendan inquires as I practice the lines. I look down at my feet and behind me.

“I’m not sure.” I respond puzzled. Brendan turns his head away and mock gasps before laughing. I laugh too.

“You know I’m glad you’re laughing because I thinking to myself, ‘you tick bastard.’ How long you be coming down here now?”

“Well this will be something like my fifth week.”

“Five weeks. Right. And when you first came you moved like a tick country Paddy. But now your movement’s come on a bomb. It’s much better.” I beam a little as I thank Brendan. “So what’s happening with your movement?”

“It’s getting better.” Brendan nods and walks off.

Some two hours later, as I’m getting changed to leave Brendan pops his head into the changing room.

“What’s happening with your movement?”

“It’s getting better.”

Brendan nods. “You’re coming on a bomb.”

The sparring is fierce, energized and deliberate tonight. I come off worse in all of my encounters. Junior Witter sinks solid crushing blows into

my back, throat, and “accidentally” at one point my chin. Tom bullies me around the ring smashing me with hooks as and when he pleases. Adam Etches bulldozers his way through me with hard blows to the sternum. Barry leaps towards me with hook combinations powerful enough to fell a horse. At one point Richard and Karl open spar. Richard starts dominantly keeping Karl at a distance and tormenting him. Barry ‘the Arab’ observes from ringside. “Come on Karl, don’t let no black man do that to you. Don’t take that Karl. Come on Karl, white power. White power Karl.” Karl unleashes a flurry of punches which catch Richard off guard and look to cause him some trouble. Dominic calls time, saving both men from their ordeal.

After training, on my way out I say my goodbyes to the boxers and to Brendan. Brendan smiles, wishes me well and then says with a wry smile, “Don’t go pinching anything on the way out!”

### Exeter: Soaked and Drained

**Bummm-bummm-bummm-bummm**

**Vrummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm**

The two sounds beat and vibrate simultaneously like a thunderous, ringing, tingling, travelling orchestra in constant motion from the top of my spine, up, round and over to the top of my eyebrows. These noises are accented by pants and gasps. I prise and peel my soaking top from my torso, tossing it to the floor. Part of me leaps up and off of my tired body in a misty vapour of work, floating up into the gym air, promising to settle in with old friends, sometime after I have left, on the already damp, moist mirrors and walls. Another part of me squelches, slurps, drips and melts

into a heap on the now slippery floor. The part that's left is empty, used up and exhausted. This part rings and sings with a ferocious burn, boasting with pride as if to say "I can, and will, do this all day tomorrow as well you know!"

Michael Jackson's 'Beat it' comes on the radio. Immediately Jordan springs into action with a whoop and a crotch grab, spinning the dial until it blares out full belt. The distorted blare hammers and hums at my ears. Jordan 'dances' through the gym. He thrusts his hips, hands and legs in all directions. A moon walking Moses parting the sea of exhausted boxing bodies. Whoops and calls of 'cha'mone' replace the sound of heavy breathing. Jordan invites Gary to dance. Gary dutifully obliges and mixes robotic style punches with awkward looking leg movements. The gym erupts in laughter and Gary, although visibly uncomfortable in his movement, continues to play for the crowd.

Empty, isolated feelings of exhaustion are dissolved by Gary's moves. Gradually each boxer is distracted from focusing on his aches and pains, from the reflections on what went well and what went wrong tonight. Like a magnet, Jordan and Gary have drawn every one's attention to the centre of the space. We are united as we laugh at the two men horsing around. Our thoughts have been taken from the self in isolation to others in relation to self. Instead of the introverted practice of checking over self, and reflecting on practice, we are checking in with other selves. We exchange glances, share laughs, connect through head nods, hand gestures and the occasional mimicked movement. Right now our focus is on this moment, reflection will be savoured for later.

## Testing

The session was good tonight. Alan, a relatively new trainer, led us through simulated and controlled sparring. He wore the body suit and pads and gave each of the senior boxers three rounds of work. I had decided before the session to focus on body shots and defence. Each time Alan presented an opening to the body I attacked it viscerously. Instead of landing the one punch he called out I let out a flurry of two or three. When he crowded me, leant against me and tried to push me to the ropes I planted the heels and pushed back. The moment there was space to breath I let rip a left hook to the liver, kidneys, or a straight punch to the sternum. Alan slobbered and drooled as he barked his commands, encouraging me to slip the jab and follow up with combinations.

Later in the session, Alan called the seniors to the ring for a talk where he reminded us of the old adage, “you box a fighter and you fight a boxer.”

Dave and I worked as a pair on defence: parrying, slipping, catching and counter punching. We had both seen the numerous YouTube clips of Floyd Mayweather Jr slipping and avoiding punches whilst trapped in the corner. We took turns acting the role of Mayweather and did our best to avoid the flurry of shots that the other fired at us. The two of us established a rhythm, swaying, bobbing, ducking and weaving around a fixed central axis. Our toes planted, heels free to lift and rotate, we stuck to our scruffy canvas floor and danced the corner jig. The movement was effortless, relaxed and controlled. At our best we were able to respond to one another’s movements instantaneously. At our worst we failed to move in unison and sweaty leather bumped off of shiny foreheads.

Tonight I noticed a sizeable shift regarding my relationship with the training space, and indeed my body within the space. I felt part of the space, rather than an invader perched on the outskirts. I felt a difference between the presence of my body and that of Alan's. My body, by the assertions I was making privately within the space, belonged here more than the body of Alan. Further I felt inclined to test Alan. In boxing terms I was "feeling out the new guy," pushing and probing him to see what he was capable of, what he could withstand, and how much desire he had to share the space with me. Alan passed the test.

Another form of testing was taking place between Dave and I. The two of us were testing our capabilities. We were experimenting with our ability to react to the actions of the other. We were using the other to test our selves. The actions of one body served as a litmus test for the progress being made by the other. I left the club that night feeling secure in my position as part of the fixtures of the gym. There was also a surge of pride as I realized that I was making progress.

### **First Fights**

March 12 will see Dave, Lee, Shannon and Andrius fight. For Lee and Andrius it will be their first bout. Their work ethic has intensified. They are much more focused and engaged with their training which they work at with a solemn icy glare. During the run Lee states how excited he is about the fight, saying how it has given him more of a purpose in the gym, something to work towards, to aim for. He says that he is trying not to

think about it “There’s no point getting nervous is there? It’s just another sparring session really.”

I am yet to be selected by Gary to go for my medical. The medical is the first step in getting your boxing license. Licensed boxers are known as “carded boxers” and only carded boxers can be selected to fight. Lee, Andrius, Dave and I all started boxing at roughly the same time twelve months ago. Out of the four I am the only one who remains without card. It is impossible not to notice the division that has occurred due to this difference. Dave, Andrius and Lee all huddle round one another. They fill one another in on what Gary has said to them, how they are feeling and what they do and do not know about their opponents. I remain outside of this discussion, I have nothing to offer. The realization of my place as researcher within this group glares at me almost mockingly. I feel alien once again.

### Damage

Sal expresses that he has a lot of anger today. He doesn’t explain why but goes to work on the heavy bag. After a few moments he walks over to Gary with a sheepish look. “Gary, I broke the bag when I hit it. Is it OK?”

Everyone turns to look at the heavy bag, slumped, crumpled and limp against the floor. The metal bracket and arm bent and warped, causing the bag to droop.

“Bloody hell, Sal! Don’t go breaking the equipment. Check out the powerhouse over here! Right, that’s it, if anyone doesn’t train hard tonight, or if the kids play up, I’m putting you in the ring to spar with Sal!”

With a referential nod to the four-minute clock above the ring skipping commences with Gary's usual remark, "We're starting on the one. I don't want any late notes!"

Half way through the skipping some of the younger members of the gym, as well as some of the older unfit members, drop out. Gary beams with pride as he comments on the number of victims he has claimed. Those who drop out of the skipping are accused by Gary of doing something wrong. They have either eaten the wrong type of food prior to training or they have not prepared properly for training. Either way, Gary makes it clear that he is only able to make someone a victim if that individual has mistreated their body.

Post training I drive Sal and Andrius to the train station. On the drive home we talk about Sal being a little distracted. The conversation flows freely as we discuss training, life in England compared to Lithuania, work and a variety of other topics. Talk turns to receiving blows to the head in sparring. I make a comment about Sal's head being damaged. Sal responds that whilst it isn't yet, his head will one day be scrambled. Silence befalls what was a rather lively conversation. For over a minute we continue the drive in silent reflection. Researcher mode kicks in, should I start a new topic in an attempt to mitigate the uncomfortable silence? Is the silence necessary as it provides each of us with the opportunity to reflect on the damage caused by boxing or to disregard the subject? I do not speak. Upon stopping at the train station we clasp hands and say our goodbyes. We never revisit the topic of damage.

## Nerves

March 11<sup>th</sup> is fast approaching and there is the possibility that I will have my first bout on this show. The atmosphere in the gym changes whenever a local boxing show is looming. Training intensifies and the boxers become more reflective. Talk rarely strays away from the weight the boxer is, the weight they need to be and the weight they prefer to be. Occasionally advice is shared in regards to how weight is lost. More often than not conversations follow a similar structure. A boxer is asked how much he weighs. He responds before being asked how much weight he has to lose. Another answer is offered before one of the men completes a simple calculation, "Two weeks to loose three kilos. You'll be alright man." "Yeah man, I'll be alright."

During the lead up to a bout the boxers talk about how they feel in regards to their performance in training. They talk about how sharp they feel, how fresh, how loose and how relaxed they are.

Sat on the base of the chin-up machine I wait for the session to start. Ryan, Jake and Chris are stood around me talking about the forthcoming bouts. They discuss nerves and when they feel them. "As soon as the bell rings for the end of round one I'm alright. I'm not nervous anymore." Ryan offers.

"You're kidding me. I'm as nervous at the start of rounds two and three as I am before the fight. I calm down when I'm sat on the stool but as soon as that bell rings again the nerves kick in, 'coz I think, 'shit this guy could knock me out this round.' The nerves only go after the final bell." Counters Jake.

Chris jumps in, “The worse bit is when they call you out from the changing room with a, ‘come on, we’re ready now.’ Then Mike gets all nervous, ‘alright-alright-come-on-lets-go’ which makes me all nervous. And then you stand there forever next to your opponent and it’s like, ‘alright?’ as you size each other up.”

Ryan and Jake become slightly more animated. “The worse bit is when Mike has told you that *Matey* is small and then you stand next to him and he’s fucking taller than you.” Jake laughs.

“Nah.” Protests Ryan, “It is when – ‘coz you get some pricks that try and act all hard and they’re alright. It’s the ones that look so relaxed that are the scariest. You think, fuck, this is gonna be a hard fight.”

The three men laugh as they bounce around on the spot. Their conversation becomes heightened in pitch and pace the more stories they share. As I sit, listening, I realize that my left leg is bobbing in rhythm to their conversation. My chest tightens a little and the air around me feels colder. I consciously stop my teeth from chattering as I make minute adjustments on the foam-padded seat. My back is stiff and my shoulder blades feel as though they are drawn closer than usual.

‘Matey’ is imagined. He is an abstract illusion composed out of our fears. His strengths are our weaknesses. We fear that our strengths will be bested by him. He becomes concrete and real on fight night, but until then all we have is our imagination. The illusion of ‘Matey’ haunts us, makes us question our training methods, our diet, our ability. Nerves feast on our illusion of ‘Matey.’

### The Mental Battle

Gary has tentatively matched me with another boxer. Details are sketchy, the other lad is either 96kgs and a rank novice, otherwise referred to as a 'non-bouter', or he is 108kgs and has had two bouts, won one lost one. I have been asked by Gary to make weight at 98kgs and have been monitoring my weight, daily and religiously for the past month. I fluctuate from my lightest weight of 98.2kgs to my heaviest of 103.4kgs. Making weight in itself does not bother me so much; I am only concerned about my weight as I do not know who I am fighting. I will need to stay close to 98kgs if I am matched with the lighter of the two men but would want to be closer to my top weight if I am paired with the heavier man.

I dread not being busy at the moment. Any second that I am not occupied my mind wanders to fight night. Images flash through my head and they are all negative. A lumbering, white skinhead charges at me from the opposing corner. I have no answers for his onslaught of punches. I look like an idiot as punch after punch rains down on me and I am unable to defend. The images end in catastrophic failure as I crash to the canvas unable to continue. Sports psychology research indicates that these negative images need to be replaced with positive ones. I should focus on the fight unfolding according to a game plan. I should visualise the perfect fight and focus on the ability of using my strengths to unpick my opponent's weaknesses. I understand the rationale behind the research but in those moments when my mind wanders I am frozen with fear. Ice-cold shocks shoot up my spine making my teeth chatter. It feels as though I have a washing machine for a stomach, as the constant rotations seem to drain my energy. I am jittery and antsy, my attention span is minimal and my temper just as short.

During these moments of panic there is only one thing that calms my mind. I reflect back on my childhood to those times when I experienced the same feelings, butterflies of fear. I envisage those dark nights as a seven year old, when my bags had been packed by my mother and stepfather, and I had been ordered to make my way to the children's home and turn myself in, telling who ever might open the door to me that I wasn't wanted at home anymore. To get to the children's home I had three possible routes to walk. The first option, the longest of the three, would take me onto the main street, past my primary school, the vicarage and alongside a council estate. Option two, the shortest, would take me directly through a rough council estate and well-known drug pit. It would spit me out on the same road as the children's home, the same road as my stepfather's parents. The third option took me through back alleys and side streets, past a rival primary school, a number of friends' houses and past the house of a local bully. None of the options were preferable, all three were dangerous, and all three were potentially embarrassing. Whichever option I chose I ran the risk of getting into a fight with local youths or by being spotted by somebody I knew. The fear of being recognized and mocked by friends was just as daunting as the fear of being set upon by older youths. I chose a different route each time I was sent to the home. My decision was made based on a snap decision as to which would be the least dangerous at any one time.

At some point into my journey, whichever route I chose, I would feel a hand grab the scruff of my neck before a voice spat out a familiar challenge. "What do you think you are playing at? Turn around and get home now. You've got some explaining to do." The pattern was familiar,

the end results inevitable. I would be marched home, my stepfather's hand tightly tugging at the nape of my hair. Once home I would be pinned to the wall by my throat, my stepfather's face inches from mine as he demanded to know where I was going. The reply I offered, "To the children's home" was always met with disdain. If I had chosen route one I would be accused of making my way to the vicarage. Route two and I would be accused of seeking refuge with grandparents. Route three would see me accused of going anywhere but the children's home and my parents would want to know why I hadn't chosen another route. As odd as it sounds, thinking about events like this, events that generated such powerful waves of emotion as a child calm my nerves about the fight. My teeth stop chattering, my stomach stops turning, and I feel excited and ready. I just want to get in there and get it over with.

### Cancelled

The Monday before the fight Gary informs me that there is a problem with my boxing license. It hasn't been returned from the administration offices in Bristol. Without the card I cannot fight on Friday's show. Gary tells me this before training. I had entered the space geared up and ready to fight. I felt energized, fresh and relaxed. Upon hearing the news I can feel a sinking feeling. It is as if I am folding into my own skin somehow, deflating into my stomach. I have no desire to train, 'What's the point?' I think as I spin the rope in a lackluster manner. I'm tired well before the first two-minute section is over. I start to notice an old ache in

the back of the left knee again. I go through the motions, unmotivated, unconcerned and unfocused.

### Meat

I drive Andrius home. He asks me about my research and I explain that I want to interview him soon. He looks puzzled. “Interview me? Why? So I can tell you that I am going to be the next world champion?” We both smirk. I explain that I want to know what interests him about boxing and how it feels to fight. He seems content with this. A few moments later I ask if he wishes to box professional. Immediately, Andrius confirms that boxing professional would be his dream. Andrius then goes on to state that he wants to win the ABA championship and win a championship in Lithuania before turning pro. He is 24 and desires to turn professional at 25. Andrius qualifies his desire to win, or at least do well in, the amateur competitions. “You need to have a good record in the amateurs before you turn pro, otherwise you’re just used like meat. They just use you until you’re no good anymore and then they drop you. If you have no record you have no TV, no nothing, you’re not known, not worth anything [...] Stewart told me about a boxer from Bulgaria, he was a good amateur, but he only fought two amateur fights in England before turning pro. He was just used. He had eight fights and only won one. The promoter would ring him up and say ‘you need to fight next week’, ‘but I’m not fit’ he would say, ‘it doesn’t matter, I’m paying you so go fight.’”

### Unification and Discord: July 28, 2010

The club, after being divided into two rival factions earlier in the year is now reunited. Training will be held four nights a week instead of just two. Senior and junior training will now be split and the coaching will be undertaken by Gary and Mike. The details of how the training will be led, by whom and in what manner have clearly not been worked out yet. This is bound to cause problems further down the line. Little ripples of discontent were evident tonight as Gary and Aidie lead the warm-up and shadow boxing before Mike and Kev stepped in to take over. Mike led the group through a gruesome strength conditioning circuit. It was evident that Mike has a greater grasp on current training principles than Gary who still adheres to an 'old-school' method. Little moments of friction emerged as Gary questioned the extent to which back-to-back leg exercises were useful and whether alternating between upper body and legs might be more suitable. Mike dismissed this idea with the justification that the legs needed to be put under stress and be conditioned for muscular endurance as "What do you box with? – You box with your legs." There was a clear divide between Mike's boxers and Gary's, although this started to dissolve towards the end of the evening to a degree. Andrius still referred to Gary as coach whereas Lee approached Mike for advice regarding how often and when to run. Interestingly Gary approached Lee and Andreas after the session to invite them to train on a more regular basis and to warn them against over-training. This was after Mike had called all of the 'carded boxers' and those 'wishing to progress' together for a prep talk. Mike stated that he would devise an individual (although at the same time seemingly communal) training regime which we were all to follow. For the first time the intensity of the session tonight was comparable to the ones at the

Sheffield gym. Only time will tell if that will work and if the relationship between Gary and Mike will be sustainable.

#### August 20, 2010

“Have you heard about the fight between Andrius and Faheem?” Sam asks as I walk through the door. I hadn’t. Sam fills me in on the details. According to Sam, Andrius, who arrived at training feeling tired on Wednesday, was in a bad mood and “blowing out of his arse” whilst sparring with Faheem. Mike called time but Andrius continued to punch Faheem. Faheem defended but did not retaliate for a number of punches. When he started returning blows Andrius wrestled him to the floor. The two rolled around trying to hit and wrestle one another. Sam and Mike had to intervene to separate the two. Lee talks to me about it after training (neither Faheem nor Andrius are present tonight). “Yeah mate, Andrius has become a real good friend of mine over the last few months. I like the guy, I do, but it is indefensible what he did isn’t it? He made himself look like a bit of a dick to be honest mate.” Uncontrolled acts of violence, or violence which appears to ignore the codes of conduct for the gym, are not tolerated by the boxers.

#### August 24, 2010

I see Faheem and we talk in the changing/free weights area about his altercation with Andrius. “I was so angry man. Why did he do that? There was no reason. I was so angry man. Anyone would be. You know I came back looking for him that night. There were 30 of us. We had 8 cars man. I told them to wait. It was a good job he wasn’t here man. We would have

killed him. Seriously man, we would have killed him.” It is difficult to gauge how serious Faheem is being. Clearly the incident was embarrassing for him and damaged his ego.

### September 20, 2010

There is a strange energy and atmosphere in the gym the week of a fight. It is a mixture between nervous energy, simmering aggression and lethargy. At one and the same time it appears that each of the lads who have a bout want to punch holes through the concrete walls of the gym and stand there motionless, expelling minimal energy. An internal energy pulsates through each of the boxers and fills the space. One of the lads, Jay sums it up, “I feel like a kid at Christmas.”

The training is rather superficial tonight. Mike has to leave as he is under orders from his wife. The chairman, Otto explains that Mike is in the doghouse for spending the entire weekend trying to arrange bouts and not spending anytime with his family. Ailie and Lewis are left to conduct training. The two are rather ineffectual. Lewis tries his best but seems easily distracted and unprepared. Ailie works with a handful of boxers on light sparring. The session is over in little under an hour instead of the usual two plus hours.

Mike’s parting words before he left were, “I don’t care what the results are on Friday as long as you all box your best and do the club proud.”

### Switching Camps, November 17, 2010

Boxing journalist Katherine Dunn states ‘not all coaches are created equal’ and that, invariably due to chance, a boxer is linked to one coach the

minute he enters the gym and talks to him (Dunn 2005: 47). The act of engaging in dialogue with a coach, unbeknownst to most novice boxers, indicates an informal partnership between the two individuals. The narrative exchange signals that the boxer now 'belongs' to the coach preventing other coaches at the gym from engaging with him through fear that they might be seen to be poaching him from their rival (Dunn 2005: 47). Dunn's observations cannot be applied to the family run gym in Sheffield, but they certainly ring true for the Exeter based club.

Despite the reconciliation between the two main coaches earlier in the year the division between the two camps has resurfaced. Two squads are formed and train relatively independent of one another. I later learn that this particular division was caused when Gary had training and competition tops made for his boxers which were red and black, rather than the club colours of black and white. "You don't just change the club colours without consulting people. That was a real insult." Mike confides in me later in the year. Similarly, much later in the year Jake and Ronnie, two of Mike's boxers, confess that the introduction of the red and black shirts made them feel like they did not belong to the club, or at least Gary's part of the club.

There are rare occasions when the two camps are brought together by Otto in a bid to reunite the club. These are usually disastrous sessions and end within the hour as Otto has had to call both sets of coaches into the side room for a 'meeting' to iron out their differences of opinion. On the occasions when the coaches remain in the space and can agree on what technique they wish to teach the boxers are bombarded with a variety of advice. Each of the four interpret the particular technique in his own way.

There is no shared language between the coaches so whilst they might agree that one particular skill is worthy of attention they will have different approaches and different opinions and interpretations of the skill and terminology.

Faheem arrives at training in a Hatton sweat suit and beanie hat. It is two days before his fight. We talk about the fight. Faheem's eyes dart quickly around the room, scoping who is present and who might be listening. "Don't tell Mike, but I have 3KGs to lose before Friday man." He confides that he won't be eating much between now and then and that he will be running a lot each day to ensure that he makes weight.

After the warm-up and the skipping I move to the back room to wrap my hands. Lewis, a professional boxer, is walking on the treadmill. Faheem and Lewis are talking about the rigours of making weight. Lewis recalls his last fight where he was fined £200 for being 1lb over weight. He tells of how his promoter Frank Maloney was enraged by Lewis's failure to make weight, how Frank called up Mike and roasted him demanding to know why Lewis hadn't been more professional about making weight. Lewis states that if he had have known that he was over he would have stopped off at a service station on route and had "a bit of a skip" to shed the excess pound. Lewis and Faheem both declare that they wish they were heavyweights sometimes, as then they wouldn't have to worry about what they eat. They look over at me. The three of us laugh. Faheem and Lewis decide that despite the constant battle with their weights, "Suffering is the best part about boxing man."

I do worry about my weight too though. Faheem's lament that for the heavyweight it is OK because the heavier you are the better it is does

not ring true for me. I realize that with lightness comes a potential for greater speed and movement. Something which I hope will enable me to avoid those dangerous powerful shots which heavyweights throw. I weigh 105 KGs tonight. I weigh myself each night before I start and most nights after I finish. I try to calculate how much I have lost in water weight training so that I know how much to re-hydrate by. I have been around the 105 mark for a number of weeks. I would like to shed 5 KGs and come in at 100 KGs dead. I was 115 KG when I started the PhD.

I train with Lee tonight. He is not fighting on Friday as he hasn't felt well or fit enough to fight. We work on speed and defence. I get the better of Lee. I usually do, despite the fact that Lee is probably a better boxer than me. Lee gets nervous when we spar or train together and his head goes. He panics and can't focus and becomes frustrated and easy to hit. Mike wants us to work on in-fighting. Lee, Andrius and I work together. Andrius has just lost in a title fight for the Western Area Championship. He decided the loss was down to his 20 a day habit. He has just quit smoking. His nicotine patch keeps coming loose and his frustration is evident. "That's not in-fighting Paul, you can't lean back like that." Lee seems to agree with Andrius's complaint and decides that he has had enough. Andrius steps in. Mike, Aidie and Kev all seem to have different opinions about what in-fighting is and what the distance should be. Andrius becomes more frustrated. He complains that I am too close, that I am pushing and leaning too much, that I am moving too far away, that I am hitting too hard. We are meant to work in a small circle on the floor. As Andrius becomes more and more frustrated he starts to swing wildly and pushes me out of the circle and against the walls of the gym. He keeps swinging and making

contact. He's told to keep his power down by the trainers. He gets more frustrated. I catch him flush in the face with a left. He bellows that I need to be told to keep my power down. He unleashes his trademark combo; a right jab, a straight left, a fast and heavy right hook and a thunderous left hand. The final left hand lands smack on my face.

The sound of a muffled bass drum being thrown down a flight of stairs reverberates around my ears. Engulfed by darkness my body goes on autopilot; gloved hands shield incoming blows. Numbness pulsates out from the extremities of my face, which I believe must have quadrupled in size, rendering me a blind, wobbly life-sized bobble head. A slight tingling sensation dances from my teeth across my lips. Silence fills the space and my thoughts. There are no feelings of pain or thoughts of fear; negativity is absent. The numbingly blind abyss offers a fleeting comfort. Light quickly pries open my eyelids. Standing in front of me is Andrius, face flushed with anger and his hands primed and ready to fire again. I was saved by the fact that I am so much larger than Andrius. As I stumbled back I was too far away for him to connect. By the time he had closed in my head had cleared and I was able to let off a couple of punches. I am thankful that I didn't get knocked out in training and yet even more thankful that nobody seemed to realize just how close I had come to hitting the floor.

**“What the fuck Andrius?”**

**“Fuck sake Paul, nobody can tell you what in-fighting is supposed to be around here. I got mad...sorry.”** I recover quite quickly but just one more blow and I would have been waking up on my back rather than still standing. Andrius and I hug, we laugh, I ask him if he is all right before we take off our gloves and help each other with our floor exercises.

I decide soon after this session to switch squads and train with Mike. I tell myself that it is a research inspired decision. I need access to Mike's boxers in order to see how they work, what language they use, what performances they engage in and the like. I convince myself it is a necessary move in order to develop my project. I ignore the fact that I nearly got knocked out, that I didn't like it and that I don't want to spar with Andrius anymore.

### My gym

I have a long talk with Jenna tonight. I re-invite her to attend one of the classes on campus and to talk to my (predominantly) female cohort about her experiences of boxing. She agrees and whilst doing so begins to provide an account of her relationship with the space, the sport, the coaches, male boxers, female boxers and the countless male and females she encounters who have nothing to do with boxing. I am surprised by Jenna's response. Her narrative is at times familiar, but at others altogether different from the male narrative. From observing the relationship between Jenna and the coaches I expect her to feel different from the boys and men. She does feel different. I expect this difference to be a negative experience as it signals her as "other", as unwelcome, someone who is begrudgingly welcomed. Jenna describes it as a positive; she receives "special treatment" from the coaches because she is the only girl at the gym. Jenna goes on to describe how she would feel threatened if another girl came into "my gym" because she might "steal" the coach's attention away from her. Another girl at the gym would mean that Jenna is no longer "special." Jenna's solution to this imagined dilemma?

**“I’d probably beat a bitch up real bad if she came in here, just so that she’d think twice about coming back. If I beat her up bad enough maybe she wouldn’t comeback. That’s bad to say isn’t it? But I don’t want anyone else coming into my gym.”**

**I am reminded of my masculinity and how that has informed my interaction with Jenna. I have perceived Jenna’s interaction with the coaches, and made assumptions about her narrative, based on my masculinity. As Chisholm (2008) argues, ‘In a society of masculine domination, every situation a women negotiates is framed by gender so that she is seen as “other” even if she does not see herself as such’ (12). This is a clear reminder that I must remain objective in my observations and that I cannot dismiss how my masculinity, my gender, affects the way in which I engage with the participants. I finish talking to Jenna and Kev gives the following instructions.**

**“Get your ropes lads. Sorry, and L-A-D-Y!” The word lady is pronounced with an affected voice, elongated, exaggerated and at a raised volume and heightened pitch.**

**In interview, Jenna addresses the complexity of her gendered performance.**

**Jenna: Yeah, as I’ve sort of mentioned to you about females ‘cos I can be completely honest can’t I?**

**P. Solomon: Yeah course, yeah.**

**Jenna: I do sort of, because I’m the only girl that’s there, and the only girl that’s ever been there – not ever been there obviously we had Shana there before but she left, she fought for Exeter, only other girl that’s ever fought for Exeter. But**

she left, just as I came in so for me I've always been the only girl that trains with the boys. Erm, they do feel sort of like my sort of boys, and my sort of club, because I'm the only girl. And I don't know, it might happen in any kind of work area, because I'm that only female it's my territory[.]

[...]

Jenna: I don't know it's almost like, I don't know it's quite strange really 'cos I, I er train with so many boys that I kind of sort of – not forget that I'm female, because I know I'm female, but kind of I don't know, it's hard to kind of explain. Because like you said, obviously I'm a female boxer but I tend to always look at the male boxers and what's going on there. I still you know, even though I'm female I've still have more respect for the males than the females which is probably wrong isn't it? 'Cos I should be, you know, out there helping us women sort of get more recognised but still sort of, I don't know, still mmm, I don't know. There's just, yeah, there's no one out there that's really totally inspired me I think as yet to come and that.

P. Solomon: Yeah. Do you think you'll be equally excited by the GB female squad at the 2012 games as you would by the male squad?

Jenna: [Smiling and shaking her head] No.

P. Solomon: No?

Jenna: No. And that's awful isn't it? I'm just thinking of it – I'm sat there thinking as you ask me this and I should be like a hundred percent behind the females "I can't wait to see the

females” like but I’ll be more excited about watching the guys, even though I will be excited when the women are on, because I know that the quality is gonna come from the blokes.

Because the women’s standard still isn’t up there is it?

**P. Solomon: Right?**

**Jenna: I shouldn’t say that but it’s true and I did a boxing course last year for a week and I got to train with the England squad who were going into the Europeans. And you know, I didn’t personally spar with them, erm some of the national finalists and that, that were there sparred with them. And I was really excited and I thought you know, I’m gonna meet some of the England girls, they’re going to be fantastic, it’s going to be brilliant, awesome. And I watched them and I just thought [frowns and shakes head slowly side to side] I could do that if I really trained. And that could be me in a year or two. And I was really quite disappointed because the standard was just. [Scrunches face and shakes head]**

Jenna’s narrative demonstrates that more attention needs to be paid to the performance of gender within the sport of boxing. The complexities of utilising the shared pool of narrative resources which make up the discourses of boxing are evident within Jenna’s narrative, particular notions of gender difference and gender identification. The tension expressed by Jenna between what her views are, and what she feels her views should be, in order to perform a particular version of femininity, are realized in the above example.

## Nerves - Again: September 13, 2011

We work on slipping punches tonight. I'm paired up with Ronnie, one of the more experienced boxers at the Exeter gym. This is the first time I have met him, although I have heard about him and seen him box, and consequently it is the first time that we have worked together. Not knowing how to read Ronnie, not understanding his temperament, his style, his flaws or flairs I struggle with the training. I catch a number of punches flush on the face. I am aware of my reactions to the punches thrown. I'm flinching, panicking, and looking out of control. This image haunts my training and stays with me, knocking my self-confidence for the next few days. It prevents me from sleeping, keeping me up at night. It fills me with fear and dread, makes me feel sick to my stomach, empty and afraid. I wish I hadn't chosen boxing as a site for ethnographic study. I regard the achievements of Wacquant more highly. He has done what I have not. He has entered the ring, fought and survived. I'm terrified by the idea of entering the ring, wishing I had an excuse to avoid it. I reflect back on the sparring up in Sheffield and think how easily I convinced myself that I had held my own with champion boxers. How foolishly I thought I was integrated as a boxer, a successful one at that. How quickly I dismissed Wacquant, Woodward and Beattie as though I was more inside than any of them. My experiences tonight bring the crushing realization to the fore that I am not the boxer doing research that I would like to think I am, but, just like the rest, a researcher looking at boxing. The truth of the experience in Sheffield was that these boxers were holding back, doing the bare minimal required to keep me at bay. Had they unleashed and let rip

on me I would have been obliterated. I shudder with chills as I think forward to my debut bout. Why have I chosen boxing as an ethnographic project? What do I have to prove? I should have chose something much easier like fresh water fishing. What is the worst I would have experienced there? How would my darkest field note entry read?

I've been battered by ice-cold rain for two hours straight. My prune like fingers limply grasp the cork of the rod. Not one bite. I've lost some line and a float to a submerged shopping trolley. I knocked over my bait when leaning for my pot of coffee. Maggots wiggle around beside me. My jam sandwich is soggy and the stench from my wax coat and the bait is nauseating.

I would take that over how I feel right now.

### September to November 2011

I am still nervous on account of Tuesday's session. I force myself to the gym after watching the three HBO 24/7 episodes on the forthcoming Mayweather Vs. Ortiz fight. I convince myself that tonight has to be a good session. I have to accept that I'm going to get hit and I have to be prepared to stand and take it, without flinching, without panicking and without looking like a hapless amateur. My concerns are for my forthcoming bout, still unconfirmed but Mike keeps assuring me that I will be fighting. I don't fear the pain of conflict, not that I don't feel it or that I like it, but I can withstand it. I'm not so much worried about losing either. My fear lies within the thought of looking stupid, of embarrassing myself. The thing I

fear most is that my actions in the ring will expose me as an incompetent amateur, a researcher who thought he could dabble in boxing.

Mike announces that we will be sparring tonight. I look around the gym. I'm the heaviest, next is Dean, a former paratrooper and semi-professional mixed martial artist, for whom I'm sure the word Alpha-male was created. Then there is Ronnie, and Lee. I like sparring with Lee. He seems more scarred of me than I am of him so I usually leave the sessions positive when facing him. Lee has forgot his gum shield, so no sparring for him. Mike calls out for the first pair to spar. Dean runs to the ring and leaps in. I look around and there is no movement from the rest of the cohort. In as much time as it takes me to decide that I need to enter to prove to myself that I can do it, and to prove to the other lads that I'm not as scared as I really feel, I'm in the ring and touching gloves with Dean to start. In total I spar three two-minute rounds, the same as an amateur fight; Dean first, Ronnie second, Dean third. I feel positive. I control the space with the jab and avoid taking any punishment. When my opponents come in close I'm able to tie them up and deliver a few to their heads. It wasn't perfect. There were a lot of flaws. But I am pleased that I didn't take much punishment. That I didn't look completely hapless, that I didn't embarrass myself. Mike has a number of pointers for me afterwards. Mike informs the group that he has arranged sparring sessions for us at a gym in Cornwall. We are to meet the forthcoming Thursday evening and travel together for a few hours worth of sparring. Only those boxers who Mike is looking to arrange fights for are asked to attend, of which I am one.

For the next few days I am gripped with nerves. I lack concentration and want to avoid anything to do with boxing, making work on the PhD

difficult. Waves of cold suddenly seize me when I am sat replying to emails. My teeth chatter and my legs shake uncontrollably. When Thursday rolls round I feel composed and calm. Meeting up with the other boxers calms me further and reminds me of Sunday morning meets as a teenager when I played for a local rugby club. On the drive to Cornwall Ronnie and I are together. “You nervous?” Ronnie probes.

“No.” I lie, “I’m feeling all right.”

“I’m nervous. I’m always nervous when I spar. Even at training – that’s why I always try to go first – just get it out the way like.”

“I’ve been nervous the last few days, but I don’t feel too bad right now.”

We arrive at the Cornwall gym, which is situated up a country lane in an old converted barn. There are no toilets or changing facilities. The space is a cavernous breezeblock structure. In one room are two makeshift rings sat atop an MDF floor. The second room is still under renovation and littered with construction debris. I scan the room quickly to ascertain who the heavyweights are. Two guys fit the build. One carries himself with an air of arrogance. He refuses to change out of his sweats and into boxing gear. Instead he hangs around on the periphery of the space, observing the lads from Exeter as we warm-up. He smiles, smirks and points. Another seems less confident but is already dressed in fighting attire. He wears mixed martial arts dress, cargo shorts, a skin-tight top and open fingered 8oz gloves. His movement patterns, punch technique and style indicate that he is a mixed martial artist rather than a boxer. After speaking with him he confirms that he will not be sparring tonight. Other than the sweat suit clad observer there are no suitable opponents for me to spar. Frustrated I work the bags. When an opportunity to spar is presented I am matched with a

much lighter opponent and told to pull my punches and be careful not to hurt him. I do as instructed which results in my opponent confidently – no fearlessly – dancing around me and landing fast flurries at will. Limited due to not being able to throw powerful punches I am beaten convincingly. As I leave the ring I notice the sweat suit clad heavyweight strips down to his boxing garbs. After speaking to his coach he gloves up and starts working the bags too. A sudden flood of anger courses through me. I interpret the actions to mean that after seeing me beaten by a lighter opponent he now fancies his chances of doing the same to me; I'm scared and annoyed that after watching me perform he feels comfortable enough to get in the ring with me. Without much delay I am called forth and paired with the heavyweight. "Go easy on him though Paul, he's an old boy." The Cornwall coach says with a smirk.

I nod and move into the centre of the ring to touch gloves – the standard form of respect shown between two boxers at the start of any bout. The second the connection has been made I ram a jab hard into his exposed face. His head jerks back supported by the groans and gasps of the spectators. I continue in the same fashion driving my fists hard and heavy into his temple chin and nose as frequently as they are presented. Within seconds I can feel that he is scared. His punches in response are tentative, his body folds away when contact is made rather than pushing forward. Relentlessly I clobber him with hooks, jabs and straights, bullying him around the ring, pushing him away with punches and knocking him off balance. I dominate the session and once my time is up I leave the ring with the knowledge that I got the better of him. Elated I thank him. Any feelings of anger towards him have been replaced by gratitude. I am grateful that

he sparred me, that he took my punches and that he did not complain, lose his temper or quit. I ask him about his experience with boxing and he reveals that he has only been training for a few months and has not had any real sparring before today. I am sickened by shame. The actions I had interpreted as arrogance and underhanded behaviour on his part were in fact a response to the fear he felt, as were my actions towards him in the ring. His reluctance to spar until after he saw me lose was not a malicious move on his part; I cannot say the same for the way I engaged with him.

A week passes and training rolls round again. I don't feel like attending today. The novelty of fighting is wearing off. It has ceased being an enjoyable past time and now feels like hard work. At the start of the session Mike confirms that my license has come through and that he can now match me up. "We've got to work on keeping your hands high though Paul, because fighting at your weight it only takes one punch and you're dead." There is no trace of humour in his voice. He is serious. Heavyweight fights grip the attention and the imagination for the very fact that one punch can end it all. In the weeks leading up to the Exeter boxing show tactics and drills are ignored. After a warm-up the night consists of open sparring. Each boxer who is to be matched is made to spar a minimum of three rounds back-to-back against a fresh opponent each round. It is hard, tiring and painful. I spar against Dean for my first and final round, between Dean I spar Ronnie and a light heavyweight who has recently rejoined the club. I'm tired, sluggish and scared. My punches don't seem to connect with any force. I am tagged and walloped at will by Dean. His heavy overhand right comes crushing down on my skull numerous times. Hooks smash into my cheekbones, and straight rights explode on my nose. By the fourth

round I am exhausted. I feel sick and want to quit. I have nothing to give and Dean is fresh and hungry for action. It is a grueling three minutes which see me backed up against the ropes absorbing punishment. Mike hollers from the corner, "If you don't pick up your work rate Paul I'm pulling you off the Exeter show. You're not boxing on the show if you don't show me you want it. Work your job or you're pulled." For the sake of the project I need to box on the Exeter show. I paw with tentative, lazy jabs, which often fall short of the target; Dean who hammers in combinations to the head and body capitalizes upon each miss. Finally my ordeal is over. Mike warns me that I need to show more heart otherwise I won't be able to box. I am devastated. The warning about heart is a comment upon my performance of masculinity. I have to show aggression and a willingness to absorb punches in order to prove that I am *man enough* to box. I hate that it can be reduced to such a rudimentary understanding of masculinity, one that decrees an individual who tries to avoid being hit is a coward and lacks the required version of masculinity, but to stand and absorb repeated blows to the body and head demonstrates courage and shows that the individual is the 'right kind of man.'

Dean approaches me after the session. "Paul, I just think you need to get more aggressive. You need to develop that killer instinct. There were times in there where I stood in front of you with my hands down waiting for you to hit me, but you didn't. You didn't seize on those opportunities to make your opponent pay, and you have to. You have to get nastier. You're a nice guy Paul, but you need a little bit more bite. It's just a sport Paul, nothing more than that. You get in there and try and kill each other for six minutes then get out and get back to normal. Just think of it as a sport, get

in, do you business and terrorize the other guy.” Dean’s tone is comforting, friendly and engaging. The tension between the choice of language and the delivery demonstrates that the performance of masculinity within the sport of boxing is complicated. Tales about being nasty, terrorizing and hurting an opponent are delivered in a way that enables bonds to be strengthened through the compassion Dean is able to demonstrate towards me.

Slightly deflated from my last sparring session I lack any motivation for training. I realize that without Mike’s threat to pull me from the show I probably wouldn’t attend training for a short period of time. PhD deadlines make skipping sessions and missing out on the opportunity to fight too costly. I try watching a variety of boxing highlight reels and listen to up tempo hip-hop music in a bid to excite me and provide me with the motivation to train. Nothing works. My attendance at the following session is lackluster. I silently implore Mike not to give the call for us to get our gum shields to no avail. “Paul and Dean, you two first. You’re going to do three rounds off the bat. One with Dean, one with Ronnie and one with Faheem.” My legs feel like they have turned to concrete, the rest of my body feels hollow. There is no excuse I can give to avoid the sparring without losing my chance to box on the Exeter show. I’m terrified at the prospect of taking a beating but at the same time I realize that I need to show heart, courage and demonstrate a willingness to be punched. Like a whirlwind I rush towards Dean once Mike signals to start. My jab works like a jackhammer driving into his face. Dean swings looping overhand rights which I either deflect with my shoulders or take firmly on the chin. I am determined not to move. Standing in the centre of the ring I attempt to ward off Dean’s advance with the jab. Dean eats a couple of shots before

taking position on the inside. I thrust my temple towards his and lean onto his body and push him back. I dig shots into his ribs, arms and occasionally the chin. Against the ropes I lean on him more before springing off and hitting him with a three-punch combination. Each time Dean advances I repeat the process.

Next up is Ronnie. I apply the same tactics leaning on Ronnie and pushing him into the ropes until his body starts to sink. As soon as I feel a drop in the resistance he is offering I push him towards the ropes as I step back and snap shots into his head. The more this continues the slower and more cumbersome Ronnie becomes. He starts walking towards me with his head dropped. I stay planted and drive uppercuts into his chin to force his head up before connecting with short sharp hooks to the cheek. Ronnie exits the ring exhausted and frustrated.

Faheem enters and adopts his awkward southpaw stance. He sits back on his rear foot and stays out of range, his powerful left hand poised and waiting for an opportunity to present itself. Every time he throws the shot I parry with my right and fire off a jab, some hit, most miss. Faheem and I stay at a distance from each other, both respectful of the power present in the other's backhand. Three rounds under my belt and I'm done. I've worked at a high tempo, deliberately stood and took shots in a desperate bid to convince Mike that I have the courage to be selected to fight.

"Dean, you're up next." I start to climb out of the ring. "No Paul, stay in, one more round with Dean." My heart sinks. I have nothing left to give and Dean has now had two rounds to recover. I look pleadingly towards Mike and Kev, but it does no good. Dean is on me, his punches

quick and fierce. “Keep working the jab Paul. Hands up Paul, use the jab Paul.” Come the cries from ringside. I avoid Dean as much as possible for the round and all but collapse when time is called.

“Well done Paul. Good work.” Mike and Kev are beaming as they congratulate me. The exhaustion instantaneously subsides, flooded out by the rush of pride. Dean, Ronnie and Faheem all approach me independently to congratulate my performance.

“I could tell you showed up for work today mate.” Dean offers. “You hit me with those first shots and I was like, ‘Okay, game on, he means business today.’”

“Man you drained me so quickly when you leant on me, I had nothing for you.” Notes Ronnie.

“I couldn’t get near you man! Every time I tried to hit you, ‘ping’ you just swatted it away man.” Faheem says.

“It felt good today. I don’t know what it was. It just felt good in there. I liked it, thanks man.” I walk around the gym beaming and buzzing, pleased with how well I performed.

### **Fight Night**

I know little about my opponent. Like me he has had no licensed boxing bouts, but as Mike confirms a couple of days before the fight he has had a few unlicensed fights. Unlicensed fights can take two forms, either it can be with gloves or it can be bare-knuckle fighting. Both are illegal and are organized with the sole purpose of generating income through betting. In both cases it is likely that the winning fighter is paid a purse. Mike has seen my opponent spar and warns me that he is a big guy, “He looks like a

meathead, he's quite off-putting to look at, you'll think, 'Oh my god what am I up against.' Be prepared for that." How I am to prepare for that I am unsure. At Mike's request I have dropped in weight. I am now around the 103 KGs mark and don't stand much chance of getting close to the 98KGs Mike had requested. "To be honest Paul he has no skill, but he's a big hitter. It could go either way. The person who will win it is the person who wants it the most. Just remember to keep those hands up, it only takes one shot to end it." Mike's coaching offers little comfort in the build-up to the fight. The support offered by my wife, whilst well intended, does not quell the nerves, "I'll have to come watch won't I? You'll need me to drive you home when you get knocked out."

"If!" I counter.

"Yeah, well, either way." Fiona shrugs with indifference.

Imagining my opponent I picture a white skinhead, shorter but stockier than I. Faster, more aggressive, more powerful and with greater endurance. The image fills me with fear. Comfort comes in the knowledge that for a boxer the opponent is a 'dream-distortion of himself' I am imagining my weaknesses to be his strengths (Oates 2006: 12). I try to cling to boxing adages and idioms for comfort, the one that springs to mind is the oft-repeated mantra each boxer tells himself, that he is training harder than his opponent. Any psychological benefit I might have received from such phrases quickly dissolves. A chest infection has reduced my training to two sessions a week, I don't feel fit, in shape, or prepared. I allow excuses, whines and moans to fester and feast, eating away at me. I recall a handwritten sign posted on the Wincobank gym wall, it reads, 'Don't waste your time and energy thinking about your opponent. Concentrate on what

you are doing.' I resign myself to the fact that my fitness and skill level is at the stage it is at, whatever that might be, and no amount of fretting is going to change it. Little comfort but I'll happily take what is available.

The evening of the show rolls round. An army of males clad in the black and white colours of the club traipses about the city centre, killing time and trying to fight their fears. Communications between the boxers is honest if not brief, "I hate this bit, I'm so nervous."

"Yeah, me too."

"I've got so many people coming to watch me. I just don't want to look stupid and make a fool of myself in front of them" a junior boxer confides in me as we stand together in a supermarket queue. Seeing the effects of fear on all the boxers normalizes my own worries and in doing so is calming.

Mike notifies me that he has heard from my opponent's coach.

"Word is he's weighing in at 118KGs Paul. How much are you weighing?"

"103KGs." There is a pause.

"It'll be all right."

One of the fights on the card has already been pulled as a boxer came in 3KGs heavier than his opponent. Upon informing the boxer of the cancellation Gary states that the judges "just wouldn't allow it. It's too big a difference." There is no such rule in place for the superheavyweights. The difference of 15KGs, 33lbs, or 2.3 stone is perversely appealing. The weight difference is so immense that I am now definitely the underdog in the bout. If I lose it would be easy to adopt a positive narrative out of the experience. I would be able to tell of how the weight difference made my chances of winning impossible. I would hope to present a narrative painting me as brave and courageous for agreeing to fight such a heavier foe, and a

bareknuckle brawler at that. Further my opponent turns out to be the stocky muscular skinhead I had imagined. He enters the convention hall in a sleeveless Everlast hoodie and cargo shorts despite it being October and cold outside. I watch as my fellow boxers and spectators realize who I am to fight. The look of horror that paralyses their faces makes me smile; they do not expect me to win. Their lack of faith removes any pressure I might have felt. All I need do is survive six minutes with my foe to maintain my pride. At this stage I sense that to achieve anything more than survival would be a beautiful bonus, but certainly not a requisite; and that realization brings with it an enormous amount of comfort.

There are a number of peculiar performances which occur 'backstage' during a boxing show. Three spaces exist for the boxers and officials, the red corner changing room to house the local boxers, the blue corner changing room to house the visiting boxers, and the officials' room which houses the doctor, judges and referees. Within the two changing rooms boxers from different clubs share the space, regardless of differences in age or gender, transforming a private space for preparation into a semi-public pen. The majority of boxers sit silently, their eyes focused on their feet, hands in pockets and mp3 players to drown out the negative thoughts. As though suffering from a chill that those who are not boxing do not feel, these individuals shiver and twitch. A row of faces frozen in the same horrified expression. Their eyes, when lifted, are distant and glazed over. The boxers are seated their legs performing a constant tapping motion. Each time the door to the changing room opens the boxers seemingly snap back into the present moment and become aware of their surroundings. Their focus darts to whoever enters with an inquisitive quality assessing

whether it is their turn to fight. There is a collective feeling of terrified hope with each boxer longing to be called to fight so that they can get the experience over with, but terrified at the prospect all the same.

Prior to their bout the coach signals that it is time to get dressed and warm up. The space is crammed full of nervous bodies reducing the preparation area to a two-metre square at best. Once ready the boxer and coach work the pads. The constant, rhythmic, narrative delivered by the coach to orchestrate the boxer's movements underscores the work.

“One, two, three. Move back. One, two, three. Come forward. Jab, jab, straight. Come forward. Jab, straight, hook. That's it. That's the one. Circle left. Jab Circle right. Jab. One two. Move back. One, two, three. Move forward. One, two, three. That's it.”

Last minute panic grips most of the boxers. “Where's my gum shield? Whose got my gum shield? I don't know where it is.”

The coach and his second offer comfort by placing an arm on the shoulder of the boxer and reassuring him that they have everything he needs.

Post-bout boxer, coach and seconds return. Whilst the boxer collects his trophy from the stage behind the ring the coach and his second enter the changing room. Looks are exchanged between the coaches from the different clubs. A mixture of pride and relief is emitted if the boxer is victorious. Coaches embrace one another. The contact is firm yet delicate and filled with compassion. The exchanges between the coaches happens quickly and could be missed by the boxers still waiting who are lost battling their fears and seeking comfort in music whilst staring at their feet.

At the start of the night all boxers have to enter the officials' room with their coach and boxing license. There are five officials, all white males

in their sixties, and the fight doctor, a white male in his fifties. In front of three officials I produce my license and step on a pair of scales. Fighting at heavyweight there is no need to remove any clothing. I am told that I have to be clean-shaven to fight in order to reduce the risk of exchanging bacteria with my opponent. It is quite permissible to exchange blood, saliva and sweat with your opponent, but the thought that microscopic pieces of food, hidden in a beard, might be exchanged between the two men is not acceptable. The men are in no mood for jokes, the message is clear, “Shave or you cannot fight.” For the doctor I am required to strip to my shorts. My chest, eyes, head, ears and nose are examined before I am given permission to fight. At this point two officials step over. One takes my license whilst the other observes. My engagement with the officials is over. As I leave two opposing coaches examine the licenses of two boxers. They argue over the weights listed as well as the number of wins each boxer has by stoppage or points. Neither coach wants to feel like they have been set-up by the other, that their boxer is facing an opponent more tested, more experienced, and more dangerous than originally promised.

My time to box comes late in the evening. I go through the motions of warming-up, of working the pads and then of waiting in the ‘wings.’ My opponent stands a couple of feet behind me. In his boxing attire he looks taller, stockier than he did earlier. I am aware that my gaze is fixed ahead of me but is not focusing on anything in particular. My brow is burrowed and I jiggle and bounce as I wait to be called to the ring. As a team Mike, Kev and I walk forward. The ring is still occupied by the losing boxer of the previous bout. He stands with the doctor and his coaching team around him. Streams of ruby red blood pour from his nose, over his vest and onto

the ring canvas. The boxer's nose is at a strange angle on his face, swollen and glowing red. The blue canvas is violet in places from the pools of blood which have collected on it.

In the ring, opposite my opponent, the referee and MC perform their duties, checking names, weights, and reiterating the rules. The referee calls for the large pool of blood I am standing in to be cleaned before the bout can commence. After the blood is cleaned I stand and stare at my opponent. I deliberately fix a menacing gaze on him as a bounce from foot to foot. I see fear in his eyes and immediately feel guilty for my chosen performance. When my name is called out my opponent claps for me. Again I feel guilt and feel I must return the gesture in order to be seen to be sporting. I don't want to clap for him. I don't want to show him compassion. He is here to hit me and I him.

The bell sounds and I quickly move towards him. I launch a jab at the same time he swings a vicious right hook. Both punches fail to connect but I follow up with two sharp jabs to his head. He throws another right hook which clips the rear of my head guard. Punches are exchanged and countered. The force with which he is throwing his shots indicates that he has every intention of knocking me out. There is little style to his technique, just swinging, booming power shots thrown with bad intention. I stay on the outside of him, out of range, jumping in with jabs before jumping back out to safety. I buzz around him towards my left, his right. He holds the centre space but I am keeping him there with my movement. As I circle towards a neutral corner I throw and land a jab and start the movement back and away. A patch of blood still lingering on the canvas causes my feet to fly out from under me, just as a right hook brushes across my left shoulder. I crash

to the canvas spectacularly, landing on my right arm and shoulder. The crowd roars. I scramble back to my feet and start towards my opponent. The referee steps in, sends us both to neutral corners and starts a mandatory eight count. I plead with him, "I slipped!" I look towards Mike for support. His face is blank. The count reaches four. "I'm OK I can go on sir. It was just a slip."

"It doesn't matter I've started the count I've got to give you the full eight."

"I know. I understand."

Behind on the scorecards I am thrown into a bit of a panic and feel deflated. I start punching at a higher volume but subsequently take more shots than I would have liked to. The shots are hard, draining and pose great danger. The remainder of the fight is a blur. The time spent between rounds, the advice given and the cheers and chants from the crowd do not register. As each round starts I continue to work the jab and little else. I pray for the sound of the bell, for respite, for it to be over. After the final two minutes draws to a close I am relieved to have survived. I have no sense of how I fared, whether or not I won but I do tell Mike I am happy with how I fought. Mike, Kev and I exchange looks. We smile, thank each other and share praise. The affection and connection demonstrated in those few seconds is a wonderful counterbalance to the lonely and aggressive experience of fighting.

The feeling post-fight is surreal and is difficult to pinpoint exactly what is being felt. It is a mixture of exhaustion, jubilation, shock and unspent energy and adrenaline. It is announced that I have won the bout with a unanimous decision and a significant points difference. I cheer, bounce and yell performing the 'correct' response to my victory. I do so

hoping that the feeling of ecstasy, the 'buzz' from a win that the boxers have told me about in their interviews will kick in.

I'm still waiting.

### Conclusion

I have refrained from providing an analysis of my own experiences as an amateur boxer. At the time of writing the auto-ethnographic vignettes, and again at the point prior to submission of this thesis, I felt too close to the accounts. When re-reading the vignettes, I am transported back to the memories of those events. The feelings described, those of pleasure, pain, exhaustion and fear, are reignited with the same level of intensity felt 'in the field' and again at the time of writing. At this point in my career, I do not feel I have enough distance from the events to provide an effective analysis. An analysis, undoubtedly, would support these accounts, and, in time, I hope to provide one.

Whilst I will refrain from a detailed analysis at this juncture, I feel it is important to elucidate the experience described following my fight. The final paragraph, of the final auto-ethnographic entry is perhaps anti-climatic. I reference the 'buzz' felt, post-fight, by my fellow boxers. The 'buzz' was something I did not feel. I was happy with the result of the fight, and the feeling of happiness and relief stayed with me for a number of days, but I would not describe it in the same way that the other boxers did; it was not akin to a 'buzz' or the feeling of being intoxicated by a powerful drug - as Jenna describes it. The conclusion of the fight signalled the end of my ethnographic engagement with the subject of boxing and, simultaneously, marked the beginning of the writing up period of the PhD. The post-fight

feeling was therefore bittersweet. The hard work of the ethnography was complete, but the fight with the thesis had just begun.

I believe that there is another reason why my narrative response to the feelings of fighting differs to that of my fellow participants. Boxing, for me, was one part, albeit a major one, of my doctoral study and pursuit of an academic career. My engagement with boxing was secondary to my engagement with my studies, the research and my duties as a tutor. For the boxers who described the experience of fighting as a 'buzz', they talked about boxing as being central to their identity. Boxing, for many of them, was seen as the only positive option they had in their lives. Success in the ring, for them, was paramount to the establishment of a positive identity. My identity was more closely aligned to my studies and my academic career. I did not view boxing as my only choice, nor did I rely on it for identity rewards; education provided me with an alternate pool from which to acquire an identity I deemed positive and desirable.

Following my bout, I did not return to either boxing gym for the remainder of the PhD. The gyms, the boxers, and my engagement in the training, provided constant flow of data. This was a data stream that I could not turn off. I could not feasibly analyse and write-up my findings whilst still being engaged in the training, still being exposed to, and co-producing, the narratives and experiences associated with the research sites. At the point of having my hand raised by the referee I knew immediately that my time as a boxer was over, I had to leave the field, leave the friendships I had formed, and a sport I had invested in so heavily. There was no 'buzz' post-fight because of how difficult and upsetting the acknowledgement was that my time as a boxer had come to a close.

## **Chapter 2: The Narrative Resources of Boxing: Reviewing the Field**

### **Introduction**

**This ethnographic project focuses on the experiences of amateur and professional boxers as they experience the day-to-day practices of boxing in the training gym. It argues that, whilst boxing stories are multiple and idiosyncratic, there are certain themes and episodes which appear in a great number of them. Combined these themes and episodes constitute the narrative resources of boxing, guiding the understanding people have of the sport, and the types of stories individual boxers can tell. For the purpose of this project episodes have been split across two very broad, and in no way mutually exclusive, categories, the pre-boxing and the boxing self. It is argued that to tell a boxing story certain episodes need to be presented, and that these episodes are likely to engage with a particular set of themes. The episodes and themes reflect the relational nature of an individual's experience and the wider cultural and public meanings about the sport. Similarly, the themes used to narrate an episode engage with the wider meta-narratives of a society.**

**As the introduction to this thesis demonstrated the academic studies on boxing engage with, and help construct, the cultural meanings of the sport. They illustrate the importance of these meanings to individual boxers and suggest that the shared narrative resources of boxing are powerful and persuasive, affecting why individuals choose boxing, how they narrate their experiences, and how they frame their aspirations. The**

introduction to the thesis contextualized the cultural meaning of boxing through an examination of the meta-narratives of Industrialization, masculinity and femininity. This chapter uses the findings of the main academic projects on boxing to illustrate how the sport is understood in the wider social context, as well as to consider the '*vocabularies of motive*' which lead individuals to box (Wacquant 2001: 186. Emphasis added).

There are numerous story types through which the sport of boxing is presented, the cultural meanings established, and analysis of the sport and its participants made. This chapter considers the story types presented in the academic and non-academic literature on boxing, accepting that stories are relational and that combined these story types provide the shared narrative resources which boxers engage with in order to make sense of their experiences. The stories presented through the media are often dramatized and highly codified (re)presentations of boxers and their experience, which are often retranslated and magnified according to the specific cannon of the author (Wacquant 2004: 6). Equally, the stories presented in the academic projects draw on and engage with the narrative resources of boxing to support particular hypotheses. What is often missed in the literature on boxing is the extent to which stories and narrative resources are relational. The result is that the individual ontological narratives of boxers, when considered, are not contextualized in relation to the story types and themes available to them. Through the form of a literature review, this chapter maps out the story types and narrative resources available to boxers.

### Story Types

**David Scott (2008) suggests that there are two ways in which boxing can be conceptualized. The first view of boxing understands the professional sport as a larger than-life phenomenon, a major commercial and mediatized endeavor wherein a small number of promoters monopolize the industry through the marketing of male bodies; predominantly heavyweights of ‘black, colored, or Hispanic ghettos’ who are sold the false promise that the sport can offer them an avenue out of poverty and obscurity (Scott 2008: xxiv). This view is shared by Sugden (1996), Wacquant (2002), Oates (2006), and Woodward (2008).**

**As Woodward sates, ‘The traditional narrative of the sport providing a route out of the ghetto or from the wrong side of town to self-esteem and even great wealth remains pivotal to boxing’ (Woodward 2008: 539). This particular cultural meaning, considered to be the false promise of sport by Sugden, is deeply entrenched in the narratives of boxing (Sugden 1996: 65). It is aligned with another pivotal narrative resource and cultural meaning which portrays boxing as a social good, an antidote to juvenile crime, and a vehicle for the rehabilitation of young offenders (Wacquant 1992; Sugden 1996; Sammons 1998; Pearn 1998; Horall 2001; Kram 2005; Satterlund 2006; Dundee 2008; Schulberg 2008; Woodward 2008; Dunn 2009). This narrative resource is ‘central to the boxing subculture’ (Sugden 1996: 67). It is a narrative resource ‘accepted by many people in the wider society’ and is ‘so deeply structured within the boxing fraternity that everybody, especially the fighters themselves, believe it to be true’ (Sugden 1996: 182).**

**The second view, Scott suggests, ‘is more a British/Irish or general European view’ (Scott 2008: xxiv). According to this view, boxing is understood more as a game, with greater focus being paid to the amateur**

level of the sport, as well as 'general participation, if only at a fitness level' (ibid). Within this view greater focus is paid to the boxers themselves, their interactions within the ring, their displays and performances as well as the gyms within which they train. The individual boxer, rather than boxing as an industry is of utmost importance, as such the projects by Wacquant (2004), Woodward (2004), and Satterlund (2006) adhere to this view.

As Scott notes, the two views are not exclusive, but rather compliment one another, which leads numerous projects on boxing to consider the sport through both views, paying greater attention to the professional components of the sport. When this occurs boxing is presented as a single entity, rather than multifaceted. The professional experiences of the sport are given greater consideration. The presentation of boxing in the singular, making no distinction between the amateur and professional components of the sport, is justified by Sugden who argues that amateur gyms and competitions serve as a farming tool for the professional game, whereby amateur competitors are groomed in preparation for a professional career (Sugden 1996). For Sugden, the amateur and professional elements of the sport are inextricably linked, so much so that he considers the sport in its entirety, paying little attention to the differences between the forms of engagement amateur and professional athletes have with their sport.

Whilst I do not dispute Sugden's findings, what is perhaps missed by this type of analysis is the extent to which the experiences of individual boxers differs dependent upon their level of engagement with the sport. Additionally, this type of analysis does not inform us how individual boxers make sense of the sport by and through the engagement with particular

narrative resources. If the sport of boxing is to be understood through the cultural meanings, and the cultural meanings focus more heavily on the professional components of the sport, how then does an amateur boxer use the shared narrative resources of boxing to narrate their ontological identity? Moving through a number of analyses, first of the singular story type, then the public conception of boxing, and then identifying the narrative themes which support it, it will be demonstrated that there is greater variation in how narrative resources are used by individuals engaged with the many facets of boxing.

### Cultural Meaning, Public Story

The combination of the oft-rehearsed historic narrative with the meta-narratives of masculinity and industrialization, presents a particular, and generally agreed upon, understanding of the sport. Through this understanding the sport can be said to appeal to males, due to the identity rewards it offers. It recruits males from the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder, providing them with an opportunity to transform their lives, their bodies, and their socio-economic standing. It offers the promise of salvation from the ghetto and a life lost to crime, drugs and violence. It requires males to engage in a body project which requires, discipline, control and aggression. Bodies are fashioned, sculpted and shaped through the percussive practices of training and competing. The body of the boxer becomes both the tool and product of his labour, which is traded on the pugilistic market, controlled and sold by managers, trainers and promoters. Some boxers stand to earn fortunes, but many do not, and of those who earn considerable sums from the sport may retire penniless.

The aim of the sport is to render an opponent unconscious, beating the body into submission. Over time the physical practices of training and competing take their toll on the individual. Bodies are liable to become damaged, and damaged bodies hold less market value. The identity of the boxer, so embedded in the physical capabilities of the body, struggles to adjust when boxing is no longer possible. The skills provided by the sport are non-transferable, and thus, in retirement boxers find themselves without the funds or the physical capital to escape the ghetto from which they came (Sugden 1996). Further, with the identity of the boxer so powerfully entrenched within them, individuals who boxed struggle to craft an alternate identity, and thus struggle to lead an alternate life in retirement.

The academic projects on boxing by Weinberg and Arond (1952); Messenger (1987); Sammons (1990); Fotheringham (1992); Wacquant (1992, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2004); Sugden (1996); Beattie (1998, 2002); Pearn (1998); Cowie (2000); Horall (2001); Clymer (2004); Huggins (2004); Woodward (2004, 2007, 2008, 2009); Elmwood (2005); Cannon (2006); Satterlund (2006); and Boddy (2008); MacNamara (2008); Scott (2008); Sowell (2008); Whale (2008) serve as the primary sources for this chapter. Texts produced by boxing trainers Atlas (2006); Dundee (2008), journalists Liebling (1990); Anasi (2002; 2005); Silverman (2005); Sugar (2005); Dunn (2005, 2009); Schulberg (2009), and novelists Shepard (2005); Oates (2006) serve as secondary sources. In addition to these secondary sources articles within serial boxing magazines, *The Ring*, *Boxing Monthly*, *Fighting Fit*, and *Boxing News* and British daily newspapers from October 2009 through to

**November 2010 have been considered to demonstrate the extent to which the pre-identified narrative resources permeate boxing discourses.**

**Combined, these resources provide the cultural meanings of the sport, meanings which are at times unified and at others contradictory. Through a review of the literature, boxing can be understood as being synonymous with masculinity and the production of male bodies which symbolically reject hegemonic notions of femininity (Oates 1987; Anasi 2002; Clymer 2004; Huggins 2004). The sport provides sites where men have power over women who are largely excluded and made to feel unwelcome (Hargreaves 1997; Wacquant 2004). It captures the imagination of males, appealing to the masculine psyche (Elmwood 2005; Scott 2008). It is about the performance of masculinities, not necessarily the ‘hyper-macho’ (Satterlund 2006: 39), but a heroic and heterosexual masculinity (Woodward 2004; Satterlund 2006), underpinned by a ‘hypermasculine ethos’ (Wacquant 1995b: 496). Simultaneously, it is a sport about aggressive masculinity (Sugden 1996), yet one that should not be equated with physical aggression *tout court* (Wacquant 1995b). The sport can be understood as the purest expression of masculine friendship, providing a space where men are allowed to be kind to one another (Scott 2008; Dunn 2009). It enables males from the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder to construct a heroic masculine identity (Sugden 1996; Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2004), an identity reward understood, sought out and adopted by males from other social classes (Satterlund 2006).**

**Learning to box leads to the acquisition of identity rewards (Satterlund 2006), and is a project of ‘ontological transcendence’ allowing the individual participant to craft a ‘publically recognized, heroic self’**

**(Wacquant 1995b: 501). The literature on boxing considered for this thesis disputes the extent to which the sport can save individuals by providing them with an escape from the ghetto, but does agree that the cultural meanings and public narratives on the sport, particularly those pertaining to the transformative qualities of boxing, are key motivating factors when individuals choose to practice or research the sport.**

**As indicated by the literature review, boxing and boxing stories are about transformation. This is substantiated by the manner in which the shared narrative resources of boxing are engaged by these authors. Transformation is considered by this project to be a major theme which links the cumulative web of shared narrative resources about boxing. The major theme of transformation respectively addresses the inherent contradiction in the cultural meanings and public stories of boxing that simultaneously present the sport as a social good and exploitative. The academic and non-academic literature addresses the major theme of transformation in equal measure.**

### **Transformation**

**“God, it would be good to be a fake somebody than a real nobody.” (Mike Tyson, New York Times, May 2002 in Oates 2006: 231)**

**The major theme of transformation is central to why individuals choose to box and how they make sense of training and competing in the sport. The theme of transformation appears across the story types considered in the literature review. Predominantly the theme is used to**

describe the desired transition from being a non-boxer - and thus nobody, to that of boxer - somebody. As Wacquant states

*To be somebody, that's what it's all about! To escape from anonymity, from dreariness, if only for the space of a few rounds. A boxer in the ring is a being who screams, with all his heart, with all his body: "I want to be someone. I exist."*

(Wacquant 2005: 148)

The literature review suggests that the transformation sought by boxers is often meteoric, akin to the plot of a Hollywood movie. The transition most typically presented by the literature is that from a financially impoverished, weak and bullied non-boxer to that of the wealthy, multimillionaire, world champion. The theme of transformation is often recruited in a linear and limited manner, to suggest that boxing is the vehicle through which a positive, progressive and exceptional transition is made possible. The theme of transformation, considered in this regard, is linked to another major theme, *legacy*.

### Legacy and Heroes

An observer is struck by boxing's intense preoccupation with its own history; its continuous homage to a gallery of heroes – or are they saints?

[...]

The boxing past exists in an uncannily real and vital relationship with the present. The dead are not dead, or not merely dead. (Oates 2006: 10)

The boxing tradition is full of legends of feats of exceptional fighters. Most gymnasiums have pictures of past and present outstanding boxers on the wall, and identification with them becomes easy for the incoming fighters. (Weinberg and Arond 1952: 463)

Asked after the [Trevor] Berbick fight why he is so concerned with establishing a record “that will never, ever be broken,” Tyson said, “I want to be immortal! I want to live forever!” He was being funny, of course – he often is, making such pronouncements to the press. But he was also, of course, deadly serious. (Oates 2006: 130)

For boxing pundit and screenwriter, Budd Schulberg, boxing is the most dramatic of all sports because ‘it so often brings us to that one night in which one fighter achieves immortality and the loser retreats into the shadows of oblivion’ (Schulberg 2009: 222). Boxing is a sport which produces “‘heroes” – “legends” – “icons.”” (Oates 2006: 195). The boxing gym being a ‘*dream machine*’, a site where one’s heroic, legendary, and iconic status can be envisaged and worked upon (Wacquant 2005: 148. Emphasis in original). Notions of legacy are extensively referenced in the majority of the boxing literature considered for this project and as such will be understood to be a central component and major theme of boxing. The literature considered thus far suggests that as a bodily practice boxing offers *all* of its participants the dream of immortality through the crafting of a legacy. The extent to which all who engage with the sport realize this

dream is not explicitly addressed; and yet a belief in the dream underscores the narratives offered by boxers, journalists and scholars alike.

Components of the legacy theme are: the need to be remembered (Wacquant 2001, 2005; Dundee 2008); the mythic and legendary (Sugden 1994; Woodward 2004; Oates 2006; Dundee 2008; Schulberg 2009); and the heroic (Wacquant 1995b; Woodward 2004; Oates 2006; Dundee 2008; Schulberg 2009). Narratives concerning legacy transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. They can be about the *here* and *now* whilst addressing the *there* and *future*. After beating George Foreman, Angelo Dundee, Muhammad Ali's trainer, observes that 'Ali's fame now bordered on the mythic', Ali told 'Madison Square Garden photographer George Kalinsky, "I can't get off the stage now...if I do, nobody will remember me"' (Dundee 2008: 191). Similarly, the theme of legacy can provide a link between contemporary boxers and their historic counterparts. Angelo Dundee reflects how Sugar Ray Leonard was an original with traces of legendary fighters, 'a little bit of Carmen Basilio, a touch of Ali, a shade of Willie Pastrano, and something of Ralph Dupas. And yet he was an original' (Dundee 2008: 227). Budd Schulberg recruits the theme of legacy when describing the ring performances of former professional boxer Oscar De La Hoya, 'Behind the flash of De La Hoya, I saw the ghosts of all those lovely lightweights who used to thrill the Garden' (Schulberg 2009: 99).

Through the narrative resources of boxing the theme of legacy is recruited. Stories about legacies can link boxers to the 'ghosts' of famous fighters. Through the theme of legacy, certain boxers are remembered; their stories and achievements kept alive and relevant, extending beyond the limits of their life inside and outside of the ring. Like the major theme

of transformation, the theme of legacy, when recruited, often describes the meteoric and the desire to establish narrative immortality. For Oates the legendary narrative is important for boxers (and it could be argued non-boxers). Not only does it allow the individual to link his seemingly lonely pursuit (Oates 2006: 10) to a larger network of individuals, but it offers the promise to boxers (and non-boxers) that they might 'transcend the merely physical; he can, if he is lucky, be absolved of his mortality' (Oates 2006: 11). This is important in a sport which 'exhausts most of its practitioners in a Darwinian struggle for survival like virtually no other' (Oates 2006: 10).

Boxing is a sport, where the practitioners invest so much time and energy in the pursuit of the body perfect and yet are continually aware of the ghost of the damaged and grotesque body (Wacquant 2004; Woodward 2007). Boxers and those who write about boxing are all too aware of how suddenly a career can be ended, a body can be damaged and a life can be taken. Connecting with heroes through the recruitment of legendary and heroic themes within one's narrative provides a focus on the body at its best; the body overcoming formidable odds; the body being able to withstand heavy punishment; the body being able to unleash heavy punishment; the disciplined and controlled body. It enables practitioners and non-practitioners alike to justify the inescapable dangers of the sport (Oates 2006: 10).

Oates's and Woodward's observations in unison allow for a greater analysis of these themes. If Oates's observations are applied to the heroes and legends themes then a series of statements could be said to ring true. Firstly, narratives containing these themes link the individual, lone boxer to a community of boxers. Secondly, this link transcends time, space, life and

death, class (weight and social), ability, and, in ethnographic terms, can link the researcher, journalist or novelist as observer to the boxer as participant. Thirdly, it links aspiration to achievement and acknowledges that this achievement is realized with and through the efforts of the material body. Fourthly, it pays greater attention to the 'healthy,' 'perfect,' material body at the expense of the damaged or grotesque body. Fifthly, the focus on achievement, mythical tales, feats of endeavour and legendary boxers (dead or alive), allows the dead and damaged body access to a narrative eternity, where the body is remembered in all its former glory. Finally, by connecting the mythical stories and legendary characters of the past to the individual in the present it perhaps demonstrates one of the quintessential appeals of boxing. If you possess the qualities required to be a great boxer, you stand the chance of becoming *somebody*, and if you become somebody you *will* be remembered.

The notion that individuals box because they want to craft a phenomenal career, achieve superstar status and thus immortality through legacy is overtly deterministic, and crudely simplistic. That said it is understandable that such a conclusion might be drawn on account of the dominant presence held by these major themes in the public stories of boxing. Whilst this conclusion might be true for some boxers I argue that it is wrong to suggest it is true for the majority.

This project suggests that the major themes of transformation, legacy and heroes are important to boxing stories, helping frame the narrative resources available to boxers. Through the recruitment of these themes boxers are able to present vocabularies of motive, stories that describe their drive for engagement with the sport, demonstrating what

they have achieved via boxing and what they aspire to. The themes should be considered as operating along a continuum. At one end, individuals may box due to a desire to achieve heroic, legendary status and narrative immortality by becoming the subject of boxing folklore, at the other end the themes may be expressed more modestly. At the more modest end of the spectrum transformation, changes to status, and the role of heroes, legends and legacy are sought, experienced and understood through the *compensatory drive* and the *familial and genealogical resources*.

### Compensatory Drive and the Familial and Genealogical Resources

Weinberg and Arond (1952), through an investigation of the culture of professional boxing, which included the recruitment, practices and beliefs, and the social structure of the boxing world, first identified the compensatory drive and the familial resource as significant elements of boxing stories. Weinberg and Arond's qualitative sample demonstrated that the majority of professional boxers are adolescents and young men of low socioeconomic background. The study argues that individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds are routinely exposed to violence in the form of individual and gang fights. In this context 'the lower socioeconomic levels provides a base for the boxing culture' as self-esteem and status are achieved through street fights, and successful amateur and professional boxers furnish highly visible role-models to the boys of the slum' (Weinberg and Arond 1952: 460).

Through the compensatory drive resource individuals make sense of boxing as a vehicle for transformation, providing compensation in terms of the identity reward it offers. Through this resource, the identity rewards of

boxing are presented as inspirational to individuals who have been subject to bullying and those who have experienced socioeconomic difficulties (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Sugden 1996; Woodward 2004, Satterlund 2006; Woodward 2007). In addition to Weinberg and Arond's use of the compensatory drive resource, Woodward acknowledges that many boxers at the Winconbank gym in Sheffield told of their decision to go to the gym and to learn to box as a consequence of being bullied, either because they were considered to be small for their age in the case of white boxers, or on account of racism for black boxers (Woodward 2004). Satterlund states that half of his participation group reported stories of being bullied and nonathletic during childhood, thus seeking boxing as a means to learn self-defense and to 'compensate for their youth experiences' (Satterlund 2006: 15). Equally, Sugden recruits from the compensatory drive theme to explain why males who lack weight, strength or natural fighting ability' find solace in the practices of boxing, a sport which teaches them how to 'take care of themselves' and enables them to 'earn respect' (Sugden 1996: 64). Through the compensatory drive theme tales of transformation present an understanding of boxing as a vehicle which can be seen to improve an individual's material lot in life. The resource addresses improvements to the material body of the boxer as well as social and economic capital.

Weinberg and Arond's project found that the compensatory drive resource was present in a significant number of the stories professional boxers told about why they took up boxing. Individuals sought transformation in terms of status within their local communities and family units. For these individuals the ability to fight was linked directly to notions of status, with successful local boxers, older boxing brothers and fathers

being referred to as heroes. Weinberg and Arond found that 'Most boxers seem to have been influenced to become "ring fighters" by a boxer in the neighborhood or by a member of the family' (461). According to Weinberg and Arond, adolescents and young men of low socioeconomic background look up to male role models, instilling in those individuals who fight a form of local hero status, which provides the inspiration to join a boxing gym. The compensatory drive and familial resource are linked through the themes of heroes, legends and transformation.

I was twelve when I went to the gym first. If there's a fighter in the neighborhood, the kids always look up to him because they think he's tough. There was an amateur in my neighborhood and he was a kind of hero to all us kids. It was him that took me to the gym the first time. (Anonymous professional boxer in Weinberg and Arond 1952: 461)

The familial unit, as presented by Weinberg and Arond, extends beyond the genealogical to incorporate males of the same kinship groups, connected by their socioeconomic status and ethnicity. The role of boxer is associated with positive qualities, and boxers usually acquire 'some measure of prestige in the neighborhood' (ibid). The identity rewards associated with boxing, are understood to compensate for actual or perceived shortfalls in status, with local boxers and older male role models viewed as heroes. Together, these resources provide a powerful stimulus to young men from lower socioeconomic background that interpret boxing to be a vehicle through which they can actualize minor and yet significant transformations to their lives and their status within their kinship groups.

**Boxing connects the everyday embodied practices with public stories of celebrity and heroism. As Woodward (2008) notes there are three types of heroes that appear in boxing stories and serve as motivation. In agreement with Weinberg and Arond, Woodward notes that there are personally known boxing heroes such as a family member, often a brother, global and all time heroes such as Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson, and local and national heroes such as Lennox Lewis or Chris Eubank (Woodward 2008: 540). Admiration for one or more of these hero types serves as a major motivator for individuals who become boxers. “I started boxing because I suppose peer pressure, lot of my friends did it. My hero, my brother did it” (Johnny Nelson, former professional boxer and world champion in Woodward 2007: 103).**

**In addition to the familial resource which connects the individual boxer with male kinship groups and male relatives through the indentificatory processes that are implicated in the creation of heroes (Woodward 2007), is the genealogical resource. Common traits within stories from this resource describe boxing as being ‘in the blood’ (Woodward 2007: 103), that individuals are ‘born a boxer’ (Wacquant 1992, 2004), and that boxing is a means of continuing family heritage (Cowie 2000). As Woodward observes, the genealogical resource is relational to the familial resource, but is perhaps one which is not available to female boxers.**

**[R]ecognition of a genealogy of belonging and identification with a tradition of masculinity that is not necessarily traditional, or hegemonic masculinity but is part of space-time and familial heritage. Although whole families and kinship**

**groups are implicated in these traditions, they are marked by gender. Expressions of continuity and inclusion by participating in boxing are much less likely to be open to young women [.] (Woodward 2007: 103)**

**When the genealogical resource, like the familial and compensatory drive resource, is recruited in stories about the cultural importance of boxing, it is linked to the positive identity rewards associated with the sport.**

**I can't with accuracy say where this hitting impulse came from, although it wasn't, I'm sure, mere peer pressure. My grandfather was a boxer, and to be "quick with your fists" was always a good trait in his view. (Ford 2002: 3-4)**

**Interestingly successful boxers who are not preceded by a male family member who boxed may engage with the genealogical resource, albeit in a slightly revised format.**

**Mum tells me I was born with a black eye and with my fists clenched. They said I looked like a boxer then – really ugly! Ever since I could talk, I've told people that one day I'd be world heavyweight champion. (David Haye, World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, in Sheehan 2009: 86)**

**The literature review indicates that individuals refer to and recruit form the compensatory drive, familial and genealogical resources for a variety of reasons and in multiple ways. The resources are often connected and intertwined, being linked by the themes of transformation, legacy and heroes. They are predominantly used to support the vocabularies of motive that drove an individual to become a boxer. The resources are linked directly to notions of class, status and gender, suggesting they are most**

closely associated with, and used, by young males from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These males seek engagement with the sport due to a belief that it will offer improvements to physical, social, and economic capital. Additionally, boxing is appealing to these men due to the heroic status they place on boxers on the global, local, and national level, as well as those boxers personally known to them.

The research suggests that the resources are predominantly used to link the aspirations of the novice boxer with the achievements of the elite boxer. However, it is also possible to see how the resources are used to describe more modest aspirations, suggesting that whilst there is a limited pool of narrative resources available to boxers they are used by the individual in different ways and for different purposes. Woodward's argument that the genealogical resource may privilege one group at the exclusion of others requires greater interrogation. Were it to hold true the already limited pool of shared narrative resources available to boxers would suffer from further limitations, possibly resulting in less flexibility in how female boxers story their experience and perform their narrative identity. On the other hand, as the example from David Haye illustrates, the resources are arguably flexible, liable to change and idiosyncratic interpretation. Haye's narrative involves the episode of being 'born a boxer' in looks rather than on account of hereditary. The genealogical resource is engaged with in an adapted format. Acknowledging, firstly, that there exist a shared pool of narrative resources for boxing, and secondly, that these resources are flexible, interconnected, fluid and in a state of flux, allows for a greater understanding of how individuals use narrative resources to make sense of self.

## Crime and Salvation

Neighbors and kin esteem professional fighters for their stout refusal to bow to social necessity, for fighting - literally - to make a better life for themselves, and for resisting either succumbing to dependency and demoralization as befalls so many ghetto residents or, worse yet, turning to criminal activities as a means of material sustenance and advancement. They are grateful for the fact that, contrary to the sinister figure of the dope seller, the pugilist's industry is oriented, if tenuously, towards the "legit" side of society and adds to the community's commonweal rather than subtracting from it. (Wacquant 1995b: 517)

Linked to the major themes of transformation, legacy and heroes, and the compensatory drive resource, is the narrative resource of crime and salvation. This resource speaks directly to the cultural meaning of boxing, which presents the sport as a social good, and antidote to juvenile crime and delinquency. Presented in the introduction to this thesis was screen and sports writer Budd Schulberg's proclamation that boxing saves 'ghetto kids' who otherwise would have been 'lost to the slammer' (Schulberg 2008: 104). As was demonstrated in the introduction to this chapter, so entrenched is this view that it passes, almost unquestioned, believed by the wider public and boxers themselves (Sugden 1996). The central ideology that boxing saves individuals from crime appears in numerous reports on the values of the sport (Sugden 1996, Pearn 1998,

Dundee 2008, Schulberg 2008, Dunn 2009). Interestingly, and rather contradictory, boxing has historical links to criminal activity, scandal, and deviant behaviour. Whilst the public boxing stories present the sport, and perhaps more accurately the amateur side of the sport, as a social good, boxing at the professional level is littered with stories of crime, scandal and corruption, creating a dual set of resources which contradict one another.

Crime and salvation is a resource that appears in the ontological narratives of amateur and professional boxers alike. A review of the narratives chronicled by Beattie (2002), Woodward (2007), and Schulberg (2008), present the crime and salvation resource as linear and fixed. The format suggests that engagement with the bodily practice of boxing 'saves' individuals from criminal and delinquent behaviour; thus once a boxer is saved he is no longer susceptible to falling fowl of the law or social norms. Of course this is an overtly simplistic and deterministic structure. It is a structure contested when considering the criminal and delinquent acts by boxers like Mike Tyson. Tyson's career and indeed his life outside of the ring have been plagued with criminal convictions and deviant behaviour. Clearly, for the likes of Mike Tyson, boxing is not the vehicle that saves the individual from crime.

The crime and salvation resource has strong links to the compensatory drive resource, sharing a common narrative element that sees boxing described as the only viable option out of the 'ghetto' and a life of crime. For Herrera and Leclerc (1999, 2000) narratives that present boxing as the only viable option to crime and the ghetto diminish the autonomy of the boxer, who has the injustice of having to choose between the risks associated with boxing and those of crime and poverty. Positioning

Herrera and Leclerc's view alongside Sugden's notion of the false promise of sport, that it can 'serve as an escalator to wealth and status for those who are effectively barred from other avenues of social mobility', raises ethical questions about the narrative resource of crime and salvation which is, as Sugden states, axiomatic of the boxing subculture, and so deeply embedded that everybody, especially the boxers believe in it (Sugden 1996: 65). Greater consideration needs to be paid to the presence of this resource in the narrative identities of boxers. This project, in chapters four and five, will demonstrate how boxers engage with this resource in their ontological narratives. In doing so it will address the manner in which this resource limits the type of identities boxers can perform, by diminishing their autonomy, or indeed the extent to which it provides boxers with the flexibility to invest in the performance of a non-criminal identity.

In addition to the academic concerns over the relationship between crime and boxing, non-academic projects are littered with references to the criminal and corrupt activity that surrounds boxing. Regular features in the weekly publication *Boxing News* are the 'In Brief' and 'Whispers' columns. The two columns provide a mixture of stories; the two types that dominate are brief reports on professional bouts that have been matched, and reports on the criminal and corrupt activity of professional boxers. Out of the 497 stories considered over the 13 month period, 65, or 13%, were about criminal activity, convictions, and civil and criminal court cases. Of the criminal based stories, reports of assaults being committed by boxers on non-boxers dominated, followed by drug abuse, drug possession, and failed drugs tests. Of the 29 publications considered, only three (September 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, September 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, October 7<sup>th</sup> 2010) did not feature stories

about crime and corruption in the 'In Brief' or 'Whispers' columns. Out of these three issues, the September 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> issues respectively featured lead articles on boxers suffering from drug and alcohol addiction, and the September 9<sup>th</sup> issue featured a lead article about racist comments made by one professional boxer on a video sharing website. The October 7<sup>th</sup> issue ran a small article about 'Preston's punching Policeman Howard Daley'. Haley, whose boxing license was withdrawn following 19 consecutive losses, was relicensed by the Central Area Council. The Council, who initially had grave concerns about the safety of the fighter, due to the number of losses, and the amount of punishment he took in fights, were satisfied by the fact that Haley had lost three-and-a-half stone since his last fight, and was able to demonstrate an improved defense when shadow-boxing before the Council. The author of the article, Danny Flexen states, 'With the recent seedy revelations regarding some of our top boxers, it's refreshing to hear an honest story about an honest pro' (Danny Flexen 'Daley returning leaner and meaner' *Boxing News* p.12).

The review of the academic and non-academic literature on boxing demonstrates the extent to which stories about crime, corruption, and salvation are present in boxing discourses. The crime and salvation narrative resource is a central component of the public narrative on boxing, and its cultural meaning. The resource portrays the sport as a social good and one that can save individuals from the trappings of crime. However, as the review of the *Boxing News* articles illustrates, stories of criminal activity, corruption and civil lawsuits affecting professional boxers, appear routinely in the boxing press. There is arguably a level of discord between the cultural meaning of the sport, the narrative resource of crime and salvation,

and the stories told about the criminal and deviant behaviour of some of its professional participants.

The importance of the narrative resource of crime and salvation to the cultural meaning of boxing, and the coverage criminal activity, corruption, and deviant behaviour receives in the boxing press appears to be at odds with one another. Regardless, crime, corruption and deviancy are central themes not only in certain ontological narratives, but also in the wider story of boxing. The themes are used simultaneously to defend and attack the morals and values of the sport. Similarly, they are used to describe the vocabularies of motive that attract individuals to boxing, and to explain why an individual might be predisposed to be a successful boxer.

Joe Louis has a classical boxer's pedigree. He was from a broken home, he moved with his mother from Alabama to Detroit when he was six years old, he dropped out of school when he was eleven and ran in the streets until a friend introduced him to boxing. (Sugden 1996: 36)

[Sonny Liston] the big, bad, black stereotype in every fearful white man's nightmare. One of at least a dozen children, Liston progressed from overgrown ten-year-old petty thief to knee-breaker for the St Louis Teamsters and the mob that owned him as naturally as a white middle-class child moves up from elementary school to junior high. It was the only possible career move for this precociously physical muscle boy who couldn't read or write but could knock opponents down with a

left jab and cripple them with jawbreaking rights. (Schulberg 2008: 80)

The relationship between the narrative resources of crime and salvation, the cultural meaning of boxing, and the professional sport is complicated and requires greater interrogation. Crime, as a theme, has purchase in boxing stories, particularly for the professional athlete who stands to benefit from a marketable back-story. In this context the themes of crime and salvation are often linked to the theme of discovery.

### Discovery

Beattie (2002) identifies the discovery theme amongst professional boxers. Tales of discovery within Beattie's project are synonymous with the relationship between boxer and trainer or between the undiscovered boxer and the individual who discovers him. Stories which contain this theme are often recruited and adapted to explain how a boxer or his soon to be trainer first came to realize the individual 'possessed' the raw talent and attributes of a prize-fighter. In short, how an individual or individuals 'discovered the boxer within', It is the discovery portion of the narrative which is perhaps most susceptible to embellishment and the one where myth and fantasy are most easily detected or contested.

Whilst Beattie's project highlights the discovery theme, tales of discovery can be found within numerous public stories pertaining to boxing icons. The likes of Jake LaMottoa, Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and Bernard Hopkins, to name but a few, are reported to have 'discovered' boxing after being the perpetrators or victims of crime.

Similarly, the discovery theme is linked to tales of delinquent behaviour, and the compensatory drive resource. Boxing trainer, Brendan Ingle reports of how he 'discovered' Naseem Hamed after seeing a young, and what he mistook to be, Pakistani lad fighting off three white aggressors in a school playground. According to Hamed this story is fabricated by Ingle.

I think it was made up, but at that particular time in my life, it was made up for a reason. It did create a big amount of interest. It did work, and people wanted to hear this story, so obviously it did good at the time. (Hamed in Beattie 2002: 95)

Here Hamed acknowledges the value of stories when marketing a professional boxer. Whilst Hamed contests the authenticity of the discovery story he realizes that 'it did good at the time' and generated a 'big amount of interest' in him as a boxer. As Hamed affirms, 'people wanted to hear this story.' The story draws upon racial tensions, delinquency, violence and aggression. It links the compensatory drive and crime and salvation themes, and in doing so speaks to the cultural meanings of boxing. Similarly, the discovery tales of Jake LaMotta, Sonny Liston, Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson and Bernard Hopkins revolve around crime and aggression, suggesting that boxing can be a reaction to injustice and also a measure to prevent further criminal behaviour.

### The Commoditization of Boxing Bodies

If, following Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 241), we define capital as

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor, then we may conceive boxers as holders of and even *entrepreneurs in bodily capital* of a particular kind; and the boxing gym in which they spend much of their waking time as a social machinery designed to convert this 'abstract' bodily capital into *pugilistic capital*, that is, to impart to the fighter's body a set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing, in the form of recognition, titles, and income streams. (Wacquant 1995a: 66-67)

This project argues that the *commoditization of boxing bodies* is a major narrative category in the discourses of boxing. Within this category are numerous resources and themes that address the value of boxing bodies and their relationship with the physical practices of the sport. The narrative resources of exploitation (Sugden 1996, Wacquant 1998, 2001), and redemption (McAdams 2006) are used to address the themes of slavery, prostitution, husbandry, animals, age, deterioration, and entertainment. In doing so, these themes and resources provide another set of vocabularies of motives for boxers. Wacquant (1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2001) established the commoditization of boxing bodies as a narrative category through two research papers, 'A fleshpeddler at work: Power, pain, and profit in the

prizefighting economy', and 'Whores, Slaves and Stallions: languages of Exploitation and Accommodation among Boxers'.

The languages of exploitation and the concept of the commoditization of boxing bodies are rooted in his two papers in 1995 which focus on how boxers transform *abstract bodily capital* into *pugilistic capital* in preparation for the day-to-day activities of professional boxing. Through these works, Wacquant argues that pugilistic capital is developed and traded in professional boxing, with boxers acutely aware that they 'cultivate their bodies in order to destruct that of their opponent and, in the process, too often, their own' (Wacquant 1995a: 82). This, Wacquant argues, is problematic

The fighter's body is simultaneously his means of production, the raw materials he and his handlers (trainer and manager) have to work with and on, and, for a good part, the somatised product of his past training and extant mode of living. [...] For what is unique about boxing is that the boxer's body is both the weapon of assault and the target to be destroyed.

(Wacquant 1995a: 67)

Sugden (1996) extends the languages of exploitation through the support of Wacquant's concepts of *pugilist illusio* and *collusio*, a collective of practices which foster the shared belief amongst boxers, trainers, promoters, managers, and matchmakers that the pitfalls and dangers of boxing will not affect them (Wacquant 1995a). For Wacquant the gym culture provides boxers with richly textured vocabularies of motives or acceptance frames that enable them to 'rationalize and deflect the

consciousness and seriousness of the bodily deterioration they are likely to suffer' (Wacquant 1995a: 83). Through these vocabularies, the pugilistic *illusio* and *collusio*, and the physical practices of boxing, 'fighters are led to conspire in the exploitation of their own disadvantage (Sugden 1996: 186). This in turn leads to a vicious cycle of exploitation (Sugden 1996: 52) where the boxing bodies of disadvantaged males are cultivated and traded until the point of pugilistic obsolescence (Wacquant 1995a) is reached and the boxing body is eroded and drained of value; all the while scrupulous managers and promoters profit whilst boxers struggle to scrape a living (Sugden 1996).

The narrative resource of exploitation, and the narrative category of the commoditization of boxing bodies, almost exclusively addresses professional boxers, with little to no reference given to their amateur counterparts. Chapter four will investigate the extent to which this narrative category, its resources and themes, are present within the narratives of amateur boxers. The presence, or absence of this resource and its themes, in the ontological narratives of amateur boxers, will provide information about how amateur boxers make sense of their sport and the relationships they have with their bodies. Further, the presence or absence of this resource and its themes will provide an insight into the manner in which the cultural meanings of the sport can silence certain stories, whilst amplifying others.

### Slavery, Prostitution and Husbandry

The focus of Wacquat's (2001) study is on narratives of exploitation amongst professional boxers; where boxers identify *their* body and *their*

bodily practice as a commodity. Within this study Wacquant identifies three key themes linking commodity and exploitation: slavery, prostitution, and husbandry. Professional boxers recruit from and formulate narratives of exploitation when they believe they have received insufficient or unjust financial gain from the sale of their body. Whilst these narratives are about the financial value of the boxer's body, they only exist because of how the boxer views their value in light of the boxer-promoter relationship. According to Wacquant boxers view their relationship with a promoter as a relationship of exploitation, where the promoter routinely exploits the boxer. The relationship between promoter and boxer is often compared to that of pimp and prostitute, cattle handler and cattle, slave master and slave, or a combination of any or all three. In order to make sense of and justify this relationship boxers utilise three 'vocabularies of motive' (Wacquant 2001: 186). The first accepts that exploitation is an unavoidable part of life and thus appreciates the relationship in terms of a necessary evil. The second positions the boxer as an entrepreneur of his bodily capital. It places emphasis on the boxer's ability to maximise his returns through the management, control and shaping of his body and his fighting ability. The third revolves around the individual boxer believing that he will be *the one* that is able to avoid being exploited.

Wacquant argues that promoters are interested in boxers as long as they can fight (Wacquant 2001: 188). Whilst this may be true, there is more to the story. In order to buy into the exploitation narratives, where promoters peddle the boxer's body as commodity, then we have to accept that the boxer's body alone holds limited capital. In order to sell tickets, to get bums on seats, a boxer needs to be more than just a good fighter. They

need greater market value. They need to be able to put on a good show. Better still if they are attractive and intelligent they are considered a gem within their field.<sup>5</sup> Once again the implication here is that these narratives exist as a web or matrix which meet, mix, influence, and clash with one another. What is evident is that studies such as Wacquant's (2001) have failed to fully address how the issue of one's performance, one's 'theatrical' capabilities affect the telling and analysis of narratives. Further, these studies have failed to demonstrate how the performance of particular narratives relates to perceived or actual socio-economic capital.

Woodward (2004) also alludes to the narrative of exploitation, paying particular attention to Muhammad Ali in a manner which further emphasises the intertwinement of narrative resources, 'One of the greatest ever boxing heroes, Muhammad Ali, describes how he could never avoid thinking about the relationship between boxing and slavery [after his fight with George Foreman in Zaire]' (Woodward 2004: 13). This links with Wacquant's notion of Ali as the pinnacle of fame, myth and legend in the sport and also supports his position on the slavery narrative being recurrent amongst boxers. The extent to which the narratives of exploitation are race or country specific is not evident from Wacquant's study. How likely is it that a white, British boxer would recruit from the slavery theme of the exploitation narrative resource? If he were to recruit from this narrative resource how would his situatedness as a white male within the broader slavery narrative affect one's interpretation of the stories he tells? If this narrative resource is exclusively used by those boxers who do not identify as white then how do individuals who do not use this narrative resource

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<sup>5</sup> See the narratives concerning David Haye's ascension through the ranks – Pat Sheehan *The Sun* newspaper November 7, 2009.

make sense of the boxer-promoter relationship? Do other meta-narratives influence the exploitation narrative? Is it possible, for example, that the meta-narrative of Industrialization and the relationship between factory owner and factory worker might focus more prominently in the narratives of boxers who identify as white and British? If so then this would surely demonstrate how personal narratives are connected to and are certainly not free from public and meta-narratives. If not then it raises questions about how individuals make sense of experience when they have a limited number of narrative resources.

### Animals

Whilst the husbandry theme addresses the notion of boxers as cattle other animalistic references can be found in boxing narratives. These descriptions may appear as similes to define the physical attributes of a particular boxer; they may be given to and adopted by the boxer as his boxing moniker; or they may be recruited by journalists to describe the manner in which a boxer fought, the characteristics and traits that were displayed during a particular fight or over the course of a career. A review of the literature outlined above demonstrates that the animal theme is predominantly recruited into stories about professional boxers. There is no evidence to suggest the extent to which amateur boxers recruit from this theme within their narratives. Journalists, promoters, managers and trainers, when reviewing or publicizing a bout or a fighter's attributes, are the main recruiters of animal theme. To this extent the animal theme can be linked to the commoditization of the boxing body category.

Within literature pertaining to the professional ranks significant reference is made to a number of animals, most frequently under the following groupings: 1) The mythical and generic descriptions (i.e. 'animal' or 'behemoth'); 2) Livestock; 3) Game; 4) Domestic; 5) Animals of flight; 6) Ocean animals; 7) Snakes; 8) Other. Under the headings certain animals are referenced more than others. Beast is by far the single most referenced word within this theme. Horses, bulls, lions and dogs are almost equally referenced. Particular animals are referenced almost exclusively in connection with one boxer: Carl "The Cobra" Froch; Lennox Lewis as the 'reluctant dragon' (Schulberg 2008: 131); John Ruiz as an 'octopus'; and Nikolay Valuev as a 'beast', or "The Beast from the East". The most generic of references, i.e., ones that are ascribed to numerous boxers are: dog, racehorse, and bull. Schulberg stands out as the most prolific recruiter of the racehorse imagery, although journalists of the weekly and monthly boxing publications recruit it on a frequent basis.

The recruitment of equestrian and canine animal imagery and terminology can be linked to the sporting practices of horse and dog racing, as well as the blood sports of dog fighting. In this context the imagery and animal themes link to notions of capital and commoditization. The use of the themes imbues boxing bodies with particular qualities and values, in relation to the cultural meanings of boxing and the pugilistic market. The extent to which individual boxers engage with these themes is not evident from the material consulted. The literature review demonstrates that non-boxers use the themes almost exclusively in order to narrate the lives and actions of boxers. The extent to which this is exploitative is not explicitly demonstrated in the literature review. The dominance of non-boxing voices

utilizing these themes, and the seeming silence of boxers raises questions about the extent to which the animal theme is open to boxers.

### Age

For boxers and for most male athletes in general the physical peak arrives around the age 25 and has passed by age 30.

Though those upper limits are constantly being pushed back by advances in medical science, nutrition, and various legal and illegal drugs, we still generally see boxers deliver their greatest performances in their 20s and then tailspin in their 30s. Even though ring intelligence and maturity are on the rise in a fighter's later years, it's rare to find one who's actually better at 35 than he was at 25 or 30, because by 35, his body is typically betraying him. (Raskin August 2010: 84)

According to the boys who keep the charts in insurance offices, Joe Louis' days as heavyweight champion may be numbered - but, at 32, the Brown Bomber is still monarch of all he surveys. Old Father Time has a tricky habit of toppling even the most secure thrones, and Joe's reign as the world's top tough guy must end some day. (Dunphy May 1947: 31)

Raskin's comments concerning age are not uncommon within boxing discourses. For the likes of Raskin there is an upper age limit for boxers, an age that directly corresponds with peak performance and an age that once passed brings in to question the credibility and effectiveness of a boxer's

career; pugilistic obsolescence. Raskin sets this age of peak performance somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, effectively declaring that someone boxing past the age of thirty is in decline, seeing their career 'tailspin' out of control with each passing year that they box. By thirty-five, Raskin declares that the body is 'betraying' the boxer and thus establishes a problematic divide between body and self. Raskin establishes his prime and post-prime ages for all boxers seemingly across time and weight class. It is important to note however that the age one is considered old in boxing terms differs between weight classes and is arguably evolving (as Raskin alludes to) due to advances in medical science, training, nutrition and drugs. Anecdotal evidence obtained through fieldwork indicates that a heavyweight boxer has 'a few more years in him' than boxers in the lighter weight classes. Why this is believed is uncertain and requires greater exploration.

Reference to age within the literature review primarily relates to boxers aged 30 years old and above, whilst some attention is given to boxers in their late twenties. The focus of age related stories are on the ageing process and the impact ageing has upon one's ability to box. Ageing is viewed as a negative yet unavoidable process that boxers struggle to come to terms with. The vast majority of age related narratives are told about boxers, rather than by boxers, yet there are examples of boxers drawing upon the theme of age within their personal narratives. Those authors who write about ageing boxers tend to: equate ageing with a devalued and less effective material body; call on boxers to retire when the author decides the boxer is old; suggest that boxers who ignore their calls are only humiliating themselves and are losing the ultimate fight – the

battle with themselves. The third of these three tangents clearly links to notions of legacy and a fear that a boxer who continues to fight into 'old age' risks ruining a successful legacy.

Budd Schulberg wrote an address in 1998 to the then 36 year old heavyweight world champion Evander Holyfield. The address came after his win against Vaughn Bean.

Evander, Evander Holyfield for God's sake, for your sake, for all our sakes, go home. Once a role model for boxing integrity, you're going out as a role model for boxing senility. We remember you *when*. Please, please stop asking your old admirers to remember you now. (Schulberg 2005: 45)

Schulberg links age and legacy directly. He suggests that by continuing to box into his late thirties, Holyfield is forcing the boxing world to remember him when he is past his best, rather than when he was at his best.

In November 2010, at the age of 48, without a heavyweight title but still an active fighter, Holyfield gave an interview to *Fighting Fit* magazine discussing his ambitions as a fighter and his desire to reclaim a heavyweight title; the article is titled 'The Never Ending Story.' Holyfield opens the article with a reflection on an interview he gave at the age of 21 when he had just turned professional. In the original interview, Holyfield was asked when he thought he might retire. "I said at 28, because I thought by the time I was 28 that would be really old" (Holyfield in Christie 2010: 76). Asked the same question by Christie at the end of the interview, Holyfield's reply, "When I can't do it no more" (Ibid). Holyfield goes on to suggest

that times are changing, that the human body is adapting because of improved approaches to training and greater scientific understanding. He asks that there is an end to people writing others off due to age, or deciding what they can and cannot do due to the fact that they have grown older; and concludes the article with reference to a body-mind split: “Fools die young; when you’re not a fool it means you’re going to have a longer life because you learn how to live. The mind is a terrible thing to waste; if you put you’re mind to something, you will do it” (Holyfield in Christie 2010: 79).

Holyfield’s narrative illustrates a tension between the public and personal narratives concerning age. This tension indicates that whilst there might be a relationship between narrative resources, such as those pertaining to age, narratives can be contested and reconstructed in order to make meaning. Narrative resources then are capable of being contested or subverted in order that an individual can make sense of their experiences. Holyfield subverts the narratives pertaining to age in order to suggest that he is still capable of winning a world title and thus is still capable of building a better legacy. Schulberg and others use the theme of age within their narratives to suggest that Holyfield is damaging an already established legacy. This suggests the possibility that legacy can be separated from the individual insofar as an active boxer is capable of affecting his legacy whilst an inactive or retired boxer is incapable of doing so; legacy becomes fixed once one is no longer engaged in the daily physical activity of boxing. The connection between legacy and age is hinged on concepts of purpose and worth.

Like Holyfield, Robert Anasi (2005) refers to a thirty-seven year old boxer, Ray, who trains at the tenderloin gym in San Francisco, USA. Ray is not ready to hang up his gloves despite the fact that he is told by his fellow boxers that he should retire. It is pointed out to Ray that his boxing skills have deteriorated with age. He responds that he “is not ready for it” and that if he had to stop boxing he “wouldn’t want to live” (Anasi in Gattuso 2005: 100). Through Ray, Anasi indicates that retirement and life after boxing is a scary concept for boxers. To be a retired boxer is to be a boxer no more. It represents a transition which moves the individual away from the self they have been working on becoming. They move from working on ‘becoming somebody’ to something other, something that the likes of Ray and Holyfield seem uncomfortable with. For Holyfield perhaps there is the hope that he can continue to build his legacy, and that he can continue to work on becoming somebody before he has to cease being a boxer. For Ray establishing a legacy does not seem his main motivator, instead he seems motivated by fear of life after boxing, a life that he wouldn’t want to live, a life without the purpose offered through boxing. Ray, and perhaps Holyfield, are inhabited by the game they inhabit (Wacquant 1995a).

Bernard Hopkins graces the cover of the September 2011 *Ring* magazine, wearing his recently won *Ring* magazine world light heavyweight champion belt and with his foot resting on a clock. The caption reads, ‘TIME BANDIT! B-Hop stops The Clock’ referring to the fact that at 46 Hopkins became the oldest fighter to become a world champion. The interview with Hopkins, conducted by Nigel Collins, understandably focuses on the theme of age. Alongside the theme of age, Hopkins recruits the themes of exploitation, legacy, and money to make sense of his ageing body,

the sport of boxing and his ambitions for his son. For Hopkins, age, time, the body and mind are related, but seemingly separate entities. He confesses to Collins that he does not feel his age, feeling ten years younger. His mind acknowledges his actual age, but his body feels different 'Your body is going to tell you something that your mind is not agreeing with. But when it's over, it's over. Time cannot be compromised. It normally wins' (Hopkins in Collins 2011: 54). Hopkins engages with the narrative theme of age, accepting that there will be a point when he reaches pugilistic obsolescence, suggesting that he will be aware of it physically before he is ready to accept it mentally. Like Holyfield, and arguably all boxers, Hopkins is inhabited by the game he inhabits. His ontological narrative reflects the extent to which the physical activities of boxing shape and define him.

Hopkins recruits the theme of age to support the belief posted by Raskin, that age and time define when a boxer is 'supposed' to fight. Referring to a contemporary and rival, 42 year-old Roy Jones Junior, who, at the time of the interview had lost his last three fights (two by way of knockout, and a points loss to Hopkins), Hopkins states

there are two reasons why fighters fight beyond the time they are supposed to fight: One is money; two is tax problems. Also, they are in denial as to where their careers are now compared to then. I don't know for sure, but all of the above probably apply to Roy Jones. But in the end, I believe fighters have to be saved from themselves. (Hopkins in Collins 2011: 48)

The relationship between the ageing body and the demands of the day-to-day work required to be an active boxer create a further tension.

**Wacquant argues that it is the rigours of the daily bodywork in the gym that wears away at the will and the body of many boxers over time. He argues that it is this wearing which forces boxers to retire rather than their experiences within the ring. 'No one escapes time, especially not boxers, those men who daydream of immortality' (Wacquant in Gattuso 2005: 145). The boxer who daydreams of immortality is faced with a dilemma. In order to become 'immortal' by establishing a legacy, one must religiously engage with a bodily practice which over time wears the body and will down, exhausting it's participants and reminding them in a very real and present way of their own mortality.**

**The seemingly opposing trajectories posed by the concept of building a legacy and the wearing out of a body are present within the narratives relating to Holyfield and Ray; as is the relationship between the two trajectories and time. These relationships are also clearly present in the writing of Raskin. Hopkins recruits the theme of legacy in a different context. Bringing together the themes of age, money, exploitation and legacy, Hopkins presents a story about generativity. Referring to his son, Hopkins states**

**Boxing is taxing on your body, and there's much that goes on in the business of boxing. The athletes are not protected by the law the way basketball and football players are. [...] Even if things [in boxing] change for the better, there are physical repercussions of being a boxer. I don't see my blood, my DNA, my son, who will inherit everything that I am building now, boxing.**

**[...]**

**You don't know how badly and how long I wanted to keep my father's name alive. My legacy will be kept alive through my son[.] (Hopkins in Collins 2011: 51-2)**

**Age, time, the physical body, legacy and generativity will be considered collectively when examining the extent to which notions of ageing are present within the personal narratives of the amateur and professional boxers who participated in this study. Hopkins's narrative demonstrates the extent to which boxers engage with a mixture of narrative resources and themes to present their ontological narrative. The body and legacy are central to Hopkins's narrative. The narrative presented by Hopkins addresses notions of exploitation, implicitly and explicitly, with the relationship between the boxing body, legacy and money being used in a manner which speaks to the narrative category of the commoditization of boxing bodies. According to Hopkins, a problematic relationship with money can, for some professional boxers, place them in grave danger fighting long after their bodies have told them to stop, and potentially tarnishing their legacies in the process.**

### **Money**

**Whilst journalists and professional fighters mention money frequently in boxing discourse there is a dearth of information and reference to the matter in more established academic work. With the exception of Wacquant (1995b, 2001, 2004) little mention is given to the relationship between money and professional boxers. It is evident from Wacquant's work, and the countless newspaper and boxing magazine**

articles considered for this project, that money is an important yet overlooked theme within boxing stories, particularly in regards to the commoditization of boxing bodies and the theme of exploitation. When money is referenced in boxing stories it can be considered to be framed in one of three contexts; those contexts being prior to, during, or post the boxer's professional career. Narratives that deal with the amounts of money made and lost during and after a boxer's career are most predominant.

Wacquant's studies (1995b, 2001, 2004) have addressed money and professional boxing suggesting that whilst the champions and title holders of the sport may command the lion's share of the revenue it is the 'rank and file' opponents, contenders, journeymen and bums who support boxing's economy and yet live off just the crumbs (Wacquant 1995b: 490). Schulberg describes this more succinctly when he states 'Either you're a multimillion-dollar baby or a bum' (Schulberg 2008: 123). For the boxers that Wacquant (1995b) included in his study there is a realization that boxing is work before anything else. Similarly, as mentioned above, Wacquant (2001) demonstrates that professional boxers consider their bodies in terms of commercial gain, believing the body to be a commodity they rarely receive a fair return for. The boxing body is crafted and forged in order that it can be sold and valorized on the pugilistic market (Wacquant 1995b). Different boxing bodies hold different value with white heavyweight champion bodies considered the rarest and most valued (Liebling 1990; Wacquant 2001; Oates 2006; Schulberg 2009). Absent from discussions on the value of the boxing body and the money that can be made from boxing by different types of bodies is the voice of amateur

boxers. Whilst these boxers do not earn money for their exploits in the ring they are associated with a world which places value on certain kinds of bodies; a world where the discourse addresses the amount of money that can be made through the same bodily practices they engage with.

Discussions of professional boxing frequently address the extent to which television transformed the earning potential of fighters with much skepticism being levied at the high revenue pay-per-view satellite broadcasted bouts (Dundee 2008; Schulberg 2008). The introduction of satellite broadcasters and pay-per-view fights means that certain boxers stand to earn millions for a fight. It is reported that Mike Tyson earned around \$25 million for his 2002 fight with Lennox Lewis (Schulberg 2008: 192), Naseem Hamed is reported to have earned £40 million throughout his career (Beattie 2002), and it is estimated that a fight between Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather could generate a purse for the two to share of up to \$80 million (Borges *Boxing Monthly* September 2010: 8).<sup>6</sup>

A narrative trend which runs parallel to those which talk of the vast riches a boxer can earn during his career is to talk of the retired boxer, or boxer near the end of his career who has squandered his millions and is in debt. Schulberg argues that despite allegedly earning \$25 million for his 2002 showdown with Lennox Lewis Tyson would still have been between \$4-5 million in debt after deductions were made by the IRS, his management team, trainers and promoters (Schulberg 2008: 192). In May 2010, Tyson appeared on the US chat show, *The View* and told the hosts that he was “totally destitute and broke” (Tyson in Ryan *The Ring* August

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<sup>6</sup> That said, boxing promoter Don King argues that promoters, managers and television companies stand to earn more money from Pacquiao and Mayweather if they never fight, based on the number of opponents they could face them against (King in Borges *Boxing Monthly* September 2010: 8).

2010: 19). Tyson's financial affairs are well publicized and yet alarmingly are not too dissimilar to a number of retired boxing champions. The 'Outside the Ropes' section of *The Ring* and the 'In brief' section of *Boxing News* regularly report on retired boxers who are experiencing financial difficulty. Reports often address the need for ex-boxers to sell memorabilia in order to clear tax bills, ex-boxers filing for bankruptcy, or ex-boxers considering coming out of retirement in search of another big payday to settle their debts.

Despite numerous narratives detailing the financial difficulties experienced by successful boxers little to no discussion exists to explain why they fail to manage their finances. Two narrative trends run simultaneously, one through the compensatory drive and salvation resources, and the second through the exploitation resource, with seemingly little correlation between them. The compensatory drive and salvation resources suggest that a vocabulary of motive for boxers is the promise of financial reward from a career as a professional boxer. A reward, that in theory, would remove the boxer from the ghetto and provide social mobility. At the same time the exploitation narrative resource suggests that the boxer is often cheated out of earnings or does not receive a fair reward for his efforts in the ring. Stories about boxers leaving the sport in serious and crippling debt or having to continue fighting past their 'natural retirement' due to the need to earn money are equally common (Schulberg 2008: 44). Further consideration needs to be paid to the relationship, or seemingly lack of relationship, between these resources. The personal narratives of professional boxers on this subject is often absent from boxing discourse. Furthermore the voices of amateur boxers

on this subject are seldom heard even those these individuals are engaged in the same bodily practices as the professional athletes. Both groups engage with a set of practices where money, earning potential and the value of the trained-fighting body are central components to the makeup of the sport.

### Conclusion

The examples presented throughout this chapter demonstrate how the themes and shared narrative resources of boxing are woven together to tell an Idiosyncratic story. At the same time, the examples share common components which speak directly to the findings by academics about the cultural meanings of the sport. Further, the examples demonstrate the extent to which the narrative resources are limited and restrictive, curtailing the flexibility boxers have to perform alternate stories and lead alternate lives. To this extent the shared narrative resources of boxing, particularly those which address the commoditization of the body and exploitation, can be understood as a *narrative technology* (Gulbrium and Holstein 1998), which, leads boxers to conspire in the exploitation of their own disadvantage (Sugden 1996). Whilst for Wacquant, the belief in pugilistic *illusio* 'is found lodged deep within [the boxer's] body' operating 'beneath the level of discourse and consciousness', I argue that discourse, and the shared narrative resources of boxing help establish and sustain the cultural meanings of the sport and the *illusio* (Wacquant 1995a: 88).

Whilst there is a significant amount of literature being produced on boxing discourses these accounts do not always focus on the voices of the boxers themselves. On the rare occasions that the boxers' voices are

featured it is usually the voices of professional, male, boxers. The voices of amateur, and, or, female boxers rarely feature in discussions of boxing and yet these individuals engage with the same bodily practices and as their professional equivalents. Whilst there is significant evidence to demonstrate that amateur and professional boxers recruit from the same pool of bodily practices and draw upon similar principles when approaching training and nutrition, there is very little discussion concerning the extent to which the two groups recruit from the same pool of narrative resources. There is little discussion concerning the relationship between narratives and bodily practices for either professional or amateur boxers.

This project is a result of this void and will investigate the relationships between bodily practices and narratives, exploring the manner in which the shared narrative resources of boxing affect the narrative identities of amateur and professional boxers. With a dearth of female participants in this study it is beyond the scope of this project to fully consider how the shared narrative resources of boxing affect the narrative identity of female boxers. Further, greater work is required to determine whether there exist gender specific narrative resources that are open to one gender group and closed to another. Through the narrative account of one female boxer, this study will demonstrate that certain boxing narrative resources are engaged with despite gender differences. This project accepts that the voices of female boxers, and females writing about boxing requires greater consideration in order to fully understand the extent to which narrative resources are shared, and the manner in which they affect the narrative identity presented by individual boxers.

### **Chapter 3: Ontological Narratives and the Engagement with Pre-identified Narrative Resources and Themes**

#### **Introduction**

**This chapter considers the ontological narratives of 16 participants: 14 boxers, 1 trainer, and 1 club chairman. The participants were split across the two research sites, with 9 participants from Exeter, and 7 participants from Sheffield. Of the 14 boxers, 8 trained in Exeter, and 7 trained in Sheffield. The age range of the boxers was 18-32. At the time of interview all 8 boxers at the Exeter site competed as amateurs, 5 of the boxers at the Sheffield site competed as professionals while 1 competed as an amateur. The amateur boxer from Sheffield had professional ambitions, a timeframe and a plan he and his coaches were working on to transition to the professional ranks. Of the 8 Exeter based boxers, 6 had professional ambitions and a timeframe within which they wished to turn pro; however, they did not have clear plans that were agreed upon by a professional**

coaching staff.<sup>7</sup> 2 of the Exeter based boxers categorically stated that they did not wish to turn professional.

Whilst previous projects have been situated within gyms where amateur and professional boxers train analysis tends to focus on the experience of professional boxers. Invariably the experience of amateur boxers are overlooked, silenced or ignored. This has been justified based on the belief that the amateur sport serves as a feeder and training ground for the professional ranks (Sugden 1996). Similarly, professional boxing dominates the representation of the sport in the media. The differences between the amateur and professional sport, and indeed amateur and professional boxers, are significant and require greater attention.

A failure to address the difference between the professional and amateur codes, and instead, to consider boxing in its entirety does one of two things. For the most part the concentration on professional athletes and professional competition relegates the experiences of amateur athletes to the background. At times this focus erases the stories of amateur athletes from the study and discourses on boxing. If, on the other hand, the experiences of amateur and professional boxers are considered together, as representative of the experiences of boxers, there is a danger that nuanced differences between the experiences of the two groups, if they exist, are overlooked. Conversely, the importance and impact of points of convergence between the stories provided by amateur and professional boxers may also be overlooked. The result is a limited understanding of

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<sup>7</sup> At the point at which the fieldwork was concluded 1 boxer from the Exeter site had turned professional, splitting his focus between professional boxing, kickboxing and mixed martial arts bouts.

how narratives are relational and how discourses on boxing intersect with, shape, and are shaped by these relations.

Recruiting from initial life-history interviews conducted with professional and amateur boxers this chapter will examine the performance of ontological narratives. Consideration will be paid to the correlation between the stories performed by professionals and amateurs across two different training sites, as will the relationship between the shared narrative resources, story types, and themes, identified in the previous chapter, and those that are presented by participants of this study.

### **Tales of Becoming: Identifying as a Boxer and the Transition from *Nobody* to *Somebody***

Tales of becoming a boxer, as a narrative resource, are recruited to make sense of the transition in identity from that of non-boxer to boxer. Embedded within these stories are the themes of change and transformation. These themes address actual and perceived adjustments within the individual, such as, relationships to and the use of an individual's body, as well as attitudes and aspirations an individual might hold. Similarly, the themes acknowledge actual and perceived alterations to how the individual is perceived by and relates to other social agents. The previous chapter introduced narrative resources, categories and themes, prevalent within boxing stories, and as identified in previous academic projects and the media. The resources introduced included the compensatory drive, the familial, genealogical, heroes and legacy, crime and salvation, exploitation. Linked to these resources were numerous themes, with the theme of

discovery being linked to the compensatory drive and crime and salvation resources.

Whilst the discovery theme appears frequently within the public discourses of boxing, particularly within the public press and biographical accounts of professional boxers' lives, it was not a dominant theme within the narrative accounts provided by boxers for this study. Out of the 14 boxers interviewed only 2, Karl Bell and Kell Brook, professional boxers based at the Sheffield site, presented narratives which bore any relation to the discovery theme. Kell describes how, after he had already begun training as a boxer, the Ingles 'from an early age they saw talent in me and er, it's like I've had it all me life like' (Brook 2011). Karl describes how, after numerous years of athletic activity including weight lifting and kickboxing, a trainer and acquaintance, Billy Mitchell, told him to take up boxing at the Sheffield site. These two accounts differ significantly from the discovery theme discussed in the previous chapter. The ontological narratives presented by participants of this study did not include episodes where the boxer is discovered; rather the stories portray an active protagonist deliberately seeking engagement with boxing or being introduced to the sport by a friend or family member. Whilst Karl is told to box he waits a considerable period of time before seeking out the gym. Similarly, Kell was already engaged in boxing practices, after being taken to the gym by his father, before the Ingle family realized his talent. This differs significantly from the theme as it appears in the public boxing stories biographical accounts of professional boxers' lives.

It would be wrong to assume a positive correlation between the discovery theme and instances where someone other than the boxer

authors the story. This study demonstrates that even when a story about an individual becoming a boxer is narrated by someone other than the boxer, for example by the trainer of said boxer, the discovery theme is not always recruited. Previous bodies of work, academic (Beattie 2003) and journalistic (Pitt 1999), have illustrated the presence of the discovery theme within the narratives told by the boxing trainer, Brendan Ingle about his professional boxers. This project found that professional boxers who train at Brendan Ingle's gym were more likely to discover Brendan and his gym than they were to be discovered.

I tell y'a I've got somebody you can meet. An absolute gem. He's about 6ft 7, 6ft 8 and about 16 1/2 , 17 stone. He's going to be the next big thing out of here. He's name's Richard Towers. He used to come here about six or seven year ago, then he disappeared. No matter what enquiries I made I couldn't find out what had happened to him. So a few months ago, who walks in here but big Richard.

"I says, 'I can't believe it.'

"He says, 'Well I'm a bit embarrassed.

"I says, 'Well what's up?'

"Well he says, 'I've just done six, seven year of a t'irteen year sentence.'

"I says, 'What? How many people did you kill?'

"He says, 'Well I didn't kill anyone. I kidnapped a drug dealer and held him hostage.'

"So I says, 'Well alright then you can train.'" (Ingle from field notes 2009).

Brendan's account of Richard's return to boxing, and subsequent professional boxing career, portrays Richard as actively seeking out Brendan and the club. It suggests that the return to boxing, after an enforced absence on account of a custodial sentence, signals the start of Richard's tale of becoming a boxer as told or understood by Brendan. Richard's own narrative supports this.

Well basically I got into boxing when I was - I think its sixteen years old when I got into it – I went down to Brendan's gym erm and we basically erm I got into training. I trained wit-im for eighteen months; trained with Naz, Ryan Rhodes.

[...]

So basically we erm...I got into training. Eight months I trained for and then...as you know I went...on anoth...another path. And it wasn't until three years ago that I actually got into boxing. (Towers 2010)

Richard acknowledges that he first encountered boxing at age 16. He uses the "I" to demonstrate his role as protagonist in his story about becoming a boxer, 'I went down to Brendan's gym'. His tale does not include a discovery theme in the same way evidenced by the literature review in the previous chapter. Richard actively seeks out the gym at age 16 and, again, upon release from prison. The narrative presented by Richard supports the reading of Brendan's narrative account that Richard's *tale of becoming* begins proper upon his return to the gym after serving his custodial sentence, 'And it wasn't until three years ago that I actually got into boxing.'

Tales of becoming do not necessarily commence when an individual first encounters the sport of boxing. There is a distinction made between the moment an individual first engages with the sport and the moment when that individual starts to identify as a boxer. Tales of becoming are told retrospectively, when an individual already associates with the identity markers of a boxer. These stories chronicle the transition from non-boxer to boxer and as such provide information about the importance and effect of that transition for, and on, the individual.

Professional boxer, Leo D'erlanger emphasizes the distinction between initial engagement with the sport and identification as a boxer.

Er, earliest memories of boxing are erm probably when I was er, like young kid like at the age of sort of about don't know about twelve, maybe younger, probably a bit younger, maybe older. Erm, my dad used to box and er, he bought a punch bag and speed ball in the lounge like erm, so he used to give me and my brother er boxing lessons.

[...]

So like erm, I didn't do it at school I did er, like a little bit at home and like college and that, I used to punch the bag and whatever I just used to punch the bag, nothing properly but I knew the basics from being a kid because my dad taught me it. But as soon as I left school at sixteen I've done it ever since then. I took it up seriously, just got in to it, and went – got serious as I got better. (D'erlanger 2011)

For Leo there is a difference in the quality of his engagement with boxing pre and post the age of 16. Leo trivializes the quality of the

engagement pre 16, 'I used to punch the bag and whatever I just used to punch the bag, nothing properly but I knew the basics'. Conversely his engagement post 16 is 'serious'. By engaging with the sport 'seriously' Leo enters into a series of transformations. He transforms from having a leisurely and basic engagement with the sport to getting 'better' at boxing, realizing he is a 'good' boxer, and thus identifying as a boxer. This signifies the start of Leo's becoming resource story. He takes the sport up seriously and as a result develops the key skills required to identify with being a boxer. The development Leo experiences is a linear progression from non-boxer, boxer, to good boxer. This progression is associated with a serious approach and form of engagement with the sport. Leo's tale of becoming indicates the potential for further transformation. The sport offers him the potential to transform 'past the level of just being good and potentially get really good.'

Transformation is an important element of a tale of becoming, not only is it the crucial element which signifies the start of the story but, these tales indicate a desire, and/or a realization that further transformation is possible. This study argues that tales of becoming are a shared story type for boxers. Through them this study demonstrates that this particular group of amateur and professional boxers are able to provide a narrative identity which they understand as fluid. Their conception of self has changed over time, demonstrated via the manner in which self is expressed at the start of each tale. Further, these individuals are aware that they are still capable of change. For the individuals within this study boxing facilitates transformation; a linear transformation from a position least desired to that which is most desired. At the point of narration these

individuals had already perceived a significant transformation of self, moving from identifying as a non-boxer to that of boxer. In this instance the identity of non-boxer is least desired, the identity of boxer more desirable, and yet these narratives indicate that there is more, an identity which is most desired and one which they are striving for. The reason why the individuals in this study place different values on specific identities requires further exploration. The theme of linear progression also requires greater interrogation. Whilst it is evident from the narrative accounts that this group of individuals believe boxing will enable them to develop a more desirable self it is not always clear from the tales of becoming alone what is most desirable to each individual. Nor is it clear how anything other than a linear progression would impact their sense of self. In a world as volatile as boxing this needs to be addressed.

### The Familial-Genealogical

One could quote entire pages of field notes in support of the notion according to which “You’re born a boxer.” (Wacquant 2004: 99)

The familial-genealogical resource is identified by the texts of boxing as a key component within tales of becoming, constituting one of the vocabularies of motives for boxers. Similarly, the recruitment of this resource is evident within the narrative accounts provided by professional and amateur boxers for this study. Previous bodies of work recruit the familial-genealogical resource to explain why an individual might be interested in boxing (Weinberg & Arond 1952; Oates 2006; Woodward

2007) why an individual might be psychophysically predisposed to become a boxer (Ford 2004; Woodward 2007); to demonstrate that those who recruit from the resource invest heavily in heroic narratives and narratives of idolization (Weinberg & Arond 1952; Woodward 2007) and to demonstrate the performance of a particular masculinity (Woodward 2007). These projects highlight the presence of the familial-genealogical resource within the narrative accounts of boxers but fail to fully interrogate the relationship between the recruitment of this resource and an individual's engagement with the sport and identity as a boxer.

Previous projects, whilst demonstrating that the familial-genealogical resource operates as a vocabulary of motive, fail to thoroughly investigate how individual boxers use the resource, and how the resource connects to the individual's sense of becoming a boxer. Failure to thoroughly investigate this relationship presents the notion that the presence of the familial-genealogical resource within a boxer's narrative sufficiently explains why an individual became a boxer, and further that it signals the point at which an individual started identifying as a boxer - or at least started to understand that the identity of boxer was desirable. In this capacity exposure to boxing from a familial-genealogical perspective is prescriptive and reductive, it marks the moment an individual decided to become a boxer, and it explains the reasons why an individual boxes. The life histories provided by amateur and professional boxers for this project challenge this concept.

The responses from participants for this study demonstrate that engagement with the familial-genealogical resource does different things for different individuals. The recruitment of the resource does at times

support the analysis found in previous studies, and mirrors some of the accounts provided in the boxing press. However, the responses from participants of this study demonstrate that the role of the familial-genealogical resource alone does not sufficiently explain why individuals box. The recruitment of the familial-genealogical resource by respondents for this study challenges the emphasis placed on it by previous bodies of work. This study demonstrates that the familial-genealogical resource is often used as a form of prelude or appendix to tales of becoming, and as such establishes a back-story. This project found that there were often significant chronological gaps between the familial-genealogical elements of an individual's story and the point in the individual's story where they identified as a boxer. It is important to acknowledge these gaps and to analyse that which occurs within them in order to fully appreciate why an individual boxes and how that relates to the performance of self and expressions of agency.

Of the 14 participants who identified as boxers 10 males drew upon the familial-genealogical resource to explain their engagement with boxing. The resource is used by these individuals to describe their first memories of the sport as participant or observer, to make sense of their desire to box, to make sense of their success as a boxer, or indeed any combination of these. Understandably then for these participants the familial-genealogical resource appears early in their narrative accounts of self. The recruitment of this resource serves numerous purposes. In the first instance, and for half of the respondents (7), the recruitment of the familial-genealogical resource describes their earliest memories of the sport. In this capacity the participants responses mirror the account provided by Oates (2006) and

those identified by Woodward (2007). Oates states that her interest in boxing began ‘in childhood - as an offshoot of my father’s’ (Oates 2006: 4). 7 participants recruited the familial resource to describe how their fathers introduced them to the sport. These introductions came prior to the participants reaching adolescence. Fathers and sons watched boxing bouts on television (1 of the 7), fathers took sons to boxing clubs (3 of the 7), or fathers taught their sons the basics of pugilism at home (3 of the 7).

And er, me dad brought me down to Wincobank gym...been here ever since. Fell in love with it. (Brook 2011)

Erm, my dad used to box and er, he bought a punch bag and speed ball in the lounge like erm, so he used to give me and my brother er boxing lessons. (D’erlanger 2011)

4 participants described a tradition of boxing within their families, most notably that their fathers had boxed and, in one example, a grandfather. However only one of these participants, an amateur boxer, states that their connection to boxing is genetic, thus engaging with the genealogical resource.

[M]y granddad was also a successful boxer so part of me believes that there is just something in the blood, in the family, which we warrior type we like to get stuck in and do that sort of – that’s our, our, sport of choice[.] (Currey 2011)

Rather than referring directly to genetics as the connection between Sam’s ability and desire to box and his father’s professional boxing career, Sam, an amateur boxer, alludes to an almost osmotic relationship. ‘I don’t know I suppose ever since a kid I’ve – my dad was a pro fighter so he’s

always been around the house shadow boxing all that sort of stuff and you sorta pick it up donya?’(Cox 2010). Richard does not come from a family of boxing males but he does believe his abilities are natural and the result of paternal genetics. Further, it is on account of his experiences with boxing that he has been able to make this connection.

Well basically I’ve always known that I have had a strong physical foundation. You know me brother he’s significantly strong in certain things – wrestling, you know fighting in particular. Erm me dad was er, had a very strong stature. So I think er I’ve never utilised what I’ve had because I’ve never really had the confidence and it is only because, it’s only since I’ve got into boxing that I’ve started to learn that I am probably more physically capable than your average person and I’ve started to utilise what I have naturally – what me and me family seem to have naturally. (Towers 2010)

Woodward argues that the recruitment of the familial-genealogical resource by boxing males situates these individuals within ‘Narratives of kinship [...] and the “brotherhood of boxing”’ (Woodward 2007: 102). The recruitment of this structure provides ‘a genealogy of belonging and identification with a tradition of masculinity that is not necessarily traditional, or hegemonic masculinity but is part of space-time and familial heritage’ (Woodward 2007: 103). According to Woodward, and Weinberg and Arond, the desire to be identified as a member of the *brotherhood of boxing* and thus to feel a sense of belonging, as it relates to the familial-genealogical narrative resource, occurs when young males place heroic status on, and thus idolize, male family figures who box. For 2 of the 13

participants the familial connection with boxing plays an important role in their own engagement with the sport.

When I said to him, “Dad I want to do boxing.” And he says, “Why the hell didn’t you tell me before man?” he got me gloves and a bag and everything and I started doing boxing ever since. [...] it’s like when I said, when I mentioned boxing with my father it is more like I won his heart. He did, he wanted one of his family like son or nephew or someone to do boxing. And I’m the second kid in my family to do boxing.  
(Khan, professional boxer, 2011)

Er, well, it’s quite sad because like he never got to know that I was to do boxing because he knew I liked it but he died in er, just before the millennium. And I was only like fifteen-sixteen so I mean like I didn’t...I was still at school when he – I was just about to leave school when he er...when he died, so I mean he never knew that I was going to take it up seriously. But I’m sure he’d be very proud because he used to love boxing. But I mean he did have, erm, he did have, I mean if he hadn’t have taught me as a kid and I hadn’t have like worked out that I could be good at it then I probably, I don’t know what I would be doing now. Because I mean he probably has got a major part to play in it, yeah. Because it probably is because of him that I do it. Not just because I like ‘Oh my dad was a boxer I want to copy him’ but the fact is I did it with him and I remember he was teaching me like how to fight and things like

that and box, that I enjoyed it, so early on I knew I enjoyed it and I'd like to like carry it on. So yeah. (D'erlanger 2011)

Leo's narrative demonstrates the complexity of the familial-genealogical resource. It is his father who introduces him to the sport by teaching him the basics at home. Leo's father was also an accomplished amateur fighter but Leo does not draw on genealogy to explain his ability and love of the sport. Similarly whilst he acknowledges that being introduced to the sport by his father, and subsequently the death of his father, played an important role in his decision to become a boxer he challenges the notion that he boxes because he idolizes or wishes to emulate his father:

Because it probably is because of him that I do it. Not just because I like 'Oh my dad was a boxer I want to copy him' but the fact is I did it with him and I remember he was teaching me like how to fight and things like that and box, that I enjoyed it, so early on I knew I enjoyed it and I'd like to like carry it on. (D'erlanger 2011)

Leo states that his motivation to box stems from the enjoyment he received from participating in it at an early age. Boxing was introduced to Leo by his father, his father undoubtedly played a significant role in his feelings about boxing, but Leo finds that boxing produces positive feelings for him; he experiences agency through boxing. Conversely, individuals like Toney, an amateur boxer, are introduced to the sport by their fathers, and as such recruit the familial-genealogical resource, but do not express a desire to be like their father or place significant emphasis on the relationship between their father and their chosen sport. Fathers can, at

times, serve no more than a means by which the individual is exposed to the sport.

Erm, my dad took me up [to the boxing gym] when I was like seven eight years old. Don't know, I went up there and he was trying to get me into it and I just thought it was shit. All I wanted to do was to play football. So I done that for about two years and I thought it was crap, went and played football and I met Jay. Started hanging around with Jay and he was boxing at the time as well. And I thought, 'Yeah, actually I want to go back up and have a crack at it.' And then, went up there and I've been up there ever since. (Tucker 2011)

Whilst Toney's father introduces him to boxing it is due to the influence of a close male friend that Toney pursues engagement with the sport. There is therefore a connection of kinship and a particular performance of masculinity found within Toney's narrative, but the recruitment of the familial-genealogical resource does little more than introduce Toney's earliest memory of the sport.

Whilst there is, at times, a degree of idolization expressed when recruiting the familial-genealogical resource, the idolization is not always for a family figure, and even when it is, what is idolized and how that idolization is manifested does not necessarily result in the pursuit of boxing.

I mean generally all of my convictions are for violence. I mean it's when I was young growing up I always wanted to be the tough guy you know I always wanted to be the toughest guy around because my dad was. You know you look up to your parents don't you? You know you wanna sort of – you look up

to your male role model don't you? You wanna be like them...so as a kid...we used to fight a lot...me and a few of my friends we would erm – once we started hitting the town once we were old enough to go in town and stuff...guarantee every night there was going to be a fall out over something. I was always quite overweight when I was young so erm...you know its...people think it's funny to take the mick out of the fat kid don't they? But I was quite tasty as well. I could fight. So they would take the mick and I would end up banging them once on the chin and then that would be it. So...I...you know I was doing that...I must have done it every week. I was knocking out three or four people every weekend...and erm...eventually you know you can only go so long without getting done. (Cox 2010)

Whilst Sam clearly idolizes his father, a former professional boxer, and was introduced to the sport on account of seeing his father shadow box around the house, Sam does not initially aspire to be a boxer. Sam desires a particular kind of masculinity, the toughness that he sees in his father. This is achieved through the violent attacks Sam committed when under the influence of alcohol. Sam's convictions for violence came after his father introduced him to boxing, but a long time before he engaged with the sport proper. Sam's desire to be 'the tough guy' and to perform a particular version of masculinity is tied into his perception of self. Sam admits that growing up he was significantly overweight resulting in multiple episodes of teasing and bullying. Sam's desire to prove his toughness was a direct reaction to the teasing he received and demonstrates a desire to

compensate for his physical appearance. For Sam, whilst he recruits the familial-genealogical resource to describe his exposure to and earliest memories of boxing, it is the compensatory drive resource that he uses to explain why he decided to engage with the sport proper.

This project found that professional and amateur boxers alike recruit the familial-genealogical resource. There was no positive correlation between the engagement with the resource and the code of boxing an individual practiced. The resource was used in different ways for different people, regardless of the code they practiced or the site at which they trained. At times recruitment of the resource mirrored the findings of previous projects. More notably the recruitment of the resource was used to introduce an individual's earliest memory of the sport, and unlike previous bodies of work this project found that recruitment of the resource alone did not sufficiently explain why individuals became involved with the sport of boxing. This project did find that the recruitment of the familial-genealogical resource was at times linked to the performance of a particular version of masculinity. Further, for those who recruited the resource, male role models featured prominently in tales of becoming.

### Compensatory Drive

The compensatory drive resource, identified by social ethnographers Kirson S. Weinberg and Henry Arond (1952), and by sociologist Kath Woodward (2007), links an individual's desire to box with a desire to increase social capital and to overcome or escape socioeconomic injustices. Previous projects suggest that the resource is recruited when individuals believe, through an engagement with boxing, they will be able to

compensate for perceived shortcomings in particular identity markers.

Weinberg and Arond, and Woodward, provide examples of boxers recruiting the resource to explain how the results of being bullied or losing playground fights led to the desire to become a boxer. Whilst both projects acknowledge that boxing can be understood as a sport which offers its participants the chance to compensate for, or improve on, any number of socioeconomic indicators, the compensatory drive resource is aligned most visibly with an individual's desire to compensate for perceived failings in their physical capital. In this respect it is linked to body image and/or a desire to assert agency in the face of intimidation and discrimination.

6 of the 14 respondent's life stories included the compensatory drive as a major theme. Interestingly, 5 of these individuals were based at the Exeter site, and whilst one of the respondents was in the process of becoming a professional boxer, at the time of interview all 6 respondents had only competed as amateur boxers. 4 of the 6 respondents engaged with the compensatory drive resource in a manner mirroring the findings by Weinberg and Arond and Woodward. For these 4 individuals the desire to box was linked directly, or indirectly with experiences of bullying.

But erm, the boxing, if I'm honest I got a thing, I was diagnosed – errr start again, diagnosed with a thing called Crohn's Disease when I was about ten and I come into school – I was quite – they put me on steroids and I was a bit chubby Erm and I had a tube because I had to be drip fed so I – I used to get - not picked on - but a few would give me a bit of like, a bit of erm, what would you call it? Stick like. So er, and then one, one in particular...and so I just wanted to take up some

sort of like martial art or something so I could, back him off  
sort of thing. You know like, 'you won't mess with me now!'  
(Broad 2011)

For Chris, prior to identifying as a boxer, there is an explicit belief that boxing will enable a desired change. A change that will affect how he feels about his body image, how he engages with the world and, more importantly to Chris, how others perceive and respond to him. Similarly another respondent, Mat, becomes involved in boxing after suffering from repeated instances of bullying at school. For Mat and Chris training as a boxer enables them to perform the narrative identity of a boxer (McAdams 2006). The stylized repetition of acts pertaining to boxing and the ability to enact the self and thus perform the identity of a boxer has positive connotations (Butler 1990; Butler 2005)

Erm, and when all the people that used to take mick and that. It were, just, they used to back off because they thought, 'Oh he can fight, he can fight, lay off him.' So, and then they all started being my friends and that. So, through it I've made more friends, and...more of me life. (Hunter, amateur boxer, 2011)

2 of the 6 respondents recruited the resource in their life histories in a manner which indirectly linked their experiences with bullying to their identity as a boxer. For Faheem the experience of seeing his friends bullied at school is used to introduce his earliest memories of boxing. For Sam being bullied for being overweight created a chain of events culminating in him becoming a boxer. Sam is bullied so he fights back. He develops a reputation and a habit for fighting when drunk. He is arrested and

imprisoned for charges relating to his violence. In a bid to shed weight and become fitter Sam engages with the sport of boxing, first in prison, and later at a local boxing club where he begins to identify as a boxer.

Yeah so I got myself fit and in shape whilst I was in jail and then me and a friend of mine we was quite interested in boxing, yer know he was quite a bit of a hard character himself, he was on remand, he was doing five years for violence and that sort of thing. And we was both interested in taking up boxing so whilst we were in Channings Wood we pinched a set of oven gloves, stuffed them with the inside of pillows and made a set of pads.<sup>8</sup> 'Cos we used to be in the market garden centre in the poly tunnels hitting the pads all day and stuff getting fit – no real technique just beating them up. (Cox 2010)

For Sam boxing is understood as a practice which leads to better fitness, better physical shape and thus an improved body image. Through the chain of events present in Sam's life history it is evident that the desire to box is linked, albeit indirectly, to a desire to compensate for the affects of being overweight. There is of course a more prominent theme and motivator present in Sam's narrative which explains his desire to box, it is the performance of a particular kind of masculinity and the adoption of a 'tough' or 'hard' enactment of self. This will be discussed in more detail later.

Like Sam, Jenna engages with boxing through a desire to make changes to her physical appearance.

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<sup>8</sup> Channings Wood is a category C training prison in the UK.

**Erm, It was something I always wanted to do and had an interest and always thought I would like to do that you know I would want to box, but it wasn't until I had my second child and obviously I put weight on. And I saw up in some gym a sort of like a boxercise class or something and I just thought, 'you know I'll just go and have a go at that. I'll try that. Just to sort of see if I can lose some weight.' And I did that and erm, really, really enjoyed it. Yeah. I still didn't have the confidence at that point to go to a boxing gym cos' I thought it was all just men and I wasn't confident in myself at that point to sort of go down there and do that, so, yeah. (Carr, amateur boxer, 2011)**

**Sam and Jenna both use components of the compensatory drive to explain their engagement with activities related to the sport of boxing (hitting prison made boxing mitts and attending boxercise) rather than the sport of boxing proper (becoming registered as an amateur boxer). The compensatory drive elements present within their life stories serves as an introductory tool to establish early boxing memories and to chart progression from one particular self to another. Life stories, the stories people live by, are their narrative identity. They construct episodic memories to make sense of 'the past as they remember it, the present as they perceive it, and the future as they imagine it' in order to provide their life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning (McAdams 2006: 83). When presenting a life story detailing the episodic memories that constitute the construction and performance of a boxing self - a tale of becoming - narrative resources can intertwine, overlap, complicate, compliment and contradict one another.**

The recruitment of particular narrative resources, such as the compensatory drive and familial-genealogical, often serve as a prelude or footnote to the episode in the story where the individual begins to identify as a boxer. As a means to introducing a tale of becoming, engagement with the compensatory drive, familial-genealogical resources demonstrate significant changes in an individual's perspective, outlook and understanding of self.

My earliest memory is quite clear. And I was seven years old and my brother and I were basically playing around in some fields that backed onto the back of the garden. And another group of lads basically entered the field. And, don't know, there was a bit of a kiddy squabble going on you know. And we ran back into the house and basically told my mum and dad what had happened. My dad at the time, he'd had a few it was a Saturday afternoon and I think he liked a beer at the time. "Right lads, this is what you should do" – because my dad was an ex ABA er finalist. Er he boxed right up until his early twenties and he was very successful. "and this is what you should do." And I remember him telling us about the pivot through the head and out through the groin "Just pivot on that and throw your punches" and that was it bang. For me, I was hooked from that moment on. (Currey 2011)

Whilst previous projects have presented a reasonable connection between the compensatory drive resource, boxing and the desire to improve on or readdress socioeconomic imbalances, the responses from the respondents for this project, like those before it, demonstrate that the

resource is recruited most prominently to connect a desire to box with a desire to improve physical capital through an improved body image.

As amateur boxers are not financially remunerated for their efforts in the gym or ring it might be expected that their life stories would differ significantly from those presented by professionals in regards to the extent to which the compensatory drive resource is used to make sense of a desire to improve upon socioeconomic conditions. Of the 14 participants 9 identified as amateur and 5 as professional boxers and yet the theme of money, having it, lacking it, or desiring it, was not addressed in terms that could be attributed to the compensatory drive resource. In the instances where money was discussed in their life stories, the boxers who participated in this study did not present a structure which suggested that before boxing they suffered financially and that through boxing they hoped to gain financial stability.

This finding significantly challenges the public stories of boxing, the cultural meanings of the sport, and the analysis provided by other projects on boxing. This project found little evidence to suggest that boxers engaged with the sport through a desire to achieve social mobility, or to *box their way out of the ghetto*.<sup>9</sup> The identity rewards offered by the sport (Satterlund 2006), and the kinship found through the sport with male role models, served as the major sources of motivation for these individuals. These individuals did not engage with boxing as a means to escape the ghetto and improve their material lot in life, instead they understood boxing as a

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<sup>9</sup> The exception being professional boxer Richard Towers who viewed boxing as a vehicle through which he could achieve a solid foundation for his family, providing his son with greater opportunities in life.

physical project which would enable them to transform their body image and connect with their peers and family.

### Crime and Salvation

The crime and salvation narrative resource is linked to the compensatory drive resource, and provides greater opportunity for certain individuals to describe how they perceive boxing as a vehicle through which their lives can be improved. Of the 14 participants it was known that 5 had criminal records. Out of those 5, 2 directly mentioned their criminal activity in the stories they told about becoming a boxer. Another 2 participants referenced crime in a broader sense, stating that boxing is what prevents them from falling fowl of the law. For 1 individual, who not long before being interviewed had been handed a suspended sentence and ankle bracelet as punishment for his involvement in a drunken altercation, crime did not feature in his stories about boxing.

Salvation was a theme linked, at times, directly to criminal activity. For those who recruited this theme boxing was understood to be the activity which 'saved' them from the trappings of crime. The theme of salvation was also recruited to demonstrate how an individual's engagement with boxing had 'saved' them either from themselves by controlling anger, or from an undesired social-economical situation. Individuals who linked notions of salvation to boxing, but did not have a criminal record, spoke favorably about how boxing had provided them with an opportunity to turn a dire situation good, equipping them with the necessary skills to make improvements to their socioeconomic circumstances. By drawing upon the narrative resources of crime and

salvation the amateur and professional boxers interviewed for this study presented a narrative identity analogous at times to what psychologist Dan McAdams defines as the redemptive self (McAdams 2006).

The redemptive self describes the life stories presented by individuals who believe that good can come from bad situations and experiences.

Redemptive stories see the protagonist move from ignorance to enlightenment via a move from 'negativity and suffering, on the one hand, to positivity and enhancement, on the other' (McAdams 2006: 41).

Salvation, according to McAdams, is one of the languages of redemption.

The sport of boxing, through the public narratives it engages with, presents itself as a redemptive activity. It is perhaps not surprising then that boxing discourse frequently contains elements of a redemptive narrative.

Redemption is linked to notions of generativity, and the theme of redemption extends far beyond addressing crime. As such, redemption will be addressed in greater detail in a later chapter.

The theme of crime, as it is used in tales of becoming, describes transition and transformation. The transition described is linear and progressive and sees the protagonist transform from an individual who is out of control, unstable, unfit (socially or physically) to one who is controlled or controllable, stable, safe and fit for society. Jenna understands boxing to be a safe and stable environment, one in which she is allowed to act upon what she understands to be natural tendencies, without legal and moral ramifications.

Erm, yeah, because everyone's got their reasons why they come into boxing 'ant they? And like a big, big, big reason for me is my personal circumstances, 'cos you know I'm not gonna

lie I have been in trouble with the police, I have got into fights, I have been aggressive, and coming into boxing I get to let this steam out but in a safe environment, where there's rules and regulations and no one – not necessarily no one gets hurt but it's allowable isn't it?

[...]

And erm, I've always been a stressful person and anxious sort of person, boxing just sort of keeps a lid on it. It, it, you know it keeps, it keeps it sort of safe. And you know, like for a lot of the lads at the gym as you're probably aware of, get into trouble with the police – they've also got that sort of similarities of you know, the tendencies to get a little bit aggressive, to get into scraps, to get that – and I know they feel the same as me. And if you channel all that aggression and all those sort of mixed up feelings into the ring, and put it somewhere where it's worth going, and you know you can, it can just help you to stay on the straight and narrow. And I think that is why it's important, it would be important to get like kids, like young kids maybe who are like getting into trouble, if you got them into the boxing club at like a young age you could really do something, and channel the aggression in the right way. (Carr 2011)

For Jenna, boxing is an activity that enables her to channel, what she believes to be, natural but socially unacceptable aggression in an environment that expects, accepts, and rewards it. It is an activity which she believes controls the aggressive aspects of her character by containing

it in the boxing spaces (the training gym or competition ring). Similarly, Sam believes that the activities and practices of boxing, particularly training, keep him 'occupied,' and focused, thus unable to engage in criminal activity.

Oh it's terrible. When I'm not training I get into all sorts of mischief. Yeah I do, I sort of fall in with the...say the wrong crowd – lot of people that I know are obviously involved in things and I sort of mix in with them again and I end up in trouble and stuff or end up doing things that I shouldn't be doing. So for me...when I am training it just keeps me occupied. (Cox 2010)

The relationship between boxing and crime, as presented by Jenna and Sam, is a simple one. Boxing provides a space where aggressive behavior is permissible but it is also a sport which requires a serious investment of time. The result is a belief, expressed by both participants, that boxing occupies and controls them. It physically channels, controls, and exercises aggressive behavior, as though it were a finite quality that once exhausted within the confines of the sport would be unable to spill out into the streets. Further, practice of the sport places considerable restraints on their free time preventing them from socializing with friends and associates who commit criminal activity. The restrictions imposed by a strict training regime remove the temptation to commit crime by extracting them from social circles where crime is routinely committed. In this capacity criminal activity is presented as something which neither of the individuals have control over. Without boxing they are unable to prevent themselves from committing criminal acts, violent or otherwise. Without boxing, when Sam is not training, life is 'terrible' as he gets into all

**'sorts of mischief' and does things that he shouldn't as he is not 'occupied' in an alternate and more law abiding activity. Following the interview with Jenna the discussion of crime continued. With no sense of irony Jenna stated, 'I just wish they'd build like a big pen with dorms at the back of the club. Mike could lock us all up there at night and let us out to train each morning. That way we'd never get into any trouble would we? We could fight each other but we'd never get arrested, never go to jail. It'd be perfect.'**

**The sense of helplessness expressed by Jenna and Sam is found within the narratives of Toney and Richard. Both boxers state that boxing is the only alternative to 'trouble' or a life of crime; boxing is all they have. The choice to box then demonstrates a desire to avoid a life of crime.**

**I started thinking, 'Oww this is something that I really consider doing. It keeps you out of trouble, it makes people think, oww fair play to you if you are doing something like that.' Other than that what else is there for most people out there? So I thought, 'Yeah, definitely I've got nothing else going for me, I'll make something out of this.' And yeah, I cracked on with it.**  
**(Tucker 2011)**

**You know I've been through a lot since I was sixteen. I've had to battle me way through physically and mentally a lot of things and it was only since I come out since – in the past three years I've realized that I think, I think I'm, I could be quite a force – and that is a big motivation for me because in all**

honesty I can't really see meself doing much else other than something physical like boxing.

[...]

I've got no choice, this is all I've got, do you understand what I mean? If I don't do this what else am I going to do? I'm fighting for me life. (Towers 2010)

The *all or nothing* narrative presented by Toney and Richard, and the notion that boxing is the only activity which can prevent individuals from committing crime, found in the narratives of Sam and Jenna, is problematic and yet it highlights the complexities and contradictions found within the sport's discourse. On the one hand it presents a group of individuals who wish to desist from crime and who actively engage with the sport because of a belief that it will save them from crime, and indeed, from themselves. On the other hand they refer to boxing as being the only alternative to criminal activity. They believe that they have nothing else going for them and no other means by which to desist. Through their narratives they transfer responsibility away from themselves. Boxing, because of the demands it places on their time, or through the manner in which it exhausts excess energy, rather than their own resolve, is responsible for them being law abiding citizens. Conversely then, when they cannot box, or experience interruptions to their training, they have no *choice* but to commit crime. They experience getting into trouble and mischief. They fall victim to their social circumstances, to their anxieties, to the stresses of life and the influence of peers and feel unable to keep a lid on the activity they understand to be illegal and socially unacceptable. This challenges the public narratives and cultural meanings of boxing, which understand the

sport as a social good, saving its participants from crime by teaching them discipline and self restraint.

The salvation theme is recruited to suggest a linear progression and transformation. Boxing saves the individual from a life of crime, transforming them from a youth destined to life in and out of prison to a respectable and positive individual. The redemptive aspect of boxing, it's ability to salvage souls that would otherwise be lost, requires greater interrogation, as an individual's decision to practice the sport does not guarantee salvation (Schulberg 2008). Salvation is a dominant theme in the public discourse of boxing, and for those individuals interviewed for this project, who have been involved in criminal activity it is an important theme that they use to make sense of their engagement with the sport.

Just er, me growing up I've seen so many friends go to prison so I think that if I weren't here from nine year old like I know more or less I would have been in prison. So this has saved me and it's been, you know, I'm on top of the world like. I'm high up in boxing now, people are starting to recognise me and I've got you know, I've got to thank Brendan and the Ingle family that this is here and I've come down, because I know I've been, I would have been in trouble no doubt about it. I think this has kept me on the track, it's kept me focused. It's kept me sa – you know, healthy body healthy mind, and I think, just, you know, I can go as far as I want. And it's all happened 'cos I got introduced into boxing at that early age. (Brook 2011)

Four boxers, including Kell, who recruited the salvation theme to explain how boxing saved them from a life of crime, have been convicted of

criminal charges (predominantly assault) following their initial engagement with the sport.<sup>10</sup> The evidence would suggest that boxing alone does not save individuals. Initial engagement with the sport preoccupies and temporarily removes individuals from situations where criminal activity takes place, something which attracts a number of the participants of this study to the sport, but does not necessarily save them from committing crime in the future. Boxing is viewed as a vehicle through which transformation can occur from criminal to noncriminal, from bad to good, but the idealization of a linear progression is not always realized. What impact then does this have on individuals who started boxing in order to be saved from a criminal life? This question will be addressed in a later chapter where stories about crime and boxing will be discussed in relation to generativity.

The theme of salvation is not just recruited by individuals who have a criminal past, but by those who believe boxing has saved them from an undesirable socioeconomic situation by affecting a change of self. The amateur and professional boxers based at the Exeter gym did not draw upon this version of the salvation theme to the same extent as their counterparts at the Sheffield gym. Reference was paid by the Exeter based boxers to a desire to make changes to self, but these aspirations, whilst linked to boxing, were not directly linked to themes of salvation. For Mat and Lee, Sheffield based boxers, their engagement with the sport, and perhaps more importantly their coach, Brendan Ingle, affected positive

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<sup>10</sup> Kell Brook was found guilty of violent assault in July 2010. His boxing promoter at the time, Frank Warren wrote to the court requesting that Kell be spared a community service order for fear that it would interfere with his boxing training. After considering the letter, district Judge Michael Rosenberg imposed a tagging curfew order instead.

changes within the self and had positive repercussions for their socioeconomic situations.

It got me out of trouble because I realized how to control me anger. Erm, how to not lose me temper. Manners, being with Brendan everyday he were teaching me community skills, key skills in life, which is – like how to approach people, how to talk to people, life skills like...how to go around mowing lawns all that kind of stuff which could get you a job. So it really, once you knew how to approach people it'd be like, “Oh are you all right? Are you OK?” all that kind of stuff, which is all your manners. So it brings up a good erm, person inside yourself. In - and then when they did an exhibition at me school they couldn't believe what they were seeing. So it were a big change in me life. (Hunter 2011)

Er whereas my dad's really negative. Erm and anything I did or whatever he'd always knock me back for it or say something negative which used to put a downer on me. I used to think, 'what's the point if my dad's always been like that?' Whereas my mum's totally positive she was totally different. Erm, so...going back...Brendan came up to my house – he had an argument with my father about me moving out of me house because my dad didn't really agree with it. So the next stage was moving out of my house, I moved down the bottom of the road next to the Post Office, where I could be in the gym everyday then I started college, erm I went to college.

Brendan said “If you’re coming down to the gym you need to go and get an education or you can’t come and train.” So that’s the deal I had with Brendan as well. Erm I started off going to Hillsborough College which was one of the main Sheffield colleges, erm, around the city. Erm, I did a three year course there for a Business Studies course. National Diploma it was. I passed that. Erm, I did a Maths and English course as well, alongside that, so I was really busy, like I was at college five days a week erm I was coming down here so I had my hands full really. Erm, and Brendan said, “You know if you carry on you’ll get yourself to University.” Erm and then you know, I was telling my dad I’m going to go to University and he’s like, “Nah you won’t go to University, you know you’ve messed about, you’ve messed up at school.” – I only got one GCSE at school you see. Erm, anyway, the years went by and all of a sudden I got into University – Hallam University erm the Sheffield Business School. Erm and then I’m doing a three year course there now and that’s where I’m at right now, so it’s been, it’s been, like to start off with it’s been a bit of a, you know, trial and error journey erm, but everything’s in place right now and it’s all come together so yeah, yeah, yeah I’m really enjoying it and like...partly why I do it as well is not a lot of people understand how good you feel after, after a workout so you know, you’ve it’s, it’s, it’s it’s something that keeps you in good health and, you know, gives you, gives you a target and gives you a routine in life; so you know, that’s one of the

reasons why I do it as well. So, yeah, yeah. (Duncan, professional boxer, 2011)

For Mat and Lee the sport of boxing affects how they feel about themselves. Boxing as an activity generates positive feelings due to the release of endorphins for Lee. Similarly it promotes 'good health' in much the same way that it did for Kell, 'you know, healthy body healthy mind[.]' Like Sam and Jenna the demands placed on the individual, on account of the training schedule, provide a level of control and stability, providing Lee with a 'routine' and 'targets.' Training teaches control over anger and thus saves Mat from trouble, echoing Jenna's experience. For Mat being able to box and demonstrate his newfound control and skills impresses pupils and teaches at his school who 'couldn't believe what they were seeing.' Both Mat and Lee associate positive experiences with boxing, experience they believe to have changed them for the better. Unlike Jenna, Toney, Sam and Richard who present an either or scenario - it is either boxing or a life of crime - Mat and Lee align their experiences with boxing with the acquisition of key social skills. Through boxing, Mat and Lee are both introduced to the trainer Brendan Ingle who sets conditions on their ability to train. As is customary with Ingle-trained boxers, both individuals are required to carry out chores within the local community (litter picking and maintaining the gardens of the church opposite the gym). Mat realizes that the skills he is learning are transferable to employment and improved interaction with others. Through the acquisition of 'manners', expressed as basically as an ability to greet others, Mat sees a positive change in how he is able to engage with the world, 'it brings up a good erm, person inside

yourself.' What Mat has been exposed to through boxing has provided him with more options in life, enabling him to exercise greater agency.

Lee, like Mat, is able to exercise greater agency due to his involvement in boxing, the conditions placed on him by his trainer, Brendan Ingle, and options he has been presented with. Lee has made a transition from an individual with a minimal education to one who is due to graduate from a bachelors programme. He understands that boxing has enabled him to move out of a negative environment and establish independence, an experience he talks positively about. Lee, like Mat, realizes that the opportunities he is being exposed to have purchase outside of boxing.

When Brendan tells, tells us to do something there's always a reason. It might not click to you there and then but after an amount of time, or you'll be in a situation. Like when he says "Can you talk about yourself for ten seconds?" Like when he stands in the middle of the ring. The job interviews I've gone for they've said, "Right, can you just tell me something about yourself?" You know and that's where it's related but 'cos I've already done it like I know that it's relevant to that situation. So there's like all kinds of – everything that happens in the gym relates to somewhere in, you know, outside the gym; erm, just in everyday life so it becomes an everyday thing. And you just get used to it, so coming down to train is just like a part of me now.

(Duncan 2011)

For Lee and Mat they have options other than boxing and crime. Boxing has exposed them to experiences and enabled them to acquire

transferable skills, skills, which they recognise, have purchase outside of boxing, and skills which they realize can change their material lot in life. The Sheffield boxers are able to engage with a narrative of salvation which extends beyond being saved from crime. They are exposed to Brendan Ingle's style of boxing training; an amalgamation of his personal, and persuasive, philosophies on life, athletic drills, and performative practices. Lee and Mat understand their experiences and skill acquisition to fall under a broad banner of boxing training, but unlike Jenna, Sam and Toney they realize that the skills they are acquiring present them with greater options outside of the sport proper.

The recruitment of the crime and salvation narrative resource can be found in the tales of becoming told by amateur and professional boxers across the two sites. Participants of this study both support and challenge boxing's public narratives on crime and salvation through their use of the narrative resource. Those individuals who state that boxing has saved them from a life of crime, even though they have received custodial sentences since identifying as a boxer, challenge the public narratives which suggest engagement with the sport has the potential to permanently transforms an individual from that of criminal to noncriminal. The fact that these individuals recruit the salvation resource demonstrates the extent to which the public narratives on boxing help individual boxers construct a personal narrative identity. It also demonstrates the level of narrative investment made by these individuals in the construction of that identity. The public narratives on boxing suggest that those who engage with the sport *will be* saved, that redemption is possible via the transformative practices of the sport. Whilst these individuals might not experience a smooth and linear

progression from an undesired and criminal self to a desired noncriminal self, they do associate a boxing identity with a more positive and law abiding self.

Boxing becomes central to how these individuals make sense of self. Failure to achieve a desired self is due to failings or interruptions in their boxing careers (amateur or professional). Improvements made in an individual's educational career, employment opportunities, and interactions with non-boxing social agents are attributed to their engagement with the sport of boxing. The engagement with the crime and salvation narrative resource raises interesting questions regarding the level of personal responsibility some boxers take for their actions and will be examined in greater detail in a later chapter.

### Conclusion

There is a degree of overlap between the narrative resources that appear in the public discourses on boxing, previous academic projects on boxing, and those which were presented by the participants of this study. However, not all of the narrative resources associated with the public discourse on boxing appear in the narrative identities of professional and amateur boxers interviewed for this project. Participants of this study made sense of their earliest memories of boxing through use of the familial-genealogical, compensatory, and the crime and salvation resources. These resources were never used in isolation but were often combined as part of the introduction to a tale of becoming. With the exception of the compensatory drive resource, the recruitment of these narrative resources alone did not sufficiently explain why an individual became a boxer.

Through the recruitment of the shared resources individuals were able to present a series of episodic memories cataloguing their introduction to the sport of boxing and leading to the point at which they started to identify as a boxer. The recruitment of the resources enabled the participants of this study to present a narrative identity, which, through the sport of boxing, had experienced transformation. For these individuals boxing was understood to be a positive influence in their life, which had the potential to affect change in a linear and progressive manner.

Despite contradictions between the use of certain shared resources and events in the individual's life, most notably in relation to crime and salvation, participants in this study used their early experiences of boxing to perform a positive narrative identity. An identity which had undergone change and made a transition from one which was negative to one which was positive. Chapter five will demonstrate that participants of this study presented a narrative identity which was still in the process of change; one which engaged with boxing through a desire to affect greater and more positive changes.

## Chapter 4: A Generative Tale

### Introduction

Chapter Two identified the pre-identified narrative resources presented within the public discourse on boxing. These are the resources available to help participants of a particular organization, in this case the sport of boxing, present the stories they need in order to do their work, in this case write about and analyze the sport. Chapter Three demonstrated how these narrative technologies form a *matrix of cumulative narrative resources*, or, *webs of rationality* (Smith and Sparkes 2008), in doing so, the chapter identified how particular narrative resources are recruited by amateur and professional boxers in the stories they tell to make sense of their experiences.

The third chapter demonstrated how narratives are a 'psycho-socio-cultural shared resource' (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 3), providing members of a group with a 'relatively crystallized repertoire of story lines', plots and themes, enabling them to give shape and substance to experience in narrative terms (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 166). The chapter presented story lines in terms of a menu that individuals recruit from in order to make sense of their experience. In doing so, narrative identity was understood as being constructed through the appropriation of stories from an individual's particular cultural menu, enabling '*Self and culture [to] come to terms with each other*' through narrative (McAdams 2006: 289). Through the recruitment of shared narrative resources, the individuals who

participated in this study were able to identify with the role of boxer. Further, they were able to tell stories of their boxing experiences within a framework which would be understood and make sense to fellow boxers. These individuals recruited from and performed the shared narrative resources, available within the culture of boxing, to demonstrate that they identified as a boxer, and were, at the same time, accepted by and belonged to the world of boxing (McAdams 1996: 313).

The fourth, and final chapter, explores the situated production of identity through the detailed examination of one case study, professional boxer Richard Towers. The chapter demonstrates how an embodied storyteller performs shared narrative resources. It examines moments of narrative linkage as well as narrative slippage (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). From a *storied resource* perspective (Smith and Sparkes 2008) Richard's past and habits are examined to understand how they have shaped his self-narration. Further, his interactions with others are used to guide a possible reading of his narrative-self. Richard's case is used, in part, because of how it engages with and simultaneously rejects one of the main narrative resources available to boxers - the salvation resource. Through Richard's negotiated recruitment of this resource his narrative-self can be read as one that seeks communion over agency and one that is generative in nature.

### **Methodology**

Following the methodological approach adopted by narrative scholar, Amia Lieblich (1993, 1998), this chapter will adopt a *holistic-content* reading of the life story of one participant. Through the holistic-content approach of analysis, two interview transcriptions, both Richard's, will be considered in

their entirety. Global impressions will be presented, detailing the type of stories Richard tells, as well as any contradictions, unfinished descriptions and unusual features of his stories. Following on from this, major themes will be presented and analysed to demonstrate the different ways in which Richard's text might be read. The thematic foci of Richard's narrative will be used to demonstrate how identity is performed in relation to shared narrative resources.

The storied resource perspective of narrative inquiry will serve as the theoretical framework within which analysis will be conducted. From the storied resource perspective, this final chapter will examine Richard's narrative as a relational act of *doing* storytelling. It will consider how Richard relates to other bodies, other storytellers, and other stories in order to formulate his own narrative identity and to make sense of his past, his present and his future ambitions. The chapter will argue that the relations an individual is engaged with, and the stories an individual has access to are important as they shape an individual's sense of self and help formulate an individual's identity.

Based on the belief that individuals are storytellers, that stories shape action, and that story formation is relational and dependent upon the access an individual has to certain narrative resources, this chapter will address the main argument of this thesis: In order for individuals to make changes to their lives, their sense of self, aspirations and actions, they require access to narrative resources to allow this change to take affect. The presentation of self is performative, as is self-narration, storytelling and the construction of identity through narrative. We perform the self we were, are, and aspire to be through the stories we tell and the stories we

hope to tell, thus the self we are capable of becoming, depends upon the narrative resources at our disposal.

Whilst working from a storied resource perspective, this chapter acknowledges Smith and Sparkes' (2008) assertion that the boundaries between each perspective are not clean and sharp; they are 'blurred and messy' (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 28). They are certainly not fixed or exclusive of one another. The performative perspective is one which will be recruited to demonstrate the manner in which Richard performs particular narrative resources, and, as such, performs his identity and sense of self. Within this perspective the individual, selves, identities and the rest of the psychological world are a 'domain inseparable from, moored in, the social' and narratives are 'storied actions' (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 24). In this view, the storied self, self-story, is performed, and the performance includes 'not only the spoken or written language, but also the bodily activities of the participants, along with various objects, ornaments and physical settings necessary to render these performances intelligible' (Smith and Sparkes 2008: 26).

Richard's performative actions, his facial gestures, use of voice, sounds and body movement will help inform the analysis of his narratives. Where this analysis will differ from a stricter performative perspective approach will be in the rejection of focus on turn taking. Thus, the overt focus on the immediacy of interaction at the expense of Richard's personal history and the connections he has made between a series of temporally linked situations, will not feature as prominently. The temporal links and the narrative resources available to be performed by Richard will take

greater focus in order to understand how these factors constitute Richard's unique experiences.

Monisha Pasupathi's (2006) performative perspective approach will help guide my analysis of Richard's text. Particular focus will be paid to the relationship between what Pasupathi describes as, the 'dramatic' and 'reflective' modes of storytelling, the narrative resources Richard recruits, and the bodily actions which accompany the performance of particular stories. This mode of analysis will demonstrate that Richard is not only able to tell certain stories due to the narrative resources at his disposal, but that certain stories are accompanied by particular types of embodied performances. These bodily performances, like the verbal stories themselves, are relational to the physical practices Richard submits to as a professional boxer. Being a boxer not only provides Richard with a pool of narrative resources which limit, constrain and enable him to tell stories of who he was, is and might become, the role also equips him with a pool of physical actions and habits which similarly limit, constrain and enable the manner in which he can perform certain stories.

### Experiential and Performative Ethnography: Transgressive Data

The transcripts from two interviews I conducted with Richard provide the primary source of data for this chapter. The interviews were semi-structured, although, in line with the work of Roberts and Rosenwald (2002) they followed no fixed interview schedule, rather relying on open-ended questions and allowing Richard, as the participant, the freedom to tell his story. The first interview was conducted in the summer of 2010, at Richard's house, following a training session we shared at the boxing gym.

The second interview was conducted in the summer of 2011, at one of Richard's favourite Jamaican restaurants, after we had eaten together. Due to Richard's profile as a professional boxer, material can be found in the form of snippets of transcripts and audio files on the Internet. These pieces of information, whilst not directly recruited, inform the reading of the transcripts. A source of data that features more prominently, alongside the primary interview transcripts, is the *transgressive* data gathered through my experiential approach to ethnography.

My interaction with Richard extends beyond the confines of the semi-structured interview setting, running deeper to include the shared experiences in the boxing gym - during sparring sessions with each other, or even just being present and observing Richard's interactions with others. Further, our interactions spilled out into a number of other settings, and involved numerous other people who were not regular attendees at the boxing gym. The settings included a sauna, each other's cars, shops, restaurants and diners, a free-weight's gym, and Richard's house. The people included Richard's family and friends, retired professional boxers, and acquaintances. Similarly, data was exchanged via text messages, phone calls and social media websites.

Over the course of two years a level of friendship and intimacy was established which extended beyond the traditional researcher-participant relationship due to its focus on reciprocity. Further, interactions outside of the traditional interview setting, can, in part, help move the experience of data generation and collection away from the feeling of an exam for participants, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the shared nature in

which experiences are created, communicated and understood (Hollway and Jefferson 1999).

### Context, Background and Overview

Richard is a mixed-raced, working-class, British male in his early 30s. His father is of Jamaican decent, his mother Caucasian and British. He is a father of a toddler, a professional boxer and reformed criminal. He stands at 6ft 8inches and weighs between 230-250 lbs when fighting. In his early teens, Richard became involved in criminal activity, robbing drug dealers, stealing cars, selling drugs and loaning money. At age 17 he was charged with two attempted murders, after he became embroiled in an altercation with a rival group of drug dealers. Richard served 12 months on remand. In June 2002, when Richard was aged 22, he was handed a 13-year sentence for the kidnap and false imprisonment of a rival drug dealer. Richard's sentence was reduced, on appeal, to 11 years in 2003. He was released in 2008, aged 29, after serving 6 ½ years.

Richard was first introduced to boxing and Brendan Ingle when he was 16 years old. He trained for eight months before his first custodial sentence took him on 'another path.' Richard dismisses this period through a number of statements, which suggest he did not identify with the gym, the coaches or as a boxer during this period of time and his initial engagement with the sport.

So it's only the past three years like I say – even at sixteen years old like I say I was training for eight months – and what kid believes hundred-and-fifty percent in-the-self? Yeah there is always the exception but I think in general kids need building

up from the start. Brendan were trying to do that but you're always smarter than anyone else when you are a kid aren't ya? And you know best so as I say I went off track and it's knowing that I could fight. You know I've been through a lot since I was sixteen. I've had to battle me way through physically and mentally a lot of things and it was only since I come out since – in the past three years I've realized that I think, I think I'm, I could be quite a force – and that is a big motivation for me because in all honesty I can't really see meself doing much else other than something physical like boxing. (Towers 2010)

Following his release from prison in 2008, Richard became a regular participant at the Wincobank gym and began identifying as a boxer. Due to lengthy custodial sentences, Richard's amateur campaign is minimal, consisting of only 6 bouts, much shorter than that of many of the amateur boxers across the two sites. Similarly, at the point of interview Richard's professional career was in the very early stages, having only fought 11 times. Altogether, Richard had only engaged in 17 competitive bouts. As a boxer, Richard's lack of competitive exposure means his sense of self is suitably located between the identity of a professional and amateur boxer. On account of his lack of experience, which is comparable across the two codes, Richard makes for an ideal candidate for a detailed analysis.

Whilst our lives differ in many respects, there are points of convergence between the way Richard and I were brought up and the relationships we established with family members, particularly the similarities in our relationships with our mother(s) and father(s) respectively, and the level of stability within our family environments.

Private conversations between Richard and I addressed the similarities and differences in our lives. In turn, these conversations shaped the style of questions asked and the responses given within the interview setting. These exchanges will remain private and will not be used in an attempt to claim authority over Richard's narrative, or indeed to suggest a more privileged or deeper understanding of the stories Richard tells. Instead the narratives will be analysed alongside the numerous public interactions and training sessions I had with Richard over the course of the two years that I worked with him.

Richard's life can be viewed in two main chapters - the first 29 years of his life, and his life thereafter. Between 1979, his year of birth, and December 2008, Richard's life can be understood as suffering from a lack of stability, containing significant instances of trauma, disruption and uncertainty. This is reflected in the comments Richard makes about 'broken backgrounds', the numerous times he has had to 'struggle' in order to survive, and an attitude and lifestyle which prevented him from seeing 'beyond a week', 'hustle today and have more money tomorrow.' For Richard this period is marked by the fact that he 'was involved in a negative lifestyle, with negative people, a negative frame of mind.' During this period of time, Richard lacks 'knowledge', 'self-confidence' and support.

Conversely the second major chapter in Richard's life runs from his release from prison in December 2008 until the time of writing (April 2012). During this period of time Richard engages more constructively and meaningfully with the Wincobank boxing gym, and is more heavily influenced by the coaches, Brendan and Dominic Ingle, who become local heroes to Richard, Brendan in particularly being described as a 'legend.'

**Legends and heroes shape Richard's acquisition of knowledge, providing him with positive experiences which enable him to develop. During this period, Richard fights as an amateur boxer, turning professional in June 2009. Richard identifies as a boxer, and, importantly, with the Ingle gym from this period onwards 'I'm associated with that gym one-hundred-and-fifty percent.' This period of his life is characterized by the acquisition of experience, knowledge and achievement. It is a positive period where his coaches, his family and his friends support him. It is a period in his life where he desisted from crime, became a father, and became a professional boxer.**

**This period of Richard's life is positive, productive and characterized by him feeling 'lucky' on account of a belief that he has been given a 'second chance.' Richard is determined to make the most of this chance and this is characterized by a sense of urgency and immediacy, everything has to be achieved 'now.' He is making the 'right decisions' for which he believes God is rewarding him. Throughout this period of Richard's life he is planning and looking towards the distant future, far beyond the day-to-day and one week at a time outlook he had well into his late 20s. Richard has goals that he believes are realistic and affirms this by demonstrating that experience has developed his self-confidence.**

**There are a number of things that Richard wants. At the top of Richard's list is a 'strong and reliable foundation', later a 'stable and reliable foundation' for the people he loves (his family predominantly). Richard believes that this will be achieved via boxing and particularly through the acquisition of a world title. Richard wants to be remembered, particularly by his family. Through his actions, Richard wants his family to 'be affected**

in the most positive way', wanting them, and him, to have 'worth', although not necessarily or exclusively in material terms. Setting a foundation is of paramount importance to Richard, which links his narrative to notions of generativity and redemption. Notions of redemption and generativity are supported by the recruitment of religious metaphors, which occurs three times across the two interviews. Should Richard achieve the goal he has set, to win a major title (revised in his second interview from world to championship level) he plans to write a book about his experiences and the transition from the first to the second chapter of his life. This book would serve as a 'guide plan' to children, offering them direction, something Richard believes they struggle with. Further to this, Richard understands the importance of sharing experience and knowledge. He acknowledges that he is continually learning and is afforded a position where he can share his knowledge and experience with others, which he finds rewarding. Richard concludes his second interview by stating that he is willing to endure the hardships of boxing in order that his son has 'the choice' to do what he wants when he is older.

Notions of choice and agency run through the two chapters of Richard's life. To a certain extent his life can be understood as one without choice in the first chapter and one with limited choice in the second chapter. Richard, whilst acknowledging accountability for his criminal actions states that he did not do them out of choice. He wants his son to have choice but Richard believes that he, himself, has no choice but to box in order to achieve his goals. Similarly Richard experiences complex notions of agency in the second chapter of his life. Whilst he is free to visit the shops to purchase ginger beer when he wants and can inhale the fresh

air in an open field as he pleases, Richard acknowledges that his trainers Dominic and Brendan Ingle control significant portions of his life:

in the morning when you get up and you're training and you feel like being sick and Dom's going, "Come on!" and you're like, "Urrgh!" and sicks there and you're just wanting to...you can't do no more and then you sit back on your settee and you're like "Oh I can have a rest now. And then he goes, "Brrrrrup", "training again." "Urrgh!" and you gotta get up again, you gotta go again. Sit down have a rest have your dinner, "Owwwh! I'm fuck..." "Brrrrrup" "Training." "Awwwh!" You've gotta get up again. (Towers 2011)

Richard has chosen this lifestyle 'I've chose to be in that gym constantly' but the degree of agency experienced has to be questioned when Richard himself states that he has no choice other than boxing, 'I've got no choice, this is all I've got, do you understand what I mean? If I don't do this what else am I going to do? I'm fighting for me life.'

### Global Impressions

Following the holistic-content approach of analysis, set out by Lieblich et al. (1998), a global impression is offered of Richard's narrative. Through the global impression a singular plot or storyline is presented. This storyline serves as a reference point for the major or most prominent feature within a narrative(s). Further, in reference to the global impression, analysis is provided of those moments when Richard directly addresses or contradicts the major plot. In this study, the global impression formed was of "the generative tale." This notion was formed due to Richard's repeated

use of the terms, *positive*, *progress*, *others*, and *credit*. Across the two interviews, Richard repeatedly tells stories of transition. Transition, for Richard, occurs through the acquisition of experience, which is gained in multiple ways. Common traits in the stories Richard tells about the acquisition of experience are, (a) experiences are relational - Richard gains experience from others, (b) experience and knowledge are interchangeable, (c) *positive* experience(s) can be achieved in multiple ways, including through exposure to circumstances, attitudes, and actions which are seemingly *negative* in nature.

Through stories of transition, Richard's narrative takes an antithetical form, where a negative past leads to a positive future (McAdams 1996). Across the two interviews, and indeed between the two, Richard tells stories of change, where he has transitioned from a self who believed he possessed all the knowledge needed, to a self that realized he lacked sufficient knowledge, to a self that has gained knowledge. At the same time, Richard tells stories of a self still in search of knowledge, and a self that believes knowledge is the key to helping others. Whilst Richard's stories demonstrate a self that has undergone transition, they also tell of a self still in transition. Richard's stories demonstrate movement away from a negative past to a positive present, but they also indicate a desire to achieve more experience, more knowledge and more positive outcomes. Richard's story is 'unfinished, complex, [and] contradictory at times' (McAdams 2006: 84). Richard's narrative is a story about *desistance* (Maruna in McAdams 2006: 223), where crime is rejected for a more generative approach to life. It is also a story about redemption (McAdams 1996, 2006), or more accurately about Richard in search of redemption, an individual

seeking communion, and an individual who accredits his own redemption to the generosity, knowledge, and experience of others (Maruna 1997).

### Components of the Global Impression

“The generative tale”, as the global impression, emerges through a number of components. These are: (a) desistance (b) redemption (c) communion and agency (d) struggle, adversity and experience.

Desistance, a term used by criminologists like Shadd Maruna (1997), refers to individuals who have disengaged with a criminal lifestyle.

Developing Maruna’s work, McAdams argues that desistance is, in part, possible if an individual is able to formulate ‘a potentially *generative narrative of the self*’ (McAdams 2006: 233). Richard’s narrative contains stories about crime. During the first interview, Richard described how his boxing career had been interrupted at the age of 17 when he went on ‘another path’ and pursued criminal activity. The interview proceeds with Richard describing how hungry he is to succeed and realize certain achievements through boxing. I asked Richard how the interruption has affected the hunger he now has for the sport of boxing. Richard asks permission to be specific about his activity.

P. Solomon: Yeah you can, I didn’t know if you wanted to or not –

Richard: - No, no I don’t mind being specific. It is all part of learning innit? For me and for you. Erm, well as you know, I got 13 years for false imprisonment and kidnap. Basically without glorifying anything or justifying anything we kidnapped a drug dealer, we held him for three days. He was tortured.

On release of the ransom money erm – on, on tsch collection of the ransom money he was released. After three days like I said. Three days and nights. ...erm...but that was just part of many things I was involved with, you know, that was just one of the things I got caught for. I was involved in a negative lifestyle, with negative people, a negative frame of mind. You know, and we're all accountable for us own actions. Again I'll stress that I'm looking for no alibis and I'm looking for no justification or glorification – erm it's all the same thing I suppose – but...again...I did what I did, I ended up where I did...only thing I'd change is the people I hurt in the process, that's the only thing I'd change – the experience I got is invaluable erm... 'Cos now I cannot only share it with people what I think are perhaps going down the same path, but my son. I can show my son why not to do this, what'll happen if you do that. So again it's invaluable and with regards to boxing I've just learnt to appreciate life so much because there were a time when I couldn't even walk down to the shop – for seven years – I couldn't even walk down to the shop and go and get a can of ginger beer. I couldn't walk down to - that's not alcohol by the way! – [Richard chuckles] I couldn't walk round to the gym and cut the grass round the gym. I couldn't walk onto the field and just [Richard tilts his head back and looks up to the ceiling] inhale and smell that fresh air what most people take for granted every day – including me – or I did do, now I don't because I realize what it's like to lose such simple things. Erm.

So I think definitely it's all played a major part – I've always known God's had a plan for each one of us, each individual on this Earth. Erm. All I can say is that I'm just fortunate to have gotten a second chance – you know I could die tomorrow – not looking at that in a negati – not saying that in a negative way but looking at every possibility that I could die tomorrow. So I've not got time. I've gotta get everything in now – I've got to do it now - make it, make everything count now , because we don't know what tomorrow is gonna bring – so you do it now – get a foundation – I don't want to leave this Earth not being remembered. [Shrugs] Yeah strangers might not remember me, the public might not remember me, but be damn, damn, damn mistaken if my family don't remember me. You know I want them to be affected in the most positive way...you know just having a bit of er...worth. So many people go away and what have they done? They've achieved nothing. People remember them for nothing. And I don't want to be one of those individuals...no way. – And like I said it's not about meself it's about setting a foundation...and who knows what's going to happen tomorrow so you've got to do it now, get it done now, you know what I mean? (Towers 2010)

In order for Richard to present a story about desistance he first has to tell of his criminal life. Richard presents his criminal activity in a manner which demonstrates he has already engaged with the notion of desistance. The crime is referred to factually and in the *reflective mode* of storytelling (Pasupathi 2006) with little added body movement or non-verbal forms of

communication. In this story, Richard accepts responsibility for his actions and shows remorse to the people that he hurt. The experience contains negative elements. Richard hurt others through his actions and his liberty was severely restricted for a number of years. Further, he states 'I was involved in a negative lifestyle, with negative people, a negative frame of mind.' Despite the amount of negativity in this story, Richard interprets the experience and the tale as a positive one. He has gained experience from it, which he can now share with others, particularly people who might get caught up in crime and, his son. Richard understands that he can use the story of his experience to help others, thus find communion with them and exercise generative tendencies.

Through stories about his crime, and more importantly how he has engaged with desistance, Richard is able to share his experience with others. In doing so he is afforded an opportunity to connect with others. By offering his story to others, Richard effectively increases the narrative resources another individual, the listener, might have at their disposal. In the build up to the second interview, I had spent two weeks with Richard, training with and being in his presence on a daily basis. It was evident during this time that Richard's self-narrative had changed significantly. Richard had moved from talking about how he lacked experience and knowledge to how he was sharing his knowledge and experience with others, and how this was proving to be beneficial. At a Jamaican restaurant, after Richard's second training session of the day, we discuss experience and Richard's recognition that by sharing his story he is helping others. During the interview Richard is faced with a number of distractions, from people who walk by and stare in through the windows, to two workmen who sit close to us and are

initially quite noisy. The workmen have thick London accents, are of black decent, and are, quite visibly disturbing Richard, who frowns and scowls whenever they become too noisy. Early in the interview I ask Richard if he would like to talk about his activities outside of boxing, with the probation service and the schools and the positive impact he has stated he has on the individuals he engages with.

Richard: Yeah well, it's like I said, you know, I walk into schools and erm, I say to the kids like – obviously I walk in with the teachers because it's them what's arranged the meeting, or arranged the, erm, talk time. So I walk in and you see kids look at me [Richard scowls] with like disgust, maybe not too much disgust but in a rebellious way because they're thinking 'Oh it's just another official...looking from a book, reading from a book and trying to tell us what to do, like all the teachers would do.' Then when I stand up I present meself, I says, "Me name's Richard Towers, erm, I'm a professional boxer. I've had eleven. I've won eleven. Erm, I've knocked eight out. Erm, I've only been boxing five years." You see their eyes start opening. [Richard opens his eyes accordingly] And I say, "I did thirteen years in prison for false imprisonment and kidnap. I were involved in a, er, different forms of gang crime. And it's been one of the things that I've ended up getting the big sentence er, thirteen years for. Erm, but now I've changed my life around," erm and you can see I've got their attention now. So just the facts in themselves, never mind what I've learnt, because they don't know anything about me – as a person, just

the facts what are on paper – if you go to the police station or the crown court they'll give you all these facts on paper. Erm, are enough to make them pay attention, so that's a start straight away. And then I'll go into like, 'Oh where I went wrong' and 'this is what my life dit di.' And you can see 'em thinking, 'Ah.' And kids have come to me before and gone, 'Yeah, I had a similar type of childhood. You know? Things went similar type of way for me. Do you think I can do it?'"

And I'm telling you now there's kids that come in our gym, er there's one kid in particular, [names individual] he's come in our gym [Richard adopts a loose guard pose] and he's training now, he's absolutely dangerous. He come to our gym [Richard waves to another passerby] like erm, I think he come about thirteen stone at the age of twelve, you know what I mean? Which is very heavy – clinically obese. And now he's fighting at featherweight [9 stone] you know, amateur, I think it's er, it might be 56 KG [57 KG] something like that. So –

[One of the workmen (WM) that Richard was disturbed by earlier interrupts the interview to speak to Richard]

**WM:** Hey mate, can I shake your hand?

**R:** [Richard extends his hand out and shakes hands with the WM] Alright pal?

**WM:** I couldn't help overhearing your conversation and it seems right positive and constructive –

**R:** - Oh definitely man. –

**WM:** - and stay on that level mate.

**R: - Definitely –**

**WM: - that's really good -**

**R: - Nice one man. I appreciate you –**

**WM: - really good talk.**

**R: - introducing yourself man.**

**WM: - It's really good, positive talk.**

**R: - Nice one man. Cheers. [The two WM leave the restaurant and Richard directs his attention back to the interview] Yeah so, erm, like I say – that in itself [referring to the interaction with the WM] that's the reward and an obvious sign that things are going right. D'you know what I mean? So, erm, it's clear to see, everything's clear to see, it's all laid out for me. I couldn't have made a mistake. If I think back – I could have obviously – because [I could have gone back to crime] but the fact that I didn't go – think about this one Paul – that I didn't go with it is the fact of why I have done so well. I'm telling you. That's why I've done so well, because I've made right decisions, nothing else. In God's eyes I think God's, I feel like God's rewarding me for making the right decisions. Because you know from talking about – I'm not the most religious of people, but...I'm definitely being watched over. Definitely being looked after. Do you know what I mean? – I could sit and explain a few things to you. There's been times where I've been sat in me house and I 'ant 'ad any money whatsoever, when I were amateur, erm I'm not rolling in it now, but I've got enough to live off. Erm, but when I were amateur and I'm**

sat and I 'ant even got money for food and then I've got a phone call like that, "Listen, erm, there's er, do you know anyone that wants weed? Erm you can make a quick grand on it if you want. Erm just knock it on." And I knew the person what I could have sold it to straight away without question. I'd have made fifteen hundred quid on it, just like that [snaps his fingers] without even touching it. And I've gone, "No, no, no." And then the next phone call I've got has been me mate, "Erm, what you doing now?"

"Oh I'm not doing nowt." I was just sat, you know I've just finished training.

"Do you want to come get something to eat? I'll get it. We'll go get something to eat."

I'm like, "Yeah, yeah." We've gone and got some food and, and I've stuffed meself and it's been the best meal I've had.

And I've gone and trained [Richard mimes running] brilliantly, and then nighttime's come and somebody's come to the gym for me, a friend of mine's come to the gym for me. "I'm taking you out for something to eat."

Then I've gone to bed thinking [Richard tilts his head to his right and looks up with a broad smile] do you know what I mean? And that's how it's happened [Richard stresses this point by shaking his hands in front of him. Fingers extended, palms facing about five inches apart] Every single time!

[Emphasised with the right hand in a hammer like motion] it's happened like that. And if it 'ant happened like that I've

opened me fridge and I've looked in me freezer and there's been something that I forgot about. What I, what I love. And I cooked it and ate it. And that's how it's gone. I couldn't have gone wrong Paul. Do you know what I mean? So, with regards to erm, being smart about what I've done, or being, er, erm, the most logical person with what I've done...I can't take credit for – I've just used a little bit of commonsense erm, and just, just, gone with the flow basically. Everything's come together. Yeah. And erm, and the results are clear to see.

(Towers 2011)

Following the positive experience described in the story, and, indeed, received from the interaction with the two workmen, Richard moves on to a tale about desistance. Richard connects his choice to reject criminal offers with positive consequences in his life. Further, he links these experiences with luck and religion, both of which are components of redemptive stories (McAdams 2006), which is, itself, a generative tale.

Both of Richard's stories feature a relationship with boxing. Initially, Richard chooses to engage more actively and seriously with boxing following his release from prison. He references how prison prevented him from engaging in gym related activities, such as litter picking and mowing the lawns of local residents, a practice which the head coach, Brendan Ingle insists all of his boxers have to do. Similarly, the story he tells about going into schools is followed by an example of how boxing has had a positive impact on one of the children who came to the gym after listening to Richard talk. After rejecting criminal opportunities, despite lacking funds and food, Richard is shown compassion and charity by friends who take him

out to eat after training sessions. Stories about desistance and the development of positive experiences are relational to Richard's experiences with boxing. Richard engages with the public story of boxing being a social good, and the narrative resource of salvation. However, both are adjusted to suit Richard's individual circumstances. Whilst it is accurate that Richard used to be involved in crime, and he no longer is; that he did not used to be a boxer, but he now is; that the transition from criminal to non-criminal and non-boxer to boxer overlaps; and boxing provides him with greater opportunities than crime did, boxing alone is not the reason for Richard's change. Richard has experienced a change in his outlook on life, which, by his own admission has significantly altered what he feels he is capable of.

Richard: Yeah I think if you compare me from now to erm ten fifteen years ago there's absolutely no comparison. Because if you think I were like, like what I told you, you know, incriminating me or not I'm just saying I just saying I use it as er, these type of things as an example, because I think there is no stronger message. But you look what I were involved in, you know [gang activity.] From that time to all the things I've been through, to this point I can't even compare ever doing something like that [gang related crime], do you know? Or even going through that – the thought process it takes to get to that point. (Towers 2011)

Richard's stories demonstrate an individual who has undergone transition in regards to how he understands himself. Boxing has played a significant role in this transition, and the shared narrative resources particular to the sport help him articulate this, but as Richard states 'it's

not just boxing' that has fostered in this change of perspective, there is more to Richard's story (Towers 2011). Boxing has provided Richard with an opportunity to work psychophysically on the self. Through his engagement with the training, other boxers and through the sharing of narrative resources, Richard has experienced communion and acquired positive experiences, and/or, the narrative resources to understand his experiences as positive.

Whilst salvation, as a narrative resource, is adapted by Richard to show that his ability to engage with desistance extends beyond boxing, there are elements of the resource which have a more direct link with his sport. Redemption, as a form of salvation, is recruited as a component of the generative tale told by Richard. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Richard states a belief that his only option to crime is a physical task like boxing (Towers 2010). He teases out the fact that boxing is really the only choice for him by stating that he would not be able to compete as a professional mixed martial artist because he lacks the background in wrestling. His exposure to boxing at age 16, whilst short, provided sufficient grounding for Richard to feel it was the only alternative to a life of crime.

Boxing offers Richard the chance of redemption in the eyes of the people he cares most about, his family. In the first example provided in this chapter, Richard states how he wants to achieve something positive. At this stage in the interview Richard has already responded to a question where he was asked directly what he hoped to achieve through boxing. It is made quite clear in both sections that Richard finds a link between what he can achieve in boxing, how his family perceive him, and the effect his boxing achievements could have on them.

**Via boxing I hope to achieve a good...strong and...reliable foundation for all the people I love. See am, I truly do believe that I'm gonna get to world level, right? When I say this I don't doubt in meself. Obviously we've all got doubts and we've all got to have confidence and we've all got to have belief in ourself. But, eventually, I think that when I do get to a world title level – because if anyone can get me there, it's these guys – er, if I do get that world title shot, all I can say is, only God knows what will happen, but all I can say is, I'll put e-very s-ingle o-unce of effort, every single bit of passion – whatever it takes to walk out of that ring with that belt and be titled as a world title holder. I'll do what I can, because that's what I know I have to achieve to get everything...I need in order to create that stable and reliable foundation. So like it, again I'll say there is no choice for me it has got to be world level or nothing...so I've got to do everything I can to get there, it is as simple as that. So the answers world level I think I can get to yeah. (Towers 2010)**

**At this stage of his self-narration, to be a world titleholder is central to Richard's concept of redemption. It would enable Richard to construct a publicly recognized heroic self (Woodward 2007) where the victorious boxer is afforded transformation in extremis, Satan transmogrified as Christ (Oates 1987). Success in the ring would allow Richard to be remembered by the ones he loves for reasons other than his criminal past. Success would enable Richard to establish a positive legacy, providing his life and the life of his family members with 'worth.' In this capacity, boxing,**

and more importantly success in boxing, is crucial to Richard's ability to develop a positive version of self, to affect redemption and thus enable salvation. Richard recruits salvation as a narrative resource, but he adapts it and supports it through the recruitment of other narrative resources. This ensures that Richard's use of the resource is idiosyncratic to his life experiences. His life stories speak directly to how he is situated within the world. Through the recruitment of particular resources, Richard presents a storied reconstruction of the past through 'the consideration of the present and the anticipation of what is yet to come' (McAdams 1996: 311).

Communion and agency are another set of components recruited in the generative tale told by Richard. In the examples provided already, Richard demonstrates how negative circumstances can lead to positive experiences and how these positive experiences involve others. As evidenced in his stories, Richard moves from a negative and individualistic outlook on life in the first chapter of his life story, to a positive, focused, goal-driven and active member of his society in the second chapter of his life story. Richard provides stories about communion wherein he actively describes the development of positive relationships with others. These relationships lead to the development of positive experiences, which inform Richard's desire to share his story with others in the hope that he can affect positive change.

Stories about communion are numerous in the narrative provided by Richard. The examples already included indicate the extent to which communion, as a component, runs through his stories. Supporting stories of communion are stories about heroes. As addressed in chapters three and four, stories about heroes form part of the narrative resources available to

boxers. Weinberg and Arond (1952), and Woodward (2007, 2008) argue that local and familial heroes are a significant source of inspiration to young males, providing motivation for many to pursue an active engagement with the sport of boxing. Similarly, Oates (1987), Wacquant (2004), and Woodward (2007; 2008) demonstrate how the sport can make heroes out of its participants. Through academic projects and in the public press, the hero narrative resource is often recruited to make sense of why boxers first engage with the sport, and, in some cases to demonstrate what they hope to achieve through the sport - to become more like their idols. Once again, Richard recruits this narrative resource in relation to the stories he tells about boxing. Local heroes (boxers training at the same gym as him) are present in the story he tells about his earliest memories of boxing, similarly distant heroes (famous boxers from different gyms and/or countries) receive a passing mention in the same story. Richard's trainers, Brendan and Dominic Ingle, feature heavily in a number of his stories, and he refers to Brendan specifically as a 'legend' (Towers 2011).

Richard's recruitment of the hero narrative resource does not adequately explain why he first became a boxer, similarly, the resource in isolation does not effectively portray what Richard hopes to achieve through boxing. Instead, the hero narrative resource is recruited, adapted and supported by stories of communion, particularly the positive effects of shared experience and the acquisition of knowledge. In addition, the recruitment of heroes into Richard's stories has a physical impact on the manner in which the story is told. Each time Dominic Ingle is brought into a story, it is done via the dramatic mode of storytelling (Pasupathi 2006).

**Richard: But erm basically, I was on a roll and that day when I lost that fight, oh I was gutted. I came home and I cried. I were gutted and I thought [Richard adopts a heightened and angry voice] ‘Why am I? I’m not boxing no more – No way! I’m not doing this for crap no more.’ [Regular voice] I thought of a few more naughty words but I’m sure they can wait [Laughter]. But erm...I thought my world had ended. And Dominic phoned me, at that very moment when I were feeling like that. And he went, “Feeling sorry for yourself kid?”**

**And I went “What?”**

**He went, “Feeling sorry for yourself kid or are you training?”**

**And I went –**

**- And the truth was [Laughing] I were feeling sorry for meself but I didn’t want to say it. And he went, and I went, “I’m gonna train Dom.”**

**And he manipulated me into a training frame of mind because I thought, ‘Right I’ve told him I’m gonna train now so –**

**P. Solomon: I’ve gotta train –**

**R: - So I got me stuff together and I’ll go and train. And I went and trained, before I knew it I were back in the swing of things.**

**(Towers 2010)**

**Richard re-enacts the scenario following his first loss as an amateur fighter, covering his feelings, as they were expressed in isolation. Richard introduces Dominic into the story, doing so by affecting Dominic’s accent and speech pattern. Through the introduction of Dominic the story moves from one of negative feelings in isolation to a more positive feeling in the**

communal space of the gym and through the practices of training. Dominic is crucial in orchestrating that shift in feeling within Richard. It is through his connection to Dominic, and the relationship that the two have as friends, that Richard experiences a positive experience due to communion.

Distant heroes, and idols, also feature in Richard's stories, and have a similarly dramatic physical impact. Stories told about the distant heroes, professional boxers, Floyd Mayweather and Mike Tyson are delivered in the dramatic mode of storytelling, where Richard re-enacts voices and facial expressions. The stories are so powerful for Richard that they affect a physiological change; he gets goose pimples during the telling of the Mayweather story.

Richard: I once heard a super champion [Richard uses the knuckles of a clenched fist to scratch the inside of his forearm] He's ranked a super champion now, Floyd Mayweather, right. I heard him say, he goes, the interviewer said to him, he was trying to wind him up, and he said to him, "Floyd, just tell us, erm, [Richard starts acting out the voice of the interviewer in his Sheffield accent] do you truly believe that you are the best fighter in the...on this Earth? Do you truly believe that? Because that is a ridiculous notion." And he went, "Listen [Richard acts out Floyd Mayweather's voice and adopts an American accent] I'll tell you this baby." [Richard alternates seamlessly between his everyday voice when he is describing who said what to whom and his Mayweather voice when he is repeating the words of the super champion] This is what he said, "I'll tell you this baby." He went, "I get in that ring," he

goes, “I can’t be beat, you know why?” He goes, “Because I’m not the strongest, I’m not the fastest,” he goes, “I’m not particularly the best skilled.” He goes, “But I’ll outsmart you.” He goes, “You thinking something,” he goes, “I’m thinking,” he goes, “I already thought that thought,” he goes, “I’m on my next thought.” He goes, “So you remember that,” he goes, “I will outsmart you” – [Richard brushes both his forearms with open and relaxed palms] I’ve got goose pimples now thinking of it. You know when he said it, it just [smiling, Richard clenches a fist and smacks it against his own palm making a snapping noise. Simultaneously he accompanies it with the vocal] **POW!** I just thought to meself, this guy he’s saying y’know, he goes, [Richard presents this in his everyday voice] “I’m not the best, I’m not the strongest,” he goes, “but I’m smart,” he goes, “I’m using it.” He goes, “I’m one of those little guys what used to get pushed around,” he goes, “but I’d think of a way of how to get you back, it’d work” he goes, “and that’s what I’m doing now,” he goes, “I’m just using my brain to get round –it’s a game of chess.” And I truly, I truly respect that erm, that idea of boxing. Y’now, because it’s all about outsmarting your opponent, y’know it’s not about – I saw Mike Tyson, I met Mike Tyson the other day. Erm, and to my surprise he’d heard of me. And he’d seen me fight apparently. And he says to me, [impersonating Mike Tyson’s voice] “I’ll knock you the f [Richard self edits the curse] out.” That’s what he said to me. So I was like, [laughing with a surprised look on

his face] “Oh right, cheers. I’m not going to argue with that.”

And he goes, [Richard’s own voice] “No, no, no, yer a good fighter,” he goes, “but it’s not all about knocking people out.”

He goes, “What it’s about,” he goes, “is using what you’ve got,” he goes, “you’ve got good movement right?” And I goes, “yeah.” He goes, “Are you smart or are you stupid?” I goes, “well I want to be smart.” He goes, “Right well concentrate on that,” he goes, “work on that.” He goes, “I were stupid,” he goes, “I had four-hundred-million,” he goes, “I wasted the lot.”

He goes, “I had twenty-seven girlfriends at one point,” no exaggeration, and he goes [acting out Mike Tyson’s facial gestures] “And I’d have fought yer.” He goes, “I’d have fought yer for the lot.” He goes, “Because I truly believe that there could have been something more.” He goes, “But all these materialistic. All these people tag along what – come-along-ers – they don’t matter.” He goes, “What matters is what you achieve in that ring and what you walk out with.” He goes, “That’s what matters.” He goes, “If you walk out with your sense.” He goes, “If you walk out with victory, brilliant.” He goes, “But, only you can determine what happens in that ring and that’s how you should think.” And I just thought, ‘wow, Mike Tyson saying that to me.’ Yeah, he’s a, he’s been in jail for charges that I don’t particularly agree on – and I’ve always said that I’d never talk to him with regards to the frame of mind that I established while I was in jail – yer know I don’t talk to rapists and I don’t talk to people what hurt women or

children basically. Erm but I could just not resist that little bit of knowledge he had to give. And I listened, I respect him for what he achieved in his life so er...so I got a little bit of a good, bit of a good experience from that so it were a bonus really.

(Towers 2010)

The Mike Tyson story demonstrates a number of things. Firstly, it is illustrative of the power a hero figure can hold over a storyteller. Despite one of Richard's life rules being that he does not talk to or associate with individuals who have hurt women or children, a rule he reiterates a number of times throughout the two interviews, Richard could not resist the interaction Tyson offered him. So compelling was the prospect of learning from one of his heroes that Richard was able to overlook a principle he otherwise holds steadfast. Secondly, the story demonstrates Richard's appreciation that through communion, through shared experience and shared stories, knowledge is acquired. Central to both the Tyson and Mayweather stories is the acquisition of knowledge and the assertion, from two of Richard's boxing heroes that success comes from the application of knowledge. Thirdly, as was also evident in the Dominic story, interaction and communion can generate positive experiences; the interaction with Tyson was a 'bit of a good experience' for Richard.

The recruitment of the hero narrative resource, by Richard, supports the generative tale that he tells. Through communion, Richard shares experiences and gains knowledge. Further, these interactions are recounted as positive, and thus a link is made between positive experiences, communion and knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer. This

becomes an important component of the generative tale when considered in connection to Richard's stories about struggle and adversity.

Richard has, by his own admission, faced a significant amount of struggle in his life, 'You know I've been through a lot since I was sixteen. I've had to battle me way through physically and mentally a lot of things' (Towers 2010). Whilst his life has changed since he became a boxer, he realizes that he is still engaged in forms of struggle. With regards to boxing he is 'fighting for [his] life' every time he faces an opponent (Ibid). Training itself is grueling and a tortuous process, yet a necessarily one all the same.

I was just doing legs before then and I were, Dom's going,  
"Right set of twenty."

And I'm like, "Oh my gosh" and I'm sat there thinking and I'm like [Mimes face and body tension of performing squats/leg presses] 'Urrggh!' And I'm feeling sick [mimes the trajectory of vomit with his right hand]

And he's going, "it's not nice is it kid?"

I Went, "Puwfft! Not nice isn't the word Dom." I went,  
"Fucking horrible is the word."

And he's like, "Yeah." Erm, he goes, "Yeah, erm...it has to be done." (Towers 2011)

You know, I'm not, I'm not going sit here and say that er, I absolutely love getting up at half five in the morning, getting ready for six o'clock being in the gym for six –thirty, getting absolutely physically tortured [Richard smiles and lets out a little laugh] I'm not gonna say I love doing that because – don't

get me wrong once I've done it I love the fact that I can, that I've done it and I'm fit enough to do it. Erm, I'm not gonna say I love going through the thought process[.] (Towers 2011)

Richard understands struggle as a major component of his life story. It features in the first chapter of his life, when his struggles were with crime and his family, and it is present in the second chapter of his life too. In the second chapter, Richard struggles with finances and finding ways to pay for food whilst simultaneously rejecting criminal activity. Training and working as a professional boxer brings with it its own set of struggles and difficulties, which are presented as part of the fabric of the life he has chosen. Whilst Richard may not enjoy the feelings during a difficult training session, and he may not enjoy the rigorous demands placed on him by his training schedule, he appreciates the feelings that come after the sessions. Richard expresses a sense of satisfaction and achievement from being able to endure or overcome certain situations, and the knowledge that he is capable of such feats.

Struggle and adversity form a prominent feature in Richard's stories. Through stories of struggle, Richard reflects on his past, comments on the present and looks towards the future. He connects stories of struggle to his career as a criminal, the transition from criminal to boxer and, then again, to his career as a boxer. The type of struggle Richard is faced with changes over time, but the necessity to deal with, endure and overcome difficulty remains throughout his self-narration. McAdams argues that certain institutions, sport being a prime example, provide languages of redemption through the presentation of narrative resources and slogans along the lines of *no pain no gain, pain today - glory tomorrow* and so on (McAdams 2006:

40). Within the ethnographic studies on boxing conducted by Anasi (2002; 2005), Wacquant (2004) and myself, it was evident that redemptive language featured prominently in gym discourse. A mural painted on the wall of the Exeter boxing gym stated, *train hard, fight easy*. Through boxing, Richard is exposed to a redemptive narrative resource which is inextricably linked to his sport.

Within each story of struggle presented, Richard is rewarded due to his ability to endure or overcome. The rewards differ in nature, from receiving invites to dinner after struggling to feed himself as an amateur boxer, to receiving praise and acknowledgement from school children and strangers (the workmen) after sharing his story of the struggle of imprisonment and turning away from a life of crime. Richard also expresses intrinsic psychophysical rewards, felt after enduring the struggle of training. The transition that Richard describes throughout his life story is one from negativity and suffering to positivity and enhancement, and as such encapsulates the key components of a redemptive story (McAdams 2006: 41).

Redemption and generativity are intrinsically linked. Richard's desire to achieve redemption links directly to a desire to affect positive change for his family and his son. His focus and drive in regards to boxing is multifaceted. Richard wishes to construct a new, and more positive self-identity other than that of the criminal. Through boxing, Richard is engaged on a project of self where he can affect change through the adoption of a positive, successful, boxing identity. Similarly, Richard believes that the new identity, combined with the material benefit of being a successful professional boxer, will improve the life of his family.

So, er...I just – reason why I wouldn't want my son to go through what I've gone through, I just think to myself 'I hope I've gone through all the shit that I've gone through in me life so that he don't have to go through it.' Do you know what I'm saying? So, erm, you just don't, you don't want your kid to be subject to anything do you? You're scared if they cut their leg, you're like, "Awwh!" [Richard puts his head in his hands] Do you know what I mean? Or if they like, me boy's like fell down and cut his, cut his lip before [mimes the facial expression of his son and speaks through pursed lips and gritted teeth] and he's stood up and bloods like right in his mouth. He's only cut his lip, he's not even crying, he's looking at me like, as if saying, "What's wrong with you?" And I'm like, "Awwh! Awwh!" Do you know what I mean? And I'm a fighter, I'm a fighter for a living [Raises two clenched fists up] I see it every day, do you know what I mean? But, you son, your children you just wanna protect them with everything you've got. And that's probably the reason why erm, I don't want him to erm, be subject to any possible danger, do you know what I mean? Obviously that's not life but I might be unrealistic when I say I don't want things like that to happen but, erm, I'll do what I can, do you know what I mean? And I'm getting in that ring, I'm – I'll go through shitting meself before fights thinking, 'I'm fighting for a title now. This guy's good and he's knocked this many people out. He's dangerous...' I'll go through all that.

[...]

I'll go through all that, that's a cheap price to pay for me erm, to make sure that he has the choice – but he's gonna have to graft for what he wants, but I want him to choose a more quicker [Richard made to sound a 'P' as in positive or productive before saying quicker] and erm productive line of graft. Do you know what I mean? Erm use his brain rather than his hands, basically, do you now what I mean? Yeah.

Richard believes that boxing will enable him to construct, for his son, the solid, and reliable foundation he wishes he had growing up. This is important to Richard, as it is through the construction of this foundation that he believes his son will have choice. Notions of choice are a recurrent source of tension and importance within Richard's narrative. His focus on establishing a situation where his son, rather than himself, has choice, further demonstrates the generative nature of Richard's narrative. Richard understands boxing as a vehicle for the construction of self. It provides Richard with an opportunity to work on self and affect change, but as Richard states, this focus extends beyond him. He acknowledges that by making changes to himself, he is in turn able to instigate change for his family.

### Conclusion

Throughout Richard's generative tale there has been a focus on his desire to share his experiences with others. Richard actively recruits, edits and reconstructs the shared narrative resources available to him through boxing in order to demonstrate how the sharing of experience leads to improved knowledge, which in turn leads to positive experiences. Richard

contrasts this with the times in his life when he had access to a different set of narrative resources, the first chapter of his life which was characterized by negativity, and was limiting on account of his 'compressed mind' (Towers 2011). Boxing, particularly at the Wincobank gym, under the tutelage of Brendan and Dominic Ingle, exposes Richard to a new and increased set of narrative resources. By drawing on these resources, adopting, adjusting and rejecting certain elements, Richard is able to reconfigure his narrative identity and tell a redemptive and generative tale. This is represented through the stories told about the second chapter of his life, but is also evidenced by Richard's ability to reflect upon his life prior to boxing, and his ability to reconstruct these stories in a positive light. The exposure to greater narrative resources is important as, 'the more stories a person has access to, the more flexibility and opportunities they have to potentially live differently' (Smith and Sparkes 2009: 9).

Richard's stories demonstrate awareness to the constructive potential of sharing narrative resources, as proposed by Smith and Sparkes. Richard's narrative is a generative tale, and it is multifaceted, drawing upon narrative resources to address notions of redemption. Redemption and generativity are linked through the repetition of the components of experience, knowledge, struggle and adversity. Central to these components is the notion that communion can affect change and that stories are central to achieving communion.

So when I get, when I do get to championship level – notice how I said when? – If I ever do get to championship level erm, I'll definitely erm, write a book and put everything down that I've picked up on along the way, because I do think that it

really is, you can't make erm, interpret it as anything other than erm, productive and a guide plan. Do you know what I mean? Definitely a guide plan. And I think that's what a lot of kids struggle with these days. They struggle finding an avenue – a doorway that they can go through, 'cos... what I've noticed...about...erm, kids from broken backgrounds in particular – you'll now what I mean by that – they probably won't like me saying that, but I don't really know any other way to describe it. Er, kids what have come from er broken backgrounds they live for today and they're not really concerned about tomorrow. And that's for the simple fact that nobody is really showing them any direction and can take to get to whatever productive, er, goal. Do you know what I mean? So I think when I write a book I think that it'll definitely present right, 'If I do this, if I do that' – 'cos I won't just say 'Oh boxing'' because it's not just boxing it's about applying yourself at anything. Do you know what I mean? And it generally, it usually works[.] (Towers 2011)

The redemptive self (McAdams 1996; 2006) is a generative tale.

McAdams and his work are interpreted as adopting a psychosocial perspective on the typology offered by Smith and Sparkes (2008), where the focus is on a thick individual and thin social relational view of self and identity. Richard's narrative is a generative tale recruiting the languages of the redemptive story. It is informed by, and relates to, the narrative resources Richard has at his disposal. Richard has key stories that he has developed, rehearsed, re-told and reconstructed over time. These stories,

particularly the story of his imprisonment, rehabilitation and reformation draw on the languages of salvation and are linked to the public stories of boxing as a sport which is able to salvage its participants. Richard understands his life through the stories he tells about his sport, and similarly through the stories his sport enables him to tell. The stories he crafts are relational, as is his sense of self and identity. He defines what is important to him for the future, reconstructs the past and reflects on the present by engaging with shared narrative resources. These resources are constructed and made available to Richard through his experiences with others. Through communion, Richard increases the number of experiences he is able to talk about, whilst simultaneously increasing the narrative resources at his disposal to talk about said experiences. With increased narrative resources comes the flexibility to tell new stories, to live differently and to perform self and identity in ways which were previously not possible.

## Thesis Conclusion

### Introduction

This thesis has presented the findings of a three-year ethnographic study into the narrative lives of amateur and professional boxers. The study was based across two sites in the United Kingdom and used qualitative, ethnographic and narrative inquiry methodologies to collect and analyse data. Data was gathered in the form of field notes, formal and informal interviews and through participation in the training sessions at both sites. Further, an ethnographic approach was taken to the competitive elements of the amateur sport. Participation in a competitive bout marked the culmination of fieldwork.

This project argued that boxers engage with a limited, but flexible and shifting, set of narrative resources which enable them to tell stories about their experiences of boxing. These stories are important and require consideration, as it is through them that boxers make sense of what they do and who they are. These stories shape the lives they are able to live based on the types of identities they are able to perform.

When narrating their experiences, the participants in this study demonstrated that the stories they tell inform, and are informed by the practices they submit to (training and competing), and the relationships they are invested in (with their trainers and other boxers). For the participants of this study their lives were narrated by and through relationships; relationships with self, with techniques of the body, with particular cultures, and kinships. Further, relationships with meta, public,

social and cultural narratives. Boxers presented idiosyncratic ontological narratives by engaging with, adapting and rejecting a multitude of relationships.

There was significant correlation between the narratives presented by participants in this study and the findings of similar studies, particularly those of Wacquant, Sugden, Satterlund and Woodward. This project therefore seeks to contribute to, support, and develop the findings of these projects in order to provide greater understanding of the culture of boxing and the performance of self through narrative-identity work. The performance of masculinity, the symbiosis of mind and body, and concerns pertaining to agency and exploitation were addressed, either explicitly or implicitly in the narratives provided by the participants of my ethnography. In addition, the participants of this study told stories about wanting to affect change within their own lives in order to find pride and respect from others and for themselves.

Through their stories, these participants performed a narrative-identity which was being formed through the practices of boxing, and engagement with the wider narratives and discourses pertaining to the sport. These individuals understood boxing to be a vehicle through which to affect positive change and transformation - even in the instances where their experiences might be interpreted as doing something very different. Boxing, and boxing discourses became an important anchor point for these individuals who sought to develop a more positive engagement with the world, most noticeably within their immediate social and familial groups. The shared pool of narrative resources featured heavily in the narration of their experiences and the understanding of their lives. Indeed, it is argued

that the public narratives on boxing were so powerful and commonly known for these individuals that they in part governed their decision to select boxing as a transformative bodily project.

### **What was Achieved?**

The introduction to the thesis outlined the meta, public, social and cultural narratives which constitute the discourses on boxing. In doing so, the relational nature of narratives was established by demonstrating how researchers, expectedly so, draw upon the narrative resources presented in other bodies of work. By drawing upon these resources, researchers assist in the dissemination of particular narratives. They strengthen certain resources and assist in the circulation of publicly accepted stories about their chosen topic, in this case boxing. Further, they add to, adjust and create new narrative resources, through which the sport of boxing can be understood.

An issue raised in the Introduction was the manner in which certain boxing narratives are taken for granted and become public knowledge with little to no discussion about the authenticity, impact, or relational nature of the stories. Certain stories and narrative themes have the power to become mythologized, and circulated as part of the shared narrative pool of resources which make up the discourses on boxing. It was beyond the scope of this project to examine notions of authenticity in stories. Instead, this project argues that the circulation of particular stories and themes influences the public narratives about the sport. This in turn affects the

manner in which boxing is understood and the reasons why researchers, and boxers alike, engage with the sport. It is argued that greater consideration needs to be paid to the relational nature of discourses in order to better understand why individuals live certain lives and tell certain stories.

Research, especially ethnography, does not exist within a vacuum. Projects are chosen, in part, due to the relationship and understanding the researcher has with the public stories about a given topic, and the questions that arise in relation to those stories. Further, the traditions and nature of research mean that from situating one's study within particular fields and methodologies, through to data collection, analysis, and the presentation of findings, projects engage with a shared pool of resources, certain narratives and themes which help contextualise and substantiate the work. It is important to acknowledge not only that this occurs, but also, to pay attention to what the shared pool of resources are. The introduction argued that the discourses of Industrialization, masculinity and femininity informed how boxing has been presented over time and across cultures. It argued that boxing discourses were shaped by these meta narratives. Subsequently, it argued that boxing was analysed in relation to these narratives. Consequently, the experiences of individual boxers were contextualized by and through the engagement with these narrative resources.

The ethnographic works, considered for this project, engaged in fieldwork and interviews with their participants. In doing so, the ethnographies helped co-create the narrative responses provided by their participants. With the exception of Kath Woodward's ethnography, this

occurred with little or no consideration for how the relationship between researcher and participant affected the data. The ethnographies critiqued one another for failing to acknowledge how the researcher's own situatedness impacted upon the type of inquiry conducted, the responses provided, and the selection and presentation of findings. All of the ethnographies considered for this study recruited from, added to and thus perpetuated the public discourses on boxing. With the exception of Wacquant's work, little attention was paid to the relational nature of discourses. Even within Wacquant's study, no attention was paid to how the public stories about boxing shape and are shaped by the ontological narratives provided by individual boxers.

The Introduction established how important storytelling is to the performance of identity. It acknowledged the relational nature of narrativity and was able to demonstrate how narrative resources, whilst multiple, are ultimately limited. It made the case for greater consideration to be paid to the ontological narratives of individual boxers, and for the analysis of these narratives in relation to the discourses of boxing, in order to better understand how this relationship shapes the types of stories individual boxers are able to tell, and the types of identities they are able to perform. Finally, the introduction argued that this type of focus would enable researchers to understand how and when narrative resources change and the impact these changes have on the stories individuals tell and the lives they are ultimately able to live.

Chapter One presented a series of auto-ethnographic vignettes, which chronicled my engagement with the sport of boxing across the two research sites. This chapter demonstrated the extent to which certain

narrative resources are engaged in order to describe boxing experiences. In doing so, it extended the arguments presented in the Introduction, particularly the notion that conducting, and writing up, research does not occur in a vacuum. The auto-ethnographic vignettes demonstrated how I as a researcher engaged with performances of masculinity, particularly heroic masculinity. As such, it supported the findings of Woodward's ethnography on boxing. By acknowledging how my gender, and my performance(s) of masculinity affected my engagement with the sport, the research sites, and my participants. This project responded to the criticism levied at the likes of Wacquant and Sugden, who allow their gender to pass, unquestioned. The auto-ethnography demonstrated that the performance of gender, in this case the performance of masculinities, is perhaps more complex than that which is explored by Woodward. Whilst performances of heroic masculinity dominate the chapter, there are times where the performance of masculinities is complicated and contradictory. Notions of gender and gender-identity, like the stories we tell about experience are not fixed, not even in a sport as overtly masculine as boxing. The practices we submit to affect the identities we are able to perform, including our gendered identities.

Through the chronological progression of the vignettes it is possible to trace my shifting relationship with the sites, the participants and the subject at large. It is possible to see that some movement was made from novice outsider towards knowledgeable and accepted insider. Conversely, the vignettes demonstrate that I remained a researcher exploring the cultural and narrative world of boxing, rather than a boxer undertaking research. I was never so fully submerged in the practices that my identity as

a researcher disappeared. At times, when I had perhaps lost sight of this fact, the experiences in the field, as reported in the vignettes, reminded me of my ever-evolving position in relation to the field and the participants.

The auto-ethnography responded to calls from the field of narrative inquiry to write the researcher into the research (Polkinghorne 1988). As such, it presented the findings of my own performance ethnography, enabling access to the sensuous knowledge, beyond the scope of the usual visual data (de Garis 1999; Sparkes 2009). The aim of the auto-ethnographic vignettes was to provide the reader with a detailed understanding of how the culture of boxing operated across the two sites, to illustrate the similarities and differences, to demonstrate how I engaged with the sites, the participants and the subject, and ultimately to provide a representation of how the sites, participants and subject engaged with, and affected me.

Chapter Two developed the central argument of this thesis by presenting the resources and themes which constitute the shared pool of narrative resources available to boxers. By considering the literature produced on boxing by academics, journalists and novelists, this chapter provided a taxonomy of resources and themes which spanned cultures and time. It argued that these resources and themes remained relatively stable, public and accessible, generating the public stories on boxing and the cultural meanings of the sport. Due to this, the chapter argued that these resources and themes constituted the shared pool of narrative resources available to boxers. Support was provided for this argument by the fact that these themes appeared in the fictional portrayals of boxing, on screen,

stage and text, as well as in the journalistic accounts of the sport and the academic projects.

The chapter identified two main concerns; firstly, in the production of boxing literature the voices of individual boxers rarely feature. Secondly, that the literature predominantly addressed the professional elements of the sport - the practices, sites and participants - at the expense of those elements which are associated with the amateur side of the sport. These concerns developed the original research question, establishing what would be the main line of inquiry for the remainder of the thesis, *how do the ontological narratives of amateur and professional boxers compare based on their engagement with the shared pool of narrative resources?* In addition to the taxonomy of narrative themes, chapter three presented a typology of narrative resources, suggesting that the themes could be understood as supporting *tales of becoming*. The chapter argued that tales of becoming were constructed by and through the shared pool of narrative resources.

Chapter Three demonstrated the degree of overlap between the shared narrative resources and themes presented in the public discourses and literature on boxing, and the responses of the individual participants for this study. Importantly, not all of the themes present in the literature and thus discourses of boxing were found in the responses provided by the participants. Additionally, unlike the findings of other research ethnographies on boxing, this project found that boxers used a multitude of themes and resources to make sense of their engagement with the sport. It was difficult to place a hierarchy on the themes or to suggest that any one of the themes in isolation explained why these individuals first became involved in the sport.

The use of the familial-genealogical, compensatory, and crime and salvation resources appeared heavily throughout the narrative responses provided for this study. By combining these resources, in different ways and to different ends, the participants of this study were able to tell stories about their earliest memories of the sport. As such, the individuals were able to construct stories that provided information about their motivations for participating in the sport. Unlike the findings of other studies, the use of these themes did not conclusively demonstrate why an individual became a boxer. Instead they provided a degree of contextualisation and somewhat of a prologue to stories about becoming a boxer. In a challenge to the academic projects on boxing, this study demonstrates that an individual's earliest memories of the sport, engagement with vocabularies of motive, and the use of particular shared narrative resources, does not automatically signify the point at which that person started identifying as a boxer, or indeed why they started to identify as a boxer.

The presence of these shared themes, across the participants of this study, and therefore the two boxing sites, demonstrates, to a degree, that boxers engage with shared narrative resources to make sense of their experiences. Further, the use of these narrative resources, across the two sites, between the participants, and ultimately in reflection to the themes as they appear in boxing literature, demonstrates that narrative resources whilst shared, are also used in similar ways, across time, and cultures. Shared narrative resources are used to contextualise stories about experience, to provide them with a recognisable framework and thus facilitate the employment of episodic memories.

**Evident within the use of the shared narrative resources was the realisation, by participants, that their engagement with boxing had led to transformation. Initially transformation was understood as a movement from that of non-boxer to that of boxer. Subsequently transformation was understood in terms of how the sport was transforming their engagement with their kinship groups, society and cultures, and ultimately their perception and sense of self. Participants in this study used the shared narrative resources of boxing to explain how the sport was affecting a positive change within them. To this end the participants of this study used the shared narrative resources to perpetuate the public story of boxing that it serves as a social good.**

**The relationship between the public story of boxing as a social good and the shared narrative resources was strong and had a powerful effect on the idiosyncratic stories presented for this project. This was evident in the contradictions between the stories told about experiences, and expectations of salvation and redemption through boxing, and the criminal activity of individuals after they begun identifying as boxers. Clearly, the narratives resources alone did not have the power to prevent criminal activity, nor for that matter did the sport of boxing, but they were powerful and public enough that the boxers invested time in the telling of them. They used these resources to explain the benefits of boxing to them, even when their experiences outside of the sport contradicted with the themes and resources. Further, they used the themes and resources to explain their continued engagement with the sport and their aspirations.**

**The use of these resources demonstrates that the individuals who participated in this study understand themselves as under construction and**

able to change. Their engagement with the sport of boxing does not indicate a final change, when they move from being *nobody* to *somebody*, a criminal to a law-abiding citizen. Instead it is indicative of the complexities of their lives, where crime and violence are realities they face and struggle with. The individuals who participated in this study understood boxing as a sport with the power to transform their lives. They invested heavily in the narrative resources which addressed and affirmed this. Despite the contradictions they experienced, these individuals were motivated to box through a desire to affect change and were invested in establishing a positive, publicly recognized self, despite the setbacks they faced due to criminal activity.

Chapter Four presented a detailed analysis of the narrative provided by one participant, professional boxer Richard Towers. Richard, based at the Sheffield site, was in the early stages of his professional career at the time of both interviews. Due to his imprisonment during his teenage years and early twenties, Richard lacks a traditional amateur background in the sport, common for most professional boxers. His amateur experience is limited and thus his boxing experience is limited too.

The final chapter demonstrated how Richard's narrative draws upon and adjusts the shared narrative resources available to boxers, amateur and professional, to make sense of his experiences. Whilst Richard is a professional athlete the interest in his narrative stemmed more from how he engaged with, adjusted and rejected the shared narrative resources to make sense of his experiences. Richard, like all of the boxers interviewed for this study, did not focus his narratives on the professional elements and experiences of the sport. Instead, Richard, like his fellow professionals and

amateur counterparts, told a story about redemption and transformation. In addition, Richard presented a generative tale.

Richard used stories about boxing to explain how he aspires to affect change within his own life and the lives of others. Richard, perhaps more than any other boxer, focused on notions of generativity, particularly the desire to make life better for those he came into contact with. Richard was the oldest boxer included in this study, being in his early thirties at the time of interview. According to McAdams (2006), notions of generativity only really appear in the narratives of people aged 30 and above. This means that the generative tale told by Richard stands out as a different story and narrative resource to that of the other boxers included in this study. Further, his willingness and desire to share his story with others speaks to the main argument of this thesis, which investigates how the sharing of narrative resources helps individuals to live alternate lives, with greater flexibility and choice.

Finally, the fourth chapter demonstrates how access to the shared narrative resources of boxing enables Richard to tell alternate stories, experience transitions and transformation. On account of the shared narrative resources of boxing, Richard is able to tell positive stories about experiences where he has gained communion, learnt and developed. This in turn affects his outlook on life and sense of self, and is contrasted with the stories he told prior to boxing and his performance of identity and self. Prior to boxing, Richard describes himself as having a compressed mind and living a negative lifestyle surrounded by negative people. Richard, importantly, acknowledges that boxing alone is not the thing that has changed his life, rather it is through the shared narrative resources of

boxing that Richard is able to perform an alternate identity, one which he feels is positive and publicly recognised as such. It is through the relationships he has established, the kinships found within boxing, that Richard is able to find communion and affect change.

This thesis has identified the shared narrative resources available to amateur and professional boxers in the United Kingdom. It has collated information from a wide range of boxing literature, covering academic projects, journalistic accounts and fiction, most notably produced in the United Kingdom and North America. In doing so, this project has demonstrated how certain stories about boxing remain in circulation, over time and across cultures. The thesis argued that these stories and themes constitute the narrative resources of boxing, providing a cumulative network of resources from which boxers are able to make sense of their experiences of the sport.

Whilst this project accepts that shared narrative resources are liable to change and are constantly under construction, it also demonstrated how certain themes and storylines remain relatively constant. It used this information to support the claims made in the field of narrative inquiry that a pool of narrative resources, whilst multiple, is ultimately limited. Further, it argued that the repeated presence of certain storylines and themes, over time, and across cultures indicated that certain stories have to be told in certain ways in order that individuals are able to identify as boxers. This argument was investigated and it was shown that whilst certain stories are told, certain themes used, boxers made appropriate adjustments to ensure that their ontological narratives were very much *their own stories*. Access to a set of narrative resources does not render an individual a

communicative puppet (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). That said, the narrative resources available to groups is limited and this limitation affects the types of stories that can be told, the identities that can be performed and the types of lives lived.

This thesis investigated the relational nature of narrative-identity. It explored the types of stories told by the researcher and the participant, in and about the training space, in the formal interview setting, and 'off record' in spaces independent of the gym or interview scenario. It placed the narrative of the researcher alongside the narratives of the participants to demonstrate how the researcher's experiences and situatedness affected the types of stories told and data collected. In doing so, this thesis put the narratives of individual boxers at the centre of this study. It explored how they narrated their lives in the formal interview setting, but also examined the types of stories told in the training space. This project found that there were considerable similarities about the types of stories told by boxers across the two sites, regardless of age, race, gender or boxing experience. Additionally, the project also found that the 'ongoing mundane gym conversations', the 'essential ingredient of the "hidden curriculum" of the gym' differed significantly across the two sites (Wacquant 1992: 231).

At the Exeter site, where there was little conversation to accompany the bulk of the training sessions, information was shared and discourses entered into during the initial group skipping exercise. The skipping routine occurred every training session, and was the only time each night that all who trained worked in unison, with the same focus, facing the mirrors, and without too much auditory distraction from the percussive sounds of boxing. During these moments it was common for conversations to be

shared about experiences with girls and crime (usually independent themes, but not always). Stories were shared about upcoming court appearances, encounters with law enforcers, experiences of, and fears about, prison. The boxing gym provided a site where these men could discuss matters of importance in a 'safe' environment. Safe in the sense that their fellow boxers were unlikely to report any of the information being discussed, and safe in the knowledge that their gym colleagues were unlikely to judge them.

The sharing of stories about crime did a number of things for these individuals. Firstly, it allowed them access to the knowledge and experience of others. Hints and tips were exchanged on how to deal with police officers, the types of things to say and do in court and how to manage a relationship with probation services. Equally, boxers with greater criminal experience and records were able to offer council to individuals who were facing a custodial sentence for the first time. They were able to alleviate worries by providing stories about how the length of time in prison the individual was facing was manageable, how they would be able to survive in prison, and/or their chances of getting released early. It is hard to imagine how many other environments these men would be able to discuss such concerns, share narratives and positively develop strategies for coping with the crimes they committed and the punishment they were due to receive.

In the sharing of stories, individuals at the Exeter gym were able to warn others off engaging in criminal activity, based on their prison experiences and fear of long custodial sentences. For the boxers at the Exeter gym, a custodial sentence of anything more than 18 months was feared and served as a considerable deterrent from engaging in crime. The

**gym allowed space for stories about crime to be discussed, for warnings to be issued, and also allowed the individuals to tell celebratory stories about how they had escaped imprisonment or had a lengthy sentence reduced. Again, it is difficult to imagine where else these particular men could meet and share these stories so comfortably.**

**In Sheffield, criminal activity, whilst being an issue, was not a major focus of gym conversation. Gym conversations occurred before, after and during training, usually on the gym floor as the boxers worked the 'lines' and engaged with one another. Whilst criminal activity was the dominant theme that ran through the narrative lives of the Exeter boxers, absent fathers took a greater focus in Sheffield. Stories about absent fathers were not necessarily shared on the gym floor, but the gym floor did become a site where stories fathers might tell to sons were shared.**

**In one notable example, Richard mocked Lee for the styling of his facial hair. At the time, Lee was growing hair under the chin, around the neckline and throat. Lee's face was clean-shaven. During the exchange Lee explained that he suffers from in growing hairs. This provided an opportunity for Richard, the older of the two, to tell a story about shaving. The story started based on the fact that Richard confessed he too suffers from in growing hairs. During the course of the story, Richard provided advice on what products to buy, how to shave and when. An audience of boys and young men gathered to hear the story, many of whom were old enough to shave or were soon to reach that stage of puberty. Richard explained how the skin on the face and neck is delicate and that men have a tendency to attack the face when shaving, applying too much pressure and force. Richard encouraged Lee, and the audience, to be gentle and soft**

when shaving, taking care of their skin in order to avoid the pain of in growing hairs.

The exchange between Lee and Richard is important. It is not a discussion about boxing, but it is through the relationships formed through boxing that Lee is able to receive advice he might not be able to receive from his own father. The story, whilst seemingly mundane, and certainly not boxing related, drew a crowd and enabled a group of young men to share a particular narrative about masculinity, which, in many ways, counters the types of stories told about masculinity in the sport of boxing. Through this particular story, Richard shared a narrative about male grooming which encouraged sensitivity, gentleness and acknowledged that elements of masculinity can be delicate. As such, it counters the stories told about the need for heroic masculinity in boxing and the ability to push the body through pain barriers.

The boxing gym in Sheffield provided a site where men could learn about being men. They received lessons in a particular version of masculinity through the bodily practices of the sport, and the narrative resources that accompanied them, but in addition they were afforded a space where alternate, albeit limited, perspectives on masculinity could be discussed. The masculine identity offered by the practices and narratives of boxing did not necessarily define the individuals at the Sheffield site. There is a difference then between the narrative resources of boxing, which are relational to the structures of the sport, its governing bodies and authority figures and the conversations and resources individuals engage with inside the gym but outside of boxing discourse.

If the focus of boxing studies is on the structures, the governing bodies, and the figures of authority, such as the coaches, promoters, managers and agents, there is a danger that the voices and experiences of boxers are lost, silenced, or at least sidelined. To explore the structures, governing bodies and figures of authority to demonstrate the extent to which boxers are exploited, controlled and trapped by the sport, whilst simultaneously paying insufficient attention to the idiosyncratic experiences of boxers themselves only tells part of the story. Further, through the focus on exploitation at the commercial level, there is a tendency to ignore the experiences of the amateur boxing experience, particularly the amateur who has no ambition to turn professional. In this scenario we are left knowing very little about why certain individuals are willing to invest their time, effort and bodies in the sport, what they gain from the sport and what their experiences are.

Clearly, notions of exploitation are important and require investigation. Sugden's work presents a rather bleak analysis of the manner in which the sport operates, and yet it does raise questions about what professional boxers, and amateurs with professional ambitions, expect and aspire to, and what their experiences might ultimately be. What the work fails to consider is the manner in which individuals come to terms with this tension, or indeed, and perhaps more interestingly, how individuals experience boxing outside of this tension. There are clearly times when boxers, whether they are subject to exploitation or not, are experiencing something positive and affirming. The boxing gym is a site that allows men the space to be kind to one another (Dunn 2009). It permits interaction and

facilitates communion, offering an environment where knowledge and experience, outside of the rules and practices of boxing, can be exchanged.

### Limitations and Plans for Development

The identity of boxer, and the performance of this identity through the narration of experience was the main focus of this study. The study explored how the shared pool of narrative resources available to boxers affected their performance of self and sense of identity. The project explained how narratives, research and individuals do not exist in a vacuum, to explain how narratives are relational. Additionally, the project argued how narrative resources are multiple and subject to change, but ultimately limited, affected by the resources an individual has access to through the relationships and cultures that individual is invested in. Narrative is not fixed, but always under construction. As an individual's narrative is their identity, so to must their identity be understood as under construction and subject to change and influence. With the acceptance of this argument it must be acknowledged that identities too are relational and multiple. The identity of boxer is perhaps one of a multitude of identities an individual who boxes may assume. The individuals who participated in my study may also have identified as fathers, labourers, students, husbands, boyfriends, sons, black, white, Arab, religious, atheists and so on. Each identity marker brings with it a set of shared narrative resources, forming the cumulative web of resources available to an individual. Clearly, it would be possible to make sense of boxing experiences and indeed self through a combination of these resources, or through any individual group.

**This study focused on the group of narrative resources pertaining to boxing. It examined the boxing literature to present a typology and taxonomy of boxing discourses, themes and resources. Transcripts were coded and analysed based on these themes, which were presented as the themes of boxing discourse, and the shared narrative resources available to boxers. Clearly, the individuals who participated in this study may have had at their disposal additional narrative resources to make sense of their experiences. These resources may have been linked to their non-boxing identities, but may have helped them make sense of their experiences and thus themselves. It was beyond the scope of this project to explore what these additional resources might have been and the extent to which they were present within the narrative account provided at interview. Revisiting the participants of this study, and following the life history interview approach adopted by McAdams (2006), could provide additional material to help develop this project.**

**The McAdams approach to life history interviewing asks a participant to do the following, 'Imagine that your life were like a book, with chapters. Please divide your life story into its main chapters. Give each chapter a name and provide a brief plot summary for each' (McAdams 2006: 94). This approach does not drive a particular agenda, but provides the participant with the space to describe their life story through the narrative resources available to them. Adopting this approach might enable participants to tell more types of stories than they did in interview for this study. It might have demonstrated the extent to which multiple resources, derived from multiple identities, helped them make sense of their boxing experiences. This approach was not chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly,**

the project required a very specific and detailed focus on the experiences of boxing, particularly in the training space and in competition. Experiences outside of this remit, whilst potentially interesting and important, might have detracted from the initial focus of the thesis. Secondly, the approach adopted by McAdams is designed for people in the middle years of their lives 'roughly the years between 35-65' (McAdams 2006: 93). Only two of my participants matched this age range, the trainer at the Sheffield site and the chairman of the club at the Exeter site.

Finally, whilst the shared narratives of boxing was the focus of the interview, and questions asked were related to boxing experience, the participants had the freedom to make sense of their experiences through any of the narrative resources they had access to. The participants of this study, when describing their boxing experiences, predominantly recruited from and adapted the narrative resources identified as making up the shared pool of resources in boxing discourses. The shared pool of narrative resources, available to boxers, was important in order that the individuals who participated in this study were able to make sense of their experiences.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, there was a dearth of female boxers at either of the two sites. Of the two female participants, only one was eligible for consideration for this project due to age. The result was that very little attention was paid to the performance of femininity within the sport of boxing. The opinions and experiences of female athletes, with the exception of Jenna, were not considered by this project. In short, this thesis could be accused of being yet another project on boxing, written by a male researcher, about male participants, with little to no focus on female participation. Considering the date on which this

thesis was completed, which coincides with the Olympic year and the first year that female boxers have been able to compete in the Olympic games, the lack of female boxing voices in this study is something I am not happy about.

Jenna's transcript hints at the complexities of gender performance for females within the sport of boxing. It demonstrates how Jenna is embroiled in a complex and contradictory set of gender performances and identity work when engaging with the bodily practices and narrative resources of the sport. The lack of female voices, not only in my project, but also in the literature on boxing indicates that more work is required in this area. Questions remain about the shared narrative resources available to female boxers. Is Jenna's narrative-identity comparable to the experiences of other female boxers? What narrative resources do female and male boxers share? What narrative resources are different? How might the sharing of narrative resources across gender groups, particularly those resources which differ, enable both groups of athletes to tell alternate stories and find different modes of engagement with the sport and self?

As was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, following my competitive bout - which represented the end of the fieldwork for this project - I made contact with a female coach who trains an all female squad. I have gained permission to observe training sessions and conduct research, at the site, with the coach and the boxers. In developing my findings I plan to spend time at this site to explore the narrative resources available to female boxers.

Issues of race, religion, ethnicity and class are addressed directly in the literature on boxing. The discourses of boxing present the sport as an

avenue through which men from the lower social classes and ethnic minorities are able to improve their material lot. Similarly, the likes of Oates use religious metaphors to describe the practices of boxing and the reverence paid to boxing heroes and legends. A number of the participants of this study were non-white, and based on their occupations and educational experience could have been identified as working-class. It would have been possible to explore notions of race and class through the interviews. These issues were not explored.

During the interview process the participants in this study did not raise issues pertaining to race or social class. The participants did not specify that they identified as a particular race or class. To identify the participants as a particular race or class would raise methodological and ethical concerns. Polkinghorne (1988) and Atkinson et al. (2003) discuss the dangers of giving an individual an identity marker they have not selected or offered themselves. Further, to have focused the questions on race and class, when the participants did not offer experiences based on their racial or class-based identities would have driven a very different kind of interview experience. That said, there is the possibility that stories about race and class were overlooked in the interview process. Clearly, at the Sheffield site, the performance of race and ethnicity features in the day-to-day activities of the gym. In developing this project further I intend to conduct follow-up interviews with the participants to explore their experiences of this type of performance.

### Dissemination

During the course of this thesis key findings from the project have been disseminated in the traditional academic formats, as journal articles and conference papers. In addition, material has been shared with the participants of the study. Samples from a published journal article were given to participants for their approval. Similarly, copies of their videoed interviews have been provided to all who have asked for it. At the amateur club in Exeter, copies of the videoed interviews were supplied on a DVD which contained footage of the participants amateur bouts. Using the resources of the University of Exeter Drama Department, I was able to film and edit the fights and interviews, providing the boxers with access to footage and material they had previously not seen.

Finally, as the participants were aware that I was conducting a number of interviews with their colleagues, and across sites, there were times when I was able to disseminate the narrative responses provided by other participants when answering the same question. The most notable example of this is the exchange between Karl and Richard, both of whom have young children. Individually they were asked whether or not they would want their child to box. At the end of Karl's interview, after he has answered the question about his child boxing, he asked if I posed that question to Richard, and if so, what Richard's response was. Truthfully at the time I could not remember asking Richard, and thus I conveyed this to Karl. Karl responded, "I just wondered what he'd say is all."

During my second interview with Richard I explained the exchange I had with Karl. The exchange between Richard and I is included below and demonstrates the manner in which communion can be achieved through the sharing of narratives

**P. Solomon:** One thing then finally, because I know, I don't want to keep you too long because I know you want to get some rest before training tonight and that. But er I, I can't remember, I don't know, I can't for the life of me remember last time if – it just came up, I interviewed Karl the other day. And Karl's got a little kid and talking to him –

**Richard:** - Oh Karl Bell?

**P. Solomon:** - Karl Bell, yeah.

**Richard:** Oh right, yeah.

**P. Solomon:** I talked to him about boxing and I talked to him about what – would you let you son – if your son wanted to box would you let your son box? And he said, “No.” he said “If he wanted to do it.” He said, “I'd let him but I wouldn't want him too.” And then he said, he said , “have you spoken to Richard?” [Richard giggles] And I said, “Yeah.” He says, “What did Richard say about it?” [Richard chuckles] And I say, “I can't remember.”

**Richard:** [Laughing] I said exactly the same as that.

**P. Solomon:** Would you?

**Richard:** No you did ask me.

**P. Solomon:** Did I?

**Richard:** Yeah you asked me –

**P. Solomon:** - I couldn't remember –

**Richard:** - and I said the exact same thing as that. Erm, yeah that's funny that in'it?

**P. Solomon:** Yeah.

**Richard: You know, but like, erm, for what I know of Karl, and I'm not...[Richard shakes his head and sweeps the back of his right hand out to camera] 'cos I'd say it if he were sat here, and I'd put it in a diplomatic way so I didn't upset him, because I do like him. I think he's a good guy. And like, our lives led to different results, you know? Different, erm, different situations, what-have-ye. So I've – apparently, from his area, he's like well known. He's, he's had his own way a lot of the time because he's a big lad and people know he can have a fight, do you know what I mean? So, erm, basically...I always thought to myself...'Me and Karl probably 'ant got much in common.'**

**Because I came to the – first came to the gym when Karl were two years in. And I've made significant more progress – just on the basis – not because I'm a great human being, just on the basis that I've not got sideline job; he's got a full-time job, and he comes after that. I've made more progress on the basis of that. Erm, but it's funny how he's come out with that and that's E-X-A-C-T-L-Y what I'd say – if you asked me would I like me son to get into boxing I'd say – and I can only think of good things what have come from boxing for me, do you know? I've not been bust open, in eleven fights, I've not been bust open, I've not got a broken nose, broken hands [Richards gestures with, or points to the parts of his body he refers to] erm, I've not so much as even got a fat lip, do'ye know what I mean?**

**The dissemination of material to the participants and not just the research community clearly has the potential to affect positive outcomes through the value felt by the participants. Communion is offered to colleagues, who although sharing a training space, exchanging in blows and knowing one another kinesthetically from sparring, do not necessarily recognize their similarities because they are not used to sharing their stories with one another. Finding ways to facilitate the sharing of narrative resources is one way in which to demonstrate the impact of research on a community, as it allows groups of individuals to engage with one another, to share experiences and to find collective ways of interpreting their experiences and thus living their lives.**

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