Electronic identifier: 14183

Date of electronic submission: 05/01/2015

The University of Manchester makes unrestricted examined electronic theses and dissertations freely available for download and reading online via Manchester eScholar at http://www.manchester.ac.uk/escholar.

This print version of my thesis/dissertation is a TRUE and ACCURATE REPRESENTATION of the electronic version submitted to the University of Manchester's institutional repository, Manchester eScholar.
Fighting for Change: Narrative accounts on the appeal and desistance potential of boxing

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2014

Deborah Louise Jump

School of Law
2.6 The Downside to Domination: Sport and Male Vulnerability………………. 42

2.7 Summary…………………………………………………………………….. 44

Chapter 3: Contemporary Ideas Surrounding Sport and Desistance from Crime…..46

3.1 Introduction………………………………………………………………….. 46

3.2 The Historical Debate: Why Sport was considered to be Beneficial......... 46

3.3 Why is Sport Presumed to Work? A Discussion on Sport’s Perceived Benefits and the Methodological Problems Surrounding This.........................49

3.4 Sport and Conformity: Theoretical Arguments for Sport’s Potential to Increase Pro-Social Behaviour…………………………………………………………... 53

3.5 Sport as Criminogenic: A Discussion on the Learnt Behaviours in Sport and its Relationship with Violence and Masculine Enhancing Properties……… 60

3.6 Summary…………………………………………………………………….. 67

Chapter 4: Methodology: Rationale, Development, Data Collection and Analysis.. 69

4.1 Introduction………………………………………………………………….. 69

4.2 Rationale and Aims of the Research…………………………………….. 69

4.3 Research Design……………………………………………………………... 70

4.4 Sampling Procedures………………………………………………………… 73

4.5 Strategies to Gain Entry and Others to Ensure Continued Acceptance…….. 75

4.6 Narrative Interviewing: The Boxer’s Stories…………………………………… 79
6.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................144
6.2 Findings in Relation to Boxing as a Site of Incapacitation .........................145
6.3 Findings in Relation to Boxing as a Form of Pro-social Development ..........152
6.4 Respect: The Gym, Opportunities and the Street ....................................157
6.5 Identity and Desistance from Violence: The Inside / Outside Gym Paradigm and the Use of Techniques of Neutralisation ........................................164
6.6 Summary .........................................................................................................176

Chapter 7: The Case of Frank: Embodiment and the Appeal of the Boxing Gym … 182
7.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................182
7.2 Frank’s Story ..................................................................................................182
7.3 Battle Wounds: Frank’s Search for Respect ................................................190
7.4 Boxing and Reconstruction of the Self .......................................................197
7.5 Discussion ....................................................................................................199

Chapter 8: The Case of Simon: Reputation, stigma and ‘fate’ .........................201
8.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................201
8.2 Simon’s Story ................................................................................................201
8.3 Working Class Habitus and Boxing ..............................................................210
8.4 Discussion ....................................................................................................216

Chapter 9: The Case of Eric: Violence, Boxing and the Damaged Emasculated
Chapter 9: The Case of Eric: Boxing, Competition and Violence

9.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................... 222
9.2 Eric’s Story .................................................................................................................. 222
9.3 The Beginning of a Boxer: Eric’s Trajectory ............................................................. 224
9.4 Physical Capital and the Boxer’s Means of Production ........................................... 226
9.5 Think You’re a Big Man Do You? Eric’s Relationship with his Father and the Appeal of the Gym .......................................................... 229
9.6 The Boxing Bulimic: Eric’s Bodily Destruction for a Sense of Acceptance ............. 233
9.7 The Boxer’s ‘Heart’ and the Controlling of a Monster - Eric and Violence Outside the Ring .................................................................................................................. 240
9.8 The Logic of Violence: Transposable Attitudes from Ring to Street ................. 243
9.9 Discussion .................................................................................................................. 245

Chapter 10: The Case of Marcus: Boxing, Competition and Desistance .................... 249

10.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................. 249
10.2 Marcus’s Story ......................................................................................................... 249
10.3 A Sense of Competition: How the Messages Transmitted in Boxing Gyms Can Potentially Promote Violent Behaviour ......................................................... 254
10.4 Discussion ............................................................................................................... 262
Chapter 11: Discussion.................................................................................. 264

11.1 Introduction.......................................................................................... 264

11.2 Findings in Relation to the Enduring Appeal of Boxing....................... 264

11.3 Findings in Relation to the Desistance Promoting Potential of Boxing..... 268

11.4 Implications for Policy and Practice.................................................... 274

11.5 Limitations of the Research and Implications for Theory................... 282

12. References.............................................................................................. 286

Word Count: 86495
Diagrams list:

Diagram 1. The Sample of Men in the Boxing Gym………………………………. 66
THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Abstract of Thesis submitted by Deborah Louise Jump for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy and entitled:

‘Fighting for Change: Narrative accounts on the appeal and desistance potential of boxing’

Month and Year of submission May 2014

Abstract

This doctoral research addresses the relationship between the sport of boxing and men’s desistance from violent crime. It examines how men make sense of violence as a result of participating in the sport, and how they subsequently rehearse and practice violence in their everyday lives both in and outside of the gym walls. Thirteen men were interviewed using Biographical Narrative Interviewing techniques as part of a six month ethnography in an inner-city boxing gym in the north of England. Furthermore, I spoke with three policy makers in the field of sport and desistance from crime, to ascertain whether or not they determined sport to be beneficial in promoting pro-social behaviour among adolescents. Throughout this thesis I pay particular attention to the participant’s understanding of violence and also how the logic of the gym reinforces attitudes favourable to violence and the maintenance of respect. Thus, this research discusses and elaborates on previous assumptions in sporting and desistance literature, and argues that while relevant, diversionary activities and sport-based rehabilitative programmes are only one element in the theory of change. In conclusion, arguments are put forward that state that boxing actually traps men in an attendant culture of respect that requires them to respond in aggressive ways to maintain an image of both masculinity and respect. This attendant culture - that is transposable between gym and street – can override the pro-social desisting elements that the gym can offer, and reinforces the logic and discourses that evokes and traps men in habits of responding to violence, therefore in terms of future policy and practice new directions need to be sought.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Copyright Statement

The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=487), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in The University’s policy on Presentation of Theses.
Dedication

This PhD is dedicated to my father Peter Jump

Acknowledgements

While the author takes full responsibility for the content of this thesis, it would not have been possible without a little help from my friends. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Jon Shute and David Gadd for their enduring support and commitment to my project, and also to the men who agreed to be interviewed as part of it. In addition, the staff and students in the CCCJ department at Manchester University were always an informal mechanism of support, and I also thank them dearly. Secondly, and more personally, I thank my parents. This PhD would not have been possible if they had not fostered and supported (financially and emotionally) a desire for education from an early age. My partner Rebecca is also at the top of the list as she consistently wiped my tears, kicked my arse, and talked me down off the ledge on numerous occasions. Thank you Bex, I would not have made it through without you. Other names would most certainly include Nikki Smith, Janet Eccles, Amie Baxandall, Alison Reed, Robert Pegg, Stuart Tomkins, Marie Smith, Laura Sandy, Jayne Compton and Stephanie Mace. Without you guys I would have missed out on beers, fun times, personal development, career advice and hangovers, and therefore disappeared into a black hole of academia. I thank you all for keeping me sane and human throughout the course of this PhD.
1. Introduction

1.1 Origins of Thesis

Boxing has been part of Western culture for millennia but has always been a contentious sport, one that attracts and repels in equal measure. Like other sports, it emerged from ancient Greece as a formalized and socially acceptable form of martial violence adapted to peacetime, and expressed the male imperative to take up arms and fight to protect citizen and polity. Boys were taught to box just as every able-bodied man was trained to fight to protect the city from foreign aggression and to uphold the prevailing ethos. Boxing was thus from the beginning seen as being a civilising influence in society by providing an outlet for male violence, while at the same time helping to promote the masculine ‘virtues’ - courage, strength, ingenuity and endurance.

This ethos has remained fundamental to boxing throughout its long history. Today it still forms part of the sport’s appeal, motivating its institutionalisation not only in the armed services but also within civil society and professional sport. And, as this thesis will demonstrate, the issues of violence, masculinity, self-knowledge and even heroism are still relevant preoccupations of those who partake in, and reflect on the sport at the start of the third millennium.

Boxing also featured heavily in the London Olympic games of 2012, and as these games were the first to feature woman’s boxing as a matter of course, boxing found itself thrust into a gendered spotlight as the contention surrounding women’s role in sports spilt over into both political and public debates. Boxing has further formed the basis of political debates surrounding its transformative potential, with many professionals and policy makers arguing that it is a useful vehicle for engaging and reforming those involved in offending behaviour (Leslie 2008; Laureus Report 2011). It therefore seems that boxing is
increasing in its appeal and exposure for both men and woman, and with the deconstruction of these elements in this thesis I begin to unravel the complex relationship between desistance from crime and sport.

It was during the London games of 2012 that this research was conducted, and throughout them I was speaking to and engaging with men who had boxed for most of their lives. Spending six months in a boxing gym in the north of England allowed me a glimpse into the lives of men who box, and also gave me the opportunity to experience the sport first-hand as I engaged in the daily routine of this pugilistic world. Conversing with the trainers and the professionals, listening to and collating their life-histories, helped me understand what boxing meant to them, how they established their identities as sportsmen, and what this mantle signified on both a structural and personal level for the likes of Frank, Simon, Eric, Marcus, Ricky and Jonny and many more of the men I interviewed.

Ethnographic in nature, the primary aim of this research was to explore whether the sport of boxing could contribute towards a process of desistance for these men, or whether it merely reinforced pre-existing violent behaviour and attitudes. More specifically, the research sought to explore the relationship between violence, discipline, and desistance in the lives of those engaged in boxing, and explores both the appeal and layers of personal significance and meaning attributed by the young men. To what extent does boxing transform, undermine, or reinforce investments in violent behaviour outside of the ring?

1.2 Why Boxing?

As a result of working in youth offending for many years as a Reparation and Rehabilitation officer, I became specifically interested in why practitioners (myself
included) often thought that boxing would contribute towards a process of desistance from violence, and also why it was so appealing to young men in particular. Accordingly, I set out to discover how the climate, and participation in the boxing gym affected men’s understanding of violence, and whether or not this could lead to a process of change. Using qualitative methods, I sought to get behind men’s stories -beyond the self-serving defensive responses we all tend to produce when questioned - to broach their understanding and relationship with violence. I felt it important to ascertain what violence meant subjectively to these men, regardless whether they had been incarcerated or not, moreover, I felt it important to ask how and why they participated in boxing - as opposed to just measuring their behavior - as I believed that this would assist with theory building and further help to reveal men’s understandings of violence in the context of their own lives.

1.3 The Boxing Gym and Site of This Research

The site of this research, and the gym in question, has been in existence for over three decades, opening its doors in 1981 after neighbourhood riots saw violent clashes with local police. Community members were perturbed over the racial tensions as a result of lack of employment and lack of provision for its young people, and the adult unemployment rate was much higher than the national average at this time. The police force had recently been accused of using racist language and excessive force against young Black youths in the area, and there was an overall sense of dismay from all aspects of the community. The boxing gym was funded as part of ‘Action Sport’; a £3 million regeneration project following the riots and it was not only seen as a site for community cohesion but as a site of opportunity; a way to engage disenfranchised youth and
hopefully giving them a sense of purpose to prevent the riots from ever happening again. Run on a ‘shoestring’ budget and held together by a local boxing hero and political activist, the gym became a hive of activity, and in its prime, transformed six local youths into national boxing championships, most of whom still train there today.

When informally discussing the benefits of boxing with the members, the majority believed that the gym was beneficial to their lives. It was difficult for some to state what that benefit entailed, but they were unanimous in their views that boxing was worthwhile. One of the trainers had previously volunteered as a youth-worker and seemed keen to make the gym accessible to young people as well as professionals, and so promoted the gym at local schools and community groups. The local government provided some monies during my time there to purchase new equipment such as gloves, bags and pads, and the young people seemed keen to come and try them on. On opening nights, there was usually a queue outside the boxing gym as the young men waited for the head coach to arrive and open the doors, and the new equipment certainly incentivised them to get there earlier and reserve it. It seemed that the boxing gym was almost universally perceived to be a community ‘hook’ for youth, and a potentially productive site for engaging young men.

1.4 Boxing: What’s the Appeal?

Undoubtedly, boxing is an appealing sport for young men. This is evidenced by the longevity of boxing clubs in both urban and inner city areas. For example, Ardwick Lads Club in Manchester first opened its doors to young men in 1896 and still continues today, and on average the number of people registered with the Amateur Boxing Association England has tripled since 2009 (ABAE 2013). For the past decade there has been an
assumption by policy makers and politicians that sport can be employed as a tool for increasing social capital, and reducing offending and anti-social behaviour, particularly among young men. Robins (1990:2) in his survey of sporting programmes ranging from outward bounds to police boxing clubs, believes however, that the issue of sport and delinquency “may well prove to be an insoluble conundrum for sociology”, as there “is no sound theoretical basis for the use of sport to combat or prevent juvenile crime”.

Yet, boxing clubs do have a long history of engaging young men in what is seen as a positive healthy activity, and they are often perceived as conducive to a sense of routine and discipline, whereby they engage youths that otherwise would be left to their own devices. However, in theory, boxing may or may not be anything other than a place of incapacitation, a community centre/gym that simply occupies young people’s time as opposed to changing their outlooks or behaviours. This would suggest that the sport of boxing does not necessarily offer a change mechanism, and that any sport that detains young people when they otherwise may be involved in criminal activity would suffice. Where boxing excels above others sport however, is the appeal. Indeed, young men flock to boxing gyms as they do football pitches for the image it represents, evidenced by the ABAE (2013) figures presented above.

1.5 Boxing and its Relationship to Desistance from Crime

This thesis examines the appeal of boxing and also its position in contemporary criminological theory. Thus, I present arguments that examine and critique the relationship between the sport of boxing and desistance from violence. Additionally, I argue that combat sports in general are conducive to the maintenance of valued masculine
identities and therefore perpetuate dominant discourses of masculinity that value violence as a central theme.

This is because, organised boxing - like football - provides a rite of passage for males, and is often viewed as a bridge between the world of working-class juvenile street gangs and street play, and also the associated struggles over ‘who rules the streets’ (Cohen 1976). Accordingly, there is a close fit between sport and masculinity; each is a part of the other, so that the prowess in sport seems to be, and is seen as, the completion of a young boy’s masculinity (Davies 1992).

Indeed, organised sport came to have a central place in the new world of urban male working class industrial culture in as much as boys learned to drink and tell jokes; they also learned the language of physical aggression. Sporting choice therefore mirrored class positioning, and if aggression is the universal currency and style of working class male relationships (Tolson 1977), then boxing and football came to be symbolic representations of working-class masculinity, especially those forged in, and associated with the industrial heartlands of Britain.

In this thesis I therefore examine the structural positioning of young men and how this translates into the appeal and desisting elements of boxing. Building upon criminological theories and in particular, Elijah Anderson’s (1999) *Code of the Streets*, I present arguments that elaborate on how the sport of boxing is appealing in its promotion of physical capital, money and peer admiration, and also how the logic of the gym reinforces the logic of the streets. In short, the lessons learnt and the masculine discourses inherent in the boxing gym reinforce the discourses of the streets, and the men who attend the gym are well versed in its translation. Seen in this light, the boxing gym merely acts as a site of
incapacitation and is therefore not contributory to a process of desistance or cognitive transformation.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis organises itself around two main themes. The first looks at the appeal of boxing, and offers a theoretical overview in relation to its enduring place in contemporary society. The second section offers insight into the desistance promoting potential of the sport and how criminological literature speaks to this; more specifically, work surrounding identity, masculinity and violence. The literature review is therefore divided along these thematic lines in chapters two and three.

Chapter four describes the methodology used for this research, detailing the ethnographic and biographical narrative interviewing methods that were viewed as optimal for addressing key research questions. The justifications for employing this method are discussed, as are the particular challenges of making them work as a female researcher in a hyper-masculine environment. The first two findings chapters -five and six- describe findings in relation to the core themes of appeal and desistance potential. Chapter five (‘appeal’) explores the tension between the straightforward ‘surface’ reward-statements of men (money, status, fame, health, discipline, etc.) and what are interpreted as ‘deeper’ motivations that suggest the gym is a physical, social but also a psychological space for accomplishing masculinity, and for creating and sustaining self-worth in the face of chronic autobiographical and structural limitations.

Chapter six (‘desistance-potential’) presents and discusses findings that contrast incapacitative, pro-social learning, and social bonding accounts of positive behavioural
change. While some surface support for all of these hypotheses is found in the narratives of men, it is also clear in their broader accounts of casual and routine violence, that boxing simultaneously verses men in an attendant culture of ‘respect’ that requires them to respond in aggressive ways outside the gym in order to maintain the identity and status gained within. This culture - transposable between gym and street –often overwhelms any pro-social influence the gym can offer, and traps men in habits of proactive and reactive violence.

Chapter seven to ten offer case studies to evidence the above points. The pen portraits of Frank, Eric, Simon and Marcus, demonstrate how boxing offers a medium by which these men can re-shape a sense of identity to support valued themes, and also why boxing is appealing particularly for these men having had a prior history of economic, academic and structural disadvantage. Frank’s story discusses how boxing acted as ‘survival training’ in an environment that took violence as a form of defense, whereas Simon’s touches upon the relationship between habitus and agency, and how his father’s reputation as the local ‘hardman’ influenced his attitudes towards boxing and violence.

Marcus’s talks of racism, competition, and violence at a time when being a young unemployed Black man were viewed negatively by both state and society. Eric’s story speaks of familial abuse - both as a victim and perpetrator – and describes the ‘deep’ appeal of the boxing gym as a site for establishing an identity that denies and defies victimization. Eric’s story illustrates the destructiveness of gym life, and the serious negative impacts that this can have upon men’s bodies and minds.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings, and elaborates on issues of situated respect, identity, and on the psychosocial perpetuation of an immersively violent habitus. Finally, and in light of these findings, I problematise the extent to which boxing is still
deemed relevant for youth policy and practice today, and argue that this misplaced and counterproductive faith only underlines the limited options of damaged, socially marginalised men, and the equally limited public expectations of them.
2. The Appeal of Boxing

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the enduring appeal of boxing and why it also continues to be a popular sport particularly among young working-class men. I begin by briefly outlining the history of boxing and how it was viewed as cultural entertainment in the 19th century. I further demonstrate how the middle classes, towards the end of this century, distanced themselves from the ideology of contact sports and in particular boxing, and refocused their attention on more definable class based sporting activities. In other words, sport became stratified, and as a result different activities became appealing to different classes of men.

Accordingly, I consider the ways in which boxing forms part of class and masculine discourses. I therefore discuss the appeal of boxing from a class based masculine perspective, and outline how contact sports form part of male working-class identities, particularly those that are informed by ‘hardmen’ discourses and motivated by violent working-class habitus ideals (Winlow 2001).

Moreover, I conclude with literature that suggests that these male discourses are perpetuated by a gender order inherent in sporting practice, whereby men are able to perform masculinity by validating their domination towards women and other males (Connell 1990; Messner 1990; Messner and Sabo 1990). Thus, boxing’s appeal is enduring, as it not only supports and perpetuates identity formation among men who use

---

1 This being a set of socially learned dispositions, skills, and ways of acting that are often taken for granted, and which are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life.
violence as a mechanism of control and domination, but further allows them to express this in their performance of masculinity and sport.

### 2.2 A Brief History of Boxing

The first recorded boxing match documented in the London Protestant Mercury newspaper took place on the 6th January 1681 in Britain. It was between the 2nd Duke of Albemarle’s butcher and butler, with the victor winning a prize (McGhee 1988). Commonly referred to as prizefighting, boxing such as this had no rules; indeed, there was no referee, no weight categories and no head protection or gloves. The first boxing rules, which were merely about preventing deaths in the ring, were introduced in 1743 and referred to as the Broughton Rules (ibid). Under these rules, if a man went down and could not continue after a 30 second count then the fight was over and the other man was deemed the winner. It was not until 1867, that boxing as we know it, came into existence, with the Marquess of Queensberry Rules introducing chalked rings, boxing gloves and timed rounds and knockdowns. However, despite the Queensberry rules, boxing was and still is, a regulated form of consensual violence. It stands apart from other sports in this fact, as it is the only one whose main objective is to inflict intentional pain on another human being.

All sports are inherently competitive and therefore conducive to the arousal of aggression, yet boxing differs as it employs violence in the form of play fight or mock battle between individuals that is the both the central and legitimate ingredient. Because of this fact, and the excitement that goes with that, boxing seems to both fascinate and repel in equal measure. In present-day society, sports such as boxing can be enclaves for the socially acceptable, ritualised expression of physical violence that is often touted as the main
appeal. Moreover, it is often cited as a very skilful sport, and as Joyce Carol Oates (1987: 94) has attested, ‘Even the spectator who dislikes violence in principle can come to admire highly skilful boxing; to admire it beyond all “sane” proportions.’

This idea of a fascination with violence is not a new phenomenon, the roots of modern contact sports such as football, boxing and rugby, can be traced directly to a set of locally variable medieval and early modern folk games that went by a variety of names such as hurling, knappan and camp ball (Dunning and Sheard 1979). They were played according to spoken rules through the streets of towns, and there were no external agents of control such as referees or linesman. In spite of the differences between these sports and modern day combat sports, one of the central characteristics of such games are the high level of open violence they involve. Participants of these sports engage in relatively free expression of emotion while exercising minimal forms of self-control, thus, generating in a pleasurable form excitement akin to that aroused in battle.

Historically, games and sports of this kind evidently corresponded to the structure of society where the levels of state-formation, and of social development more generally were relatively low; where violence was a frequent feature of everyday life (Dunning 1986). Indeed, 18th and 19th century boxing matches competed with public executions to satisfy audiences’ desire for violent spectacles, and quite often, boxing matches were held as part of a larger open-air festival in conjunction with other sports such as horseracing (Sugden 1996). As a consequence, prizefighting came to be more and more accessible for popular consumption, evidenced by the sports journalist Pierce Egan who published his Boxiana series (1813-1829) during this period. Pugilism as it now became known as, was particularly popular among the lower classes from whose ranks the vast majority of prizefighters were drawn (Sugden 1996). The rising popularity of pugilism occurred during a period of poverty when life expectancy was short, and both Hobbes (1968) and
Elias and Dunning (1986) wrote about how life for the urban poor was both brutal and nasty during these times. Accordingly, pugilism was able to flourish, as ‘The bloodiness in the ring and the pit paralleled the bloodiness of society’ during these times (Gorn 1986:27).

Nevertheless, as the 19th century progressed Stearns (1987) argues that the gymnasium and sport movement became informed by an ideology of social and moral development, therefore, suggesting that the exercise of controlled aggression in sports was a good thing for the physical and moral development of young men. Indeed, Gorn (1986:202) claimed boxing provided the perfect vehicle for this, as pugilism with its ‘Blood-letting, merciless competition, and stern self-testing in the ring addressed the newly perceived need of middle and upper-class men for a more active life.’ In short, boxing was seen as counteractive to ‘effeminizing tendencies’ and thus prepared men for education and military training in Britain’s expanding empire, and more so, sport in general, was seen as ‘a vehicle for the inculcation and expression of “manliness”’ (Dunning 1986:82).

However, a rising tide of opposition that had previously formed in the United Kingdom began to take shape in the USA and the middle classes started to slowly distance themselves from the sport of boxing (Dunning 1986). Indeed, towards the end of the 19th century a change in class structure among sporting activities started to become apparent, with the middle classes slowly beginning to turn their attention to gymnastics and other college based scholarship sports in a more discerning manner (Dunning and Sheard 1979). It was in this context that players became subject to written rules in sport, with many of these rules expressing a control or elimination of more extreme forms of violence.

In 19th century Britain, there was interplay between what happened nationally and what happened in the school, and the Victorian public school became the main site for a new
kind of masculinity that focused on the physical characteristics of the loyal, brave and active man (Dunning and Sheard 1979). Common to both was the codification of sports. The Football Association was founded in 1863, the Rugby Union rules (based on the Rugby School rules) were formulated in 1871, and in 1866 the Pugilists’ Benevolent Association adopted a series of rules partly devised by the lightweight champion boxer-Arthur Chambers (Boddy 2008). Boxing regulations gradually became more rigorous during Victoria’s reign as the London Prize Rules superseded Broughton’s rules in 1838. These specified in particular, the size of the ring, the use of the turf, the role of umpires, and outlawed head-butting, kicking and biting. More importantly, and to the dismay of the Victorian underworld, these rules also decreed that if the contest was undecided all bets were off (Thomas 1998).

The Queensberry rules that were essentially a modified version of those that had governed sparring for many years, and went much further towards bridging the gap between the amateur and the professional sport. All the grappling style holds associated with wrestling, or indeed, modern day Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) were disallowed. This ensured a more upright position and the introduction of weight categories, which for professional boxers, were also to be strictly observed. Gloves that had been mainly used in training were now to be compulsory in fights, and under the Queensberry rules there would also be a set number of rounds, usually in the region of 20.

After 1860 old style prize fights continued in secret, but they were no longer national events, and the Queensberry rules were generally chosen over the London prize Rules in most legitimate fights. Indeed, it was with the introduction of these new rules that contributed overall towards the eradication of bare-knuckle boxing, and therefore paved the way for boxing, as we know it today.
During the mid-Victorian period public schools began to spring up. It was during this period that ideas around engagement in sporting activities as a form of moral redemption started to be instilled in young men. The abrasive sporting regimes of the English public schools began embedding ideas of the virtuous ‘Christian Gentleman’ into forms of official education as a form of social control, and sports as a moral education proved to be the public school’s most powerful contribution to education at this time (Robins 1990).

Accordingly, sport was placed at the heart of the curriculum as it was seen as a central way in which values could be transmitted. Public school sporting stories became enormously popular, with *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) starting the trend. These sporting stories epitomised the values of what became known as ‘muscular Christianity’, and moral rectitude became directly equated with physical fitness (Hall 1994). This was because “boys active in strenuous sports were considered less liable to indecent behaviour” (Robins 1990:11).

Further to the establishment of moral rectitude in public schools, a move towards improving the moral and physical health of the poor began to form as a central feature of the Victoria social reformers movement (Robins 1990). Indeed, all forms of games, athletics and recreation were encouraged and sponsored during the early years of the 20th century as a bulwark against the presumed ‘evils of urbanisation’ (ibid). Social reformers therefore supported sporting activities as a way of counteracting tendencies towards delinquency by recommending, for example, that “settlement houses manage the athletic sports of young people, for it has been proven that the athletic sphere when delivered properly may be one of the largest fields of usefulness in neighbourhood work, since all classes of people will rally more enthusiastically about athletics than anything else” (Mason and Wilson 1988:2).
One of the ambitions of this Christian movement was to establish a series of Working Men’s associations, and in 1854 evening classes developed into the establishment of the Working Men’s Colleges (Boddy 2008). These colleges with classes offering amateur sparring of an evening, helped break associations with bare-knuckle brutality, and during the 1860’s in particular, the two faces of boxing started to become radically opposed (ibid). In 1880, The British Amateur Boxing Association was founded with the motto, “Box, don’t fight”, and with this in mind, social and religious reformers encouraged the establishment of boxing clubs in working class areas. The violence of the street, it was thought, could be redirected into the gym (Boddy 2008). Indeed, in his 1899 study of East London, Walter Besant wrote of the importance of bringing the public school ideal into poor neighbourhoods:

“They work of their restlessness and get rid of the devil in the gymnasium with the boxing gloves and with single stick; they contract habits of order and discipline; they become infected with some of the upper-class ideals, especially as regards honour and honesty, purity and temperance” (1899:172).

In East London, Besant discusses the success of church based boxing clubs and in many respects, the church and later synagogues, ran gyms and supported fighters. The symbiosis of organisations such as the Boy Scout Movement, the Jewish Lad’s Brigade and Boys’ Town in amateur boxing forms the basis of many boxing legends and stories from this time (see Reed 1988 for further discussion on Anglo-Catholicism and the urban poor in East London). However, needless to say, boxing in its new revised form did little to ‘rid the streets of the devil’ (Boddy 2008), and during the 1950’s when British boxing was at its peak, the majority of those attending East End boxing clubs were far removed from the Christian ethics that the sport was supposedly endowed with.
Alex Daley’s (2014) book *Fighting Men of London* describes how London became the epicentre of boxing during the 1940/50’s, and how managers, promoters, and boxers were leading the way internationally in the sport of boxing. Particularly after the second-world war, boxing reached an all time high for the capital as the post-war boom brought the number of shows and active professionals close to pre-war 1930’s level (ibid). The Tory government at the time soon put a stop to this rising tide of pugilistic success as without any prior warning, they introduced a 33 per cent live entertainment tax in 1952 that put countless small-time promoters out of business (ibid). The social and technological changes during this time also contributed towards boxing’s changing face, and the rise in cinema and T.V as rivals to live entertainment, combined with the disappearance of boxing from schools would finish the fight game as a sport of the British masses.

However, those unable to lose the wages or those reliant on boxing as an income, carried on regardless. This generally compromised of young Jewish men, but in the late 1940’s and 50’s they were replaced with fighters from the Caribbean and West Africa, who at that time were arriving in Britain in growing numbers (Daley 2014). Areas such as Bethnal Green in London became the hub of boxing during this period, and fighters such as Ted Berry were hungry for a better life; one they believed could be achieved by professional boxing (ibid).

The Oxford House Club, a religious institution as described prior, was set-up to promote recreation and education among underprivileged men and boys, and the likes of Ted Berry attended. As he describes in Daley’s (2014:59) book ‘…you had to either be a fighter, a footballer or a cricketer; anything else, you got beaten up”. Because of this, and also the lack of entertainment during this period, the likes of Ted Berry and indeed the Kray twins, flocked to amateur boxing gyms in droves (ibid). Working by day in professions such as ‘hawking”; buying and selling unwanted household items from a local market stall, Ted
Berry and other young men from the East End of London worked by day and boxed by night; in professions that enabled them to train as amateurs after work, all with the hope of turning professional sometime soon.

The Mile End Arena was the most popular place for professional bouts during this period, and those young men who worked the markets by day and trained by night, all wanted to feature on its bill (Daley 2014). A four round match could earn you £5, whereas eight rounds got you £30, yet, the majority of ticket sales and the main cut of the purse went to the promoter who fronted the money to put on the show (ibid). Boxing was a lucrative business during this time, and it soon attracted the attention of unsavoury characters. The Kray twins in particular took to amateur boxing, and started to emulate their older brother’s success by winning various titles. Reggie was the more successful of the two, and at 17 years old both the brothers turned professional. They made their debut on the same bill at the aforementioned Mile End Arena on 31st July 1951, with both of them winning their fights on the same night (ibid).

By the time they had started boxing, the Kray twins were well known around the East End (Pearson 1984), where they and their teenage gang wreaked havoc, carrying swords and knives, and battling with other local gangs from the area. As a result, the twins had been barred from most of the area’s dance halls and cinemas and had narrowly escaped prison sentence several times (ibid). Boxing seemed to be the only activity that might have steered the twins away from a life of crime and notoriety, in theory at least, so much so that their father writes in Pearson’s book:

“…I thought boxing would be the making of the twins, give them the discipline they needed, take them off the streets and give them something other than mischief to occupy their minds” (p 41)
But soon afterwards, Pearson notes, “the street violence they were involved in mysteriously increased as well (p 43). Street violence and boxing has a long history, and forms of ‘hardness’ can still be anchored in street-fighting traditions where these forms still survive (Robins and Cohen 1978). Housing enclaves, commonly known as estates housing third generation Irish families still contain traces of what is known as ‘hardness’ (ibid), and in 2014 boxing is still anchored in the Irish travelling community’s traditions and forms of entertainment, evidenced by the recent Channel 4 documentary ‘Gypsy Blood’ (first aired 19\textsuperscript{th} January 2012). Accounts of famous fights form the root of oral traditions among these communities and families, and are generally passed down from father to son. These narratives form legends, and are part of a son’s instruction to carry on the family’s name for ‘hardness’ (Robins and Cohen 1978). As Robins and Cohen’s book \textit{Knuckle Sandwich} observed, “ In earlier years much family talk would have been sustained by a whole network of popular institutions which linked into a wider community context, and even into the professional fight game” (p 89). It is therefore no coincidence that professional fighters have been traditionally recruited from the ranks of first generation immigrant families struggling to survive in a hostile environment (ibid).

According to Robins and Cohen (1978:92), a young man would demonstrate his capacity for fighting through shows of violence in local neighbourhood gangs. These fights were not necessarily grounded in defence of territory, but also demonstrative of the integrity of the parent culture (ibid). Workmates or friends of these fighters soon realised the potential for making money, and fights would be arranged between different families with lucrative bets placed on either fighter (ibid). These fights would not follow any set rules, and lasted until the last man stood, with a trusted member holding the purse, and another on ‘lookout’ for the police (ibid). These fights were not only ways of making money for the contenders, but also a further way of displaying their talent and attracting the attention of
the local boxing fraternity. This fraternity compromised of mainly ex-fighters themselves who also worked in the labour trade, and also the fixers and bookers of fights who were generally in it to make money and exploit a new member to the fight game (ibid). Managers and trainers were also needed to turn professional and obtain a licence to fight; generally recruited from the likes of the above, and most professional fighters during this period worked part-time in the market or the docks to supplement an income while having the evening free to train.

Once a professional licence was obtained, fighting in back alleys or on the workshop floor after hours was disallowed, as was bar fighting or any other form of illegitimate violence. To get involved outside the ring would risk losing one’s licence, and most men would rather abstain and avoid potential jail time, or worse, lose money as a result of losing their licence and having to drop out of professional bouts (ibid). The status however, of once being a ‘backroom brawler’, followed these men into the ring, and no doubt contributed towards ticket sales. Indeed, the audience could discern a street fighter from his legend and demeanour, as this “two-fisted style of fighting evoked echoes of street culture and its underworld” (Robins and Cohen 1978: 91). Moreover, the fighter against the boxer provided the drama, and those who worked alongside the fighter in the markets and docks during the day inevitably cheered him on by night.

As previously discussed, the boy’s club movement was mainly established in working class domains, and therefore attempted to introduce a different ethos to that of the street fighter. The amateur code of the gentlemen attempted to stress the importance of sparring as fitness, fair play, sobriety, and most of all, losing with grace. The gym became a place to box according to the amateur code; not the back alleys or estates, and arguments between rival groups were supposed to be settled with gentlemanly gloved fists and fairness, as opposed to pure brutality and territorial vigour. The amateur game, arguably
pure ceremony marginally succeeded in stripping boxing of its unsavoury connections such as gambling and petty crime (Robins and Cohen 1978), and this evidenced in modern day versions of the sport with the advent and rise in White Collar Boxing. Yet, despite many efforts of social reformers, and indeed contemporary policy makers, boxing is still associated with some working-class family traditions (ibid), whereby it is seen as a full-time career or as a part-time job as a journeyman, and not necessarily just a form of moral rectitude or physical exercise.

2.3 Modern Day Boxing: Routes to Turning Professional

Undoubtedly, boxing does offer opportunities for young people, especially for those who are dedicated. It has a distinct appeal, and the vast numbers of youths and young adults participating in amateur boxing across the U.K evidences this. Indeed, the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) reports 19,000 registered members across 900 active clubs in 2013 (www.abae.co.uk). Yet, for those wanting to turn professional, it is by no means an easy feat. Professional boxing, as we know it today, is governed and overseen by the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBOC). This organisation governs and grants professional licences, and draws up contracts that legitimise and regulate the working relationship between boxers and managers. The BBOC stipulates that to become a professional boxer one must have significant experience at amateur level, and have successfully competed to a competent degree. The Board will in exceptional circumstances grant a professional licence without amateur experience but only with the tutelage of an experienced trainer and a demonstration of skill to board members. Anyone applying for a professional licence must undergo extensive medical checks, particularly MRA brain scanning and H.I.V and Hepatitis tests. Once these checks are
complete, and the relevant paperwork signed, the application is passed to the local secretary for approval. It is a requirement that the boxer remain fit and healthy, and a waiver must be signed that indicates that the boxer is aware of the risks involved and competent enough to consent. More specifically, the boxer is informed that very few make it to the pinnacle of success in professional boxing and are advised to stay in employment if this is already the case:

“Many young people may be attracted to the sport by the lure of big money and it must be realised from the outset that very few boxers make it to the very top. For most boxers their ring earnings will act as a boost to their ordinary earnings and all potential boxers are therefore advised to ensure that they have a good regular income that they can maintain during their boxing career. A sympathetic and understanding employer is always an asset.” (BBBOC: www.britishboxingboardofcontrol)

Additionally, boxers are also informed that their behaviour outside of the ring must be aligned with the standards outlined in the documentation: ‘Career as a Professional Boxer: Necessary Steps’ (BBBOC: www.britishboxingboardofcontrol). This document stipulates that a boxer’s conduct will be monitored outside of the ring and any behaviour that brings the sport into disrepute will be sanctioned. For example, heavyweight Dereck Chisora recently had his licence revoked by the BBBOC for slapping Vitali Klitschko his opponent at the weigh-in prior to the fight, and also for a press conference brawl with David Hayes in February 2012. The board withdrew Chisora’s licence in March 2012 that meant Chisora was unable to box with a British licence until the following year (The Independent: March 2013).

The BBBOC has been overseeing and regulating boxing since 1929, but its role has changed considerably over the years. Initially the board was set-up to organise procedures considering champions, but more recently the board’s work covers a wide-range of issues
ranging from medical records through to appointment of referees and charity work. The Board has 2,000 license holders currently, and out of these, 650 are active boxers (BBBOC: *The Role of the British Boxing Board of Control*, [www.britishboxingboardofcontrol](http://www.britishboxingboardofcontrol)).

Of these 650 most are semi-professional, and on average a professional boxer will have no more than 12 contests a year (ibid). While the Board takes no interest in the pecuniary element of boxing, especially between manager, promoters, and boxers, it is responsible for ensuring that the bouts are evenly matched in terms of experience. Thus, potential ‘mismatches’ are resolved between the board, the promoters, and managers, to prevent any unnecessary injury, and match fixing (ibid). While the Board takes no responsibility for injuries caused in the sport, it recognises that boxing is a “physically hazardous sport” (ibid: p50), and therefore tries to minimise harm by advising all licence holders of the potential dangers and pitfalls concerned with choosing the sport of boxing as a career.

Yet, having said that, the BBBOC recognises that boxing may offer opportunities for young men when others may be lacking, and states that: “Professional boxing is not a career to be embarked upon lightly, but for the dedicated, determined and fit young person it may offer an area of opportunity in times where there may be very few others around” (BBBOC: *Career as a Professional Boxer*, p4. [www.britishboxingboardofcontrol](http://www.britishboxingboardofcontrol)).

Arguably, due to the decline in craft skills and traditional trades which have been crucial in defining and shaping images of masculinity (Hobbs 1994), boxing *may* offer a gendered opportunity for men when there may be few others around. The BBBOC recognises this in its documentation surrounding routes to turning professional, yet, as stated above, very few make it to the pinnacle of success as turning professional full-time for some men is a difficult process. Fitness and dedication are the pre-cursors to turning professional, and unless dedicated to this endeavour full-time, maintaining one’s fitness
while holding down an additional job can be difficult. Thus, unless truly talented and
dedicated, turning professional is generally something regarded as quite a risky
endeavour, and most men remain at an amateur level while maintaining other careers.
Lack of opportunity may well be something that attracts young people to the sport of
boxing, and in the next section, it is my intention to further break down the appealing
elements of the boxing gym. Therefore I will be looking at how boxing offers further
opportunities to define masculinity in sporting structures, and how it not only offers
opportunities for employment, but also allows men to employ the sport as a form of
domination. Lastly, I examine what is at stake for men looking to turn professional, the
status awarded to those who do, and the barriers and constraints for those who are unable
or cannot. I will discuss the agency and vulnerability of men who box, and with that,
foreshadow the obstacles that they face in their daily lives as result of choosing to box for
a living and a pastime.

2.4 Sport as a Definer of Hegemonic Masculinity

Sport is a key terrain of contest for gender, as well as race, class, sexual and global
relations (Connell 1990; Messner 2005). It is a highly visible forum in which male and
female bodies are literally built, their limitations displayed and their capacities debated.
As such, it is a key site for ideological contest over the meanings of masculinity and
femininity. In the 1970s with the emergence of second wave feminism and inspiration
from the ‘men’s liberation movement’ (Connell 1990) a small amount of work on men,
masculinity and sport started to appear (see Farrell 1974; Schafer 1975 for further
discussion). However, it was not until 1980 with Donald Sabo’s book: Jock: Sport and
Male Identity that scholars started to develop critiques of sexism, homophobia, violence,
and militarism at the heart of men’s sports. Sabo (1985) developed these ideas, and laid
the foundation for specific questions to be asked surrounding boy’s socialisation through
sport, competition and success, bodies, emotions and pain, domination of women, and
aggression and violence. Additionally, these questions paved the way for feminist writers
such as Theberge (1991); Bordo (1989) and Hall (1991) to conduct research in pro-
feminist directions and look at how women fit into an overall structure of power from a
sporting perspective.

As discussed previously, in the United States and increasingly Britain, men’s sport was
formed during industrialisation and urbanisation, in a time of shifting work and family
dynamics for both men and women (Kimmel 1990). This was at the tail end of the first
wave of feminism and also amid racist fears of immigration, therefore sport served to
bolster faltering ideologies of white middle class masculine superiority over women, and
also over race and class subordinated men (ibid). Based on these concepts of gender,
feminism, masculinity and sport, Connell (1987) supplied sport studies scholars with a
conceptual framework with which to examine the complexities of gender dynamics in
men’s sports that revolutionised the way we think about masculinity.

Traditional sociobiological theories of masculinity stated that a man’s body and gender
was purely anatomical (Wilson 1978), yet, in the social sciences, bodies and gender
started to be viewed as neutral surfaces that could be imprinted upon, constructed and
performed. This wave of thought was in response to notions of sex role theories of gender
and the idea of a male sex role, as scholars could see that sport was an institutional realm
in which men construct and affirm their separation from, and domination over women.
According to Bartky (1988) Lensky (1986) and Theberge (1991) this was particularly
relevant, as women’s exclusion from most aspects of sporting activity contributed towards
men’s continued control and dominance over women’s bodies. However, sport did not
just seamlessly reproduce men’s power over women, sport was also a realm in which men of dominant groups affirmed their dominance and superiority over other men. Indeed, Connell’s (1995) concepts of hegemonic, marginalised, and subordinated masculinities gave conceptual form to the idea of gender as multiple. These concepts produced discourses with which to speak about seemingly paradoxical gender dynamics, with hegemonic being the currently dominant and ascendant form of masculinity (ibid). Put simply, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as not feminine, but also simultaneously, not-gay, not-black, not-working class, and not-immigrant. Thus, hegemonic masculinity recognised the connection between two important social patterns - hierarchy among men and women, and also hierarchies among men (Connell 1995).

Sport therefore, became a perfect starting point for investigating how individuals actively construct meaning around gender, power and masculinity. The idea that sport is, on one hand, a modern bastion of patriarchal power, and on the other, a terrain that has been contested continually by women and by marginalised men, has been imperative to studies of sport and gender to the present day. Since the 1980s concrete studies of gender and sport, such as those mentioned, have repeatedly demonstrated how the once unquestioned bastion of powerful, competitive, hierarchical, and often-violent heterosexual masculinity is not a seamless patriarchal institution (Messner 2005). Rather, the very crux of the gender order of men’s sport is contested and wrought with contradiction and paradox (ibid). These contradictions and paradoxes cover thematic areas such as bodies, relationships, violence and domination, and for the purposes of this PhD, I turn my attention to the latter.
2.5 Sport as a Form of Domination

As discussed, sport plays an important role in the ‘masculine validating experience’ especially in the formation of identity in adolescence (Connell 1983). Connell suggests that to learn to be a male is to learn to project a physical presence that speaks of latent power. He therefore argues that sport is empowering for many young men precisely because it teaches them how to use their bodies to produce effects, and also, because it teaches them how to achieve power through practiced combinations of force and skill, ‘What it means to be masculine is, quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence’ (ibid 1987: 27). This is especially important among adolescent males for whom other sources of recognised masculine authority (based on earning power, sexual relations or fatherhood) are some way off.

The male body therefore, and especially its capacity to express force and skill, becomes an urgent task. Sport serves as an important conduit for achieving this, as according to both Connell (1995) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) our sense of identity is firmly rooted in our experiences of embodiment. It therefore becomes integral to the reproduction of gender relations that men are encouraged to experience their bodies and themselves, in forceful, space-occupying, dominating ways (Connell 1987). This is precisely why sport matters in the total structure of gender relations, as it can be argued that masculinising and feminising practices associated with the body are at the heart of the social construction of masculinity and femininity.

In linking embodied constructions of masculinity identity in structural concepts of patriarchy, Connell (1983:27) suggests that it is through a combination of both strength and skill that this is possible. Hence, ‘Men’s greater sporting prowess has become a theme of backlash against feminism, as it serves as symbolic proof of men’s superiority and right
to rule’ (Connell 1995:54). It is through this combination of strength and skill that the body can be symbolised as masculine, and arguably, nowhere else but in the discourse of sport can this be so readily harnessed. The masculine body moved from symbol of beauty to symbol of power (Dutton 1995), and in sports such as boxing, the ability to demonstrate the embodiment of force and competence is second to none, as ‘Sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture’ (Connell 1995: 54).

In the main however, this idea of force and competence is accomplished through competition, as this develops hierarchy and is deeply embedded in social structures of gender, race and class. Moreover, with the cultural meanings accorded to masculinity, men employ techniques that allow them to not only be masculine but also ‘do’ masculine (Messerschmidt 1993). This ‘doing’ not only preserves the exclusion of women from masculine validating practices such as sport, but further serves to create and carve further identities based on domination and aggression.

Messner (1990:100) argues that: ‘Violent sport as spectacle provides linkages among men in the project of the domination of women, while at the same time helping to clarify and construct differences between various masculinities.’ Boxing therefore offers a specific, traditional, physically aggressive site that invokes hegemonic masculinity, subordinates homosexuality, and by and largely excludes women from the higher echelons of success (Hargreaves 1997 Woodward 2004). Boxing therefore forms part of a practice that depends heavily on binary oppositions - especially between women and men - and this is what supports claims to exclusivity and notions of a stronger sex. Indeed, Woodward (2004: 8) writes: ‘Boxing is ever more constructed around resistance to the rhetoric of transgression and interconnections and remains entrenched in a binary logic. ’

---

2 However, in light of the recent 2012 Olympic games, where women’s boxing was included for the first time, this may be changing. For further discussion see chapter 4.9 for ethnographic account.
Woodward’s point being that, whilst theories of identity, especially gender identities, become more of a fluid dimension, the site of boxing becomes more entrenched in its resistance to anything not classed as ‘manly’, and with that, an intrinsic aversion to ‘femininity’. Accordingly, this dualistic rigidity pervades the sport, with its inherent language of heavyweights/lightweights, strong/weak, professional/amateur, courageous/cowardly, and the constant negotiation of these semantics performed and practiced by men who participate.

However, according to De Garis (2002), the disciplinary practices in boxing gyms form part of a social relation in which social identities are formed and expressed. This is particularly evident in fighting and sparring, as they are seen as being strongly associated with masculine identities and performance. This is because sparring practice involves a negotiation and representation of subordination and dominance, with De Garis (2002) further arguing that sparring practices create rituals of ‘somatic intimacy’ that are important and relevant for men in sporting arenas. He observed that sporting practices in boxing gyms offer a space in which men may share somatic intimacy that otherwise would not be socially sanctioned. The example he provides is that boxing is: ‘One of the few times in which two scantily clad men may, in a socially acceptable manner, emotionally and intimately embrace each other is immediately after they beat each other up’ (ibid: 97). De Garis further suggests that the gym is a ‘safe’ place to express this intimacy because the textual representations of boxing as masculine and violent deter any allegations of weakness and femininity.

Indeed, somatic relations among men outside of a sporting realm are controversial. Culturally this is seen as a subordinated masculinity and in opposition to that of hegemony. As gayness, weakness, and other forms of intimacy between men can be classified in these negative subordinated terms, therefore, allowing for the patriarchal
ideology to expel homosexuality from the hegemonic order. Bodily weakness is also affiliated with subordinated masculinities, as the non-sporting male can often be taunted and symbolically linked to femininity, further contributing to this idea of the insistently masculinised male. Indeed, emasculating words such as ‘pussy’ and ‘gay’ are often banded around sporting arenas as references to men who fall below the expected competitive standard set out by the dominant masculine order (Eder et al 1997; Kreager 2007).

The textual representations and the rhetoric used to describe sporting activity, particularly boxing, evoke masculinity, as aggressive boxers are often referred to as macho or hard. Messner (1990) argues that one of the main attractions of boxing is the macho quest to assert dominance through competitive victories, suggesting that masculine domination in combat sports promotes an attitude in which the body is used both as a weapon and a tool to achieve goals. According to Messner (1990) this form of masculinity is destructive to the body as it denies emotional intimacy, with the body merely acting as a medium and target of destruction and domination. He therefore argues that any intimacy shared is covert, and only characterised by doing together rather than mutual talk about inner lives. Klein (1986) and Oates (1987) both see it as a further attempt to employ aggression in the domination of others - opponents, teammates, women, ethnic minorities, and gay men, therefore, rather than discuss forms of ‘somatic intimacy’ vis-à-vis De Garis, we should pay further attention to the ways in which sport is employed to invoke hegemonic masculinity.

Notwithstanding, sports, according to Messner (1990) do provide some form of positive relationship. This is accomplished through having teammates, participation in group-activities, and the emotional salience of men’s earliest sporting experiences in terms of their relationships with other males. It is not so much the competition (although this is a
dominant masculine value of organised sports) that seems important here, but something fun to do with fathers, older brothers or uncles. Indeed, Messner’s (1990:100) respondents reported that the most important thing about sport was ‘being out there with the guys - being friends’, and this for them, led to ‘some kind of closeness’.

However, though sports participation may have initially promised this intimacy, Messner discovered that the less skilled, less competitive boys started to become alienated from the hierarchical system. Those who did experience some early experience of success in Messner’s sample, started to receive recognition from adult males (especially fathers and brothers), and therefore received higher status among peers. As a result, participants invested more and more of their energy and identity into athletic participation, developing a self-concept to that of an athlete, and internalising the rewards that came with it. These young men therefore learnt that athletic participation was a guaranteed way to obtain recognition, contingent on being a winner, and that performance and winning were extremely important. For some, this created pressures that served to lessen or eliminate the fun of athletic participation, whereas for others it was a way to achieve and obtain status among peers and male family members (Messner 1990).

2.6 The Downside to Domination: Sport and Male Vulnerability

Connell (1995:45) argues that: ‘True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies - to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body’ and in his 1990 work *Iron Man*, Connell demonstrates how the mental, emotional and physical training regimes in becoming a top athlete encourage men to deny fear, deny anxiety and pain, and avoid any other inconvenient emotions while mentally controlling one’s body to perform its prescribed tasks. ‘The decisive triumph’ Connell concludes, ‘is
over oneself, and specifically over one’s own body. The magnificent machine of the iron man’s physique has meaning only when subordinated to the will to win’ (1990:95).

However, Jefferson (1998:78) claims the embodiment of masculinity is deeper than just the male body as a centrality to the sense of self, as he writes: ‘It is thus about representations of the masculine body and their psychic underpinnings; for without the latter it is impossible to comprehend how masculine body imagery has sufficient affect to be reproduced across the generations’ (emphasis in original). Jefferson posits that whilst masculinity is embodied, it is also carries an emotional investment - the suffusion of both desire and anxiety - thus providing a further backdrop for the construction of masculine identities.

Sam Fussell’s (1991) book Muscle, predominately based on bodybuilding and not boxing, does however lend weight to Jefferson’s argument, when he discusses how he took his body to an extreme physical limit to gain a sense of ‘control’. Similarly, Klein’s (1990) ethnographic study of male bodybuilders illustrates not only the quite literal construction of hard male bodies but also the emotional insecurities, health costs, sexual anxieties, and contradictions that lie beneath the layers of muscle. Indeed, athletic careers construct masculine bodies as machines or tools, and often in this process, alienate themselves from their health, feelings, and relationships with others.

Hall (1991) argues that accounts such as Fussell’s or those seen in Klein’s ethnography, are reflective of a personal ‘hidden anxiety’, with Glassner (1989) and Pleck (1982), arguing that these anxieties tap deep into the core of conventional masculinity, as the majority of men’s self-esteem correlates highly with having a muscular body. This pursuit to obtain muscularity and a sense of control, highlights men’s ‘passionate battle against their own sense of vulnerability’ (Glassner 1989: 315), and therefore reinforces particular
embodiments and hierarchies of masculinity in sport. Moreover, one of the ways in which these hierarchies can be established and the vulnerability denied, is through the credible use of violence and domination in sport. Indeed, by honing muscularity and denying intimacy, male athletes not only protect themselves from inner anxieties, but also further allow for the perpetuation of a dominant gender order seen in sporting discourses, especially those of a combative violent nature.

2.7 Summary

In summary, much of the literature views sport as a masculine validating experience and violent sports in particular, provide linkages among men in the project of the domination of women, while at the same time helping to construct and clarify differences among various masculinities in the gender order. The employment of the male body in violent sports forms the basis of male identification and competition, and therefore becomes an important organising institution for the embodiment of masculinity. Additionally, men’s power over women becomes naturalised and linked to the social distribution of violence, and then largely through the media, weaves a structure of symbols and interpretation around these differences which naturalises them (Hargreaves 1986). Not only does the hegemonic pattern construct difference between men and women, it further serves to construct difference between class, race and status.

Historically, violence in combat sports such as boxing was often seen as primitive and uncivilised, and thus reduced to men from lower status backgrounds in which socioeconomic circumstances prevented status being achieved in academic and financial ways. For most men, particularly those from lower status backgrounds, the status and respect that they can achieve through the medium of sport becomes important simply
through being achievable. Yet, as suggested by the BBBOC earlier, very few men actually achieve monetary success or fame through professional boxing. What is achievable however, is the local success and reputable name that is often associated with those boxers from the communities where the gym resides. Having said that, the barriers and constraints that befall a professional boxer are all too common, as the risk of monetary exploitation by promoters and managers is as significant as the risk of injury (Wacquant 2004). For those few that do succeed at a professional level, the pressure to maintain fitness and avoid defeat is all encompassing, not to mention the early age at which most boxers are forced to retire (ibid), therefore making the career of a professional boxer somewhat short-lived and tenuous.

In general terms, professional success does not equate to overall social mobility. As Jefferson (1992:4) has observed, ‘That the next heavyweight champion will almost certainly be black has nothing to do with chromosomes and natural aptitude but everything to do with the racial and/or class disadvantages combined.’ Indeed, this hegemonic pattern evident in sport, merely serves to perpetuate a gender order that is constructed and legitimised by the overall domination of women, and also the marginalisation of certain men. Additionally, sport provides an arena in which men can distance themselves from the intimate feminine other and the subsequent marginalised male. Boxing therefore, is appealing to men as an investment; an investment in physical capital and muscul arity that allows for the domination of both women and other men who do not meet the standards prescribed by the hegemonic gender order. This standard inherent in male sporting culture is what arguably contributes towards violent attitudes and behaviours among male athletes, as one of the most widely discussed research areas to develop from masculinity and sport is the relationship between male athlete’s on/off the pitch violence. In the next chapter I will discuss how a combat sport such as boxing
subscribes towards the arguments surrounding male athletes understanding and practice of violence, and more importantly, how this may or may not contribute towards a process of desistance for those who box.

3. Contemporary Ideas Surrounding Sport and Desistance from Crime

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I describe and critique what I consider to be the most important criminological theories in relation to boxing’s desistance-promoting potential. I begin with an outline of policy debates that suggest sport is beneficial and important for young people in general, and also for those deemed at risk or those currently involved in offending behaviour. I elaborate further by discussing how boxing can be seen to promote conformity among young men, and how it is commonly seen as a site for conventional activity that bonds young men to socially valued themes.

Secondly, I present arguments that state that sport is causally irrelevant, especially as the empirical evidence for sport’s beneficial properties is methodologically weak. Lastly, I consider literature questioning whether sport is potentially criminogenic, particularly combat sports such as boxing, as they are arguably instrumental in promoting violent masculine discourses and therefore unfavourable to positive change.

3.2 The Historical Debate: Why Sport was considered to be Beneficial

Vague and unexamined claims surrounding sport’s efficacy in addressing issues of anti-social behaviour and crime have always underpinned public investment in sport (Coalter 2007). From 19th century concerns with social order and the moral condition of the new urban working classes (Bailey 1978) right through to the establishment of the Wolfenden
Committee in 1957, government bodies have sought to investigate the contribution that sports and outdoor activities might make in promoting the general welfare of society. The most significant policy debate however, was the inception of the 1975 White Paper on Sport and Recreation, as this paper outlined sport as ‘part of the general fabric of the social services’ (Coalter 2007:10). This paper stated that a reduction in boredom and urban frustration through participation in recreational activities contributed towards the reduction of hooliganism and delinquency among young people, thus, establishing the idea of recreation as welfare (ibid).

Policy developments such as this occurred during a period of emerging economic crisis, as the Labour government at this time halted the period of welfare expansion previously seen in the UK. Accordingly, economic decline and rising unemployment became the norm as inner cities started to become rife with decay. As a result, there was a general shift of monies away from local government leisure services to more urban sporting programmes that concentrated on the targeting of particular social groups in deprived areas (Henry 2001).

Carrying on this policy trend the newly appointed Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher directed the most significant example of money towards urban sporting programmes following the urban riots of 1981. During this time, the Sports Council allocated £3 million over three years for a demonstration project entitled Action Sport (Rigg 1986), as the government deemed it an urgent matter to place community leaders on the streets in view of the social crisis they were facing. The overall aim of Action Sport was to demonstrate that leadership could develop positive attitudes to sport and recreation, and thus increase participation among disenfranchised communities (ibid).
More recently, the New Labour Government of 1997 set about replicating previous policy ideas such as Action Sport by bringing in a number of not dissimilar policy initiatives. Yet, under New Labour it was not just delinquency that they set out to tackle. With this government, sporting programmes came under the umbrella of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, which sought to place sport (among other social agencies) more centrally on the broader social political agenda (Coalter 2007). Key indicators such as community cohesion, pro-social development, health and fitness, housing, employment and reduction in anti-social behaviour were also added to the list, with sport in particular, becoming a source of what Putnam (2000) refers to as ‘social capital’.

Nonetheless, this concept of social capital was not necessarily a new idea, as its roots were already established in the classical concerns of sociology and political sciences. Although its meanings and relevance are disputed, it is generally referred to as a social network based on social and group norms which enable people to trust and cooperate with each other via which individuals or groups can obtain certain types of advantage (Putnam 2000). In short, social capital is taken to refer to various social and moral relations that bind communities together. Indeed, communities deemed to be high in social capital are ones with strong community links and civic infrastructure; those with an active sense of local identity and solidarity in terms of mutual support. Broadly speaking, communities high in social capital tend to have a number of positive aspects, such as lower crime rates, better health and lower rates of child abuse/neglect (Kearns 2004).

In the main, all institutions of civil society have the potential to contribute towards a broader social inclusion agenda, as the Policy Action Group as part of DCMS (1999:5) states: ‘Participation in the arts and sport has a beneficial social impact. Arts and sports are inclusive and can contribute towards neighbourhood renewal, and build confidence and encourage strong community groups.’ More recently, the Department of Education
(2010:21) also wrote: ‘Sport offers a way of helping young people to build their confidence and self-esteem, while overcoming behavioural issues and acquiring life skills…it can also reduce involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour and improve attainment.’

As a result of this link to social capital (see Putnam 2000), sport policy and target-driven agendas started to appear nationally, with participation in sport becoming a requirement for all young people under the policy banner of Every Child Matters (DCSF: Department of Children School Families 2010). However, accompanying this newer more systematic emphasis on the social role of sport, there became an increased general concern with evidence for its effectiveness. In the UK especially, New Labour placed emphasis on what they termed ‘evidence based policy making’ and ‘value for money’ (Coalter 2007), therefore, focusing on ‘welfare effectiveness’ as a key outcome for further public expenditure (ibid). In other words, sport had to prove itself. Could it really be effective in accumulating social capital? And more importantly, could it be effective in the reduction of crime and disorder?

3.3 Why is Sport Presumed to Work? A Discussion on Sport’s Perceived Benefits and the Methodological Problems Surrounding This

Although the health benefits of sport are well established, the evidence for sport’s impact on education, crime, and community cohesion is limited and largely anecdotal (Collins and Kay 2003; Laureus Report 2011). Coalter (2007) argues that vague and unexamined claims about sport’s ability to address issues of anti-social behaviour and crime have always underpinned public investment in sport. From the 19th century concerns with social order and the moral condition of the new urban working classes via the 1975’s
White Paper’s concern to reduce ‘boredom’ and ‘urban frustration’, the supposed role of sport in combating crime and anti-social behaviour has been key for public sector rationale and investment.

In the main however, sport has traditionally always been regarded as having moral components; having the ability to instill values that are transposable to other areas of life (Coalter 2007; Nichols 2006; 2007). These values often range from character building attributes to the development of self-efficacy, locus of control, self-discipline and fair play. Moreover, qualitative policy documents can often be littered with ad hominem statements of how sport ‘saved me from a life of crime’ (Coalter 2007:62). The main focus however, is on the relationship between sports participation and crime reduction. Can participation actually reduce criminal activity, and if so how? The answer to this question can be broadly broken down into theories, one being the rehabilitation of known offenders, and the second, being theories concerning crime prevention or ‘diversion’ as it is more commonly known (for further discussion see Brantingham and Faust 1976).

The former approach of rehabilitation tends to involve smaller projects with a specific focus; usually the targeting of known offenders and often based on outdoor adventure activities. They generally have a specific remit in terms of a counselling based approach in which participants are risk assessed and their needs identified as part of the project’s mission. These types of programmes are usually adapted to meet needs, and aimed at developing personal and social skills while building self-confidence and esteem. More importantly, these programmes are specifically focused on the development of a locus of control, whereby participants believe that they can control events that affect them, and therefore be less likely to blame external forces for their own behaviour. In short, locus of control can be said to be about personal responsibility and core evaluation of one’s self,
therefore this locus, once developed, is presumed to be transposable to the wider social context and thus reducing offending (Coalter 1988; Nichols and Crow 2004).

Diversionary programmes on the other hand, which are the predominant concern of social policy initiatives, tend to be relatively large scale, open-access sports programmes, targeted at youth at risk in specific identified areas during times when anti-social behaviour is perceived as being at its peak. This approach was specifically sanctioned under the New Labour regime as part of their social inclusion agenda, and part of a cross-cutting scheme that saw all agencies under the banner of crime and disorder coming together in a holistic targeted approach, indeed, the significance of this approach was indicated by the establishment of a national sports-based programme called Positive Futures. This programme was established in 2002, and by 2003/4 it had acquired approximately £6 million worth of funding between the Home Office Drugs Strategy Directorate, Sport England and the Youth Justice Board (Coalter 2007). The initial 24 established nationwide projects were specifically targeted at 10-16 years old in wards identified as the 20 most deprived across the UK with a specific focus on increasing regular participation in sport, a reduction in youth offending, and a further reduction in drug use among 10-16 years olds participating on the schemes.

Beverley Hughes, then Minister for Children, Young People and Families, said that the Positive Futures schemes were: ‘Engaging young people in their own communities and effectively changing the behaviour of some of the most “hard to reach” young people’ (Crime Concern 2006:5). New Labour were reported as having spent £1.6 billion each year funding the youth service and programmes to engage young people in activities designed to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour (Audit Commission 2009). Yet despite this, evidence for any of the schemes effectiveness was methodologically weak, as ‘It is not possible to make direct connections between the impact of sport-based social
interventions such as Positive Futures and reductions in crime or substance misuse’ (Crabbe et al 2006:13). Similarly, Coalter (2007:117) in a review of 11 UK schemes designed to use sport to divert young people from criminal behaviour found that ‘information about outcomes was hard to come by’.

The absence of systematic evidence of the effectiveness of such programmes can be explained by a number of factors. According to Coalter (2007), at the level of practice there has been an absence of a culture of monitoring and evaluation, bolstered by a range of factors and a simple belief in the efficacy of such interventions. However, the fundamental issue is the fact that there has been a widespread lack of clarity about the nature of outcomes and their measurement. Furthermore, there have been substantial methodological difficulties in controlling for intervening variables and assessing the cause and effect relationships of these programmes (Nichols and Crow 2004; Coalter et al 2000). Moreover, these same problems are also said to be evident in the more focused small-scale rehabilitation programmes (ibid). Similarly, Taylor et al (1999) argues that the major problem in identifying and measuring the effects of sport on criminal behaviour (if any) is that the influence on behaviour is indirect, working through a number of intermediate outcomes or processes, such as improved fitness, self-efficacy, self-esteem or locus of control, and the development of certain social and personal skills. It is therefore clearly not sufficient or wise, to measure changed behaviours and to simply assume that they are as a result of sport participation. In short, it is difficult to analytically separate the developmental changes related to sports participation from more general developmental changes in young people’s lives, and also from the influence of social and structural factors unrelated to sports.

Finally, it has been consistently noted that many of these projects have a number of common weaknesses, such as vague rationales, overly ambitious objectives and a
relatively unsophisticated understanding of the variety and complexity of the causes of criminality (Coalter et al 2000; Utting 1996). Moreover, related to this definition of criminality or anti-social behaviour is the interesting question about the extent to which many young people may not accept that their behaviour needs to change, which for many academics and professionals working in the field, is a major factor in the potential success of any intervention (ibid). What can be said is that it is a complex relationship, one that can only ever be partially illuminated upon, and I discuss this further below.

3.4 Sport and Conformity: Theoretical Arguments for Sport’s Potential to Increase Pro-Social Behaviour

Over the past thirty years a number of studies have indicated that involvement in sport can be associated with reduced delinquency and violent behaviour. They argue that sustained involvement in sporting activity contributes towards an overall decrease in crime and anti-social behaviour (Landers and Landers 1978; Mahoney 2000; Langbein and Bess 2002). It is arguments such as these that lend legitimacy to delinquency prevention programmes such as Positive Futures in the United Kingdom and the Midnight Basketball Leagues in the United States of America, with both of these schemes promoting sports as a means of keeping young urban males off the streets while increasing participants bonds to schools, conventional peers, and also increasing self-esteem, social capital and upward mobility.

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

To elaborate, sports participation should increase attachments to coaches, teammates and institutions (Coleman 1961; Purdy and Richard 1983; Messner 1992), and the bonds to these influences should arguably reduce individual tendencies towards aggression and delinquency. Arguably, this is what the Conservatives had in mind when they developed Action Sport, and placed community leaders at the forefront of crime prevention in deprived areas after the 1981 riots. Furthermore, the actual participation in the sport itself should allow for the athlete’s commitment to conventional lines of action, as the penalties imposed for breaching the rules would result in loss of social status. Additionally, the time required to practise and be successful in the chosen sport should increase involvement, and with this, a decrease in time spent on other non-conventional/illegitimate activities (McNeal 1995). Finally, because the rules and values of sports are assumed to lie in the value system shared by conventional society, participation in sports should increase an adolescent’s belief in these, and therefore promote pro-social behaviour (Larson 1994). Indeed, many youth sport initiatives have
explicitly promoted pro-social behaviour through the learning of fair play, teamwork and conventional values (Fine 1987), and this element is considered extremely important in reducing and sustaining desistance from violence and delinquency.

Evidence for these theories generally comes in the shape of case studies, or qualitative interviews with bonded participants, and this can be see in projects encompassing both rehabilitative and diversionary elements. For example, work by Nichols (2007) examined a host of projects - both rehabilitative and diversionary - to examine the processes by which participants were said to have reduced their criminal involvement. Nichols (2007:199) states that: ‘In the long run, sports participation might provide a diversion from crime, in the same way that it is obvious that someone cannot be committing crime at the same time they are on a programme.’ Indeed, the same long-term effect would be achieved by long-term sports participation, and in this respect, crime reduction and sports development objectives coincide. This mechanism of involvement is the rationale behind many sporting programmes, and it is often felt by policy makers that if participants developed a long-term commitment, in the sense of Stebbin’s (1997) serious leisure - a major life interest, then this would prevent them getting involved in anything else, as the commitment developed through the love of sport would maintain a long term interest across the life-course.

Nichols (2007: 199) discovered however, that there was ‘limited evidence for this effect in the case studies’, as after 12 weeks of participation on a rehabilitative programme only 3 out of 9 case studies were progressing to independent sports participation. Furthermore, out of the 45 clients that began the rehabilitative programme, only 12 went full term. This does not necessarily mean that the mechanism of developing a commitment to sports participation that will then act as a long-term diversion from crime is invalid; it just means
that this particular programme has not succeeded in overcoming all the barriers for that individual.

Working to this premise, long-term sporting programmes are important as hooks to gain involvement, which was more than apparent in the eight programmes. Having said that, certain sports will be more attractive than others, as Scraton and Flintoff (2002) identified. Their evidence suggested that attitudes towards a specific sport are strongly linked to gender stereotypes, and that these can negatively affect girls and young women, therefore, consideration needs to be paid on how sport might reinforce a certain image of masculinity for some young men. In some cases however, this masculine concept is incorporated into the programmes ‘hooking’ potential, and combat sports such as boxing are generally referred to as ‘male specific’ (ibid). It would seem, from McGuire and Priestly’s (1995) conclusion however, that the main aim for policy makers, and indeed community leaders, is that the activity attracts the largest amount of the target group regardless of gender exclusion and potential reinforcement of gender stereotypes, as it is often assumed that diversionary activities that are attractive, and therefore attract large numbers, are satisfactory enough to combat crime.

Having said that, it is arguable that in a sporting context, the most significant factor associated with positive long-term behavioural change is its staff and trainers (Purdy and Richard 1983). In four of the projects that Nichols’s (2007) analysed, the participants stated that the staff played a significant role in maintaining their involvement and securing their participation. Indeed, there are arguments that the quality of the relationship between a sports leader and a mentee depends on the qualities of that leader (Pawson 2006; Nichols 2007; Taylor et al 1999; Hendry et al 1993).
While none of Nichols’s (2007) projects examined this concept specifically, further work by Pawson (2006) - based on a review of studies of mentoring - encapsulated this process as accomplishing functions of befriending, direction setting, coaching and advocacy. Furthermore, mentors were seen to assist the mentee through relationships with other agencies, implying that mentoring works better if it is embedded in sporting programmes that offer further support (ibid). More specifically, and more importantly for this thesis, Nichols (2007:202) identified that the key characteristics of leaders on sporting projects were that they must create an atmosphere of mutual respect and most certainly not respond aggressively to aggressive outbursts. Indeed, he states: ‘Staff had to be role models in the values required to live together harmoniously.’

Taylor et al (1999) report in their research, that some managers of sporting programmes claim that high-quality staff are essential to the success of their projects, and when assessing and recruiting staff these managers place more emphasis on the values that the recruits portray than on the technical skills they possess. The managers felt this to be imperative in the recruitment of staff, as young people attending their sporting programmes were said to be in a transition in their own sense of self, therefore, as also described by Hendry et al (1993), the staff themselves must have a depth of maturity.

Lastly, it is often assumed that participation in sporting activity will provide access to new peer networks, and indeed, there is some evidence that this is successful for participants on the rehabilitative programmes (Nichols 2007). This was as result of participants gaining support from conforming peers, and these peers assisting in the development of new self-identities and lifestyles that are at odds with criminality, and more specifically drug-taking. This change in self-concept and self-identity, has also been further identified as important in research by Graham and Bowling (1995) and Maruna (2001) into those who desist from offending and drug taking.
Nevertheless, in the more primary diversionary sporting programmes, there was little evidence that participation in sport offered new peer networks, and if it did, there was little evidence that these peers were any less likely to be involved in offending (ibid). The latter therefore, contradicts ideas that involvement in ‘diversionary activities’ automatically bond youths to socially valued themes, and is more reminiscent of theories surrounding differential association (Sutherland 1947) and the idea that criminal behaviour is learned behaviour specifically in interaction with deviant others.

In summary, the concept of sport and its relationship to control theory (Hirschi 1969) is a highly intricate web of complementary and contrasting interactions that are difficult to untangle. In the context of programmes to reduce youth crime, sport is a tool to facilitate a process, much more than an end in its own right. Sport’s value rests on its ability to hook young people in, followed by the ability of its programme staff to develop attachments and foster its participants through transitory periods of self-discovery. This requires an awareness of the process and an ability to match the needs of participants with the experience that sport offers. Further, it may also require an awareness of how perceptions of sport - masculine physical prowess and physical risk - may jeopardise what the programme originally set out to achieve.

Having said that, there is a lot of empirical evidence to support the fundamental claims of social control theory outlined above, as Mahoney and Cairns et al (2003) and McNeal (1995) amongst others argue, that adolescents are less likely to drop out of school, more likely to attend colleges, less likely to behave delinquently, and more prone to upholding rules and elements of conventional society (Fine 1987). Notwithstanding, these theories do not specifically address violence, nor do they specifically address attitudes towards violent behaviour.
Moreover, control theorists assume that the motivation to commit delinquency is a constant across individuals and that group norms supportive of crime are weak or non-existent (Hirschi 1969). This is because control theorists choose to focus on pro-social bonds and therefore omit the idea that individuals may be tightly bonded to groups or subcultures that promote antisocial behaviours. Working to this premise, violence by male athletes would be interpreted as evidence that either sport is not a conventional activity, or that violent athletes are not as fully bonded, as one would expect. Thus, considering there is a lot evidence to suggest that sport involvement is generally regarded as conventional behaviour, sport scholars are left assuming that those athletes who commit delinquent acts are somehow alienated from institutions such as schools, peers and families, as it is this lack of association that would free an athlete to behave violently.

Furthermore, the argument that an attachment to role models in the form of trainers or coaches immediately reduces delinquency is a common misconception. While it is acknowledged as important, it also becomes imperative that the coaches and trainers on sporting programmes have the skills to develop and align participant’s behaviours with more conventional values inherent in wider society, and not just as part of a silo of sporting activity.

Purdy and Richard (1983) identified that the length of contact between participant and coach is crucial to the development of a relationship, and therefore are critical of the more ‘open access’ diversionary programmes that Positive Futures offer. Thus, the evidence for successful personal development in some young people in the more intensive rehabilitative programmes was ‘more heavily influenced by the role model of the sports leader with whom they had developed a strong personal relationship’ (Nichols 2006). Additionally, there is some evidence that young people’s attachments to negative role models can be negatively influenced by the coach’s value system, as Collinson’s (1996)
analysis of young males’ search for self-identities through drugs and crime attested. Thus, it may be possible that the bond that athletes develop with their coach could negatively impact upon their behaviour, and therefore increase their propensity for crime and delinquency.

3.5 Sport as Criminogenic: A Discussion on the Learnt Behaviours in Sport and its Relationship with Violence and Masculine Enhancing Properties

As with the potential for negative bonds to be formed with coaches, there is also the risk with certain sports, particularly those with a combative nature, that the bonds created and the lessons learnt can also have an adverse effects on an individual’s behaviour and attitude. In contrast to control theories, social learning perspectives allow for subgroup variation in attitudes toward violence and delinquency. Accordingly, some theorists argue that individuals learn anti-social values and violent behaviour as part of group interaction, in intimate social relationships such as peers, partners and family members (Akers 1998; Sutherland 1947). And others such as Sykes and Matza (1957) argue that some groups have positive attitudes towards criminal behaviour, or at least find ways to justify and/or neutralise behaviour.

Social learning theories posit that individuals may be tightly bonded to others while simultaneously possessing attitudes that are favourable to violence and delinquency, indeed, as Trimbur (2009: 263) wrote: ‘One can be an accomplished drug salesmen and an accomplished Golden Gloves champion.’ It is this very idea that separates learning theories from theories of control. Work by Akers (1998) has developed this idea of differential association reinforcement theory by suggesting that individual violence and delinquency is as a result of continual and reciprocal processes of observation, attitude
Hughes and Coakley (1991) apply these theories to the debate around athletic deviance, suggesting that rather than athlete’s deviant behaviours resulting from social alienation or rejection of specific cultural values, they emanate directly from the normative definitions learned in the sporting environment. They refer to this as ‘positive deviance’, stating that the values associated with sports - obsession with status, sacrifice for the team, playing through pain, and refusing to accept limits - are generally associated with individual success and conventional behaviour. These values and normative definitions can also create dilemmas in which ‘athletes do harmful things to themselves and perhaps others while motivated by a sense of duty and honour’ (Ibid: 311). This idea arguably contributes towards a participant’s aggressive attitude and behaviour, as the aggression displayed is often an essential component of sporting success. Indeed, as Kreager (2007:708) has attested: ‘By applying lessons learned in sports, athletes may perceive violence and intimidation as acceptable means of achieving off-the-field goals and solving problems unrelated to sports.’

Additionally, peer relationships in the sporting context also play a pivotal role in the learning process, particularly during the teenage years when identity formation and status conscious processes play an important part (Coleman 1961). As Eder and Kinney (1995) highlighted, sport provides males with clear trajectories for increasing peer status, and team sports in particular, and can provide consensus to group norms. Humiliation and hierarchy all apply to group loyalty - particularly among sporting males - and ridicule and status competition serve to reinforce it (Warr 2002), therefore, for male athletes, disparaging comments can help reinforce the hierarchy with words such as ‘pussy’ or ‘gay’ that pose deep threats to their masculine status.
Seen in this light, the defence of masculine reputations both in and outside of a sporting context may see men resort to ‘character contests’ where violence becomes an acceptable solution to a problem (Goffman 1967; Luckenbill 1977), whereby these character contests form part of a systematic hierarchy of masculinity commonly seen in masculine peer groups (ibid). Furthermore, Curry (1998) observed in his work on athletic off-the-pitch violence, peers simultaneously encouraging retaliation through violence as a means to build cohesion and display courage. As a result, violent reactions both in and outside of the sporting context bonded teammates to exclusive peer groups based on normative expectations of honour, masculine courage, risk-taking and ridicule, whereby individuals were forced to compete for status to secure their identity and avoid humiliation at any cost.

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

Eder, Evans and Parker (1997: 69) offer evidence to support these claims, as their research demonstrated how young men were able to successfully construct masculine identities in combat sports. In their research, Eder et al observed young men initiating patterns in which, ‘higher status was associated with intimidation of others, and lower status was associated with submission’, particularly when athletes were responding to insults and issues of disrespect both in/outside of a sporting context. According to the
above, these intimidating responses established a system by which those who participated in violent sports had access to resources that enabled them to respond more violently. Moreover, this behaviour guaranteed higher status among peers in the same sporting milieu and additionally served to prevent future attacks. As a result, the aggression shown by athletes, and more importantly, the willingness to respond to challenges, identified leaders in the group while further helping to promote disdain for those unwilling or unable to retaliate in defence of themselves (ibid). Because of this, those unwilling to use violence were derided as being weak and effeminate and either expelled from the dominant group or subjected to violent victimisation. Furthermore Kinney (1993) identified that this lack of retaliation can also result in a stigmatised label, as those who cannot fight or prove their ‘toughness’ are placed at the bottom of the status hierarchy and assigned an identity as someone who is weak and ineffectual, thus, promoting violence among athletes as a way to maintain status and dominance in group activities.

In addition, studies by Messner (1990), Begg et al (1996) Eder et al (1997), Curry (1998) and Miller et al (2006) have all documented a positive relationship between sustained sport involvement and violent behaviour. They argue that participation in sporting activities can actually contribute to an increase in aggression and violence for participating individuals, particularly if the sport is classified as ‘combative’. To support these claims, Endreson and Olweus (2005) conducted a cross-sectional design over a two-year period to specifically analyse the effects of ‘power’ sports (boxing, wrestling, martial arts and weightlifting) on aggressive and antisocial behaviour in male adolescents, as there is a strong argument that those who participate in combat sports such as boxing, may have a higher probability of being involved in violence than other conforming peers and/or athletes who may chose and pursue less combative sports (Kreager 2007).
Edreson and Olweus’s research produced results that distinguished between contact and non-contact sports as important in determining violent attitudes, with the contact sports category demonstrating an above-average risk of being involved in violent behaviour. Edreson and Olweus (2005:477) concluded that:

‘From the practise of power sports itself and, very likely, from repeated contact with “macho” attitudes, norms and ideals with a focus on muscles and physical strength and a belief in the value of toughness, and maybe violation of societal norms. We found no support whatsoever for the fairly common view that participation in power sports serves as cathartic function and actually leads to a reduction in violent and antisocial behaviour in everyday life outside of sport. It rather seems that boys with fighting skills and physical strength are particularly likely to use these “assets” outside the sport situation as well.’

However, as the latter research does not provide any concrete evidence to support claims for the use of violence ‘outside the sport situation’, Kreager (2007) has argued that the reliance on cross-sectional designs that are unable to distinguish selection from socialisation effects is a problem endemic to sport-violence research. Yet, despite these limitations, Kreager’s (2007:721) results suggest that ‘male dominated contact sports have important consequences for male adolescent violence’, and as a result, could therefore have serious implications for social policy design.

To conclude, it would seem from these above arguments that boxing would most certainly be classified as combative, therefore raising questions around its efficacy as a sport to reduce desistance from violence. Without a doubt, boxing is most certainly attractive to young men, and promoted as a way to construct a dominant form of masculinity (Messner 1990) that some young men aspire to. The work of Kreager (2007) would reinforce this argument, as the dominant forms of masculinity often seen in combat sports increased the
likelihood of these forms becoming transposable to wider arenas unrelated to sports, and it is this very argument that I wish to test and develop in my thesis.

In particular, desistance from crime is recognised as relying on the successful negotiation of a reformed alternative identity, be that of spouse, sportsperson or employee. And one important aspect of sport-based activity is its role in promoting a shift of identity away from that of offender (Nichols 2007; Meek 2014), offering alternative positive identities, many of which may be represented through sport. However if the identities represented in the sporting context reinforce domination and ‘win at all costs’ attitudes, then the pro-social element may be lost in the wider discourses of hyper masculinity and dominance (Kreager 2007; Messner 1992).

Related to the above point, and a critical feature of desistance, is finding an activity or change in circumstances which has the potential to engage and motivate individuals and enable them to develop alternative pro-social identities, as well as contributing to the development of positive networks. The key to understanding desistance in this context, is the recognition that in order to abstain successfully from crime, offenders need to ‘make sense’ of their lives as non-offenders. The desistance literature has identified a range of factors associated with no longer being actively involved in offending, many of which are concerned with the acquisition of something meaningful to the offender which promotes a re-evaluation of their sense of self (Maruna 2001). And previous research into sport as a factor in the desistance-promoting process highlights the role that sport can play in transforming outlooks on life, and developing both social and cultural capital for those that participate (Collins and McKay 2003; Kearns 2004; Nichols 2006; Crime Concern 2006).

Contemporary research that focuses upon the role of the individual in the desistance
process has tended to focus on the ways in which different individuals can negotiate familiar social factors, and how this can lead to different desistance outcomes. For example, Giordano et al (2002) have argued that ‘agentic moves’ (2002: 992) are the most influential aspect of the desistance process, and that an individual’s commitment to change, openness to change, and ability to identify ‘hooks for change’ are the factors which are most likely to facilitate desistance. Similarly, Maruna and Roy (2007) have suggested that desistance is more likely to result from changes in an individual’s ‘self-identity and worldview’ such as their commitments, concerns and needs (2007: 115), and the ways in which social and environmental factors are likely to be interpreted differently depending upon these changing worldviews.

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

I began with a brief history of how sport became to be seen as welfare, and accordingly, how sport was used as a vehicle to generate social capital, foster inclusion, and contribute towards tackling poverty. I then proceeded to provide brief arguments for the desistance promoting potential of sport, looking at theories surrounding sport’s ability to incapacitate, bond, develop, and involve young people in conventional activities, though these may not always be methodologically sound in terms of outcomes.

Moreover, I have discussed the criminological theories and policy implications in relation to sporting activities and provided an argument that not every type of sport provides the same outcomes in terms of pro-social development and desistance from crime. I have also looked at theories of masculinity; arguing that sports - particularly violent combative ones - reinforce a sense of hegemony and therefore promote attitudes favourable to violence, especially when concepts of status or winning become threatened.

As discussed, in these particular sports violence forms part of the dominating element of winning, and therefore an imperative part of maintaining valued identities and status forming attributes. Not dissimilar to work on subcultural theories of crime, these identities and attributes form part of a habitus of respect, honour, and status, where violence forms part of a system to maintain the latter and ensure the continuation of dominance and respect. As a result, this habitus of sport and the win at all cost mentality often fostered in combat sports becomes embedded in men’s self-concepts whereby violence becomes part of an everyday occurrence. Moreover, the status promoting aspects of sport and violence become neutralised in certain men’s frame of reference - they see it as normalised behaviour in the pursuit of winning or maintaining face and thereby forming part of their identity as successful sportsmen.
Combat sports therefore, can be said to be symbiotic, whereby they involve and incapacitate young men at times when they otherwise may be involved in criminal activity, yet, arguably contribute to a habitus where violence and hegemonic masculinity dominates other values (Messner 1990; Sabo 1986; Connell 1990). By creating and sustaining identities that are favourable towards violence, combat sports such as boxing, can form part of an activity and sporting culture that takes violence and masculinity as a central theme. Accordingly, the idea of desistance is not generally viewed as an option for men who identify as boxers, as sustained change in behaviour generally warrants a change in identity and outlook. Exploring the social psychological processes underlying role transition among offenders has emerged as a critical question for theory and empirical research on the desistance process (Shover 1996; Maruna 2001), therefore if sportsmen have inculcated the values of hyper-masculine dominating sports such as boxing into their self-concepts, then it is more likely that these individuals will be motivated to act in accordance with group norms in order to achieve a positive identity, and that behaviour is therefore guided by the norms attached to a particular identity within that group setting.
4. Methodology: Rationale, Development, Data Collection and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the methodological aspects of the research. I therefore outline the procedures employed in the collection and analysis of data and how I gained and maintained access to the sample throughout the duration of my fieldwork. I begin with a description of the original aims and objectives of this research, and also why this topic was of interest to me. This is followed by a brief account of research theory and design, whereby I justify the methods I chose to adopt.

Secondly, I discuss my sampling procedures and how I gained access to the boxing gym, along with an outline of the participants, and how I put my interviewing techniques into practice. Ethical considerations formed an important part of my research, as did reflexivity, therefore I discuss any issues that arose in the field as a result of being a female researcher in a hyper-masculine environment. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on how I analysed the data, and lastly, the strengths and limitations of my methodology.

4.2 Rationale and Aims of the Research

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

I originally began by formulating questions of why men in particular are attracted to the sport of boxing and whether participation in this combat sport actually contributed towards their understanding of violence.

My overall aim was to find answers to the following questions:

- Why is the sport of boxing so appealing, particularly to young men?
- What does violence mean to these men before and after participating?
- Can boxing act as a desistance-promoting tool?
- Why are boxing gyms often viewed as spaces that are both incapacitating and reformative?

Finally, having scripted the above questions, I turned my attention to research design. Prior experience in mentoring and working alongside young offenders led me to favour a qualitative approach which is best suited to my strengths and the most fitting to appropriately answer my research questions.

4.3 Research Design

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

In exploring these ideas I employed an ethnographic approach, as this approach seeks to understand the context of people’s behaviour in specific cultural settings. It provides a process of inquiry that is open-ended and flexible, whereby it focuses on human meaning and interaction as viewed from the perspective of those who participate (Flick 2006). Moreover, this method has long been viewed as an effective and sophisticated technique for analysing social worlds from the ‘inside’ as it starts from a theoretical position of describing social realities and their making (Adler and Adler 1987).

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

This approach proved to be successful as it allowed for an in-depth appreciation of participants’ individual experiences and helped understand the ways in which individuals construct meaning in their social world. Thus, the relational dynamics under observation
were epistemologically grounded in symbolic interactionism, with this theoretical approach specifically focusing on the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their activities and their environments (Mead 1934). Indeed, this approach is based on the premise that individuals construct their perceptions and meanings as a result of their interaction with others, and that meanings are derived from, or arise out of social interaction. This method suggests that there are different ways in which individuals invest objects, events, experiences and so forth with ‘meaning’, and that the reconstructions of such subjective viewpoints become the instruments for analysing social worlds (ibid).

This method allowed me to observe the boxers in their natural setting, while encouraging me to stay close to the field and the world it represents. More importantly, it allowed me to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts from the data collected, specifically those that related to my research questions above. Accordingly, the theoretical framework of both symbolic interactionism and grounded theory assisted in the unpicking of actions and meanings for these men, and therefore allowed me to explore what elements these men assigned to specific actions.

In other words, it allowed me to explore the climate of the gym and the relationships fostered in this environment. Additionally, it facilitated my understanding surrounding the culture of the boxing gym, and also, how the inherent discourses of competition and masculinity potentially translated into the wider community when men left the premises. The method of ethnography which I explore further in chapter 4.9, helped me explore how the logic of gym violence could potentially translate into street violence, and whether or not this was the case for my sample.
4.4 Sampling Procedures

The sample size was estimated at between 10-15 participants, aiming to cover young men, their trainers, and initially, a select few policy makers working in the field of diversionary activities and desistance from crime. Using a purposive sampling strategy, I built upon a deliberate selection of individuals according to their a priori relevance, and this was aided by the fact that I have previous work experience in youth work and policy. Thus I identified, approached, and recruited participants in the following way:

1) Boxing trainers. Trainers acted as (i) informal gatekeepers who allowed me to research the gym they ran, and (ii) participants providing interview data. I did not always need them to identify and directly approach boxers for possible participation – see below. Regarding (i), youth work contacts had already introduced me to trainers running the boxing gym and had signaled their provisional interest in participating in the research. I revisited these contacts, confirmed their wish to participate and ask to be presented to the boxers during a gym session in order to explain my research to possible participants. I also placed in the gym a set of posters based on the participant information sheet and including both my photograph and the University of Manchester logo, so that boxers who were not able to attend this initial presentation knew who I was and why I was there. Regarding (ii), I also collected interview data from the trainers directly and in advance of doing this, I employed the full consent and information procedures described below.

2) Boxers: As this research was ethnographic in nature and involved non-participant observation in twice-weekly gym sessions over a period of six months, I kept carefully anonymised field notes of my observations and experiences during this time. As I become both more familiar with the environment and accepted by the boxers, I planned to use informal interactions with the young men to identify interesting and interested boxers who
seem to represent the variety of backgrounds in the gym. In advance of collecting data (i.e., recording an interview with them), I formally approached each boxer using the full consent and information procedures described in the ethical guidelines. I explained both in the initial presentation to the entire gym and in my formal approach to individuals that the study was about much more than offending (it was also about boxing, masculinity and personal orientation towards violence, so participation was not equivalent to a stigmatic admission of an offending past. It is likely by virtue of their demographic (age, class, attachment to legitimate violence) that a proportion of boxers will have offending histories, however, this was not known to me in detail and in advance of the interviews. Moreover, friendship networks in the gym facilitated further interviews, and an informal snowballing technique evolved, with formal information and consent procedures used in each and every case.

Diagram 1. The Sample of Men in the Boxing Gym
In addition to those above, I informally spoke with three key figures in youth services and policy at local level, those with a high-level involvement in promoting boxing as a diversionary pursuit. They were identified using previous work contacts in youth services and approached via telephone or e-mail, and therefore recruited by both explaining the study in general terms, and by employing full consent and information procedures.

4.5 Strategies to Gain Entry and Others to Ensure Continued Acceptance

Woodward (2004:4) posits that: ‘Men’s boxing gyms are very difficult to access for women’ yet previous work experience in the field of youth work gained me access to these arenas. This experience in previous work roles was critical in establishing and maintaining access in the field as former colleagues acted as gatekeepers.

According to Coffey (1993:94) the sponsorship or use of gatekeepers in gaining access to the field ‘is the ethnographer’s best ticket into the community’, and these were essential components in the research. Fetterman (1989:43) further states that intermediaries ‘can open doors otherwise locked to outsiders’, and I felt this to be the case, as the gatekeepers ‘vouched’ for my credibility and trustworthiness, thus maintaining my inclusion and access. Having gained entrance and completed the introductions, my access was similar to that of a member, and I was therefore given advice on how to behave in the gym, including the etiquette of ringside participation.

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

Indeed, previous ethnographies in boxing gyms have mostly been conducted by men acting as participant observers (Beattie 1997; Sugden 1996; De Garis 2002; Wacquant 2004). In fact, the small amount of boxing research that has been conducted by women (Woodward 2008; Trimbur 2009) has always been non-participatory, and usually focused on issues of race and ethnicity. My research, while technically non-participatory, was actually that of someone who ‘hangs around’, a ‘researcher-participant’ (Gans 1962), and while I did not aim to participate in any of the sparring, I did seek to embrace the overall culture of the boxing gym as I felt this was important to maintaining access and understanding the lives of these men.

It was imperative that I was viewed as someone who played an active role in the gym, and I soon discovered that small amounts of participation were crucial to developing trust among the participants. Accordingly, I decided to dress in sportswear and assist and participate in the day-to-day activities of the gym. It was during these participatory moments that I was able to forge relationships with the men, as they appreciated the effort I had made to understand their social world and the importance that the sport had to their lives. Indeed, it was during the holding of the pads, or sweeping of the floor that I was able to schedule interviews and negotiate access to their lives.
Before commencing the interviews I ‘hung around’ the boxing gym for a period of two weeks. I became familiar with the faces in attendance and spoke informally to many of the men who seemed curious by my presence. I began by interviewing the trainers as I felt it important to begin with those who ran the gym because boxing gyms have strict hierarchal structures and the trainers and professionals are classed as being at the top. It was important to be respectful to the cultural standing of the gym members and begin with those deemed to be most experienced and influential. This was a wise move on my part as other men began to follow suit after the trainers had already been interviewed, as they reported feeling ‘safer’ about talking to a researcher once the trainers had ‘checked me out’.

Before any of the actual interviews commenced I explained my position as a PhD student and the nature of my research. I also explained how the interview would be conducted, and requested that they sign a consent form. I reiterated that they could withdraw consent at any time, and that they were free to stop the tape if they wished. I further explained that I would be taking notes throughout the interview to jog my memory of events, and to allow me to actively listen without the worry of forgetting the finer details. Most of the interviews were conducted during the day at the boxing gym, as the evening sessions were very crowded and noisy. Most men wanted to train hard and I did not want to stand in their way (literally and figuratively), therefore I organised the interviews around their training schedules and often met them after their lunchtime workouts.

The changing rooms proved to be a good place for the interviews to be conducted as they were away from the ring and the deafening sound of the bell. Furthermore, the showers were housed in a different section and this allowed me access without worrying about breaching the men’s privacy. The majority of the men were responsive and found my research intriguing, whereas a few declined to ‘go on record’ but would offer me vignettes.
and anecdotes of their lives and boxing careers. I jotted most of these down, and incorporated them into my thinking along the way. These short accounts, although not on tape, offered me a chance to think deeper about my subject area and helped build a rapport with the men whose social world I had immersed myself in. The more time spent in the gym, and the more interviews I conducted, further assisted me in becoming more confident at asking questions, thus, I found myself being able to reflect back key points without referring to my notes and more adept at navigating the flow of the interview.

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

As a result of this immersion, I began to understand the gendered experience of my lived body in the research context, and more importantly, how my involvement shaped the production of knowledge. As Denzin (1989:27) has argued, ‘There is no such thing as gender free knowledge’ as gender is a significant factor in the research process (see also Presser 2005). Woodward (2008) argues that the sexualised positioning of a female researcher in hyper-masculine arenas such as boxing gyms is vastly important. In her
research, Woodward consciously adopted a subject position that was neither threatening nor complicit in masculine discourses finding the ‘maternal figure’ to be the most successful research persona.

Joyce Carol Oates (1987:73) states that a, ‘Female boxer cannot be taken seriously - she is a parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous, and had she an ideology, she is likely to be a feminist.’ This resonated with me in the context of my fieldwork, as I identify as a feminist gay woman, and in some respects I believe I was interpreted as monstrous for this even though this was not directly inferred. I suffered sexist remarks on several occasions, and while my aim was to remain as asexual as possible this did not always prove to be successful, as one boxer stated that he did not know whether to ‘fuck me or fight me’. Accordingly, a sense of distancing had to be established, as my distinction as a researcher was further constituted as an outsider particularly in terms of my class, race, and sexuality (see 4.9 for further discussion on gender and reflexivity).

4.6 Narrative Interviewing: The Boxer’s Stories

Narrative interviewing techniques were chosen as they help to distinguish personal stories and assist in the unpicking of constructions and subjective investments made into identities of boxing and masculinity. Ricoeur (1991) posits that it is through narratives that we make sense of our lives as they enable us to see the links to wider social contexts, whereby biographical approaches are able to conceptualise both the individual and the social, as both of these elements need to be engaged with in order to understand how men make sense of their experiences of both masculinity and violence. By exploring these individual’s biographies in an in-depth way through this method it offered me the opportunity to appreciate the heterogeneous nature of an individual’s experience. It also
ensured that the biographical originality of these men’s lives was not lost but employed in understanding the differences and convergences in their experiences.

Engaging with these narratives helped me examine the embodied nature of boxer’s experiences, as this approach assists with the unpicking of complex stories. As Plummer (1995:170) has suggested: ‘Somewhere behind all this storytelling there are real active, embodied, impassioned lives.’ The interpretation of biographical narratives also gives consideration to the narrative as a co-constructed account combined and united through the interaction of the researcher and the participant (Wengraf 2001). Indeed, this allowed for me to be included in the analysis, as it offered a reflexive account of how I, the researcher, impacted upon the story being told (Presser 2005). Lastly, as other researchers from the narrative tradition have highlighted that narrative offers the possibility of considering various levels of analysis when interpreting accounts including the social, the individual, and the intersubjective (Gadd 2000; Wengraf 2001; Gunaratnam 2004).

The narrative interview is mainly used in the context of biographical research (Bertaux 1981; Plummer 1983; Denzin 1988), as its main purpose is to elicit the participant’s story in relation to the research topic, therefore, the interactions, relationships, and ‘meanings’ that boxing encapsulated for men were explored using these techniques. All techniques of narrative interviewing generally begin using a ‘generative narrative question’ (Riemann and Schutze 1987:353) that refers to the topic of the study, and is intended to stimulate the participant’s main narrative. In this research, the narrative was framed by asking the participant to, ‘Tell me the story of how you became a boxer?’ Or in the case of the few policy makers that I spoke to, ‘Tell me story of how you became a policy maker for youth sport provision?’ Overall, the aim was to open up a dialogue that would elicit a story about their life, and their subjective understanding of boxing and desistance as a result.
I specifically chose this method as it is increasingly thought that it is through documenting or ‘storying one’s life’ (Plummer 1983) that lived experiences can be understood. In common with other narrative techniques (See Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Plummer 1983), the biographical method encourages the participant to discuss events and experiences that they consider to be important features of their life story. Thus, I was interested in these men’s experiences of violence, family, boxing and desistance, and also, how they saw themselves in relation to these concepts now, particularly having chosen to participate in such a transformative sport like boxing. As Connell (1995:89) has suggested, ‘Life histories give rich documentation of personal experience, ideology and subjectivity…but life histories also, paradoxically document social structures, social movements and institutions,’ therefore, with this in mind, I intended to also listen for men’s constructions of masculinities and also, their relationships to the social institution of sport.

While listening, the role of any interviewer is to elicit lengthy narratives through focused questioning and non-verbal forms of encouragement. Indeed, crucial to this form of interviewing is the lack of interruption or obstruction once the generative question had been posed, as active listening becomes the key to eliciting narrative. Listening is therefore demonstrated through simple ‘hmm’s’ or nods to support the participant in finishing their narrative to the end, and once completed, it is the job of the interviewer to employ further narrative enquiries to hone in on specific passages or events that bears relevance to the research question. For example, I often stated that: ‘You mentioned before how you started boxing at a certain time in your life, can you tell me more about that time please?’ Or, ‘You mentioned X (person, event time period, etc.) can you tell me more about this?’ This therefore enabled the respondent to relate back to areas of interest in order to clarify certain points and to elicit further narration.
The main criterion of success for narrative interviewing is whether the story elicited follows a sequence of events - a narration from the beginning to the end - that demonstrates a development from one state to another. Accordingly, words or phrases were often reflected back to participants in a questioning manner to stay within their meaning frame, as the aim of this method is to carefully consider which questions would result in further narratives. Using ‘why’ questions are often avoided so the interviewee does not feel like they have to provide justifications for their actions. More importantly, this can actually detract from the telling of their life stories, as it has been suggested that sometimes people do not necessarily know why they acted in a particular way (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Wengraf 2001).

The second interview, usually held a week later in my case, provided further opportunities to explore the men’s narratives. It was usually on the second meeting that the men would relax and open up, and on one occasion I interviewed the same participant four times. Moreover, these second interviews allowed me to get underneath the data and also pay particular attention to any issues the participant may be avoiding, particularly changes in tone, absences, and noticeable changes in subject, when the topic being explored seemed sensitive. Thus, the second interviews gave me an opportunity to develop trust, and work alongside these men in the facilitation of their narrative, indeed, it helped me gain a better picture of these men’s lives by asking further narrative questions in a jointly constructed considerate manner.

### 4.7 Analysis of Data

Faced with a mass of unstructured data the task of any researcher is to break the data down into some kind of logical system, therefore, following qualitative research
traditions, I specifically employed Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) ‘grounded approach’ in my analysis. This approach specifically focuses on the development of theories through the collection and dissemination of the data, therefore, in some respects it is an on-going process whereby data is employed to formulate hypotheses and codes. In short, when analysing your data, you continually assess your theory against the data collected to generate answers and conclusions to your research questions.

In this research, what inductively emerged from the data were concepts formulated around the participants’ original motivations to box, their interpretations of masculinity as a result, and how and why boxing may or may not contribute towards a process of desistance for them. With these concepts in mind I therefore began to code. Although coding was useful in the compiling of the data it did not really offer me anything by way of meaningful interpretation, indeed, I found myself filing data as opposed to interpreting, and therefore decided on a different course of action.

Returning to the data helped, as the narrative approach places emphasis on the whole, referencing the way that the interview cannot be separated from the person. I therefore began to rely more upon subtlety and intuition as captured in reflective field-notes, and therefore tried to develop a larger picture in which the ‘whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000: 68). Accordingly, I re-immersed myself in the data and re-read my field notes alongside the transcripts, re-creating the scenario or situation to think further about the context of the situated respondent in my search for the whole.

I began by plotting the participant’s chronology in as much detail as possible, highlighting those parts that jumped out or seemed important. Secondly, I would try and extract those parts of the transcript relevant to the various themes that had emerged from the overall
research. For example, extracting what the participant had said about 1) ‘motivations to box’, 2) interpretations of masculinity, 3) ‘prior violent behaviour or victimisation’, and also, their understanding of, 4) desistance. This material was then compiled together with the chronology to generate a pen portrait or case study of each participant.

Secondly, I applied various theoretical frameworks to the case study, for example, viewing the individual from a structural perspective in terms of masculinity and violence in a sporting context (Messner 1990; Connell 1990; 1995), and also, applying theory from subcultural perspectives to interpret their social worlds (see Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1996; Cloward and Ohlin 1960). Moreover, I looked for themes within the men’s narratives that related to theoretical positions of violence, desistance and masculinity. Indeed, each time I detected a theme or comparison, I would refer back to my research questions and emerging themes, and then return back to the data to see if there was more evidence to support or negate particular theories.

As with any qualitative approach it is widely claimed that explication is an art form. Maruna and Matravers (2007:429) argue that all ‘psychosocial interpretation involves an element of creative conjecture’, whereby intuition, analyst subjectivity, and emotional correspondence all play a hand in the construction of knowledge, whereby, to truly grasp another’s subjective understanding you must view it through your own (ibid). Indeed, as Glaser and Strauss (1967:252) also point out in their corollary of the grounded tradition, ‘Principal insights are based on personal experience.’ However, with this idea, there is a real risk of imposition of the researcher’s viewpoint onto the subject. Ogden (1994) posits that each subject is dynamically produced in every inter-subjective relationship, and through the acknowledgement of these issues, attention must be paid to the principle of unconscious inter-subjectivity and ‘counter-transference’ (Hinshelwood 1991).
In this research, for example, I felt it important to ask myself the following questions: How much of myself did I bring to the production of narrative data? How much of my personal experience did I implicitly write into the narrative? And how different was my experience to that of these men? Nonetheless, I aimed to remain vigilant to this issue in the collection and analysis of my data, and therefore test every emerging theme from the data against my research questions and overall aim. More importantly, I wanted to remain as open as possible, and not allow for any prejudice towards these men to cloud my analysis.

4.8 Evaluating the Research

I employed an inductive grounded approach based in the method of ethnography. I spent a period of six months hanging around a local boxing gym in the north of England, as I was particularly interested in men’s narratives, the appeal of boxing, and therefore participant’s understanding of violence and masculinity. I immersed myself in the world of amateur and professional boxing to bring myself closer to understanding its cultural norms and implicit values. I acted as a researcher-participant, and assisted men in their quest for ‘trophies, money and fame’. In the sampling frame, I intended to interview between 10-15 gym members and their trainers in the gym and also local policy makers working in the field of sport and crime reduction/desistance while remaining open to the possibility that more respondents may have come forward once in the field.

Most of the men that I interviewed were professionals - or retired professionals - at least. Most were serious in their sport and many wore the physical and emotional scars to prove it. In total I interviewed 13 participants, 10 boxers (including 2 trainers) and spoke informally with 3 policy makers using a narrative approach to interviewing and data
collection. I spoke with nearly every member of the gym, spending significant periods of
time in these men’s company over a period of six months, and through the taking of
ethnographic field-notes - what Emerson et al (1995) refers to as ‘jottings’ – an
understanding began to develop. These jottings helped to shape and illuminate the
particular themes in this research, and this proved to be invaluable in the analytical stages
of the enquiry as they helped me to reconstruct interactions, discussions, and the general
caracterisation of the order of events therefore helping me to recall first impressions of
settings, ideas, people, relationships and elements of interaction.

I was constantly aware of my gender position as a white female researcher as I jotted field
notes and engaged in informal conversations with men who boxed. I became an active
listener and participant in gym life adopting the role of a member and assistant to the
professionals. More importantly, I remained appropriate at all times while maintaining the
ethical code of conduct stipulated by the university.

The Biographical Narrative Method proved very successful, after a period of trying out a
few different narrative techniques. I had planned to originally use semi-structured
techniques, but with persuasion from supervisors and substantial research, I began to
favour more narrative-based approaches. The use of these methods allowed the men to be
more open regarding the nature of their stories, and some men disclosed that they had
‘never told anyone this before’, and I sensed that this may have been due to the fact that
nobody had previously cared to ask. Stories of familial abuse as both victim and
perpetrator jarred me, and at one point a respondent broke down as he relayed his story of
manslaughter involving a fellow boxer.

In certain interviews, I felt upset at the trauma and violence experienced by some of these
men, and at other times felt objectified by the male gaze and angered by men’s often
profound misogyny. Nevertheless, using the narrative method, and particularly the opening statement of: ‘Tell me the story of how you became a boxer’, opened up a dialogue that most men appeared to be comfortable with. At times, some of the respondents checked-in and sought reassurance from me, asking me whether ‘that’s what I wanted?’ or ‘did I answer that right?’ When this occurred, I simply stated that I was interested in their story, and if they felt it to be relevant, then it simply was. Some men tested me. By this I refer to their anxiety about talking to a woman about their stories of violence, or interestingly, their own boxing defeats. Men would also question my knowledge around boxing techniques or historical knowledge of bouts and fights, trying to ascertain whether I had what one man referred to as the ‘boxing bug’. Furthermore, I often heard comments about my appearance, and one interviewee actually stated that I was not ‘your average girl’.

Reflexivity from a narrative position scrutinises the researcher’s process and examines how power relations are attended to both within the relationship and in the construction of the narratives. Presser (2005:2070) argues that: ‘Cross gender studies of men generate unique concerns about research practice’, and from a feminist perspective this argument is well known. Yet, I align with Presser, when she argues that cross gender studies simply bring the processes of gender accomplishment into plain view, much as anthropologists are better able to discern cultures not their own. Thus, I observed men using the research situation as a further opportunity to accomplish their masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000), as they told me stories of masculine accomplishments involving violence, virility, and status affirming exploits.

Indeed, by the mere fact of me being a female, the men in this research saw this as an opportunity to further accomplish their masculinity, and this is not dissimilar to Arendell’s (1997:347) work when she described how men both presented themselves as
masculine persons - defined by them being competent, assertive, controlling and rational, whereby they worked on proving their manhood during conversations with her. However, I acknowledge that there is no final version, and my narrative representation and interpretations are only made possible through interpretative readings. Hence, the narrative accounts presented in the case studies do not resemble every boxer, nor do they resemble every man. In short, they resemble a collection of stories of lives, and by interviewing and facilitating the construction of these men’s narratives I was able to discern and analyse what violence, masculinity and desistance meant for them, both collectively in the gym environment, and subjectively in their everyday lives.

4.9 An Ethnographic Account of North Town Gym

4.9.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the ethnographic context of the research. It illustrates core observations from fieldwork in the ‘North Town’ boxing gym, and reflexively comments on the intricacies and personal relationships of the men in this social world. Drawing on classical ethnographic research techniques (see Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1996), I aim to give a strong experiential sense of the physical and social environment in which this research was situated, and of the role I played in shaping it. I aim to recreate and illustrate the habitus of these men and bring alive their social world and subjective stories.

4.9.2 Meeting “The Boys”

I first met Rico when he showed up at a youth project I was managing as part of my time as a youth offending worker. He was recruited as a member of volunteer staff for a local
mentoring project I was involved with, but overall, his disposition reflected that of the client group we worked with. He admittedly referred to himself as “street”, and said that volunteering, as part of this mentoring project was his last chance to “get out” of a troubled lifestyle. Rico had been known to “gang bang”, and at times would joke about the violence he had been party to or perpetrated personally. He disclosed that on more than one occasion he had been “strapped”.

Regardless, Rico felt positive that he had something to bring to the young people on the project; he had “been there” and “knew the score on the street”.

According to Rico what “saved” him was boxing. He had turned his back on gang violence after seeing his friend killed in a fight over “something stupid to do with drugs and money”. After witnessing this shooting, Rico was determined to do “something else”. The local boxing gym - North Town- overlooked the estate where Rico lived, and the boxers could often be seen road running around the park adjacent to the housing estate and gym. “Knowing a few of the lads in there”, Rico crossed the busy road that separated the housing estate to the gym that would become his “life and love” for the next ten years.

Rico and I became colleagues, and over the course of three years of working together we became friends. Having a brother who boxed facilitated this and Rico would often come into the youth centre and talk of the gym and upcoming fights. I was therefore able to engage with Rico’s passion and learn the complex system of weight categories and boxing manoeuvres. As we were professionally tasked with designing diversionary programmes for young offenders, we started discussing the possibilities of boxing as a tool for reducing street violence. When the project ended, as funding dried up under a shift in governmental ideology and priority, Rico went on to train as a fireman. Regardless, we kept in touch as he said that did he ever “need a reference from someone who ‘got him’”,

---

3 Slang for being known to carry a firearm
then I was to be his “go to” for this. Ironically, Rico ended up being my ‘go to’ as the idea of boxing as a diversionary activity never left my mind. It was with this idea that I applied for funding to begin a PhD, and once accepted and my idea for this ethnography realised, Rico was the first person I called.

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

Anyone who has walked into a boxing gym will know that it is an immediate assault on the senses. From the deafening sound of the bell instructing men to tacitly change posts from either sparring to bag-work or vice versa, or the loud music inevitably competing for space among the shouting and the rhythmic pummeling of flesh and leather. The smell is naturally one of body sweat, but intermingled with this is the faint smell of Vaseline, blood, and glue from the hand-wrapping tape. It is distinctive and indicative of most boxing gyms nationally and internationally. Necessarily, there is a weighing scale in the corner near the ring and more than likely there will be at least one mirror close by. These
apparatuses are fundamental to the boxing gym as they reflect the hard work; the hard bod-work of the men in attendance, and an orderly queue is often forming at various times of the day, as men check their weight against their fighting category— heavyweight, lightweight, bantam weight etc. The mirror is a celebratory or commiserative reflection of a pugilist’s craft. “The mirror does not lie” according to Simon the professional light middleweight, and indeed, it represents the male boxing ego in its full glory.

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

“Yes Rico man”, Marcus proclaimed as he grabbed Rico’s hand and quickly enacted some form of complicated hand gesture that ended with a bumped fist. “Touch” each one of the professionals said as Rico went along the group and bumped fist with Eric, Simon, and Frank. “This is Deb, who I told you about, she’s safe”, as I was introduced to the men by Rico. Unable to remember, or more likely through fear of embarrassing myself, I refrained from ‘touching’, and merely raised my hand in a hello gesture. I explained why I was there, the aim of my research, and asked their permission for me to come and hang out at North Town. It was evident there and then that Marcus called the shots, as
everybody turned to him to provide the answer. “Sure, if you’re a friend of Rico’s then we trust you” Marcus answered. However, he needed additional reassurance that I was not a “fed” (police). I told them my history of youth offending work, and how Rico and I had always wanted to explore the possibility of boxing being used as a tool in the reduction of violent crime. “I’m telling you, boxing works!” said Eric, the others nodded in agreement, as Frank proclaimed that without boxing he would most certainly “have not made it”, stating jail or death as the alternatives. Simon professed that “boxing saved my life”, as Marcus chimed with “yeah man, before boxing I’d never been nothing, never seen nothing, was nothing, you know what I’m saying?” Looking to me to nod in agreement with each of the men’s sentiments.

Eric had previously been involved in youth work also, and was keen to tell me his story of community philanthropy, as he talked about “goin out on the streets with some gloves and pads and talking to the kids, tellin ‘em to come train man, first session is free- just show up”. He was adamant that boxing worked, “hooked the hoods in” as he liked to put it. And Marcus, in a competitive fashion quickly reinforced this with a tale of how many letters he receives asking him to “go into schools with my belts and talk to the kids about ‘making it’”. At this point it became clear quite quickly, that these men believed in boxing as a tool to reduce violent crime, and crime more generally, as they spoke wholeheartedly about boxing and its desisting and “life -saving” properties. I was excited to get started and told the men that I would be back on Monday with consent forms and an enthusiastic attitude, as Rico beckoned me down the stairs of the gym and out into the community that I was to become to live, love, and better understand over the course of my six month ethnography.
4.9.3 First Day ‘on the Job’

Monday came around and at roughly 6pm that evening I showed up at North Town gym on my motorcycle. I parked it next to the entrance and stood with the men as they waited for Marcus to show up and open the shutters that protected the door. A black BMW car pulled up alongside my motorcycle and Marcus got out to let us all inside to train. “Nice bike” said one of the younger amateurs as I entered the gym, and a part of me felt relieved that I was visible- someone had actually noticed me- as most of the men initially ignored me or gave a sideways glance that seemed to infer that I was not supposed to be there. Women are not common sights in boxing gyms, at least not in North Town. Indeed, during my time there I never once saw another female, nor were there facilities there such as women’s changing rooms or toilets. I initially showed up identifying as an academic, as a PhD student researching boxing and men’s understanding of violence, however, this subject position was not proving fruitful, nobody spoke to me on that first night, and I found myself edging closer towards the periphery as I sat on a stack of mats next to the ring watching the amateurs and professionals hit the bags and each other. As a result of this, and an ensuing fear that I would not be able to collect any data, I decided to come back the next day dressed to participate. Hence, on Tuesday evening I climbed the stairs of North Town dressed in sport shorts, running shoes, and equipped with an attitude telling me that I could and would succeed.

“You decided to train then?” Marcus stated as I walked through the door. I felt foolish for a second but took a deep breath and told him I could do it. It was during the time of the London Olympics 2012 that this ethnography took place, and I was inspired by Nicola Adams, the first female boxer to win Olympic Gold. Regardless, some men, particularly Marcus were not as enthusiastic as I, and expressed their disapproval quite openly. “I’m not getting in the ring with a girl”, shouted a younger amateur as we lined up to spar, and one
other older professional refused to hold the pads for me as I tried to ‘partner up’ and practice drills. Others were curious, and had no qualms in partnering up, or indeed sparring with me, as it enabled them to use sport as a terrain for testing, proving, displaying and enhancing masculinity (Connell 1990). As the men became more familiar with my presence, the boundaries between male and female binary positions became blurred, as sometimes, others perceive women that display athleticism as maintaining a position that challenges the “boundaries of femininity” (Blinde and Taub 1992a).

“You’re not your average girl are you?” proclaimed Derek the older amateur and sparring partner to Ricky the upcoming professional, therefore solidifying Binde and Taub’s above point. When I asked what he meant by that, he stated that: “most girls don’t ride motorbikes, and get in the ring with men”. He had a point; the previous ethnographies that I had studied by females interested in boxing had never once stated participation in sparring (see Woodward 2004; Trimbur 2009), and I could not think of any other female researcher who had actually made a point of dressing in sportswear and participating in the social world of male boxing. Ethnographies among male academics are commonplace in boxing gyms (See Wacquant 2004; De Garis 2002; Beattie 1997), with Wacquant in particular, participating to a level that saw him compete in the Golden Gloves championships over the course of his research.

Being female and participating in a male dominated environment was certainly challenging, and at times I was more than aware of my gender positioning and sexuality. Yet, I found that my own experiential knowledge of violent youth culture as a result of my working class upbringing, older boxing-brother and youth work experience allowed me to ‘gender-cross’ more efficiently. Hobbs, O’Brien and Westmarland (2007: 28) in their work on female working-class bouncers state that: “pragmatic knowledge is a deeply embedded aspect of working class life, a distinctive form of consciousness geared towards
embodied performance”, therefore, I was able to adapt and embed myself in the “quintessentially masculine habitus” (Wacquant 1992: 234) of boxing, and share a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990:62; Mennesson 2000). In some respects I drew upon my habitus of “working class femininity” (Skeggs 2004; Lovell 2000) to occupy and negotiate my continued access in the hyper masculine environment of the boxing gym, and construct an “alternative femininity” to confirm my gender as pure situated accomplishment (Messerschmidt 1997; West and Zimmerman 1987). This in turn helped me better understand the habitus of the boxing gym, while inhabiting a precarious space at the intersection of sexuality, femininity and class.

Identifying as a gay woman was something that I never openly disclosed to these men. I felt that this information was not appropriate for this setting, and more than likely would become salacious gossip, or further reason for the men to create distance between me as a female researcher in their homosocial world of male pugilism. Goffman (1963) suggests that the control of personal information is the key to identity management among people labeled as deviant, which my lesbianism most certainly would have been in this environment, and as Blinde and Taub (1992a: 11) identified in their research into homophobia in sport, “concealment of information, deflection of characteristics perceived as harmful, and normalization of the stigmatized behaviour is used to manage the lesbian label”.

This came to light when Ricky stated that he “didn’t know whether to fuck me or fight me”, and as I laughed it off I realised that for men like Ricky, the domination- sexual or otherwise- of another was not only heteronormative, but supportive of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) point when she states that preoccupation with women’s sexuality is a necessary component to the institutionalized practice of “compulsory heterosexuality”. Accordingly, my gender positioning was blurred and confusing for the men in this study, and as I
became a known presence in the gym, men often wondered: “how my boyfriend felt about me being in a gym with all these half-naked men?” I had to negotiate my way around such questions with tact and care, and most of the time I just laughed, as I found this to be the most useful defence mechanism in guarding my privacy and maintaining my access. In the main however, the men accepted me, Rico had ‘vouched’ for me after all, and as I started showing my face each week and asking how their kids were? Or ‘who won at the weekend?’ The men started to refer to me as Deb as opposed to “that girl”.

4.9.4 The Pro’s and the Amateurs

Boxing gyms possess strict hierarchies, and the professionals (‘pro’s’) rule the roost. Amateurs are subservient to and envious of most of the pro’s, and therefore anxiously try to negotiate time in the ring with the ‘up-comers’; those who are billed as the ‘next big thing’, or be asked to ‘represent’ in the corner at the next title fight. Simon in particular was a popular professional and many of the younger amateurs were keen to be associated with him. His posters dominated the walls, and he came from a lineage of boxers, as his father was also a professional in his time. Simon was referred to as ‘junior’, and the mantle of his father’s success was something Simon felt he had to live up to.

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

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

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

(Simon professional boxer 32 years old)

This was a legacy in North Town gym; the firm’s way of handling the situation when violence arose; the firm being Simon’s father’s friends who actively engage in violence as part of their job in the night-time security industry, or local men who have no qualms about rehearsing violence as part of their everyday lives (see Simon’s case study for further description). The firm’s definition of ‘not fucking about’ according to Simon, meant retaliation and ultimately winning, and if status and televised kudos could be achieved then all the better. It was never made clear whether or not the outbreak impinged on Simon’s father’s career, but it certainly added to his, and subsequently junior’s informal status among the social world of professional boxing. Indeed, stories were important to men in the gym, especially those that spoke of triumph over hardship, or courage in the face of fear. This is likely because stories such as this confirmed and accomplished key aspects of a boxer’s identity. The discourses in the gym environment supported narratives of victory, bravery and toil, and the men accomplished these attributes by relaying tales of individual and collective success, whether that was ones of legitimate violence in the ring, or illegitimate violence outside of it.
Ricky a young ‘up-comer’ was keen to be included in the conversation; he wanted a legacy too. He was also keen to grab at success as soon as possible, and could not wait for “the nice house and nice car”. Only 20 years old and already a young father, Ricky was seen as the “baby in the gym”, yet Marcus and Eric believed he had “heart and could go all the way”. Ricky’s uncle was a friend of both Marcus and Eric and was the one who introduced Ricky to the gym originally. Having problems at school for fighting Ricky was excluded and sent to a Pupil Referral Unit, yet his uncle “didn’t believe in that shit” and brought Ricky to North Town instead, believing that the discipline and guidance of Marcus and Eric would be the key to “setting him straight”. Ricky was a determined character and attended the gym everyday; having left school five years ago without any qualifications he believed the gym was “his only chance at success”. Struggling to read, evidenced by an inability to fully comprehend the consent forms I provided, Ricky in particular disparaged any form of academic or mental labour. He was completely invested in bodily and visceral forms of capital to the point of exhaustion and I often wondered how he maintained his energy and drive for such brutal sparring matches or bag drills:

“It’s all about hard work boxing I’m tellin you. If you put in the graft no one can beat you. If you mess about and take days off, your opponent gets the edge, and I can’t have that.” (Ricky 20 years old)

Ricky was highly competitive, but also very sensitive. It was not very often that he lost in the ring, but when he did, the tears in his eyes were more than evident. Indeed, one Tuesday afternoon when sparring with Derek for an upcoming fight, Ricky disclosed that he was “not feeling it today”. When I asked him what he meant, he started to discuss how he had not slept properly for a few days as he had been in charge of childcare and the baby had been having sleepless nights. Derek capitalised upon Ricky’s apathy and saw this as an opportunity to beat him physically; in the ring Ricky was up against the ropes
for most of the count, taking and absorbing painful blows from Derek’s gloved fist, and I distinctly remember at one point having to look away. After three rounds of punishment, Eric called the fight to halt, but berated Ricky for being a “dope”:

“You a dope today kid, ‘rope a dope’ that’s what you are. Get your shit together because if you perform like that in a few weeks you’re fucked.” (Eric 51 years old trainer)

I felt sorry for Ricky at this moment as he was evidently struggling, but there seemed to be no sympathy for his plight from the other members. I started to slowly realise that in male dominated spaces such as boxing gyms, sympathy is certainly lacking. This is in line with Wacquant’s (2004:67) observations also, as he argues that little information about private lives is exchanged in the gym and that current events that are not sports-related rarely surface. There is a sense of camaraderie present, yet this is bound by competition, either through talk of football teams that the men support, or who is the most physically capable in terms of exercise regimes. Thus I tried to reach out to Ricky that day and talk to him about his problems with childcare. He was actually very responsive, and as I sat on the mats and he did his ‘sit-ups’, we talked about the struggles that we all face in personal relationships, and how we negotiate with our partners for time to pursue interests and hobbies:

“What my missus don’t understand is that boxing ain’t a hobby, this is my job. She wants all the fancy stuff right, but then moans when I’m never around to take care of the baby, she does my head in”.

I listened to Ricky as he explained his situation and tried to empathise with his distorted notion that women are solely responsible for childcare. This was somewhat successful as when I was leaving Ricky awkwardly thrust a free ticket into my hand for his upcoming fight and mumbled a “thanks” as he headed towards the shower room. Derek on the other
hand was jubilant. He had “kicked Ricky’s arse”, and after many months of being his sparring partner Derek felt he had “the upper hand today.” Eric was not best pleased, and I could hear him from the shower room still berating Ricky for his poor performance in the ring:

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

A shot at the title was always big news in the gym, as it meant payday for the trainers and kudos for the pros. Title fights are what make a boxer, and they are a series of intricately weaved accomplishments and belts that make little sense to the lay person. Even after six months of research, I gained only a fairly minimal sense of the complex names and myriad of titles that are achievable for the average professional boxer. However, they remain at the pinnacle of boxing success, and every professional in North Town anxiously awaited a shot at a title. This is because titles and belts are tangible assets for men who box; they act as “cultural capital”, to cite Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Cultural capital is a form of ideas and knowledge that people draw upon as they participate in social life, therefore, for a social group such as boxers the acquisition and accumulation of capital is paramount to success. Wacquant (1995a: 65) describes it as “conceiving of and caring for the use of the pugilistic body as a form of capital”, and how they transform “abstract” bodily capital into “pugilistic capital”. In other words, the body of boxers is a learning machine, an instrument, a weapon, and crucially something boxers deeply invest in to enhance their ability to succeed, as it is: “liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles and income streams” (ibid: 67). Further, a participant in the gym with skill, someone with ideal-typical bodily characteristics valued in this habitus will rank higher on the social hierarchy of the field,
because their appearance specifically fits onto beliefs about field-specific ability. In the case of North Town, pugilistic capital was perceived to be higher among boxers with the blueprint bodily traits than among those without, and therefore those in possession ranked higher in terms of symbolic, physical and cultural capital.

Biography and history was also important in the gym. Your name and potential for success translated as ‘your rep’- one’s reputation in this social world. Indeed, reputation was hugely important; “making a name” for oneself was prevalent across the sample, and the capacity to convert cultural capital into economic or ‘workplace capital’ (McDowell 1997) was significantly relevant for this social group as a whole. Men such as Ricky, and also Eric and Marcus, were focused on this alone, and the habitus of the boxing gym guided their thinking and reasoning to support notions of reputation, success, and wealth at any cost. Interestingly, most of the men claimed to be unsuccessful in other careers outside of boxing, yet quite a few of the gym members also worked in the security industries. This was mainly the amateurs, those who supplemented their employment with boxing routines and reputations, as it enhanced their physical capital and added to reputations that relied on the ability to employ violence where necessary (Winlow 2001). Moreover, in the night-time economy where many of the amateurs were located and employed, these violent reputations served both organised crime networks and the new security industry, as the more irrational the level of violence displayed, the greater the ‘transcendence of rationality’ (Katz 1988) and the more valuable the reputation (Hobbs 1995; Hobbs et al 2003).

The professionals were fully dedicated to the career of boxing, and could not risk any form of injury or hindrance that might jeopardise their next big fight. The amateurs were less committed but nonetheless still dedicated to the bodily routines and craft of pugilism. The striking difference between the two was the amount of time spent in the gym and the
internalisation of the gym’s culture in terms of success and opportunity. To elaborate, the professionals see themselves as boxers and nothing more, whereas the amateurs utilise and exploit the sport as a means of furthering themselves in other identities, careers or past-times. Frank was one example. As we will discover in his case study, he never turned professional even though expressing a desire to from an early age. Frank was a friend of Rico’s and had grown up in the same circumstances; both had suffered from a lack of opportunity as a result of growing up in an area of deep social exclusion, and both had become embroiled in local gang violence from an early age. Frank, like Rico, had used boxing to escape the daily routine and trivialities of street based violence, sheltering in the sanctity of the boxing gym as a way to occupy and distract himself from the surrounding community’s illegal activities and seductive charm. Both of these men had managed to maintain an image as “someone not to fuck with”, and accomplish their masculinity in street approving ways, yet escape the trap of street based violence that many of their peers had found themselves caught up in. This was often a form of conversation between the two men, as Rico and Frank enjoyed being able to tell tales of escape and success to each other as forms of validation and redemption.

Rico: “I look back man and I think to myself, what was I doing?”

Frank: “Part of the game man, we had to survive out there”...(points out of the window)

Rico: “I see the young ‘uns now, acting all bad and that, and I think to myself ‘that was me’, god knows what would have happened if I hadn’t have got my shit together”

Frank: “We’d be dead I’m tellin you, either that or doing a long arse stretch...”

Redemptive tales and stories of near misses were commonplace, with a near miss generally being a prison sentence or a violent attack. Each member had their own story,
yet I found Marcus’s to be the most compelling and indicative of boxers as a group. Marcus who is also explored further in the case studies, lacked redemption but loved to discuss how he negotiated his way around external agencies and forms of social control. He saw himself as being ‘above the law’, and liked to think that he “saw through the system”, therefore reminiscent of Laurence Taylor’s (Taylor et al 1999) work when he discusses how successful criminals consider themselves as distinctly different from everyday citizens, and see petty aspirations and trivial mundanities such as paying fines as something to be scorned.

The police were a typical example of Marcus’s scorn, and he always had something to say regarding the police force or recent police activity in the local community. This is because Marcus as a young man had allegedly suffered from police brutality, and as a young professional found himself spending six months in jail for accusations of attempted murder:

“Fuckin feds man, I feel sorry for the kids these days. Police still racist ya know, don’t get me wrong I know they got a job to do like the rest of us but it takes a certain kind of person to wanna be a copper. I wanted to be a copper once, I wanted to make a difference but I saw the racism, same as the army. They see a black man round ‘ere and they immediately think trouble.”

Marcus liked to offer his opinion to other men on how to “cheat the law”, especially minor civil offences such as speeding tickets or parking fines, and his glee was evident when his advice paid off, as men would bob and weave their way around statutory legislation as they would gloved fists in the ring. Mostly however, the men talked of how boxing saved them from lives of crime, and how without the gym they would not be successful at their chosen professions; boxing or otherwise, yet regardless, this did not
prevent them from still engaging in illegal activity and illegitimate violence when the opportunity arose.

4.9.5 Framing Desistance: The Ambivalence of the Boxer

Desistance was achieved in part by the men in the gym. It took shape in the form of incapacitation, detaining and occupying men’s time when they may otherwise be involved in criminal activity. Yet, the conversations I heard and the interactions I detailed, did not instill me with confidence when it came to refraining from fighting outside the gym walls. Challenges to the men’s identities and status diminishing comments, especially those of the emasculating kind, seemed to negate the desisting promoting potential of the gym as men would discuss having to “defend their honour” (Ricky 20 years old professional), and not “look like a pussy” (Simon 32 years old professional) when challenged or berated. Having said that, there was a distinct difference between the desisting promoting elements of the gym in terms of the professionals and the amateurs. The professionals were certainly detained for longer in the gym environment, as the monastic nature of the gym dictated dedication and constant attendance. The stakes in terms of status and identity seemed higher for the pro’s as they had more of a reputation to defend, yet having said that the professionals generally refrained from day-to-day incidences of street violence. Nonetheless, professionals such Ricky and Jonny would often talk of being involved in skirmishes after professional fights, or even backstage prior to stepping into the ring. The amateurs (exclusive of white-collar boxers) seemed freer to engage in street based violence when necessary, indeed, the younger teen amateurs seemed intent on establishing identities based on violence, and boxing served as a status-promoting asset in this quest:
“Good thing about the gym yeah, is that people know you train, they walk past and see you in here, that’s a good thing because it means you’re less likely to get stepped to you know what I’m saying?” (Carl 16 years old amateur)

“Boxing gets me girls and respect, of course I love it!” (Elliot 16 years old amateur)

The older amateurs like Frank were not that dissimilar, as Frank could be heard discussing his altercations “on the doors” after the weekend:

“Proper dickheads out this weekend, I think it’s the weather and people drinking all day thinking they’re well hard. I’m not arsed me, I’ll ignore them until they piss me off and then I’ll just drop ‘em”.

Baz who was still on license from jail listened intently and agreed with the sentiment that punters get one chance, and after this they inevitably have to suffer some sort of violence to get them to “shut the fuck up and listen”. As Van Maanen (1978: 233) points out in his study of policing “The person must be taught a lesson. And whether the teaching occurs in public or in the back of an alley, the person must be shown the error of his ways”. Therefore, personal retribution or the rectifying of respect and authority is inevitable for men like Frank, as it reinforces the working solidarity of bouncing (Hobbs et al 2003), “it weakens the threat to their occupational identity and the grievance is redressed by the use of force” (Holdaway 1988:123).

Stories of violence from the boxers both young and old generally focused on bravado or reclaiming respect, and it became apparent that violence was often employed to maintain the above. In addition, the potential for violence or the threat of violence was also sufficient enough for men to be able to maintain desired identities and also ward off potential attacks. This is where boxing comes into its own; acting as a resource that
allows men to achieve a semblance of violence— an outward appearance of someone “not to fuck with”. It is this attribute, as well as the ability to actually fight, which men like Frank base their commercial value upon. Boxing literally enabled Frank to evoke: “traditional violent masculine strategies to be relocated into new commodified arenas” such as those available to him in the night-time economy and bouncing (Hobbs et al 2003: 183). Or for young men like Carl or Elliot, it allowed for them to accomplish masculine identities based on the potential for physical violence and male virility.

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

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

Jonny was slightly different in his approach, and was not one for going out drinking after his fights. He had a girlfriend and generally just “chilled with her and a few mates after a fight”. However, Jonny was known for “kicking off” prior to the fights backstage, especially if other contenders laughed at the fact he wore glasses. Jonny was slightly more reserved than Ricky, but nonetheless still concerned with his status and identity as a boxer. I would argue that Jonny’s long-term girlfriend was one of the main reasons for his stated desistance, as the relationship proved to be another form of incapacitation not dissimilar to the gym:
“When I’m not here I’m generally at home with my girlfriend, she’s studying to be a nurse. When she works nights I come down to the gym and sometimes just hang out, I don’t really go out much to be honest it’s not massively my thing anymore...”

Eric whose story we interrogate in the case studies, supported his “lads” wholeheartedly, and often talked of how he was a “father figure to the boys”. He saw himself as a role model, and was proud of the fact that he could “talk ‘em down if it looked like it was about to kick off”. In the main however, Eric was supportive of identity defence mechanisms, by this I mean his acceptance of violence being permissible in “certain situations”. A permissible situation may include “someone taking the piss to the point where you have no choice”, or “sometimes a slap is what’s needed”. Overall, desistance was something that men favoured and boxing was viewed as a tool in achieving this. However, I was not wholly convinced, as evidence from these men’s narratives spoke of recidivistic tendencies when threats to status, identity, or sheer competitive thrill came to the fore, and I often wondered whether the likes of Ricky, Jonny et al actually practiced desisting behaviour when faced with personal challenges outside of the gym environment.

4.9.6 Discussion

In this chapter I have discussed and provided a detailed picture of my ethnography at North Town gym. I have illustrated a small part of the lives of these men that I came to be a part of in my six months of being there. It was my wish to remain authentic to their narratives and also non-judgmental in my quest to paint a full and evocative picture of boxing and its relationship to violence, and I hope I have done justice to the men’s tales. It is commonly known that ethnographic research provides the detail to analyse the wider relationship that groups and social worlds have to larger structures, therefore in my research I aimed to look at the context of these men’s lives in relationship to the
communities and circumstances they grew up in. The appeal of the boxing gym which I discuss in the next chapter highlights the struggles and barriers some of the men faced in their personal narratives of recidivism and desistance, and I additionally interrogate the sample with a selection of case studies that illustrate my arguments further.

5. The Appeal of the Boxing Gym

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the themes that emerged from my research, particularly those that relate to boxing’s enduring appeal, and also, those that demonstrate how the sport can be a fundamental source of masculine accomplishment and status. I begin with a reflection on the initial appeal of boxing for some of the men in the gym, and also how that relates to their understanding of why they continue to attend. Furthermore, I discuss how boxing is a response to personal and structural vulnerability for the majority of men in this sample, and therefore present data to illustrate how the appeal of boxing has changed for them over their life-course. Moreover, I present evidence to demonstrate how these men’s journeys throughout their amateur and professional careers have changed, and whether or not, there are differences in the reasons why they persist.

5.2 Reflections on the Appeal of Boxing

During the six months that I spent in the field of amateur and professional boxing it became increasingly evident that the gym was an important and valuable space for the men who attended. The conversations had with these men, and the time spent hanging around this inner-city gym allowed me a glimpse into their social world, and therefore
permitted me access to their worldview if only for a brief time. Most of the men I spoke to had a personal reason for participating. Some men I spoke to talked of getting fit and losing weight, whereas other men talked of boxing being their ‘life’. Others perceived themselves as contributing to, or overcoming some form of social, economic, or academic barrier, and one of the successful professionals I spoke with proclaimed that boxing, ‘Proved I was capable of doing something, that I was worthy of something’ (Simon 32 years old professional). Coincidentally, this phrase echoes the words uttered by the character Billy Tully in the cult boxing film *Fat City*, when he proclaimed: ‘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.’ One of the other men I spoke with believed that boxing was a ‘good thing to channel into’ and ‘if you haven’t got anything to put your aggression into, it goes elsewhere - thieving, fighting or robbing’ (Ricky 20 years old professional).

For others, boxing was an ancillary activity to a career in the night-time economy, providing the physical capital needed to guard the pubs and nightclubs in a metropolitan city. For some men, the boxing gym was simply a place to come and hang out; constructed as a neutral space that remained a place of safety no matter what was happening in the community outside. Indeed, Wacquant (2004:31) referred to boxing gyms as ‘islands of stability and order’, in that they ‘protect an individual from the street’ and ‘act as a buffer against the insecurity of the neighbourhood and pressures of everyday life’. In short, he believed that boxing gyms helped to regulate men’s lives when disorder and delinquency threaten it, and this seemed to be the case for a significant amount of men in my sample, as those who grew up in the surrounding community disclosed how the gang-violence that engulfed the area during the 1990’s was ‘left outside the gym doors for us to pick up after training!’ (Marcus 42 years old trainer).
Undoubtedly, the majority of the men involved in this research invested themselves heavily into the sport of boxing. Professional trainers, professional boxers and various amateurs said boxing symbolised - to them at least – much more than a place where you went to punch a few bags and ‘let off steam’. Interestingly, some men spoke of the boxing gym as they would a lover and discussed (without being aware) the sensual and erotic pull of pugilism; disclosing how the smell of sweat, and feel of skin contributed towards the seduction of the sport:

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

*Good man on man combat is the best buzz you can have, forget drugs, a good fight is the best buzz, up against the ropes toe to toe.* (Baz 38 years old amateur)

*In the ring where it’s all dark outside, and it’s just you and him, puts you in a trance, like a form of dancing, and all you can hear is breathing....* (Sal 42 years old ex professional)

The above quotes are reminiscent of Stephen Lyng’s (1998) concept of ‘edgework’, whereby participants combine the exhilaration and momentary integration of danger, risk and skill in the experience of boxing, and the physicality required to participate only adds to the seduction. Most certainly, the physicality required to invest in the sport was a huge draw, as men honed their bodies into either money-making machines or defensive structures in the pursuit of employment in the security industry or the professional boxing circuit. As expected, the professionals were seen as the highest investors, and for those who worked in the security industry, particularly those employed in the night-time
economy, boxing was seen as part of the job, and in some respects not that dissimilar from the professional boxers.

Bouncers and professional boxers were at the top of the hierarchy in the gym, and this was quite evident in the way the gym functioned. It was not very often that those with professions such as these, had to queue for equipment or want for a parking space outside, and this was due to the respect and prestige placed upon them as a result of earning a living from the crafting of their physicality.

The men in these superior positions also did favours for gym attendees, such as guest lists for nightclubs and ringside seats, therefore the regular attendees behaved in ways that maintained the bouncers and professional’s exalted positions, and this hierarchy was clearly well established. Moreover, it became quite clear early on in my fieldwork, that this hierarchy was based on physicality and the participant’s capacity for violence, whereby those with the highest rate of physical capital had the most power. Professions that supported or employed physical capital in the day-to-day occupations that these men inhabited merely contributed towards this omnipotence, as these men existed in a habitus that took violence as a normal part of everyday life. Thus, the boxing world came to be seen as a site where implicit rules of physical capital and masculine accomplishment governed its smooth running, indeed, it was seen as a place of excitement, male companionship and ruthless violent competition, and all these factors contributed towards its appeal.
5.3 Boxing’s Appeal Being Status, Fame, and Action

Boxing is - to borrow Goffman’s terminology – ‘where the action is’, a universe in which the smallest of actions becomes ‘fateful’, which is both exciting and problematic for the individuals involved. Goffman (1967: 174) explicitly lists boxing among the ‘professional spectator sports whose performers place money, reputation and physical safety in jeopardy at the same time’, which he sees as paradigmatic of ‘action’. Roger a retired boxing coach, and the oldest member in the gym at 63 years of age, kindly pointed this idea of ‘action’ out to me during the warm-up to a professional prizefight: ‘It’s the only sport where you have two doctors on-hand, a resuscitation team on standby, and an ambulance outside.’

Roger, proclaimed that: ‘Boxing is the only sport where you can do all the work and sometimes never get paid’, as he referred to the injustice and excitement of the game as sometimes investments never pay off. A typical example of this, would be a scenario in which a new professional gets knocked out in the first round, and becomes what is known as ‘dead meat’, or a fight gets cancelled at the last minute due to injury and the purse gets taken elsewhere, leaving both trainer and pugilist out of pocket. According to Goffman (1967:167), men who enter an occupation that depends on the ‘willful undertaking of serious chances’, decisively realign the structure and texture of their entire existence in ways that place them in a unique position to assert their agency.

Thus, the majority of boxers in this study felt that by stepping into the ring, they would achieve something forbidden to them outside, whether that is wealth, fame, excitement, or more importantly, a sense of control. Wacquant (1995b: 510) writes that, ‘It is the unspeakable prosaic joys of being caught up in a thickly knit web of tensionful activities that valorise them and imbue their life with élan, drive and significance’ that appeals to
these men, and all these rewards can seemingly be attained under the men’s own powers as an outcome of their individual choice and toils. Indeed, as Ricky a young professional in the gym once said: ‘I did this myself, no-one else did it. I was shit at school but looks who’s laughing now?’

Unsurprisingly money was a strong motivating factor in the appeal of professional boxing. Most men talked of ‘getting out from ‘round ‘ere when I make my millions’ (Derek 32 years old). At face value, boxing would seem appealing for simply that reason, being a sport that requires little equipment and nothing in the way of academic qualifications, yet, very few professionals actually make the coveted million and many end up injured and retire early as a result (Wacquant 1995a 1995b). Eric, who is further discussed in the case studies, demonstrates this unwavering appeal for the status and money that comes with boxing success and the sacrifices that have to be made in order to achieve it. What is surprising is that Eric, and most of the men I interviewed, did not originally begin boxing for these reasons, yet in order to be successful they had to adopt the discourses commonly seen in competitive hyper-masculine environments such as boxing gyms, and adopt an approach that exalts invincibility.

Boxing’s appeal is not always a reaction to material deprivation. It is arguably more a vehicle for exerting a sense of agency, establishing authority and remodeling oneself in the world, particularly if those participating feel that other opportunities for success are blocked. It was quite common to hear men such as Ricky state that he ‘couldn’t do nothing but box now’, having left school with no qualifications or potential job prospects. Whereas men such as Baz, a 38 years old amateur, felt that boxing gave him a sense of purpose after struggling to find work and purpose on release from prison:
Boxing saved my life man, if I just had to sit at home all day being on the dole and that, then without boxing I’d go mad, gives me something to do, something to focus on, and I get by with what the social give me innit.

The idea of the boxing gym being a place of purpose and resolve is common among those who have conducted ethnographies in them (see Wacquant 2004; Sugden 1996; Trimbur 2009), and in my study, a vast majority of the men reported that the gym was like ‘family’, or how they could not imagine their life without the gym and its structure. However, as much as this may be the case - whereby the gym fosters a community spirit - the moment that men step into the gym they are fed a steady diet of masculine discourses that exalt the idea of the lone warrior or modern gladiator, which in some respects contradicts the collective attitude they so attest.

Moreover, this idea of the lone warrior which many reaffirm when they repeat the boxing mantra, ‘When you step into the ring you step in alone’, gives them a platform on which to affirm their valour and heroic self, thus allowing them to escape the status of ‘non-person’ to which they have been consigned (Goffman 1959:151). In some respects, it further develops their status as a modern gladiator fighting against all odds, and as the famous Rocky posters that littered the gym attested: ‘His life was a million to one shot.’

This idea of a heroic self is prominent in combat sports such as boxing. The modern gladiator - triumphant and masculine - reigns supreme, and one way to achieve this perceived image is to heavily invest in the body. Fearlessness and enduring pain are other imperatives imposed by perceived notions of masculinity to be seen as successful in this environment. Eric who we meet in the case studies, often talked of fighting through pain: ‘I just kept hitting him, I knew my hand was broke but I had to carry on, all the work I’d put in - I couldn’t let everyone down’, as he discusses how he entered a title fight with a
broken hand just so he could avoid the shame of pulling out at the last minute and ‘letting everyone down’, including himself.

Most certainly, this idea of disassociation with one’s body is evident in boxing, with men seeing their bodies as machines as opposed to flesh and blood, and treating them as one might a fancy car - polishing it, checking it, and showing it off around the neighbourhood. Yet, on the other hand, they destroy it through obsessive exercise and monotonous drills, all the while convinced that ‘the harder you push the more you succeed’ (Eric, trainer 51 years old). Jefferson (1998:78) posits that ‘hardness’ can also be defined as a ‘certain indifference to the body’, an ability to withstand pain and injury regardless of rationality and consequences.

It became apparent that one of the major appeals of the boxing was its ability to allow men to craft their bodies in line with masculine discourses of the modern gladiator, while simultaneously allowing them to escape the reality of their circumstances, particularly those men who were disadvantaged through lack of employment or criminal records. Thus, the gym was viewed as a site of reconstruction, whether that was a new family, a new identity, or a new body, and the men in attendance each had their own personal reason for attending. When asking each man individually to ‘Tell me the story of how you became a boxer’, each one of them in some way or another, referred to the physical element as part of the original motivation.

Crafted ‘hard’ bodies represented status in the gym, but more importantly, they represented control. Coward (1984:229) claims that a ‘body defined is a body controlled’, and those in the gym who could withstand pain such as that suffered by Eric, or those that dedicated their lives to professions were physicality was the main requirement, were seen as accomplished men who were in control. Indeed, if a boxer could control his body, he
could craft it, thereby demonstrating his competence, his skill, his status, in a culture that takes physicality as the primary definer of masculinity (Connell 1995). If the men in this study could demonstrate a sense of control over their bodies then they felt more in control of their lives, particularly for those who felt disempowered by structural forces such as the job market or the criminal justice system:

*Can’t get a job coz of my criminal record, so I help out at the gym, Marcus lets me train for free if I mop once a week and sort out the glove box and stuff, helps me save on subs and that, and I get to work out everyday, keep myself in shape, keep myself sane!* (Baz 38 years old amateur)

*I have to work out otherwise I’d go mad, when my body feels good, I feel good, and it helps my mood.* (Jonny 19 years old professional)

Eric felt he had ‘something to prove’ having been diagnosed with chronic asthma as a child, whereas Marcus ‘needed to train’ having left school and merely ‘hanging on the streets with the boys’. Simon, whose father was also a boxer and local ‘hardman’, discusses how ‘not drinking’ and ‘not messing around’ with friends was conducive to his success, and therefore set about purifying his body to achieve it. Ricky and Jonny felt that being a professional boxer was ‘all they had going for them’, whereas Frank sought the sanctuary of the gym to escape the ‘drama outside’; each one, relying upon their physical capital as a means to make money, or reconstruct themselves in a new light. Accordingly, the gym was viewed as the place to do that, a place to hone a new identity, physically, structurally, and mentally. Thus, these elements of reconstruction combined with the control and sense of determinism that boxing provided contributed towards the gym being a site of enduring appeal for those in attendance.
5.4 Boxing’s Appeal Being Dedication, Reconstruction and Bodywork

Sacrifice and monastic devotion are touted as the way to achieve success in the boxing gym. Men could be often heard discussing how if they ‘put in the work, there’s no way I can lose’ (Ricky 20 years old professional). The professionals in particular were vocal about their dedication and determination to win, and Ricky often posed in the mirror-lined gym and bellowed how he was unstoppable, particularly if he ‘kept training and getting up at 6am to run everyday’ while also ‘sparring three times a week’.

Jonny, a young professional like Ricky, also disclosed that he would get up earlier than the rest of the professionals to go running because he wanted to ‘be the best’, and also how ‘boxing ain’t like a job but a hobby you get paid for’. Indeed, being the best was everything to these men, and the culture of competition in the gym was widespread. Everyone wanted their photograph to adorn the walls, so they could join the ranks of the professionals before them, or become famous like Tyson, Lennox Lewis or Muhammad Ali. Members of the gym saw success as being achievable through hard work - hard bodily work, and it seemed that the more you were able to do physically, the better chance you had at making it. The trainers encouraged this sentiment and often joked that they would lock the boxers in the gym and ‘have a fight to the death to prove who was the best’. As would be expected, the boxers absorbed this ethos, and occasionally could be heard placing bets on who would ‘walk out of the gym alive’.

Competition motivated these men. Everyone wanted to be better than everyone else. There was a real fear among gym members of being humiliated or ostracised for being weak, and the boxing gym worked to this hierarchy. The framework was based upon bodily success, who can go the most rounds, who can do the most chin-ups in a timed minute and who had the most feared reputation. This idea of reputation was also
prominent in the gym culture, and there was a tacit understanding - an unspoken code - informing those members of who took precedence. Trainers were usually in charge. One in particular called Marcus, as well as being a trainer, collected the money. He exuded a sense of control and command in the gym. His photograph was on the wall next to the ring, and he still embodied the same physical capital that he did in his earlier days as a professional boxer. This was achieved by countless hours ‘on the weights’ particularly if there was a professional bout due (even though he was not on the bill), and he was known to come in and train during the night as he did in his earlier years as a professional boxer.

Appearance was important in this milieu, as were symbols such as cars, tattoos, and jewellery. They all seemed to symbolise success for these men and most coveted the above if they did not already possess them. These facets contributed towards specific men’s reputations, and added towards the overall demeanour they were trying to convey. This being one of success, especially in relation to ‘having made it’ and therefore earned enough money through physical endurance and presence, either in the ring or in the night-time economy where many of these men moonlighted. Indeed, assets such as cars, jewellery and surplus cash, seemed like additional trophies for the men in the gym (as did women which will be discussed later in the thesis), and feminist theorists such as Faludi (1999) would argue that symbols constructed around celebrity and consumerism portray a ‘crisis of masculinity’, characterised by the replacement of a culture of useful production with a culture that is ornamental.

Nonetheless, bodily capital took precedence. Muscles, ‘heart’ and endurance seemed to be worth more in the gym environment than any ostentatious asset. Men dieted obsessively, particularly if there was a fight coming up, and there was always a queue for the scales as men lined up to check their daily weight. Food and nutrition was discussed regularly, and it was not uncommon to hear how men would starve themselves prior to a bout. Drying
out was also another technique among the professionals; whereby they would starve
themselves of water to lose a few extra pounds prior to weigh in. Not making the weight
was a real fear, because that meant that the fight could potentially be cancelled and the
purse taken elsewhere. Thus, men equated bodily capital with financial gain, and for
many, this bodily manipulation and destruction felt like the only way to succeed. Bodies
became these men’s prized assets, and yet, underneath the bravado and valour there was a
deep fear of injury and/or death.

The somatic culture of the boxing gym formed part of a wider masculine discourse that
informed men on how to behave, how to endure, and most importantly how to be male. It
embodied competition, fearlessness, and lack of intimacy, commonly seen traits in
masculine sporting discourses (Sabo 1986; Messner 1990). Additionally, it further served
to create a gulf between what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine,
as men relied on sociobiological notions of the stronger sex to assist in the making of their
masculinity, and boxing in their opinion, was a way to achieve this.

5.5 Boxing’s Appeal Being Competition and the Accomplishment of Masculinity

In the gym, men invested in traditional versions of masculinity that evoked gender
binaries and ideas of a stronger sex. Quite a few of the members seemed perturbed at my
presence, or acted like I simply was not there. In my opinion, this was to maintain a sense
of gender difference, as boxers constantly distanced themselves from anything classified
as feminine. Femininity in this arena implied softness, maternity and vulnerability, and
this was to be avoided at all costs for the participants in this study. As a result, the
construction of boxing became one that depended heavily on binary oppositions,
especially those between men and women, thus supporting essentialist claims to
exclusivity, and further reminiscent of Butler’s (1999) ideas of anatomical sex. Moreover, it supported work by Woodward (2004) when she discussed how boxing forever remains rooted in a binary logic, and is therefore constructed around a resistance to any rhetoric of gender transgression. Indeed, these theories became illuminated in my research as men openly discussed their disdain for women’s boxing:

*Nah man, I’m not into that. Women should be admired and appreciated as opposed to bust-up and beaten.* (Marcus professional trainer 42 years old)

*I’m a traditional man me, don’t like women fighting and that, I should be the one to protect them not the other way around, know what I’m saying.* (Frank 31 years old bouncer and amateur boxer)

*If women wanna box then let ‘em, they’ll soon go back to pilates when they realise how hard this is...* (Baz 38 years old amateur)

Women were discussed in ways that construed them as opposites - fragile and maternal - and a lot of the men did not believe that women should box. This dualistic thinking pervaded all aspects of the sport, not only in the gym but also in the national press at the time. Amir Khan, one of Britain's best-known boxing Olympians who won silver at the Athens Games in 2004, was also not in favour as he said at the time: ‘Deep down I think women shouldn't fight, that's my opinion. When you get hit it can be very painful...women can get knocked out’, (The Guardian 2012). Indeed, it is not only comments like that of Khan’s that appeared in national newspapers during the course of my research, but further insidious references that enforced a binary logic in the gym. These were terms such as: professional/amateur, heavyweight/lightweight, success/failure, and more importantly, women’s boxing/men’s boxing. All these logics, therefore, have to be constantly negotiated by men and women who participate in the
sport. Boxing might present as traditional masculinity, but the inclusion of women’s boxing in the Olympics was a historical moment when this traditional version may have been challenged, however, this was worrying for some men in the gym during the course of my research:

For women, boxing is too physical. Me personally, I don’t approve of it. I wouldn’t have them in the Olympics, because I’ve been there, having done it I know what it’s like. Women shouldn’t box because of their wombs and everything. Women are a lot different than men. I would rather they didn’t do it. (Marcus professional trainer 42 years old)

Women’s boxing in the Olympics? Are you having a fucking laugh? (Baz 38 years old amateur)

It became imperative to the success of this research, to explore the ways that men constructed meanings associated with gender and violence, and how this positioned them both structurally and subjectively, as all too often in this research, men in the boxing gym could be heard speaking in ways that asserted dominance of women and each other. On more than one occasion, I heard references to ‘pussies’, ‘girls’ and ‘bitches’, with the former being the most common and the one that was most likely to evoke retaliation. Arguably, this is because it refers to a woman’s genitalia, and in the male homosocial world of sport it becomes an emasculating term that serves to separate the weak from the strong. To be classified as ‘someone’s bitch’ in this hyper-masculine arena also relates to masculine discourses surrounding sexuality, and literally means to get ‘fucked’ by one’s opponent - ‘fucked’ in the sense of beaten as opposed to penetrated. This term was mainly spoken by the professionals and in reference to an upcoming opponent’s presumed defeat. For example, Ricky stated that he was ‘going to make him his bitch’, and then proceeded to laugh among the other boxers.
Moreover, what became to be known as ‘banter’ (joking around) in the boxing gym was actually a proliferation of discourses in the gender order, and, ultimately, a perpetuation of men’s dominance over women. Curry (1991) discusses how insults and jibes are a kind of verbal jousting, and are representative of men’s friendships in sporting cultures. Whereas, Klein (1986) posits that many of the men in his study of Mexican baseball players used jokes and jibes as ‘weapons’. Messner (1992) argues that relationships between teammates are characterised by an ‘antagonistic cooperation’, that is predicated on competition and domination, and through the medium of language, male athletes bond. Nevertheless, it is usually at the expense of others - women, gay men and ethnic racial minorities - and this was indeed evidenced not only through verbal interactions in the boxing gym, but through the choice of music men chose to train to. Misogynistic hip-hop was usually played, and the trainer regulated the choice of music. His taste in music could usually be relied upon to have derogatory terms directed at women and gay men, and all too often had references to violence and revenge in the songs.4

Competitiveness was inherent in the gym, and successful competition regulated men’s relationships with the world and each other. Competition amongst men develops hierarchy, and is deeply embedded in social structures of gender, race and class, especially with the cultural meanings accorded to masculinity (Messerschmidt 1993). Marcus the prominent trainer in the trainer whose story we also revisit in the case studies illuminates the above point, as he stated that, ‘competition breeds competition’ among men, and it was this factor above all others that maintained his interest in attending.

According to Connell (1995:54), ‘Men’s greater sporting prowess has become a theme of backlash against feminism, as it serves as symbolic proof of men’s superiority and right to

4 Artists such as Buju Banton and N.W.A. were amongst the play-list.
rule’, and in linking embodied constructions of masculinity in structural concepts of patriarchy, Connell (1983:27) suggests that it is through a combination of both strength and skill that this is possible, ‘what it means to be masculine is, quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence’. Thus, it is through this combination of strength and skill that the body can be symbolised as masculine, and arguably, nowhere else but in the discourse of sport can this be so readily harnessed.

Connell (1995: 54) writes that ‘sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture’, and for the men in this research it was certainly a method of accomplishing and reaffirming their masculinity. However, in the boxing gym, violence or the capacity for violence also formed part of men’s gendered identity, and aggression and violence shown in the ring were permissible whereby injuries had to be conceded as being part of the game. Messner (1990) discovered that men ‘naturalised’ their capacity for aggression and violence in sport, as the rewards and prestige placed upon athletes who demonstrated it in the pursuit of winning reinforced and created contexts in which violence became normalised (Smith 1974; Vaz 1980). In the boxing gym, superfluous violence became rewarded with masculine kudos, and this was reinforced by nicknames such as ‘Hardcore’, ‘Ruthless’ and ‘Ice’ (due to the cold heartedness shown in the ring). Indeed, men who demonstrated cold heartedness or lack of empathy were seen as tough guys or not someone to mess with, and this lack of empathy was consistent throughout the gym as men seemed intent on inflicting as much pain as possible in the pursuit of winning. Black eyes and cut lips would be worn with pride - because as much as losing is frowned upon - the way you lose is just as important. Frank, one of the top amateurs who we explore in the case studies, demonstrated this above point when he suffered a broken rib in an aggressive ‘friendly’ spar:
“Shit, I hate it when he gets one on me. Broke my fuckin rib- you can see it popping out here look! *laughing* I only hate it because it reminds me that I’m mortal! Marcus, look, look at my rib popping out here- bastard! *laughing*

Men who lost with valour, or demonstrated heart (courage) in the ring were not viewed as negatively as those who were knocked down or threw in the towel. To surrender or give up was viewed as emasculating, as much as not being able to withstand pain or defeat. Wacquant (1995:496) refers to this as ‘the specific honor of the pugilist’, and relates it to that of an ancient gladiator - a refusal to concede or back down. Sabo (1986) refers to this as the ‘pain principle’, a concept with huge significance in terms of the structure and value of the boxing world. Any boxer who quits in the middle of a fight is branded with the mark of infamy and suffers a kind of symbolic death, as non-compliance to the principle of pain results in being ostracised, and further references to ‘pussy’ and ‘bitch’, those terms that relate to feminine softness and inferior sexuality.

The subjective understandings that men have in relation to aggression and violence are observable in the boxing gym. Among the men in this study, identities were often predicated on violence and its potential enactment. Often, violence was used as a weapon - in combination with language - and without being openly aware of the success of the professionals one quickly understood who was revered and who was feared. Tattoos were also symbolic in the gym, as they acted as further trophies in men’s successful quest for body modification, and in some respects demonstrated their capacity for pain. Interestingly, Sanders (1989) refers to this as ‘permanent bodily alteration’ that allows one to redefine one’s identity and position in social classifications, and most of this
artwork comprised of religious iconography with quotes that held religious meaning, even though none of the participants ever disclosed being religious. The quotes usually related to endurance promoting mantras, or relative’s names - usually the children of the men themselves, further promoting their virility and sexual potency. More than one member had a pair of boxing gloves tattooed onto their arm, and when asked what the tattoos symbolised he replied: ‘I pray to the god of boxing me mate’ (Ricky 20 years old). Wacquant (2004: 100) in his ethnographic work stated that: ‘The gym is to boxing what the church is to religion, becoming a boxer, training for a fight is a little like entering a religious order.’ Indeed, men rose early on Sundays to run, and many took the ethos of boxing as seriously as they would a faith.  

Like religion, the homology of boxing is predicated on the notion of sacrifice, as it is widely believed in boxing circles that the more you sacrifice, the better chance you have of winning and ascending into the highest ranks. Upon discovery, the notion of sacrifice in boxing reinforced a sense of control amongst men, as they invested in sporting discourses that proclaimed that ‘without pain, there is no gain’, thus sanctioning and perpetuating wider masculine structures that dictate that success is predicated on competition, endurance and bodily capital. Indeed, Marcus stated that:

*The fight is won in the gym, not in the ring, coz the fight is with yourself, and when you walk into that squared circle knowing that you have given up everything to win, then you win.*

*I knew I just had to keep hitting him, if I could just keep doing that then I had a shot at winning, I wasn’t gonna stop.* (Eric 51 years old trainer).

---

6 Alcohol was also off limits during fight training as was sexual relations.
This mentality of competition inherent in boxing, further perpetuated men’s decisive triumph over their own bodies (Connell 1990), serving to reinforce discourses that talk of physiques only having meaning when deployed in the act of winning. The will to win, or “fight with yourself” did not merely arise from personal ‘drive’- familiar words often bandied around in sport arenas - but more from a social structure of sporting competition that serves to perpetuate a gender order in which it comfortably resides.

In order to properly conceptualise the masculinity/boxing relationship it is important to stipulate that most men enter into this social world already aware of their gender identity and positioning. Judith Butler (1999) posits that gender is merely ‘performance’ and always in a developmental process that unfolds in a social context. The boxing gym thus proved to be a fascinating context in which to examine the performance and unfolding of masculine gender identity, particularly as it is distinguished from femininity that is construed as its psychic opposite. Yet enactment was often contradictory as this traditional masculinity was also haunted by frailty and failure, as the sculpted hard male body that largely contributes to discourses surrounding traditional masculinity always has to negotiate the frailty and failure that characterises boxing (Woodward 2004).

Indeed, while not necessarily appealing, the masculinities that are carved in this sport are always contradictory, vulnerable and fractured, as the risk of injury in boxing is so high, that the ability to degenerate from beautiful to grotesque is a slippery slope that boxers are more than aware of (Woodward 2004). As (Connell 1995: 54) posits: ‘The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained - for instance, as a result of physical disability’, and more often than not, this idea was evidenced through boxers stories detailing suicidal thoughts when unable to perform due to injury. Indeed, Sal a prominent boxer, now
turned trainer, detailed this sense of vulnerability after a street attack that left him in a wheelchair for six months:

*The assault stopped me turning pro - it was my dream - so I went through all the usual, feeling suicidal you know, I didn’t have anything. It sounds dead shambolic but until that happening I was living with a Page 3 Girl (glamour model) and had a Sierra Cosworth (sports car). You know, I was living the lifestyle- sports cars and fighting at the top level, then when that happened and it was just like hmmm. I hit rock bottom.*

Moreover, Eric, after suffering defeat as a result of a broken wrist stated that he felt like he had lost his ‘ability to be a man’, and also described feeling suicidal at the time. With these vignettes in mind, it is fair to state that the appealing elements of the gym are related to the masculinity that could be achieved through ‘bodywork’- through physical capital and commitment to the pain principle (Sabo 1986). This was further supported by heteronormative banter, and a psychological distancing from anything classified as feminine. Physical hardness was valorised, as was mental toughness, and men demonstrated their capabilities in these areas by investing in competitive bodywork and endurance tests. This would involve circuit training and charts on the wall that illustrated how many sit-ups Ricky could do in a timed minute, or an exercise called ‘jumping the beam’, which involved jumping over beam backwards and forwards to develop strength, cardiovascular endurance and flexibility. Additionally, money, status, fame and muscle all contributed towards the appeal and masculine discourses inherent in the gym culture, and thus, further allowed for men to perform their masculinity in conventional ways.

“*Yo, check Simon jumping that beam, he did over 100 today. The man has skills, and you know what they say- skills pay bills*” (Frank 32 years old amateur)
“You’ll never make Frank crack in the ring, he’s got ‘dead eyes’, hard-case that one”

(Elliot 16 years old amateur)

The appeal of the boxing gym is grounded in a sense of hardness, described as an ability to ‘risk the body in performance’ (Feldman 1991). This is evidenced by famous names such as ‘Iron Mike Tyson’, or ‘Hands of Stone Duran’- boxing pseudonyms that evoke a sense of hardness, coldness and industry. To say you box, is to say you are hard; it is to say you are made with materials that are infallible and not easy to break, evidenced by Frank’s above quote, and Eric’s case study describing bodily endurance in the face of pain. Moreover, this sense of hardness coexists with a sense of manliness - a sense of industry and toil - reminiscent of working class masculinities and their associations with heavy industry (Bathrick 1990; Winlow 2001). In short, boxing as an occupation carries weight in masculine working class communities that are built upon the use of the physical body as a method to not only negotiate one’s masculinity but also negotiate one’s income and social standing. For the men in this study, those who predominately heralded from these cultures, boxing was a conduit for accomplishing masculinity when other channels seemed blocked. Simon’s case study that we explore later describes this very point, as he discusses how boxing was his “only option”:

“Got fuck all else going for me, can barely read me, but boxing gave me all I need money-wise, I can provide for my kid and that’s all that matters” (Simon 32 years old professional)

It served as a career option for the talented among the sample, and for others, it acted as a safety net when chaos and disruption threatened to enfold their lives, particularly Baz who was recently realised from jail on licence.
“The gym saved me, I was doin a bit inside you know, on the pads and the weights and that, but when I came out I knew I had to keep my head down so I just came here and keep to my curfew.” (Baz 38 years old amateur)

Indeed, boxing’s appeal is a combination of all these things; a masculine homosocial world that reinforces gender binaries and allows men to accomplish their masculinity in approving ways, and a further reinforcement of working class habitus ideals that the majority of these men were familiar with. It is thus appealing for these very reasons, money, status, fame and action, and the ability to craft physical capital when the potential to accrue social capital is somewhat limited. The boxing gym is therefore viewed as an important site for men, and one that encapsulates a host of meanings for those that attend. And on a deeper, perhaps less conscious less level of understanding by its participants, it is used as a site that allows men to overcome some form of personal or structural vulnerability, and it is this fascinating element that I turn to next.

5.6 Boxing as a Response to Personal and Structural Vulnerability

One of the most important themes in the masculinity/sport equation is the overall relationship men have towards intimacy. As De Garis (2002:100) previously argued, boxing is appealing because it provides a site of acceptable ‘somatic intimacy’, that allows for ‘cooperative sharing which is intimate, shared and familial’. And for some men in this study, boxing provided ‘brothers’ and ‘second ‘fathers’ in the shape of peers and trainers. Boxing therefore demonstrated an emotional attachment through terms that clearly speak of the protective and nurturing functions it possesses for them, while providing a safe place to express feelings of friendship, companionship, and camaraderie:
Don’t know where I’d be without the gym, its like family to me. (Jonny 19 years old professional)

I come to the gym on Christmas day to say a prayer for Paul before I go home to my other family. (Marcus 42 years old trainer).

In the main however, participation was also fractured by an inherent sense of competition and fear of intimacy and femininity. Messner (1990) among others (see Chodorow 1978; Rubin 1982), argue that these levels of intimacy create ambivalence, and while craved and accepted in the rule bound structure of sport, the attachments formed also constitute a major threat to psychological boundaries around fragile masculine identities (ibid).

Furthermore, Gilligan (1982) claims that males tend to perceive vulnerability alongside the possibility of violence in situations of close affiliation, and interestingly, the majority of men in this piece suffered some form of violence, usually at the hands of their fathers. This ambivalence towards intimacy therefore became inherent in most of these men’s social interactions, including their sporting experiences, and while men expressed companionship in familial terms there was always a perceived distance that protected the boxers from becoming too intimate - too vulnerable.

Boxing teaches you that you’re on your own in life, life the same as the ring man, when you step out, you step out alone, and when you go down you go down alone. (Marcus 42 years old professional)

Conversely, De Garis (2002:97) posits that: ‘The gym is a “safe” place to express intimacy because the textual representations of boxing as masculine and violent deter allegations of weakness or femininity.’ Nevertheless, in this study, men refrained from discussing any intimate concerns unless it provided a further opportunity to buttress a
sense of masculine pride and reinforce their standing in the gender order. Women were often the targets of men’s intimate concerns, as participants would openly discuss chastising their wives and girlfriends for any form of challenge or complaint.7

“*I just ignore the missus when she starts*” (Eric 51 years old trainer)

“She’s always on my case, she don’t understand that this is my job, she wants all the fancy stuff but then moans about me fucking working all the time” (Ricky 20 years old professional)

Ricky, who was recently separated from his partner often talked about the arguments he had surrounding childcare, and could be counted upon to disparage his partner as a result. He felt that it was a women’s job to care for their child and struggled to comprehend that childcare was also his responsibility, particularly when it affected his ‘training schedule’.

In the boxing world, individual’s roles and separate positions in hierarchal structures are determined by competition in a clearly defined system that governs interactions and relationships. In the boxing gym, members would push the boundaries to gain any advantage over an opponent, but always demonstrate regard for the rules in the game. Messner (1990) posits that this is part of a system, or code of conduct, that places safe boundaries around their aggression and their relationship with others. To not have these rules in sport - particularly boxing - would result in chaos on both physical and psychological levels, as there would be an ‘incredibly frightening need to constantly negotiate and renegotiate relationships’ (ibid: 98). Nevertheless, intimacy in the rule bound structure of sport feels relatively safe to those who participate, and in some

7 Reminiscent of the work of Holdaway (1988: 122) when he discussed some of the views held by the British Police, ‘If it wasn’t a girl we would just thump her.’
respects the boxing gym provided a relatively comfortable context to develop a certain kind of relationship with other men.

However, forms of interaction in this gym were devoid of visible emotion and therefore rarely authentic; evidenced by one participant disclosing that when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer he felt unable to discuss this with other gym members, and as a result, left the gym for over two years until he recuperated. This undoubtedly reinforces Connell’s earlier words around how disabilities and illnesses contradict the constitution of masculinity so much so, that Derek felt unable to disclose his cancer to his gym peers. As a result of Derek’s experience, it seemed that intimacy was only permissible when it perpetuated discourses in the gender order. This was more than evident in the gym, as those members that breached this tacit agreement where chided and referred to as ‘pussies’, particularly if the situation under discussion involved altercations with female partners or other men who did not box.

Furthermore, there was an unspoken code in the boxing gym that dictated that members should not carry their daily trivialities into the gym with them, and least of all vocalise any sensitive issues in relation to love, work or family obligations. The latter was constantly reinforced with verbal cues that shouted: ‘Leave your personal shit at the door’, and posters displaying text that stated: ‘Discipline involves the mind as well as the body’. Indeed, Wacquant (2004:37) posits that: ‘Everything takes place as if a tacit pact of nonaggression governed interpersonal relations and ruled out any topic of conversation liable to threaten this “playful form of association”, hamper the smooth functioning of daily individual exchanges, and thereby endanger the specific masculine subculture that the gym perpetuates.’
However, most of the men interviewed in this piece spoke fondly of the gym, and many discussed the way in which boxing had acted as some kind of salvation; usually salvation from crime, but more often than not, salvation from vulnerability. Vulnerability for these men, took shape in the form of divorce (although rarely discussed) or re-entry after periods of imprisonment. Yet more often than not, this sense of vulnerability tacitly focused around the prevention of repeat victimisation. Notably, most men in this study had suffered some form of physical or emotional abuse throughout their formative years - either through familial abuse or peer bullying - and at least 8 of the 10 men interviewed disclosed that physical violence had been present throughout the lives from an early age:

*It was crazy, the whole thing was crazy. I could write a book about living in that environment. There was a situation that I will never forget, and my brother will never forget it either because my dad beat my brother so bad that he nearly killed him. And you know why? Because he forgot to polish his boots for work.* (Eric boxing trainer 51 years old)

*Errr it’s difficult to say things about my dad. The ‘tough love’ that he showed me growing up you know, as an ex-marine. I don’t know. I feared him. I feared him. I think there is only me and my brother on our street who didn’t have a criminal record, and I think that’s part of being hit and the fear of my dad.* (Sal retired boxer 42 years old)

*My dad liked to drink didn’t he, you know what I mean? But he wouldn’t even know now that he used to hit me, he would have forgot.* (Simon professional boxer 32 years old)

---

8 For a full discussion of boxing and re-entry see Lois Trimbur (2009), *Me and the Law is Not Friends*: How Former Prisoners Make Sense of Re-entry.
Did I respect my parents when I was born? No. Because there was times when I was disobedient you know what I'm saying? But when they beat the shit out of me I feared them then didn’t I. (Frank boxer 31 years old)

For those above, violence had been so diffused throughout their lives, or had taken such similar and recurring patterns, that it had simply become part of what life was like for them. The violence was emotional and physical, and more often than not involved the father. Only one of the participants had no further contact with his father, while the remainder seemed to accept their father’s abuse as simply a way of life, with Frank stating that, ‘It never did me no harm, toughened me up it did’. Interestingly, most of the respondent’s took up the sport of boxing in their early teenage years when the abuse was at its peak, and every one of them believed that boxing had played a significant role in the formation of their identity.

From an early age then violence formed a key part of these men’s ‘habitus’; an aspect of inherited culture in their daily lives that it almost ‘goes without saying’. Indeed, this habitus of violence operated on a level deeper than rational ideology and became embedded in their sense of self. Moreover, boxers are required to understand the complex interactive preludes and precursors of violence, and this combined with practical occupational considerations, allowed for violence to become entrenched in these men’s self-concepts.

This is clearly the case in the habitus of boxers, where many have already incorporated violence into their own sense of self. And as a result of this, when faced with conflict, violence became confirmed and underlined as both an obligation and expectation (Tedeschi and Felson 1994). The men in this study defined themselves with violence - saw it as part of their everyday life - so much so, that some participants would return from
road-running having been involved in an impromptu street fight with no comprehension that this may be illicit:

*I’ll bang that cunt out if he talks to me like that again, sat on the wall like a dickhead outside, while I’m in here trying to get ready for next Saturday’s fight.* (Jonny 19 years old professional)

This identity as a ‘fighter’ shaped men like Jonny, and also acted as a crutch in times of personal danger and uncertainty. Ricky, another young professional, defined the outlook of a fighter as someone ‘more than willing to physically fight if the occasion arises’. He described himself as a ‘fighter at heart’ and was prepared to ‘physically fight anyone you put in front of me’. He described ‘not being afraid of no-one’ and ‘no-one is that hard that they can’t be beat’. Indeed, Ricky invested in this idea of success being achievable through violence, and constantly compared himself to other men’s potential for it in the gym:

“I know I’m at the top of my game, there’s very few that could beat me here, especially when I’m on form. I’m a fighter you know what I’m saying, always have been, always will be. That counts when you’re doing it for a living, I can’t have people coming in here thinking they’re hard and getting the better of me”

It later transpired that the reasons why he choose to hone this identity was as a result of being small at school and having to move to secondary school:

*Most people understand that if they are scared of you they won’t push you, they won’t mess around with you, they won’t annoy, they won’t test you. You know what I mean? They won’t take the piss out of you; you know what I mean? If they are a bit wary of you they will move onto the next person so they don’t have a real fight on their hands. That’s
why I did a lot of my fighting; it was to make a statement at secondary school. Basically I’m not a big lad so it was more a ‘don’t fuck with me kinda thing’. And it worked. Errr, quite quickly, from-you saw other kids getting dragged about in the corridors and all that. No-one used to drag me.

Boxing therefore became attractive to such men, as it not only spoke a language they were already familiar with, but further acted as a physical defence mechanism when their lives became unreliable, disrupted or threatened. Sullivan (1950) called these defence mechanisms ‘security operations’, a way to reduce feelings of psychological anxiety when confronted with events that threaten one’s identity. Defence mechanisms consist of thoughts/behaviours aimed at returning a sense of security and power to the ego (ibid), and engaging in confrontations is thought to be one such ‘security operation’ as individuals can challenge another’s behaviour or assertions towards them. Moreover, these confrontations allow men to draw upon an inherited cultural framework that places violence central to their own sense of self, and use it as a personal resource that informs and advises social interaction and performance (Hobbs et al 2003). And in some respects, boxing played a part in maintaining this.

Seen in this way, feelings of inadequacy can be defended against by enacting violence, as individuals attempt to defend a specific self-image so as to avoid feelings of inferiority and weakness. Furthermore, behaving aggressively can be an especially important defence mechanism for individuals who feel access to alternative ways of demonstrating their social worth is limited (Gilligan 1996; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 1996). This was an important point in the research, as for men like Ricky, boxing not only ‘paid the bills’, but allowed him to also invest in physical capital, whereby he could deposit muscle in the bank as well as money, thus eradicating feelings of low self-worth associated with financial and masculine insecurities. In fact, a lot of the men in the gym reported starting
out from a limited structural position and therefore conformed to this kind of appeal, and this idea is further compounded in work by Andrew Tolson (1977) when he suggests that the accomplishment of masculinity is formally based in the attainment of a wage.

Whereas regular attendance at the gym guaranteed the development of Ricky’s physical capital, as well as his monetary, as the grueling workouts that the sport demanded contributed towards his muscular frame. It was with this muscular frame that he felt a sense of power, as it eradicated a sense of fear and inferiority, and as he attested above, the muscular armour that boxing produced, protected and defended against others when at school. For men like Eric, the original appeal of boxing resided in his need to ‘prove himself’, and later in life, as a way to stand-up to his abusive father. For Frank, who we also revisit in the case studies, boxing’s appeal resided in his need to ‘escape the streets’, and ultimately served to carve him a career in the night-time economy as a result. For men like Sal, and many others, boxing was a way to carve a new identity as his story told of bullying taunts at school as a result of being overweight:

I was the fat kid weren’t I? All that shit with my dad made me find safety in food, wasn’t until I started boxing that the weight started to come off, then the bullying stopped! Ha!

(Sal retired boxer, now trainer 42 years old)

Undoubtedly, the boxing gym provided a place of security for the majority of men within this study, as Wacquant (2004) proposed - it became ‘an island of order and stability’ for those that attended. Thus, it provided structure and companionship to men both young and old from the surrounding area, while acting as a place of salvation when ‘things were bad at home’ (Simon 32 years old). Moreover, some men discussed how some of the trainers had become second fathers and significant others in times of need, and how having a
purpose and structure within their lives had distinguished them from other young people hanging around on the streets:

*I walked into the gym, and my coach was there, he has been at the gym for 55 years now, and we basically just developed a relationship from there, I became part of the family.*  
(Sal retired boxer/trainer 42 years)

*I stopped going to school in the end...didn’t bother with my exams or anything, my life became about boxing, it changed everything I did, because I’m not academic me, and I thought...I used to watch boxing and all that, and when I was just leaving school I thought what am I going to do? And I thought I’m going to box - that’s it - I’m going to box.* (Simon 34 years old professional)

It was also common to hear how boxing had ‘saved’ men’s lives, and without it they believed they would have either been ‘in jail’ or ‘dead’, with some of the men who had been previously imprisoned stating that boxing also ‘kept them out’:

*Started boxing in jail, nothing else to do like, it helped me stay focused when I came out, stay away from the scene and all that- start over.* (Baz 38 years old amateur)

*If I hadn’t of started boxing when I did I reckon I’d be dead by now, either that or in jail for something serious.* (Ricky 20 years old)

In the main however, each of the participants interviewed demonstrated some form of vulnerability, an anxiety relating to a previous or potential violent attack. For many, their life story was one in which they experienced problematic family relationships, became involved in criminal activities, felt stigmatised and excluded, and doubted their abilities outside the realm of boxing. In describing their childhoods and lives, many of the respondents appeared to be struggling with memories of major family disruption -
violence in particular was reported as an issue - and this resulted in feelings of betrayal, distrust, insecurity and inadequacy. Others recalled being rejected by parents and significant others, and many of these men reported feeling abandoned and abused, which led them to feel unsure of their social status and/or self-worth:

*When I was at home I had to be a soldier, I’d say my dad didn’t have a son - he had a soldier. I got love off my mum, but my dad was in charge and that was just the way it was. So what I got from the gym was men who knew how to fight - knew how to look after themselves, but could let that ‘toughness’ be something else. They just looked after me, gave me hug, spoke to me like an adult and cared for me. Whereas my dad, he served 22 years in the Marines - tough love - he’s just that kind of man.* (Sal 42 years old ex boxer/trainer)

*Having a dad as a boxer, seeing him come home with black eyes and all that, you know as a kid, and I would say: ‘What’s up?’ And he’d been beat, or he’d won, you know....it just wasn’t something that I took to as a kid or anything. I know some things go over your head as a kid.... He never used to be just like, ‘come ‘ere’, or give us a hug or anything. He was too strong.* (Simon 34 years old professional boxer)

Boxing and the significant others present in the gym, therefore provided a medium to alleviate both Sal’s and Simon’s anxieties. By providing an activity for both these men to invest in, it allowed Sal and Simon to replace feelings of weakness with feelings of pride, valour, competitiveness and self-worth. Thus, for men like Sal and Simon, becoming a boxer meant becoming somebody. Moreover, as most of these men heralded from violent backgrounds, boxing seemed to also fit neatly in their cultural framework and habitus, as they embraced the culture of the gym as they would family.
Boxing further provided opportunities to convert physical capital into financial capital, when other avenues were perceived as blocked. Marcus often spoke of how boxing and his coach gave him ‘a chance’ as prior to boxing he had:

*Never been nothing, never done nothing, just hanging on the streets with my boys.*

(Marcus 42 years old trainer)

In the main, feelings of powerlessness associated with being a victim of abuse, or structural disadvantage, led some of the men to attempt to resist and/or replace these feelings of powerlessness and victimhood with feelings of power and control. This idea, in their eyes at least, could be obtained by overcoming another in the ring, or accruing trophies and belts that proved they had ‘made it’. Physical force amongst these men was regarded as a ‘natural’ drive, and a way to secure rewards, particularly those that seemed unobtainable by more conventional methods (Cloward and Ohlin 1960).

As a result, boxers were not only well-equipped to respond in the face of perceived threat, but felt obligated to socially respond to an apparently biological compulsion. This was often used as an excuse for violence, as it located it in a seemingly ‘inevitable frame’ (Rubinstein 1973). Moreover, the habitus of these men encouraged investments in bodily discourses that promoted strength and size, and the men immersed in this social world felt obliged to not only practice violence but also project an air of its inevitability.

Men further believed that boxing was their ‘way out’. But I sensed it was also a way to not ‘look in’. Accordingly, boxing allowed men to bury fear behind walls of muscle and invest in a discourse that repudiates intimacy. By shunning this intimacy, and investing in discourses surrounding competition, bodily endurance and virility, men were able to distance themselves from the idea of ‘victim’ - the feminine other. They were able to create a space that allowed them to dictate what level of intimacy was permissible,
whether that be ‘sparring’ vis-a-vis De Garis (2002), or simply somewhere to ‘hang out’. In terms of genuineness, the intimacy was staged. It never deviated from the masculine script. It merely replicated intimacy one might see outside of the gym, one that confirmed and maintained their position in the gender order. Indeed, vulnerability meant ‘victim’ to most men in this research, and having adopted this subject position previously in their lives, most made sure they would never return. Boxing therefore allowed men to invest in both bodily and structural discourses that eradicated any sense of vulnerability, so much so, that presenting as invincible became embedded in their psychic economy; it literally became written in their mind as well as on their body.

5.7 Summary

I have discussed in depth how the appeal of boxing encompasses many different elements for those that participate. I have presented data that reflects on boxing’s enduring appeal from a structural perspective in terms of money, fame, status, and action (Goffman 1967), and also how the gym came to be seen as a medium by which to obtain all the above. Accordingly, I then proceeded to outline how the gym was viewed as a place of reconstruction, a site of development for men in both structural and embodied terms, as men consistently employed the sport of boxing as way to craft both a body and a self-concept that fits with an overarching masculine ideal. Indeed, an ideal that is transposable between both gym and working class habitus mores from which the majority of these men herald.

Finally, I illustrate how these men’s journeys have changed, and how boxing is not merely a response to material and structural deprivation, but two-fold, in the sense that it also protects and ensures the prevention of repeat victimisation. Boxing therefore acted as
an, ‘island of stability and order’ (Wacquant 2004) when delinquency and disorder threatened these men’s lives. This could either be structural constraints, in terms of class, race and gender, or through the prevention of further victimisation via parent or peer physical abuse. Thus, boxing carries a host of different meanings for different participants. However, these meanings, while portrayed in a serious manner, also reflected a hidden anxiety, an anxiety inherent in masculine sporting cultures that threatens the structure of the male self (Messner 1990; Kreager 2007). Indeed, physical identity via the ‘production of bodies’ (Wacquant 2004) was culturally sanctioned in the gym as a way to achieve success, yet, the notion of sacrifice was less about control and free will than it was about the management of anxiety.

To invest as heavily as the men did in this study - classifying boxing as their ‘life’- led me to believe that something more than investment in bodily and structural discourses motivated these men. Jefferson (1998:78) posits that: ‘It is about representations of the masculine body and their psychic underpinnings; for without the latter it is impossible to comprehend how masculine body imagery has sufficient affect to be reproduced across the generations.’ Indeed, with each participant in this study, a sense of vulnerability and hyper-vigilance towards violence was present. Boxing somehow served as a defence mechanism against this, whereby investing in the very masculine discourses that combat sports perpetuate, men were able to defend successively against feelings of anxiety, vulnerability and femininity.

The masculine identities forged in the boxing gym were a process of establishing boundaries around traditional masculinity and dealing with some of the anxieties that besets masculinity. Boxing therefore became subjectively ingrained in the fabric of these men’s lives - ‘the boxing bug’- as one professional described it, almost disease-like and difficult to relinquish. Furthermore, boxing had a certain romance to it that cannot be
explained away by ecological antecedents and financial difficulties. Accordingly, the ‘route out of the ghetto thesis’ (Wacquant 2004; Bourgois 1996) becoming too simplistic and over-determined, as the investments made by the men in this research went beyond structural discourses surrounding poverty and just ‘making millions’. Thus, the investments made by these men into the sport of boxing ran deeper into their psychic make-up than mere lack of career opportunities, and therefore formed part of their identities as fighters as boxers, which ultimately helped construct a new sense of self and direction in line with exalted masculine ideals.
6. The Desistance Promoting Potential of Boxing

6.1 Introduction

In this section I will present the findings from my research and discuss in detail how participants viewed and engaged in violent behaviour. I do this by considering how violence has been present throughout these men’s lives prior to beginning boxing, and also how the sport speaks to their identities in terms of an attendant culture of respect that evokes and traps them in habits of responding to violence. Accordingly, I argue that boxing while incapacitating, offers nothing by way of cognitive transformation (Giordano 2002), as the identities of these men are too heavily invested in violence. Achieving status and being respected, combined with the hyper-masculine discourses present in the boxing gym overrode theories of incapacitation and pro-social development in my sample, and I therefore present data to support these arguments.

I begin by discussing findings in relation to boxing as a site for incapacitation, followed by evidence that suggests that the gym only incapacitates men for the time that they are there, and does not contribute towards a change in violent attitudes when outside of this setting. Boxing then, for many, arguably creates as many, if not more opportunities for extra-gym violence than those prevented by involved incapacitation in the gym. Thus boxing is often more criminogenic than desistance promoting.

However, some data suggests that the gym can be a site for pro-social development and I reflect this point in a discussion around the gym’s capacity to produce significant others; demonstrating how trainers and peers can bond an individual to the gym and that this element does have the potential to influence attendees attitudes in both positive and negative ways. Notwithstanding, I present further data to suggest that issues of status and
respect take precedence among men who box, and that these concepts are vastly important to the men in this study, more so than the pro-social elements of the gym and its members. Lastly, I discuss the ways in which the men would consistently justify both actual autobiographical violence, and potential theoretical violence using core moral neutralisation techniques. This suggests that they had neither accepted responsibility for their acts, nor effected cognitive change in a way consonant with a secondary form of criminal desistance characterised by a change in outlook, thus, being more invested in maintaining illusions of status and respect particularly when outside of the gym setting.

6.2 Findings in Relation to Boxing as a Site of Incapacitation

Incapacitation is commonly defined as restraint. It is discussed in penal discourses as a rationale for punishment to render convicted offenders incapable of committing further crimes over specific timeframes; imprisonment is one such method, as is electronic tagging and capital punishment. However, incapacitation is not just incarceration, or the restriction of freedom, incapacitation can be a chosen activity that diverts individuals away from crime and offers positive restraint as opposed to mandatory loss of liberty. Indeed, since the 1960’s sport participation was articulated in several policy statements as a form of positive incapacitation, and also as a vehicle to reduce crime and drug use amongst young people (Smith and Waddington 2004). It was proffered as a space and an activity that would engage young people at times when they otherwise might have been engaged in criminal or delinquent behaviour.

As previously discussed in the literature review incapacitation theories remain relevant for aiding desistance. The most recent and popular example being the *Midnight Basketball*
programmes created in the USA in the 1990’s (See Hartmann 2001). The proponents of this scheme created the diversion to specifically incapacitate young men during the period between 10pm-2am, when violent crime was at its hourly peak (ibid). However, evidence for any effectiveness was weak, and since the scheme lacked any kind of coherent and evidence-based theoretical rationale, it represented, at best, ‘An immediate, practical response to a perceived social problem’ (ibid: 353). Based on this evidence, it would seem that sport just occupies one’s time rather than consciously seeking to change one’s attitude, therefore it is arguable that incapacitation theories while relevant, do not offer a full explanation when it comes to understanding a process of change in criminality.

Due to the sub-culturally necessary ascetic dedication of boxing, this incapacitation theory - as I discovered during this process – works more merely by absorbing the men’s time rather than as a positive restraint. During the course of this research I observed that men would attend the boxing gym whenever possible, usually in the region of three times a week for amateurs and five times a week for professionals. 9 In fact, men would spend at least nine to ten hours a week in the gym and when there would devote their time to the sport fanatically. However, in their personal lives outside of the gym, attitudes and behaviours were less sacrificial, as the men in this study often reported that they did exactly what they liked outside of the regiment of sport:

In the gym I’m dedicated, I do what I’m told you know what I’m saying, outside I do what I like, ain’t nobody out there who’s gonna tell me what to do - only my trainer gets to do that. (Jonny 19 years old).

Boxing incapacitated these men on a regular basis, and taken at face value, it could be argued that their behaviour when in the gym was respectful and legal. Regardless, my

---

9 The professionals also trained during the day at least three out of every five days, and reported that they went running when not in the boxing gym.
interest lay in their overall understanding of violence, so it became imperative to assess how they understood their own behaviour both in and outside of the boxing gym. When in the gym, men would behave according to the rules. These rules ranging from, waiting for your turn to be called to spar, sharing of the equipment fairly, and no fighting outside of legitimate sparring. The men adhered to these rules and the gym functioned like a well-oiled machine, with men tacitly obeying the guidelines and functioning as part of an overarching system. Interestingly, no one person was responsible for the dictation of the rules yet the pugilists seemed to understand how the system functioned.

In the ring boxers were expected to demonstrate courage, or ‘heart’ as it was often referred to, dominating opponents and psychologically breaking them down. Yet, outside the ring, there was an expectation of courteousness and patience as the men would politely wait for equipment, or patiently hold punching bags while other men took their turn. Not once did I witness the breaking of any rules such as those stipulated above, and it seemed like the men complied with each other and the implicit system of gym etiquette. Nevertheless, having spent time with these men, I came to the realisation that the same principles did not necessarily apply outside, either in the outside world or outside the realm of sport.

Take Ricky, a young 20 years old professional who had been in the gym since a teenager, having been brought there by his uncle for ‘anger problems’, often referred to himself as a ‘natural born fighter’, and felt that he made a good boxer as a result of being a ‘scrapper’ all his life. He felt that a violent upbringing gave him ‘grit’, and the ability to withstand pain, and he often discussed how he would get involved in altercations when out with his mates. He discussed one particular incident after he had ‘gone out to celebrate his “big win”’ the night before:
A handful of lads we know are in this club we have gone to after the fight, they are all in one clique; one group. I’ve gone to the toilet and he started there in the toilets, just for me being a boxer you know what I mean? Because if they can beat me up they can say ‘I beat Ricky piece of piss’, and if they don’t, they can say ‘well what did you expect he’s a boxer’. Anyway, I’ve had to crack him before he cracked me because it’s gonna go! You can see it in their eyes and you’re better off getting the first shot in so they go straight to sleep and you can get off sharpish.

From the above account we can see that Ricky – a self-confessed ‘scrapper’ all his life - was involved in violent behaviour before, during and after participating in boxing, as this was just one of many incidents that Ricky disclosed. This predilection for violence is highlighted no better than when Ricky confessed to, ‘throwing the first shot’ after a ‘big fight’. In this incident he said that his friend was about to be attacked in a Chinese restaurant:

We’ve had a few and I’m sat at this table, my girlfriend was there too. Some lad is staring at me from this other table so my mate goes over and asks him what his problem is. I see this lad squeezing his bottle in his hand dead tight so I run over and hit him - pow!

As the stories unfold, Ricky maintains that he behaves in this way to ensure victory and minimise injury, stating that it is important to ‘get in there first’. I would also argue that the sensuous attraction of violence was particularly heightened after Ricky’s ‘big win’ as Katz (1988: 130) often cites violence as a ‘magical transformation’ that ‘brings comic-book symbolism to life’. I would further argue that Ricky’s act of violence was also a strategy to maintain his identity and perceived respect as a boxer, as well as demonstrating his ability to win both in and outside the aegis of boxing. Indeed, Winlow
(2001:45) has attested that, ‘the maintenance of honour supplants all other concerns’, and I could not agree more.

In the confines of the gym, Ricky would never be faced with such a scenario, as the hierarchical structure dictates that as a professional he is at the top and therefore respected. As a result, Ricky does not have to demonstrate his potential for violence as the structure of the gym supports his dominant position. However, outside these walls Ricky feels like ‘everyone wants a pop’, and maintains that he has to be ‘on his guard’ most of the time, thus demonstrating a hyper-vigilance to violent attacks common among the men in this sample:

It’s the same as school right, you gotta prove to others that you won’t take no shit, you know what I’m saying. I went on the defence straight off when I changed schools to let people know that I wasn’t someone to fuck with.

According to Winlow (2001) a subliminal hierarchy is formed among certain groups of men, especially those that are attuned to incidences of violence. Such individuals will therefore place themselves and use their knowledge of violence about others as yardsticks for competition and violent wagers. This idea was transposable across both sites of gym and street, as men would literally gamble on who was the ‘toughest’ and ‘who had beat who’ previously. Indeed, in this study, the men often came to the gym already familiar with this measuring tool as demonstrated by Ricky’s quote above, and I would argue that he was versed in this language of violence as he constantly relayed stories of how he maintained his status in the hierarchy from a young age.

However, when not surrounded by peers in the gym, Ricky would disclose that growing up was ‘tough’, and that changing schools was a traumatic experience, so much so, that he was excluded not long after and referred to a Pupil Referral Unit for emotional and
behavioural difficulties. It was at this point that his uncle decided to take him to the local boxing gym and Ricky has been here ever since. As his uncle was ‘well-known’, Ricky found that he did not have to ‘prove himself’ to such a degree when first starting boxing, as the reputation of his uncle preceded him, therefore Ricky was treated with a degree of ‘respect’ for demonstrating violent potential by proxy:

*My uncle’s well know innit, so when I came here I got respect straight away, he knows Eric and Marcus and that, from back in the day, so I knew I would be looked after and that.*

Indeed, common among men such as Ricky, working class males will acknowledge the appeal of violent capability (Winlow 2001), and this was evidenced among gym members in an almost salacious fashion, as young teenage amateurs could be overheard discussing who they thought was the most dominant:

*Ricky is fast man though, he’s got a wicked cross that’s gonna wipe out Danny’s, I’m tellin’ you he’s the hardest here after Frank coz he’s sick! (Elliot 16 years old)*

*I wouldn’t fuck with Marcus, even now. (Carl 16 years old)*

In much of the existing literature, this culture of competition and honour is often stated as a justified reason for violence (Katz 1988; Anderson 1999; Scheff 1994). Blok (1981:435) recognised these two phenomenas in his work on Sicilian men, when he wrote: ‘It thrives in certain peripheral subcultures of “men in groups”, in bars, dockyards, prisons, and the premises of organised crime, where rank and esteem are largely matters of sheer physical force.’ Secondly, he recognised that the concept of honour is intimately linked to physical force, and this largely pervades arenas such as the military and sport. In this regard, Ricky often felt that he had to defend his honour and position as a boxer with physical force -
‘the first shot’- to ensure the continuation of respect for his profession and his reputation, regardless of the consequences.

Seen in this light, it could be argued that ‘respect’ is a very short-lived phenomena, and therefore quite a fragile attribute to maintain. Daly and Wilson (1988:174) point out that a, ‘A seemingly minor affront is not merely a stimulus to action, isolated in time and space. It must be understood within a larger social context of reputation, face, relative social status, and enduring relationships. And in most social milieus a man’s reputation depends in part upon the maintenance of a credible threat of violence.’ To maintain this illusion of credibility for men like Ricky and Jonny, it involves constantly remaining vigilant to issues of perceived ‘disrespect’, and thus maintaining their position in the hierarchy. This is especially important for the professionals, as their reputation at the top of the hierarchy must be maintained to ensure continuation of respect and honour.

This idea of identity and honour is specifically linked to the world of boxing for many reasons. Firstly, participation in sport is not only seen as validation of a certain kind of masculinity (Connell 1995), but further relates to the prestige and power of the national state to which it belongs. Indeed, to say you fight for England is a huge statement amongst the boxing community, and many of the young professionals aspired to utter these words. For Simon, his idea of himself changed when he got picked to fight for England. Prior to this Simon was consumed with envy and feelings of inadequacy, struggling to accomplish his masculinity at a new school. Getting picked to fight for England ‘proved he was worthy of something’, and this was partly related to the status and prestige that was now bestowed upon him by other males in the gym:
The younger kids coming in here have seen my face around town, on posters and that, so I get that respect, also my dad’s a boxer so my surname adds to that you know what I’m saying.

Indeed, fighting prowess became a badge of honour for most young men in the gym and they wore it with pride. Boxing was more than a few rounds in the ring for most; it forms them physically while simultaneously moulding their identity and fuelling their social status inside and outside this setting. Thus, the association with the gym and the prestige that accompanied being a boxer, contributed towards Ricky’s Simon’s and Jonny’s - to name but a few- sense of self-worth. Furthermore, it ensured that these men’s honours remained unchallenged and therefore fixed at the top of the pecking order. Arguably, it is this maintenance of honour above all other concerns that traps these men in an attendant culture of respect, and thus incriminates boxing in a tightly knitted web of criminogenic attitudes and behaviours. Having said that, boxing does have its benefits, in as much as it postpones or incapacitates men when they otherwise may be involved in delinquent activity, and it is these arguments I turn to next.

6.3 Findings in Relation to Boxing as a Form of Pro-social Development

Other evidence revealed in my findings that provide a contrast and a paradox to the above arguments, was that the men seemed to temporarily change in pro-social ways when they entered the gym. Comments could often be heard how the space ‘relaxed’ men, gave them ‘time –out’, and allowed them ‘to chill’ with their peers without fear of ‘trouble’ or ‘beef’. The contradictory nature of this environment, I would argue, as well as concentrating on competition, aggression and violence, acted as a place of safety for its members because the implicit hierarchy was already established. Men could feel relatively at ease without
feeling a constant pressure to maintain the illusion of respect that they battled with outside of its walls.

The trainers were mainly responsible for the gym’s cohesion and established hierarchy as they set the tone of the gym. Eric and Marcus ran the gym as a business as it was their only source of income but they often referred to it as a ‘family’. This is not uncommon in sport, particularly boxing gyms, as Wacquant (2004:69) has observed: ‘The emotional attachment to one’s gym, which boxer’s readily compare to a “home” or a “second mother”’, is testament to the protective and nurturing functions boxing possesses in some men’s eyes. Accordingly, both the boxers and the trainers developed strong attachments with one another, and the cohesive nature of the gym assisted in the cultivation of mutual respect for each other’s position and craft. Marcus was always quick to point out that boxing gyms ‘allow anyone in’, and at one point he offered to drive me around the city’s gyms to prove that they were spaces of multiculturalism and acceptance.

Undoubtedly, boxing gyms offer some form of safety and comfort to men (and increasingly women) in the shape of attachment figures, routine and regular activity, but the biggest appeal by far is the relationship that the men have with one another, and this is reflected in the almost religious dedication that men show to the gym. It is through this mechanism of change, that the gym is able to demonstrate its potential to not only incapacitate, but to further work alongside young men and women in developing their attitudes in a more positive manner. With the dedication shown by those in attendance, and the incapacitatory element of the gym itself, boxing is able to captivate an audience that otherwise might be disengaged from mainstream activities. This was evidenced by the dedication and admiration shown by the younger amateurs in the gym towards Marcus and Eric the trainers:
Marcus is my role model, he came from the streets like me and he turned it around, I’m gonna do that too, my picture will be up there one day I’m tellin you. (Carl 16 years old amateur)

However, the crux of these arguments, and ultimately the success of this activity, sits with the skills and perspectives of those in charge - the trainers - as it is their outlooks and ideologies that underpin the overall ethos of the gym, and subsequently the attitudes of those that attend. The trainers in the gym did indeed act as surrogate parents for most of the young professionals, and it was not uncommon for them to be referred to as a ‘second dad’. The relationship between trainer and trainee was the most significant in the gym and the most interesting in terms of this research, as it provided a relationship with a significant other that often seemed to be lacking from other areas of young men’s lives.

Both Butt (1987) and Coakley (1990) consider the importance of interpersonal relationships in sport settings, and discuss the impact of the coach-athlete relationship in positive or negatively influenced outcomes for young athletes. They claim that sporting institutions and clubs offer young people a sense of belonging, attachment, and purpose, and from a social bonding perspective it is the quality, strength and consistency of these social bonds that play a crucial role. Furthermore, Mutz and Baur (2009:309) claim ‘that most sports clubs provide bonds that encourage pro-social behaviour patterns’, and therefore assume that such involvement tightens adolescents’ bonds to moral codes and limit their propensity to commit acts of violence.

On the surface I saw this happening in the gym when Eric in particular, would attempt to lecture the young professionals about refraining from violence outside the ring, however this did not always seem sincere and the young professionals often smiled and made empty promises whenever he broached the subject. Engagement in violence outside of the
gym walls could result in a revoking of their professional boxing license, and most were aware of this, yet, it seemed to be a chance that some would take if faced with threats to their personal identity especially when out drinking after a fight.

Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory focuses on these mechanisms for change, and posits that unless an individual is effectively bound to moral standards and socialised into conventional social structures then deviance is likely. From this perspective, participation in a boxing club would therefore be regarded as a conventional activity that is socially appreciated, as there is an assumption that being a member of a club inadvertently ‘bonds’ members to strong and stable relationships (coaches, peers, team mates) with whom individuals feel attached. But as discussed, the moral codes that these men inculcate via coaches and trainers are somewhat flawed even though delivered with the best intentions.

Moreover, the violent relationships that most participants had with their fathers prior to joining the gym contributed towards many of them seeking a further male attachment figure in the boxing coach, and this was evidenced on more than one occasion in my data. Indeed, Sal’s case study in particular, discusses how his boxing coach replaced a father figure he so desperately craved in his home and family life, whereas Marcus the hard-faced boxing trainer confessed to thinking about his deceased boxing coach everyday.

Indeed, Eric liked to discuss how he instilled morals in his professionals and amateurs, and he felt that he was a ‘good example’:

_I did some voluntary youth work for a while, you know playing football with the kids and taking them on trips and that. They liked me because I was a boxer; I wanted to put something back, you know, be a good example._
However, the good example that Eric liked to portray of himself was riddled with hypocrisy and ambivalence, as I witnessed Eric reinforcing negative attitudes and propensity for violence in his athletes on numerous occasions. He expressed violent attitudes in his own life, and disclosed how as a young athlete he would become involved in illicit fighting when challenged. He disclosed that when he was once referred to as ‘pathetic’ by a competitor outside of the ring, he wanted to ‘smash his face in’ for being ‘disrespectful’. Outside of Eric’s awareness were the implicit messages he bestowed upon his gym members as he often talked of just ‘walking away’ when faced with violent challenges, but more often that not he was complicit with a discourse that saw boxing as a weapon to be potentially used, and therefore sanctioned retaliation as he often stated that you should ‘always stand your ground’ and ‘don’t let no-one take the piss’.

The athletes listened to Eric and Marcus religiously, and usually after the weekends, tales of retaliation from the boxers themselves could be heard around the gym:

*I know I shouldn’t of, but when little dickheads in the take-away act all hard and that, I have tell ‘em they’re dickheads.*

*Funny when they reckon they can have me an all, I just ‘one bomb’ (one punch) ‘em innit. Shut the fuck up then don’t they.* (Baz 38 years old amateur)

Like the paradox of the gym environment these relationships are complicated too. Despite the young boxer’s tales of weekend violence, Eric was instrumental in developing habitual behaviours amongst his athletes. He promoted constant attendance and participation in gym life, and from this perspective he contributed towards a form of incapacitation by virtue of them simply attending. Nonetheless, the messages inherent in this hyper-masculine world were complicit with those that reinforced competition, retaliation, strength, virility and instrumental aggression, with the athletes investing in an
environment that sanctioned violence while further developing a significant relationship with one that legitimised it. Arguably over time, the identities of these men will inevitably become imbued with hyper-masculine discourses, supported and sanctioned by significant others who were complicit in the rehearsal of such behaviours, as both athlete and trainer functioned collectively in creating a social world that viewed violence as an acceptable solution to a problem.

6.4 Respect: The Gym, Opportunities and the Street

Lind and Tyler (1988) suggest that people care deeply about whether they are treated fairly by others because fair treatment indicates something important about our social status and identity as judged by others. Likewise, the notion of ‘respect’ involves treating another as though they are worthy of consideration and this is viewed as crucial for the development of a secure sense of self (Kant 1964; Tyler and Lind 1992; Tyler and Bladder 2000). In contrast, disrespect entails a disregard for the individual, and when others behave in ways that are perceived as disrespectful it conveys a message that they are not worthy (Miller 2001). Perceived insults or disrespect are often reported as catalysts for aggression and violence amongst men (Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Toch 1992), and in the world of boxing disrespect was seen as the ultimate insult.10 Insults of a disrespectful nature seemed to penetrate men deeply, and they were cited as the cause of aggressive behaviour on more than one occasion. However, in the gym itself, incidences of disrespect tended to be of a playful nature, and were not usually taken that seriously.

10 ‘Pre-fight banter’ has become essential to professional boxing as the throwing of punches in the ring. Originally starting with Muhammad Ali, and more recently with David Haye: ‘This is going to be the most brutal execution you have seen of a boxer in many years’, when speaking of Wladimir Klitchiko his opponent. Klitchiko responded by saying that Haye’s words were: ‘Disgraceful and disrespectful.’ www.guardian.co.uk ‘Boxing Trash Talk That Stings Like a Bee’ Tuesday 28 June 2011.
These could range from taunts in relation to body weight or dietary requirements, and more often than not, they were received with jest and no further action was taken:

*I hate dieting, eating salad isn’t my thing, but if you wanna make the weight, seriously, you have to cut out the burgers and stuff.* (Simon 32 years old professional)

*He’s worse than a woman that one, he’ll be asking if his arse looks big in them jeans next.* (Marcus 42 years old)

It seemed from the above account and others witnessed, that in the confines of the gym the concept of banter was accepted - men were taunted on the premise that it was part of the game - part of the sport, and not an attack on status or identity. Yet, on the street it was a very different scenario, men would retaliate against the slightest remark and often cited them as ‘disrespectful’. This led me to believe that the confines of the gym acted as a safety net, and therefore the comments uttered in the gym were not taken seriously.

The gym itself possessed a certain cohesion that provided a temporary space for men to feel safe and welcome regardless of their social standing in the wider community, as Wacquant (2004:53) stated: ‘The gym culture is ostensibly egalitarian in the sense that all participants are treated alike.’ Indeed, the ethos of the gym was simply ‘train hard’, and most men invested in this discourse with relish. Training hard encapsulated endurance, stamina, and bodywork, sculpting and honing the body to resemble their perceptions of the masculine ideal. In turn, this reflected a sense of achievement for most men, and praise was always dispensed to those who had successfully crafted the perfect torso, so much so, that advice was usually sought from the most ripped (toned), and diet plans were openly exchanged among followers.
Outside of the gym it was a different story altogether, as the younger boxers would often become embroiled in disputes in the local community:

_The boys were out running and heading back to the gym when two lads asked them ‘who they thought they were?’ Jonny and Ricky didn’t take to kindly to that and marched over to the lads sat on the wall. I had to go over and prise them apart as they would of fuckin’ killed ‘em._ (Eric, boxing trainer, 51 years old).

The men arguably felt more vulnerable to attacks, and were less likely to engage in friendly banter and exchangeable advice. They generally retaliated in defence of their perceived identity and status as a boxer, with some reporting that attacks were inevitable by virtue of simply being a boxer, as other men would try to pit themselves against the pugilists as a way of dominating one another. This is apparently not uncommon among males. Winlow (2001) has attested that men’s violent encounters, or potential violent encounters, are viewed much in the same way as a bookmaker may decide the favourite in a forthcoming sporting event, and that the odds are calculated in a similar fashion, as men gamble on who will beat who, based on mental calculations and prior victories. Notwithstanding, to be dominated, or to let an affront go, was and is a process that can strip many working-class males of their image of themselves and ultimately change their image in the eyes of others (Winlow 2001). It is this concept and the fear of losing respect that challenges the boxers when outside of the gym, as losing ‘face’ or not living up to the expectations of other male’s mental calculations of victories can plunge men into a pool of shame and humiliation (Winlow and Hall 2009).

Blok (1974: 62) stated that what earned men respect was, ‘Their capacity to coerce with physical violence and invoke fear in others.’ In this research, boxing played such an important part in men’s self-concepts and identities that it proved very difficult for some
of them to back down from a violent reproach, so much so, that they viewed retaliation, or lack of, as a life or death situation. Michael, a 40-year-old boxer, and ex-convict described the above as such:

_Nah, you can’t never back down, because that’s seen as weak. If I back down then people are gonna think that I’m an easy target. Don’t matter whether it’s inside or on the streets you got to act like you won’t put up with anyone coming at ya._

Michael’s testament demonstrates perfectly Blok’s earlier point. By demonstrating the capacity to coerce with violence Michael was able invoke fear in others and signify that he was not vulnerable to neither attack, nor present as an ‘easy target’ as he readily states above. When faced with violent encounters - particularly those perceived as ‘disrespectful’- Michael was able to rebuke any concept of desistance, as he arguably felt culturally obliged to respond. This is because the cultural importance of violence, reputation, and violent reputation are exceptionally strong among criminals and ‘hard’ men alike (Winlow 2001). Moreover, for men like Michael and those who have also spent significant periods in prison, the cultural importance of violence becomes a form of ‘survival’, with violence further serving as a defence mechanism in the sublimation of feelings of inadequacy and shame (Butler and Maruna 2009).

Indeed, violence and violent potential has been viewed as a ‘cultural expectation’ and a way to sublimate shame for working class men for a long period of time (for example see Wolfgang 1959; Toch 1992; Scheff 2000). Accordingly, the majority of men in this sample identified as working class, or stated that they came from a working-class background, and out of the 10 boxers interviewed in this study 9 reported growing up in difficult circumstances. These circumstances ranged from absent and abusive fathers to
neglectful mothers, and lack of educational qualifications with long spells of truancy from school.

Previous ethnographic research in this area has suggested that when an individual’s access to social capital and/or social status is limited, being treated in a respectful manner becomes vastly important for one’s sense of self-worth (Gilligan 1996; Bourgois 1996; Sennett 2003). Anderson (1999:66) also writes that: ‘In the inner-city environment, respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable.’ It was not uncommon in the boxing gym to hear men discuss the lack of employment in the surrounding area, and most complained of the difficulties they faced when looking for work. These difficulties were mainly as a result of criminal records, but most reported that they could not imagine doing a ‘regular 9-5 job’.

Bouncing or door work was one example of an accepted profession as many of the boxers in this research moonlighted as bouncers to supplement their income and reputation. Boxing therefore acted as a pastime during the day for some men who ‘didn’t wanna sit at home watching telly’ before their night shift started, and for others it provided the physical capital needed to ensure continued employment in their chosen profession. Moreover, the men chided anyone with a successful career outside of boxing, bouncing or security work, and the head coach often stated that ‘the posh ‘uns have come to the wrong end of town to mix with the real boys’ when the white collar boxers entered the gym. 11

This led me to believe that some of the boxers saw those members who were in full-time white-collar employment as something to be scorned. They felt that full-time work that

11 White-collar boxing is a form of boxing in which men and women in white-collar professions train to fight at special events. Most have had no prior boxing experience.
did not involve the physical body was somehow effeminate, and it was not uncommon to hear remarks in relation to this:

*Can’t imagine sat at a desk all day me. I’d get bored just sat there. I need to be up and doing stuff otherwise I’d get bored and then just end up saying something to someone.*  
(Lewis 19 years old trainee plumber and amateur boxer)

*I’d rather not have a job than have to be told what to do all day.*  
(Sam 23 years old unemployed amateur boxer)

*Boxing is a proper job, don’t even feel like a job, just show up and train, get good and then become top of yer game and earn money, none of this 9-5 shit.*  
(Jonny 19 years old professional boxer)

These seemed interesting statements as they arguably reflected an aversion to anything classified as subordinate in these men’s eyes - being told what do, or having to be somewhere at a particular time. The likes of the above, particularly Jonny, saw full-time employment as something to be avoided, especially if it involved structured practices or adherence to a set of rules stipulated by an organisation. Yet, interestingly, Jonny complied with the structured practices of the gym and the rules set by this accompanying culture. I would argue that the ethos and status associated with gym culture fitted more closely with Jonny’s idea of himself as independent, tough, and physical, and therefore reminiscent of Willis’s (1977) ‘lads’ when he discusses how working-class ideals are part of a strategy to demonstrate one’s masculinity and differentiate themselves from authority (ibid).

Indeed, male activities in the world of boxing are not entirely divorced from wider working-class culture, as Tolson (1977:43) has observed: ‘Aggression is the basis of
“style”, of feeling physical, of showing feelings and protecting oneself”, and in this context, masculine performativity meant exhibiting a measure of the general lower class masculine role. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) termed this the ‘conflict orientated sub-culture’, and suggested that in particular group settings access to opportunities - illicit or otherwise - may be lacking. Working to this premise, the conditions in the boxing gym created opportunities for the emergence of a conflict, or a fighting orientated subculture, as men would demonstrate their potential for violence as a means to further themselves when other opportunities were not forthcoming.

Matza (1964:28) claimed that the ‘delinquent transiently exists in a limbo between convention and crime’, whereby young men postpone commitment and evade decisions in their everyday life. Accordingly, this idea of ‘drift’ (Matza 1964), and the concept of a ‘conflict orientated’ delinquency allowed for many of the boxer’s behaviours to be ‘neutralised’, as they were able to view their behaviour as being no more than normative for the environment in which they lived (Sykes and Matza 1957, 1961). Indeed, comments in relation to criminal activity usually focused on the normative elements of their surrounding culture, and men would justify their behaviours as being ‘just what happens around here’. This could be anything from the selling of pirate DVD’s in the gym, to retaliatory behaviour for issues concerning respect. Moreover, the financial rewards and opportunities that certain elements of criminal activity could provide became a source of income for some gym members, as those without legal professions sought to ‘make ends meet’ with illicit activity:

*Between me and you, I do a bit of other boxing on the side, just a bit to make a few quid, coz I don’t have a professional licence me and a few of the lads organise other fights in a gym across town where there’s usually a wager and a cash prize, that’s why I normally look mashed after the weekends!* (Derek 32 years old amateur)
I do a few hours personal training at a gym near where I live, it’s cash in hand so I can scratch (claim benefits) at the same time, frees me up to try and turn pro and keeps my fitness up at the same time. (Jason 27 years old amateur)

If a couple of the Asian lads ever need back up then they ring me, I can round a few of the boys up and give ’em hand, I scratch their back and they scratch mine. (Marcus 40 years old trainer)

In summary, being respected, creating opportunities, and earning money was an important element in the culture of the boxing gym. Men young and old, amateur and professional, sought to become infallible, respectable, and employable through sheer physical force and intimidation. These ideas were sanctioned and perpetuated by those in charge as well as those participating, and were further reflective of the subcultural norms inherent in the surrounding community where most of these men heralded from. Opportunities, and employment mainly focused on masculine validating professions, and the men would pick and chose the areas they wished to forge a career in, particularly those that reinforced their physicality. Moreover, these professions accompanied the boxer’s identities and spoke volumes in terms of the way they negotiated certain behaviours and attitudes, thus reinforcing their self-concepts and structural positioning as hard-men.

6.5 Identity and Desistance from Violence: The Inside / Outside Gym Paradigm and the Use of Techniques of Neutralisation

Brookman, Copes and Hochstetler (2011:398) posit that: ‘The study of self and identity provides valuable insights into the links between structural conditions, cultural influences and individual behavior.’ They argue that selves are compromised of situated identities -
self-concepts - and that these concepts form part of a character that people create for
themselves and express to others. How a person ‘likes to think of himself as being and
acting’ (McCall and Simmons 1966:65). As such, an individual’s construction of self
plays a part in how he evaluates situations, chooses lines of actions, makes sense of
behaviours and presents himself to the world. Indeed, aspects of the self not only
represent how one likes to be viewed in the world, but further demonstrate consensus with
wider cultural and subcultural understandings. Moreover, Stoke and Hewitt (1976) argue
that by aligning one’s actions with the beliefs and expectations of a larger group, makes it
possible to explain both action and construction of personal identities. People construct
identities in various ways, personal appearance, physical appearance, choice of leisure
pursuits and choice of partners. And for the majority of the boxers in this sample, they
liked to think of themselves as masters of their own fates and decision-making processes.
Eric, Marcus and Frank all one time or another discussed how they could no longer
imagine doing anything but boxing or bouncing, as it allowed them to form their identities
in line with cultural ideals of masculinity and respect. Frank in particular, talked of
attempting college when he realised his dream of ‘world champion’ was not forthcoming:

I attempted college, thought about going into my own business like, but it got too much
with the boxing and wanting to go out and stuff, that I sacked it and just focused on the
gym. It got me a job bouncing so it didn’t really matter that much anyway.

Furthermore, Eric, whose story we also revisit in the case studies, originally trained to be
an electrician but he became disillusioned with the trade and devoted his time to
fashioning his career in professional boxing, with both him and Marcus later becoming
joint owners of the boxing gym where this study was based. Marcus disclosed never
having a ‘proper job’, as he knew early on that he wanted a career in sport. He therefore
set about carving his career straight after school believing he had limited prospects in any other profession:

*I knew when I left school that there was fuck all else going for me, I went to a sports school and was pretty good at basketball, when I left I was just hanging out on the streets as there was not much going on when I was growing up. It was only until I found boxing that I knew I had a way out.*

A ‘way out’ was a common theme in the men’s narratives as the boxers framed their identities in the idea of there being limited opportunities available to them, or alternatively, working class discourses that they hoped to transcend. Jonny the youngest professional in the gym at the age of 19 literally stated that boxing ‘forms a massive part of who I am’. Having previously lost his mother the year before at the age of 18, Jonny confessed to relying on the gym as a form of social support, and as a result spent vast amounts of time there even when not training. Jonny’s father was a bouncer and worked most nights so when Jonny was not ‘at his girlfriend’s house’ he would most definitely be in the gym. Jonny identified as a boxer so much so, that he ‘only hung around with boxers’. He ‘wasn’t interested’ in much else and defined himself as a professional boxer ‘above anything else’. Moreover, Jonny felt that boxing ‘was in his blood’, as his dad had ‘tried his hand’ in the past as part of ‘working the doors’, and accordingly, Jonny felt that boxing as a sport reflected his personality and class positioning:

*It takes a certain kind of person to wanna get hit for fun, you know what I’m saying. I don’t think you’d get many kids from posh areas taking it up. Boxing is for lads who can take a punch, none of this ‘glass jaw’ stuff. Growing up were I did you had to be able to look after yourself, and that set me up for boxing you know what I mean.*
Most of the men in this study were raised in highly disadvantaged circumstances - places where you ‘had to be able to look after yourself’ or ‘be on your toes’. Most of those that I interviewed had experienced familial abuse and fear throughout their childhoods, and therefore were familiar with the implicit codes of violent milieus. Accordingly, the majority of the men who did experience violent upbringings became finely attuned to incidences of disrespect, and viewed any attack as an attack on their identity and self-concept. Boxing therefore became embedded in a sense of self, as Jonny previously attested, and formed a huge part of the way they wished to be perceived. So much so, that any attack - potential or actual - was met with force and an almost life or death commitment. As previously mentioned, this was generally proclaimed as a way to maintain honour and respect and retaliatory or instigated violent action was passed off as necessary.

When challenged outside of the gym many of the boxers felt that they must react, though this did differ slightly between the professionals and the amateurs. The messages inherent in their environments both in and outside of the gym supported this response, however, the professionals had more to lose in terms of their boxing license than the amateurs did. Yet, to not respond in a violent way would not only result in emasculation and leave the men potentially vulnerable to further attack, but also threaten their self-concept and identity. Some professionals took the risk.

Moreover, in the boxing world, the culture of masculinity that pervades the gym is all-inclusive, and therefore reinforces hierarchies based on physical dominance. This can lead to confrontations, as some boxers attempt to replace feelings of psychological anxiety with feelings of pride obtained through an aggressive display of ‘masculine’ behaviour (Gaylin 1984; Gilligan 1996; Miller 2001). This experience of personal indignation is
what raises the risk that boxers will engage in violent behaviour, as feelings of disrespect do not so much trigger retaliatory violence as make it possible.

In this study, for men like Ricky, the fact that they were boxers dictated - in their eyes at least - a suitable violent response to confrontations that reinforced their self-concepts and place in the subculture of the boxing gym. Indeed, for Ricky to have gone against the expected moral code and predictable violent response, would have not only endangered his identity as a boxer but made his position in the social world of boxing untenable; and his identity and location in the group fragile. According to Gilligan (1996) such individuals rehearse violent behaviour to deflect threats to their identity as they attempt to replace feelings of shame with feelings of respect; therefore, they demonstrate aggressive behaviour with pride and masculine prowess. Likewise, Katz (1988:24) argues that when an individual feels wronged in some way, he may experience himself as the object of another and thereby seek to regain his ‘lost control of identity’ through aggressive and violent behaviour. And in addition to feeling ‘righteous’ (ibid), some men justify their violence and aggression as a way of ‘reasserting one’s dignity and identity’ (Young 2002:408).

Certainly in this study, concepts of dignity and identity were so important to men that they would do almost anything for it to remain intact. As you will see further in the case study, Marcus the retired boxing champion turned trainer encapsulates the above when he discusses how he was involved in an altercation with the police. He disclosed that when challenged for parking illegally he responded with a violent act, to the point of confronting the police officer and requesting that they ‘go round the corner and sort it out’. When I asked Marcus why it felt so important for him to challenge the officer he responded by saying:
I would go jail man, in my book you’re either right or you’re wrong and I was 100% right there. And I wouldn’t regret it either. I’m serious I wouldn’t. I’d go jail to be right. I’d die doing it. Simple as. 100% die for being right. So jail is minor you know what I mean?

It transpired that Marcus felt disrespected by the police officer, and felt him to be racist, as he believed that in the police officer’s eyes he looked like: ‘Another black man, another drug dealer in a BMW.’ However, there was a sense that Marcus just did not like to be challenged, particularly by those in authority, as he felt that ‘no-one has the right to tell another person what to do’. He viewed most disagreements and challenges as ‘disrespectful’ and generally responded to them in the same manner. Marcus, having previously spent a period of time in prison for a ‘crime he didn’t commit’ often portrayed a hyper-vigilant attitude to any form of challenge, particularly ones from the police, and was very quick to respond to any small sign that inferred he was somehow inferior or wrong.

The above retaliatory tale was one of many from the men in the gym, and it was not uncommon to hear tales of fighting outside of the ring amongst the amateurs and professionals, particularly in response to challenges from other men and authority figures. Traffic wardens were obvious targets, and on more than one occasion a pugilist could be seen running out of the ring and down the gym’s stairs to ‘stop some fucking cunt’ putting a ticket on their car with threats of violence. The professionals seemed less likely to pursue violent altercations as they raised concerns over their boxing licences and worried over injuries to hands. Indeed, Jonny a young professional climbing the ranks voiced this concern:

---

12 Marcus was accused of nine attempted murders but managed to clear his name. This was only after having spent six months in jail.
Why bother with the dickhead ‘weekend warriors’, you know those guys who wanna drink 10 pints and start a fight. I could take ‘em but I’m not arsed, don’t wanna break my hand doing it you see, coz it would put me out of the game for a few months and I can’t afford that.

Jonny’s story in particular is interesting as it demonstrates how boxing can promote a ‘primary’ form of desistance from violence (Maruna 2001). Indeed, Giordano et al (2002:1040) discuss how, ‘The ability to imagine a negative sequence of hypothetical consequences that might flow from one’s deviant behaviour can have a deterrent effect.’ Nonetheless, Jonny’s story is purely instrumental and offers no evidence by way of ‘wilful cognitive distortion’ (Maruna 2001), as his outlook and understanding of violence and thus desistance does not form part of a new self (ibid) Jonny literally refrained from ‘taking ‘em out’ due to his fear of breaking his hand, and whilst it is arguable that this is desistance promoting - and it is to a certain extent - it does not offer evidence of any cognitive transformation - Jonny still felt the need to enact violence. Had he not been in fear of injury, or worried about losing income as a result, it is more than likely that he would of engaged in violent behaviour, as he felt that boxing ‘formed a massive part of who I am, and when I’m not training I get a bit “snappy” you know’. Moreover, this instrumental desistance-promoting element did not always take effect, as Jonny alongside Ricky relayed the previously mentioned story of fighting when out running with Eric. Hence, the desisting element of fear of breaking one’s hand becomes temporary and situational, and not part of a redemption narrative or ‘new self’ (Maruna 2001) whereby men recast themselves in new lights having taken ownership of previous behaviours and attitudes.

Furthermore, some of the younger amateurs involved in this study that were not in fear of losing any income or sustaining injuries, were more than happy to engage in violent
behaviour outside of the gym. Carl, a 16 year old refugee, felt that boxing gave him ‘street cred’, and his friends looked to him to ‘sort out any problems’:

Yeah, coz, a 25 year old gang member wanted to fight with one of my 12 year old friends, and he ran away, so the 25 year old tried to punch me didn’t he, but I beat him and earned respect by standing my ground.

For most of these men, their attitudes and involvement in urban environments such as boxing gyms enabled them to call upon street codes and boxing cues as a convenient and acceptable way to make sense of their violence. For example, by providing storylines and excuses that reflect codes that are relevant to the social audience, participants were able to depict their experiences more generally, and portray themselves specifically as bastions of an accepted moral code and related behaviours (Anderson 1999). Anderson claims that there is a ‘set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behaviour, particularly violence’ (p 33), and that the rules prescribe both proper comportment and the proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so supply a rationale allowing those inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way.

Evidence procured in this study demonstrated that any lack of response from these men would have conveyed a message that they tolerated victimisation. With the majority of the men heralding from violent and abusive upbringings, the fear of repeat victimisation became acute. The men were therefore hyper-vigilant to any affronts, as being classified as a victim was damaging to their sense of identity in this masculine domain. Indeed, they did everything in their power to abdicate this subject position, and quite often called upon the code of the street to justify their violence and destruction. Seen in this light, codes become yet another linguistic device for maintaining a positive self-concept, much like
techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza 1957). Indeed, when the men were questioned about their wrongdoings, for example Ricky and Jonny, the way they explained their actions became a central way of maintaining a particular sense of self. Moreover, these explanations demonstrated an endorsement of a code - a cultural expectation and narrative identity that signified these men’s self-images with a potential to react violently.

Working to this premise, Gilligan (1996), Bourgois (1996) and Sennet (2003) all suggest that when an individual’s access to social capital becomes scarce, being treated respectfully becomes hugely important for one’s sense of self worth and self conception. For example, an individual may lack the skills and confidence to assert themselves sufficiently to get basic respect needs met from others. This lack of capability may lead to increased subjective emotional experiences of frustration and humiliation, which may be relieved or comforted through aggressive release (Ward and Maruna 2007). To avoid the consequences of such outbursts individuals may then seek to ‘neutralise’ their behaviours to remain bound to the dominant social order, and therefore defend their actions with justifications and rationalisations.

Sykes and Matza (1957: 666) argue that ‘neutralisation theory’ is ‘delinquency based on what is essentially an unrecognised extension of defences to crimes in the form of justifications for deviance’. They identified five techniques of neutralisation available to the offender that not only allowed for denial of responsibility, but also denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners and appeal to higher loyalties (ibid). Sykes and Matza argue that it is through these techniques that juveniles become delinquent as they allow for moral disengagement and lack of self-sanction. According to Sykes and Matza (1957) young offenders are fully aware of the wrongfulness of their actions, yet, if these juveniles are to maintain commitment to the dominant social order
then they must find ways to assuage guilt and shame as a result of the offence committed. This guilt and its potential for producing a negative self-image helps the average person refrain from committing an immoral act most of the time, therefore, in order to participate in deviant behaviour under such conditions, individuals must find methods to rationalise the actions or neutralise the guilt associated with it. Indeed, the five techniques outlined above form part of this procedure, and provide ‘defences to crimes in the forms of justifications’ (ibid), and if these neutralisations are to carry any psychological weight, then they must be at least partially believed by the person enacting them (Maruna and Copes 2005).

In this research techniques of neutralisation were used to justify violent behaviour. Excuses usually focused around narratives of disrespect and loyalty to the code of the street, as men felt justified in their defence of what they perceived as ‘honour’. The men felt that their narrative identity or self-concept was somehow being compromised by a lack of retaliation, as these boxers defined their own actions as a form of rightful retaliation or punishment. In the case of Eric, you will see that he justified the beating of his children as a punishment for ‘lying’, whereas Marcus - also a boxing trainer - felt justified in violating a parking restriction to the point where he was unable to take responsibility for his wrongdoing and became aggressive. Marcus was also quick to condemn the police, justifying his retaliatory behaviour as ‘standing up for me and my community’, he somehow felt that asking an officer to accompany him around the corner to settle the altercation in a violent way was somehow permissible.

In Frank’s case, an appeal to higher loyalties was evident as Frank would informally talk of his job ‘on the doors’, and how sometimes he ‘manhandled’ punters to present an impression of his door crew being ‘not a firm to fuck with’. Unfortunately this once involved the punching of a deaf man, as Frank was unaware of the man’s disability when
reprimanding him in a noisy bar. Thinking him to be ‘arrogant’ Frank punched him and threw him outside, only then realising that the gentleman was deaf and unable to comprehend the instructions Frank was giving to him at the time. This was a saddening tale, and in some respects I could see that Frank carried a sense of guilt, however, this was largely laughed off as being part of the job, and a ‘mistake anyone could of made’. This story added a new dimension to Frank, and at it was at this point that the bravado he had successfully managed to convey became hugely fractured. Moreover, the images of Marcus, Eric, and Frank, now seemed untenable as the stories of retaliation and violence outside the gym began to reek of fragility. Eric was terrified of replicating his father’s violence, but also ruled the family home with violence, therefore, he was only able to defend against his own behaviour by rationalising it to himself and others as part of his culture and ‘good for instilling discipline’ in his children.

Marcus on the other hand, condemned the condemners as he felt that the police were responsible for his false imprisonment, and felt it important to stand up for the community as an appeal to higher loyalties. Marcus further felt himself to be a community activist, and stated that ‘if it could happen to him it could happen to anyone’, and therefore took it upon himself to wage arguments with the police for ‘the people’. Frank also demonstrated his vulnerability on numerous occasions, and had developed a sense of hyper-vigilance to matters of disrespect - to the point of paranoia - that I often wondered how he managed to sustain his job. Simon, a championship boxer, often thought people were laughing at his inability to competently read and write, and felt that if he did not have boxing he would ‘have nothing going for him’.

Another example, Ricky, who once revealed that he was ‘bottled’ in a restaurant as a result of a challenge involving a friend, felt that the beating he administered afterwards was justified due to the injuries he had sustained. Simon also rationalised his deviant
behaviour as a teenager, stating that the theft of designer clothes from his affluent peers was ‘only right as they could afford it and we were proper skint’. In this instance, neutralising the behaviour by denying that affluent individuals are not entitled to be victims.\(^{13}\) Indeed, it became evident throughout my research that victimhood was denied to most parties; interestingly this included the men themselves. The participants would refer to victims as ‘pussies’- someone you can shift with impunity - therefore viewing this subject position as feminine, and far removed from their own self-concept as humanely possible. The idea of being a victim or even creating one was immediately dismissed, as most men would see victims as ineffectual or weak, the irony being, that most of them had been one at some point in their lives.

These boxers employed neutralisation techniques designed to assuage guilt or deny their own vulnerability, in keeping with the cultural mores of the gym, as there was always an excuse to evade responsibility or place the blame elsewhere. This is in keeping with Brookman, Copes and Hochstetler (2011) argument when they discuss how violent inmates employ ‘formula stories’ to maintain ‘street codes’ thereby maintaining valued identities and positioning in their cultural world.

Indeed, the nature of the violence in these men’s lives was an interesting topic and one that began to unravel throughout the course of this research. The logic of gym based violence and street violence reinforced each other, and as a result, cognitions stayed intact that maintained and supported the idea that violence was an acceptable solution to most problems. Accordingly, the men in this study continued to justify both their own autobiographical violence and their potential theoretical violence using core moral neutralisation techniques. This idea was consistently reinforced by the attendant culture of

\(^{13}\) In the case of Simon, you will notice that he denies the theft of the teacher’s purse, then later admits to it when the dictaphone has stopped recording. Perhaps this demonstrates the salience of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) theory as Simon felt it important to remain ‘bound to the social order’ at least whilst on tape.
the boxing gym, and the wider community that most of these men inhabited, and as a result, their lives became imbued with violence both in and outside the gym walls.

6.6 Summary

Desistance from violence proved to be difficult for the majority of these men. They had too much of their own identity resting upon their construction of muscle, their performance of masculinity and their own subjective denial of vulnerability. To therefore resist retaliation would not only force them into a corner of victimhood, but also deny the very existence they had fashioned for themselves via the sport and masculine domain of boxing. By using neutralisation techniques when discussing violence, boxers were able to align their actions with social expectations (Stoke and Hewitt 1976; Brookman, Copes, and Hochstetler 2011), which further allowed them to maintain desired identities. When participants discussed violence, the way they explained their actions became a central way of maintaining a particular sense of self. In this respect, the narrators elevated their stories as evidence that in their social world they were acting, as ‘real blokes’ should, and that their violence became an easily understandable and expected reaction to unfolding events (Brookman, Copes and Hochstetler 2011).

Giordano et al (2002) highlights the degree to which cognitive and linguistic processes themselves play an important role in behavioural change. According to Giordano, for there to be a change in behaviour there must be an ‘openness to change’, described as an agentic desire and receptivity to a ‘hook for change’. Posited as catalysts for lasting behaviour these ‘hooks’ supposedly energise fundamental shifts in identity and therefore changes in the meaning and desirability for deviant and criminal behaviour. More importantly, these hooks enable a participant to craft a satisfying ‘replacement self’, one
that is seen as incompatible with continued criminal behaviour (ibid). However, it would seem that the men interviewed in this study had adapted their behaviour to support cognitions relating to masculine discourses and ‘codes of the street’ (Anderson 1999), and whilst boxing arguably acted as a hook - much in the same way as religion or prison might - evidence was supportive and supplementary to self-concepts that denied vulnerability, were attuned to perceived incidences of humiliation and disrespect, and neutralised violent outbursts as evidence of cultural and psychic defences. From this perspective it would seem that the only ‘replacement self’ was the one from ‘victim’ to ‘boxer’. And the defence of this new identity combined with the prevention of repeat victimisation took precedence over anything else. Indeed, the maintenance of desired identities coupled with a desire to deny a sense of vulnerability in an environment that does not tolerate weakness, saw men in this research invest in discourses that enabled them to view violence as a part of everyday life. Thus, desistance was only achieved when incapacitated in the gym environment itself, as it prevented men from physically engaging in illegitimate violence when in attendance. However, while the implicit code of the gym was generally respectful and legal - and the men usually refrained from illicit fighting when present - the culture of the space and the significant others present, often reinforced discourses that spoke of competition, masculinity, violence, and retaliation. The boxers embraced this social world wholeheartedly and fashioned identities and cognitions in line with expected behaviours, and did not demonstrate attitudes or subsequent actions that were cognizant with desistance from violence. Notably, this did differ slightly between the professionals and the amateurs, as the professionals were detained for longer in the gym environment and less able to engage in illicit fighting. Additionally, there was an underlying anxiety from the trainers and the professionals that any arrest for violent conduct outside of the gym environment could result in the loss of a professional license,
therefore, the professionals were aware of the risk that illicit fighting held for them but some chose to engage in it regardless.

Nevertheless, evidence did show an openness to change, as some men on re-entry from prison or those ‘sick of being in trouble’ demonstrated an investment in the sport as a way to occupy their time. Hence, boxing had the potential to act as a hook for change as it incapacitated men at a time when they otherwise may have engaged in crime. However, hooks vary in their transformative potential and as Giordano argues, for a cognitive transformation to take place an identity transformation, or what Maruna (2001) refers to as a redemption script, must be evident. Men in this sample did not provide any evidence of redemption scripts nor ‘willful cognitive distortion’ (ibid), nor did they take ownership of their violence or recast themselves in new lights. In fact, the participants saw no wrongdoing in violent retaliation and therefore neutralised any violent interaction as part of a code by which they lived by.

Giordano et al emphasises how hooks have to offer a broad outline of a replacement self - a new identity - one that is open to change and susceptible to redemption. Boxing does not offer this. It may offer an element of incapacitation or employment, or as a connection to some ‘positively valued themes’ (ibid), but the masculine discourse of the sport combined with the discursive meanings of violence for these men only serves to reinforce self-concepts that define violence as acceptable and necessary in certain situations. Ward and Maruna (2007: 151) write that ‘in order to construct viable identities people draw on the discursive (sources of meaning) resources in their social and cultural environment’, and in the social environment of boxing, discursive resources were complicit with a dominant masculine gender that reinforced violence. As Presser (2005) also argued, self-identity is not constructed in a social vacuum, and each one of us draws on available cultural narratives in constructing our own worldviews.
Indeed, the attitudes fostered in the gym led me to believe that not only had the men not changed their attitudes towards violence, but also boxing and the gym reinforced them. It is therefore a legitimate argument, that in some cases boxing elaborated the rehearsal of violence for the outside world. All too often, the boxers could be heard talking about altercations they had been involved in over their life-course and it was this particular element that assisted in the surmising of my theory. The discursive meanings that were entrenched in the social world of boxing saw the men finely attuned, and the trajectories of these men had already demonstrated a significant relationship towards violence, as Jonny stated ‘It takes a certain kind of person to want to get hit for fun’.

Indeed, the habitus of the gym, with its emphasis on competition, muscle, and violent potential proved to be not only reflective in the bodies of these men (Bourdieu 1977) but also ingrained in their consciousness as a system to live by. Boxers are committed to violence. Violence sustains their identity as men who demand total respect, unable to compromise as this would remove the essence of their identity; their self-concept, and the gym is a reinforcing mechanism that prescribes these very discourses. Indeed, every semblance of a boxer’s body is ‘packed into a framework of confrontational options which are then manifested as violent potential’ (Hobbs 1995:122), and the men define themselves in terms of a cultural inheritance both in and outside of the gym that gives primacy to violence. As a result, it cultivates a willingness to engage in violence wholeheartedly which makes boxers unique from the rest of the general population that generally shy away from violent reproach. Because of this, boxers command fear; and their physical armour is honed daily in the confines of the gym adds to the image.

The ability to command such fear and furthermore obedience, results in an ability to also command respect, as Frank stated: ‘I respect someone I fear’. Boxing acts as a gateway to respect, the same way as a high-powered job or financial success might. Indeed, the men
often compared Roger the boxing promoter to Alan Sugar, the despotic businessman turned television star who became famous for being rich and mean - in their eyes this was respectable. As the majority of men in the gym knew that significant professional success happened to the mere few, those that were left - particularly the younger amateurs - felt restricted in ways to achieve success and status. That being the case, Daly and Wilson (1988) claim men’s violence towards other men involves a masculinity of status competition and bravado among peers, and that violence can be seen as a common means by which men can rise above the throng of working-class youth who also inhabited their communities. With this in mind, the men in this study, arguably used violence as a crucial signifier of self-image, a reflection upon a culture that favourably judges those who maintain a credible threat (Winlow 2001).

Because of this fact, men did not consider ‘walking away’ as this would demonstrate a fear to engage in violence, and reduce their credible threat. This would lead to feelings of humiliation and shame, and potential exclusion from the masculine domain of the boxing gym. Accordingly, men invested in violent retaliation to avoid shame and humiliation, and to stay engaged in a hyper-masculine domain that places onus on retaliation as a way to maintain respect. With this in mind, the men involved in this research did not demonstrate any other understanding of violence than as a way to achieve financial success or defend their honour,

What initially began as a sport, arguably further contributes towards an escalating violent life. More often than not, these boxers held careers that required violent potential - mainly bouncing and security - therefore further immersing themselves in social worlds that condoned it. As a result, men’s self-narratives and self-concepts were increasingly imbued with violence, their cognitions spoke to it, and this prevented them from rewriting a narrative of change or a redemption script (Maruna 2001).
As we have seen from my findings boxing does not offer anything by way of cognitive transformation (Giordano et al 2002) when it comes to desistance from violence. The logic of gym violence reinforces the sagacity of street violence, and this became evident through men’s narratives of illicit fighting when outside the gym and in the wider community, as the behaviours and rewards of courage, competitiveness and respect become counter-productive and thus criminogenic when applied to the street. This is demonstrated by the aggression shown by the men, in a pre-emptive way, particularly the idea of 'getting in there first'. Hence, the gym encourages repertoires of violence, and also reinforces masculine identities.

Conclusively, the rationales by which the majority of participants lived their lives remained intact through core moral neutralisation techniques and justifications for further action. Indeed, the men in this study always had an excuse for their behaviour, and considering that these rationales and excuses were supported and sanctioned by significant others in the gym environment where the majority of the men spent their time, allowed for boxers to craft identities that spoke to violent recidivism, therefore, riding roughshod over any sign of pro-social development.
7. The Case of Frank: Embodiment and the Appeal of the Boxing Gym

7.1 Introduction

In this case study I present Frank. I discuss how he accomplishes his masculinity through embodiment and also why the boxing gym was a huge source of appeal for him. Furthermore, I explore the ways in which he invests in the sport of boxing to overcome structural and personal vulnerabilities, and also how he copes with experiences of prior victimisation in a violent habitus that positions ‘respect’ as a central theme. Moreover, I illustrate the ways in which Frank reconstructs himself physically, mentally and emotionally, whereby the sanctuary of the gym not only contributed towards Frank’s search for respect, but also his distancing from a violent peer group as a young man; the boxing gym therefore allowing him to redefine himself as a boxer rather than a gang member. Having said that, the pro-social mechanisms which have incapacitated Frank in the gym over his life course are merely temporary, and this is evidenced throughout his narrative, as he discloses personal incidences of violence and persistence in a habitus that respects retaliation.

7.2 Frank’s story

Frank is 31 years old, and has boxed since he was 12. Growing up as a young black male in the 1980s in an area of deep social exclusion, Frank immediately disclosed that he ‘doesn’t trust many people’. Thus, he was a little cautious about talking to an interviewer: ‘I don’t really want to go on record, but I’ll do it because you seem cool’, and considering I had been hanging around the boxing gym for a few weeks now, and the boxers had got
to see my face and know my name, I managed to convince Frank that I was not a ‘fed’ (police officer), and therefore he agreed to share his story with me.

Boxing gyms are particularly noisy places, and as a result, the use of a dictaphone was not proving fruitful over the loud hip-hop and rhythmic pummelling of the punch bags. I therefore suggested a café a few doors down from the gym and it was there, over a can of coke, that I asked Frank to tell me his story. I told him to start at the beginning and take me up to the present day, and he began by saying that his ‘schooling wasn’t great’, and that he had been expelled from various primary schools. It was ‘around the age of 12 years old’ that Frank realised that most of his problems ‘stemmed from anger issues and fighting’, and as a result the gym became a source of appeal for him at this age.

Being out of school and part of a single parent family, Frank mainly lived with his father and his brother, yet, considering his father was at work during the day and Frank was expelled from school, he was often left to ‘his own devices’. He did however, reside with his aunt during the day, a mile or so out of his residential area, and ‘hung around with kids who were not in school’ close to her home. In fact, his first experience of boxing was with these young people who were also not in school.

The boxing gym was run by a trainer who had been in the area for a long time and was used to seeing young men come and go, but Frank remembered the trainer telling him he had a ‘good punch’. This made Frank feel good about himself, and think that he ‘could be a boxer one day’. However, it was not until Frank walked into the ring and participated in some sparring that he realised boxing was more difficult than he first anticipated, as he recalled ‘blowing all over the place like a fucking feather’. Nonetheless, as the other young men drifted away from the gym, unable to compete with the physical demands of the sport, Frank continued to attend. Spurred on by the encouraging words of the trainer,
and the belief that maybe one day he could be a boxer, Frank turned up to the gym most days.

However, the gym was in close proximity to his aunt’s house and not near his permanent address, therefore, in spite of his dedication, Frank stopped attending when he returned to mainstream education closer to his home. Furthermore, Frank disclosed that certain members of the community where he permanently resided were not happy about him associating with other young people from a different area, as at the time they were seen as rivals to gang factions in the local area. This was a cause of concern for Frank, as during his teenage years who you associated, and the area you belonged to formed part of a cultural identity that many young men were ascribing to:

*Where you came from mattered back then more than it does now in some ways, there was no way I could hang out with my mates from my auntie’s house and live at my dad’s, no way.*

Moreover, Frank was warned to ‘stay away and stop chillin’ with those guys’ otherwise he would be ‘putting himself in an awkward position’. As a result of these threats the boxing gym that he had start to attend was no longer an option. Regardless, Frank still had a desire to box, and disclosed that it became more important now, particularly as a result of these threats:

‘*When you got beef like I had, it makes you wanna learn to defend yourself better, you know what I’m saying? I wanted to keep on boxing because I liked it, but also because I needed it!*

Frank therefore sought out a gym closer to home and began attending frequently after school, distancing himself from friends in the local area, and also those he met at his
aunt’s house. He thus began to attend the inner-city gym where we first met, and has continued to come here for the last 19 years. It is here that Frank trains and coaches younger members while simultaneously maintaining his physique to facilitate his occupation as a bouncer. In fact, maintaining his physique and potential for violence (Hobbs et al 2003) was the important element in Frank’s story.

When I asked him if he was in pain just after he suffered a broken rib, he begrudgingly replied that he wasn’t, and that it ‘was nothing’, and the only thing troubling him, was the fact that the injury reminded him that he was ‘mortal’ and he ‘hated’ that thought. He then proceeded to tell everyone he had broken his rib, and parade his injury around the gym as a symbol of masochistic pride and endurance. I wanted to unpick Frank’s original motivation for boxing as a result of this conversation. Was it a sense of immortality that Frank desired? Or was it because he ‘needed it’ to defend himself against threatening behaviour in the community? Thus, I chose to return to the question: ‘Tell me the story of how you became a boxer?’ Furthermore, in the method of narrative interviewing it is important to grasp the full complexity of the story told, therefore, I asked Frank about his time at primary school as he disclosed in the first five minutes of talking, that ‘anger issues and fighting’ were the main cause of his schooling problems.

**DJ:** You said you were angry when you were younger, when you first started boxing, can I ask what it was that was making you angry at the time?

**Frank:** Looking back on it now, probably a combination of a lot of things, maybe someone pissed me off, or another kid had disrespected me or something.

**DJ:** Yeah.
Frank: Coz as a kid you’re trying to find yourself, and growing up in this area you’ve got to stand your ground.

DJ: Stand your ground?

Frank: Yeah, you’ve got to be a strong character, you’ve got to be strong, you can’t let people bully you around, because you become that guy, that victim...

DJ: That victim?

Frank: Going through childhood there was a tendency, or there was potential for me to become that victim.

This was a sore point and one that Frank found difficult to disclose. The idea of being a victim was so abhorrent to men like Frank, that they would do almost anything in their power to avoid it. Moreover, the fact that he referred to his experience as ‘that victim’, led me to think he may be trying to put some distance between himself and the victimising experience. Referring to ‘that’ victim, ‘that’ which does not belong to me, allowed Frank to hold his experience at arms-length, thus helping to reduce feelings of shame and humiliation (Winlow and Hall 2009). When trying to probe Frank further, especially regarding his unwanted anxieties of being a victim, he referred to how ‘alpha males’ would ‘capitalise on it straight away’. When I asked Frank to clarify his point, he summed it up by saying they would ‘smell fear’. Thus, I felt it important to reach an understanding of the term ‘alpha male’ from Frank’s perspective, as this was an interesting reference point, and also at odds with the term ‘victim’.

DJ: What does the term ‘alpha male’ mean to you?
Frank: For most people it explains the fact...someone who’s self-assured, confident, ermmm... and self-assured and confident, and I’d say someone who doesn’t take much shit.

This seemed a strange answer, but evident from Frank’s perspective that ‘alpha males’ are men that can defend themselves, ‘someone who doesn’t take much shit’, and also someone who would ‘retaliate when the time came’. Conversely, a self-assured confident male might be more apt at ‘taking shit’, whereas someone who was riddled with self-doubt might see enemies everywhere. Indeed, it started to transpire from Frank’s story that the appeal of boxing was part of a strategy to deny being a victim, avoid being bullied, and develop in his mind, a persona that ‘doesn’t take much shit’.

As the conversation ensued Frank seemed to soften and open up a little more as he admitted to ‘not being the toughest of kids’. He admitted that boxing was a form of defence, and disclosed that prior to joining the gym, there were times when he would fight and get his ‘arse kicked’.

DJ: Was boxing a form of self-defence for you?

Frank: Yeah, didn’t like the fact that ‘I got it’ (beaten up) – it could bug for me for days, weeks, you know what I mean?

DJ: Right.

Frank: The fact I’d lost meant learning boxing for me was like a skill and made me more of a fighter. Boxing helped as well as people respected me more.

From this small excerpt, we can ascertain from Frank’s narrative that the fear of losing a fight, becoming a victim, could produce unwanted thoughts and feelings after the event that could plague him for weeks. Accordingly, Frank invested in the sport of boxing to
make him more able to fight, more able to defend himself against potential attacks, and in some respects, eradicate the shame and humiliation that could plague him for long periods after the offending incident. It further transpired that Frank felt more respected when able to defend himself, particularly in an environment that values retaliation as a method to maintain respect. And as the narrative further unfolded it became clearly visible that Frank associated the concept of respect with the concept of being feared.

This was not uncommon amongst those who boxed, as the word ‘respect’ was something that was mentioned frequently and exalted to the point where losing or gaining respect became a matter of life or death. This notion of ‘respect’ became a key theme and a turning point in the research, as something that was evident in nearly all of my interviews. What I learnt from these men was that their definition of respect meant the ability to intimidate and command fear. This one of many strategies to accrue respect in a milieu that values retaliation as respectful behaviour. Thus, when asking Frank what respect meant to him, and how boxing somehow made people respect him more he said the following:

*The fact that I boxed when I went back to school at the age of 13 my physique looked good, even at that age I’d get the respect. Even the older kids would be like ‘there’s boxer’ and they wouldn’t call me by my name just ‘boxer’.*

The fact that even now other young people refer to him as ‘boxer’ still bolsters Frank’s confidence, and he said it has been instrumental in motivating him to maintain this title up to the present day. Returning to Connell’s (1985) point that masculinity emanates from men’s bodies, I would tentatively ascertain that Frank’s boxing physique and fighting status, in his mind, was part of a strategy to accrue and maintain respect in an environment that valued these things, further evidenced by his commitment and
dedication that has lasted, so far, for 19 years. Indeed, by investing in his physical capital, and accruing status as a fighter, Frank was not only able to ward off any potential attacks that could threaten his sense of masculinity and render him a further victim, but also, more importantly, it allowed him to reconstruct himself from the subject position of ‘victim’ to that of ‘boxer’.

This is evidenced from early on in his life with Frank’s reference to the older children at school not calling him by his name anymore, further indicative that the identity of ‘boxer’ was vastly important to him. He swelled up with pride when he told me this part of his story, as he talked of how he would ‘get respect now’ for being known as ‘boxer’ and not as ‘Frank’ and it started to become increasingly unlikely that children at school would ‘disrespect’ him anymore. When I asked Frank how he felt about being called ‘boxer’ he replied: ‘It felt nice, better than being bullied.’

Frosh (1997:72) interprets the concern of boys and men with body size and muscularity as representing some kind of ‘estrangement’ from their bodies, writing: ‘They are striving to make their body the instrument of the will, to be honed and worked upon so that it will be able to achieve what is expected of it.’ In Frank’s case, his body became part of his identity - a visual representation worthy of consideration and respect, and also as an outward defence mechanism to avoid being a further victim of bullying. Indeed, this investment in physical capital as an antidote to being bullied was an important investment for Frank, so much so, that he distanced himself from this concept with almost disgust, therefore withdrawing his previous reference to being bullied.

*I would not say I was a bullied child in school, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I was bullied, but that all stopped when I started boxing anyway.*
Frank qualified his statement with how ‘all that stopped’ when he started boxing, as arguably, Frank had constructed himself a new identity as a ‘boxer’ with an investment in physical capital that even the ‘older lads respected’. Indeed, this reconstruction and investment in boxing became part of strategy for Frank, as he searched for the respect that he felt he lacked as a young boy. In his eyes this was achievable through the medium of boxing, and it is this element of his story I turn to next.

7.3 Battle Wounds: Frank’s Search for Respect

Many of the issues Frank raises in his narrative of growing up in a socially disenfranchised community, chime with Elijah Anderson’s (1999) *Code of the Street*. According to Anderson, this ‘code’ is a reciprocally understood way of living - a set of prescriptions and proscriptions for behaviour in communities where other institutions and codes have failed. Frank disclosed that in his community they are deeply suspicious of authority, and that the police ‘only ever come round ‘ere when looking for gang bangers’. Anderson claims that this code was particularly inherent in inner city black communities with inherent socio-economic decline, and as a result, this contributes towards a strong sense in the community that they are ‘on their own’, especially regarding self-protection and self-defence. Accordingly, members of these communities must take personal responsibility, and Frank illustrates this in the excerpt below:

*Around here you respect someone you fear. It’s not necessarily the fear element but the combination of things - don’t fuck with that guy because this is what he might...what he’s gonna do! He’s a moneyman, he got cash, and he got boys to back him. So if someone got cash but ain’t willing to defend it then he’s a pussy innit? You understand?*
When I probed at the respect/fear equation Frank seemed perplexed, and I sensed an air of patronisation as he explained what he meant:

*DJ: Do you think respect and fear are the same thing?*

*Frank: I think they can go hand in hand definitely*

*DJ: So why would you respect someone you feared?*

*Frank: Hmmmmm, let me give you an analogy. Did I respect my parents when I was born? No, because there was times when I was disobedient you know what I’m saying? But when they beat the shit out of me I feared them didn’t I?*

The above allows us a glimpse into how Frank associates ‘respect’ with ‘fear’ and ‘obedience’- however achieved - as the use of violence by his parents developed a sense of fear in Frank that he saw as a mark of respect for them. As Frank got older he alluded to still respecting his parents even though they ‘don’t give me an arse wuppin' no more’, but maintained that it was because of the beatings that he originally developed a sense of respect for them. From this, I tentatively ascertain that Frank sees violence as a way to gain respect and maintain a sense of fear in others. Additionally, the area that Frank also habited in his younger years was as he put it, ‘somewhere you had to be on your toes’, a place he alluded to as being somewhat tense, somewhere that required a sense of vigilance. It therefore seemed that Frank’s investment in boxing was not only part of a strategic response when in school and family environments, but also a cultural one, particularly in a habitus that places onus on violence as a defence mechanism.

Frank not only demonstrates how violence is used to protect one’s self and assets among his community, but also resorts to the disparaging word ‘pussy’ when describing someone who isn’t willing to resort to violence. Often used amongst men, the word ‘pussy’ denotes
weakness, femininity, and an ability to shaft with impunity. Used in this derogatory manner, the slang term for a woman’s genitalia, ‘pussy’ simply means ‘not masculine’. To refer to someone as a ‘pussy’ is often viewed as emasculating, and a further indicator that the individual is somehow not behaving accordingly in particular cultural environments. Moreover, whilst being disrespectful of women, the word ‘pussy’ when used in an emasculating way can often be seen as a mark of disrespect, and for some men this is worthy of a counter-attack:

You can respect someone because of the position they’re in, but they can retain that respect, you can retain that respect for them through violence yeah. You can’t fuck with this guy, he ain’t a pussy, you can’t rob this guy, because if you fuck with him he’s gonna kill you.

It started to become starkly obvious that Frank viewed violence as a way to instil fear in others, and also as a method to gain respect. Frank was able to gain his idea of respect, indeed, often talking of ‘wanting to be strong’, ‘wanting to physically hold his own’, and through the sport of boxing he was able to achieve this:

DJ: For you, is boxing a way of getting some respect?

Frank: Definitely, kids that would go and train I’d get respect from them - my peer group I would - coz of my abilities, I was hard, so that peer group get respect from them, for being competitive in that peer group yeah.

The nature of most sports is inherently competitive, and according to Messner (1990) successful competition in the rule bound structure of sport is a major platform for male identity and their relationship to wider society. Thus, we can see from Frank’s recollection of being a young man that competing and having a good physique was an
important factor in his peer group. I would argue, that it was also a way to maintain status amongst ‘kids that would go train’, as in any hyper-masculine context, hierarchies based on muscularity and strength will be evident. Moreover, Frank disclosed that his good physique ‘boosted his self-esteem’ and gave him a ‘bit of kudos’ in the community, whereas I would argue that Frank’s idea of kudos was intermingled and confused with what he perceived as a sense of fear. If Frank could instil fear in others then he was unlikely to come under attack and this was his modus operandi. In Frank’s mind, his muscular physique and the ability to use it in force occupying ways allowed him to convey an impression that he would not tolerate victimisation.

Nevertheless, Frank’s peer group were a source of conflict for him, as the ‘gang’ factions becoming apparent in the area at the time worried him. Having now left school and ‘going down that road’ put Frank in a vulnerable position to conform to the group expectations, and without disclosing specific details, Frank lifted his shirt to show a scar that he referred to as a ‘battle wound’. This was about 10cm long and evidently a stab wound. When I asked for the story of the scar, he became vague and talked about how he sought refuge in the boxing gym to escape the ‘drama outside’ and the ‘options that go with that’.

According to Frank the ‘options’ open to his peer group during that period were: ‘Prison, death or a shit job,’ and he disclosed that a lot of his peers had fallen victim to either imprisonment or gang violence. Matza (1964) among others (see Cohen 1955; Cloward and Ohlin 1960), refer to this worldview as a sense of ‘fate’ or ‘blocked opportunities theory’, thereby discussing how men growing up in disadvantaged areas usually perceive themselves as having limited options. In short, these theories argue that individuals in specific subcultures fatalistically experience themselves as object and effect rather than as

subject and cause, and in Frank’s case, a sense of fatalism was apparent when he disclosed what options he felt were available to him and his peers. It was only with the security of the boxing gym that Frank felt that he had opportunities; opportunities to be the ‘next world champion’, and because of this he dedicated all his time to pursuing this ‘dream’.

In order to pursue this goal Frank trained on a daily basis, distancing himself from his peer group that were otherwise involved in street violence and anti-social behaviour. The newly discovered peer group in the boxing gym developed a sense of camaraderie among those attending, and Frank felt he had found a ‘new crew’. Wacquant (2004: 68) writes that: ‘Boxers relish the fact that they share membership in the same small guild, renowned for its physical toughness and bravery’, as they revel in the enjoyment of knowing that they are different from others. Perceived as fighters, boxers glory in this title, as it not only comes with a sense of satisfaction and pride for those that participate, but further adds to the element of danger and masculine prestige contained in the image.

Additionally, for Frank, the competitive element of the gym also served as an incentive, as he believed that it ‘drives you to be better than what you are’. He argued that it was imperative for young men to be competitive, and when further trying to unpick Frank’s reasoning behind the appeal of the gym, he stated that:

_It’s what’s promoted to young men isn’t it - for the reasons I’ve stated - a man should be strong and should be able to defend his family._

Again, Frank refers to the word ‘defence’ as a reason to engage in boxing, arguably basing his argument upon a cultural expectation of masculine performativity in a habitus that takes defence very seriously. Furthermore, by making reference to this cultural expectation - what is promoted to young men - he demonstrates Connell’s (1995) point
that to maintain dominance and respect, men must not become subject to the will of others. Frank further believed men should be manly and women should be feminine, and therefore justified violent behaviour as a natural recourse for men:

There are certain career paths that are directed towards men, boxing is a career path directed towards men more so than women, because it's naturally a manly sport, and it's not a women's role to go do that, just as it's not a women's role to go die on the battlefield

Aside from the references to ‘natural manliness’, I found the idea of boxing and its comparison to ‘the battlefield’ an interesting analogy, as the military like the boxing gym, is a further site for the performance of a certain type of aggressive hyper-masculinity. In other words, the ethos of both these arenas is one that promotes endurance, strength, and physicality, and therefore chimes consecutively in Frank’s mind as a comparative career choice that reinforces masculinity and marginalises women (for a further discussion of boxing in the military see Mason and Riedi 2011). The other common denominator linking the boxing/military connotation is the sanctioned use of violence, and I posed this dichotomy to Frank:

DJ: What war and boxing have in common is violence is it not?

Frank: Yeah, you have to see boxing as a life and death situation, I mean, what’s the next stage from knocking someone out? It’s taking their life isn’t it?

This answer was aggressive, and the fact that Frank referred to boxing as a ‘life and death situation’ led me to believe that Frank’s investment in the sport is of great importance to him. Again, I couldn’t help feeling that for Frank, boxing was a defence mechanism for staying safe, hence the ‘life or death’ analogy. Indeed, Frank further disclosed that boxing
forms his character’, and without it he feels ‘lost’, discussing how absences from the
gym and taking time out from training leads to a sense of vulnerability for him. When not
training, Frank feels ‘undisciplined’ and inevitably finds himself ‘down the wrong road
of smoking and drinking’:

I feel it in myself - I need to train, otherwise fuck knows what would happen.

Seemingly, from Frank’s narrative he obtains a certain sense of morality and physical
purity from his training, but when I pressed Frank further, trying to explore his deep-
seated need to train, he discussed how it made him feel ‘secure’ in himself. I asked him if
there was ever a time he did not feel secure and he said when he is not fit and when he
was a teenager. I tried to get to the bottom of what being ‘secure’ meant to Frank, and
identify if there was anyone, or any situation, that made him feel particularly vulnerable.
Frank reported fearing attack from ‘everybody’ as he disclosed how he started ‘working
the doors at 18’ and had to ‘put up with loads of shit from everyone’ in this position.

This sense of paranoia was evident in Frank’s overall demeanour. When we walked back
to the gym after our interview we nearly found ourselves in an altercation with a group of
drunken males who Frank presumed were ‘eyeballing’ him. Fortunately, the situation did
not escalate, and Frank refrained from ‘fuckin’ them up’. This was slightly worrying as
Frank had already disclosed he ‘worked the doors’, and this seems like an environment
where drunken males are commonplace. Accordingly, I felt that Frank’s occupational
choice was interesting, especially when dealing with trouble, as “it is vital for the bouncer
to establish interpersonal control” (Cruse and Rubin 1973:3 in Hobbs et al 2003), yet, for
Frank, this certainly did not seem the case.
7.4 Boxing and Reconstruction of the Self

It was evident from Frank’s narrative that his identity as a boxer (and subsequently a doorman) played a huge part in whom he is as a human being. Comments heard throughout the gym - Frank as ‘boxer’, Frank as ‘doorman’ - gave him his status, his power and his control. Frank had built his self-confidence both in and outside the gym and carved both of these identities on the successful employment of violence, both of which reinforced each other. Indeed, Hobbs et al (2003:222) identified that: ‘Most bouncers emerge from a social environments that embrace the potential benefits and rewards of violent conduct.’ Frank was no different. He came from a social environment where violence was seen as a solution to a problem. In his disclosures he justified his violent behaviour towards anyone he felt ‘disrespected’ him:

*I’m not one to start trouble, but I’ll finish it if I have to, you get me?*

Frank’s original desire to box was never made explicit, yet it somehow seemed a necessity for him now as he expressed his ‘need to box’. I sensed this ‘need’ was not just one of physical purity, but also one of power and control. Indeed, Frank gains a sense of identity through being both a boxer and a bouncer, and his investment in both these identities are of great importance to him. Thus, the appeal of the gym lies in Frank’s reconstruction and maintenance of an identity that allows him to accomplish his masculinity in line with cultural mores, while creating distance between a younger self that ‘wasn’t the toughest of kids’. Indeed, I never unearthed the story of his battle wound, but I expect the scar to be shown on a regular basis as this formed part of Frank’s story and his transition from victim to boxer.

As Theberge (1991:124) writes: ‘Successful images require successful bodies, which have been trained, disciplined and orchestrated to enhance our personal value.’ For men like
Frank, success came from embodiment - his sense of personal value - arguably explaining ‘his need to box’ and his sense of shame of guilt when not. Further, his body became the source of his identity, it created a distance between victimhood of teenage years, and later became a source of income and power in his occupation as a bouncer. Moreover, not only did the scar form part of Frank’s trajectory, it evidenced his ‘toughness’, his ‘hardness’\footnote{Hardness not being dissimilar to ‘machine-like’ or ‘cold, hard steel’ references commonly found in combat films and men’s advertising.}, and further demonstrated his willingness to be able to withstand pain. Connell (1995: 53) posits that: ‘Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are.’ For men like Frank, they not only view their bodies as maps of experience, but also as signifiers of both physical and social capital.

These signifiers become vastly important for men like Frank, as they not only serve as defence mechanisms in environments that value shows of strength, but also contribute towards accruing respect and status for those in possession of both physical and social capital. Additionally, Frank was able to reconstruct himself sufficiently enough to obtain a career as a bouncer in the night-time economy; contributing further towards the status and power he now had in the gym environment. For Frank, bouncing was a ‘laugh’, and a ‘way to pay the bills’, and he often discussed how he liked the environment of both gym and door as places where the ‘boys hang out!’ Winlow et al (2001) posit that ‘bouncing’ becomes important for certain men for a whole host of reasons, and is generally perceived as a way to earn money while further investing in long established violent reputations.

Furthermore, the ‘cumulative knowledge of where and how violence is situated in relation to both culture and the self, provides the primary skills, and indeed the essential and pre-requisite cultural triggers for the choice of bouncing as an occupation’ (Ibid: 224). Indeed, Hobbs et al (2003) posit that the logistics involved in the working environment of the
night-time economy leads to a heightened sense of violence, and this is often coupled with men’s gendered and class specific cultural socialisation. For men like Frank, it is arguable that the profession of door-work is not just about the competency required for the profession, but a knowledge of the inner-workings and cultural mores of contemporary urban violence.

With this in mind, and the constant threat of potential violent encounters forming part of one’s occupation, it is of no surprise that Frank feels a sense of paranoia. For Frank and his colleagues, professions such as bouncing, when amalgamated with violence, paranoia, and gender/class focal concerns, view violence - both actual and perceived - at the very heart of door-work. As a result, violence provides a framework for notions of respect (Neff et al 1991), and this is vastly important to men like Frank who have been subjected to previous violent attacks, and also inhabit daily environments where violence is an acceptable solution to a problem. Therefore for men like Frank, violence forms part of their cultural make-up, a strategy and a resource in maintaining respect. Boxing contributes towards this maintenance. It forms part of the strategy, and allows for Frank to not only employ its physical benefits in the maintenance of his ‘respectful’ reputation, but also proves useful in his chosen occupation as a bouncer.

7.5 Discussion

In this case study I have looked at the appeal of boxing, and used Frank as an example of how men accomplish their masculinity through embodiment and sport. Furthermore, I have examined the investments that men like Frank make into reconstructions of self through the medium of boxing and physical capital, while demonstrating that the gym can be a source of comfort for those that have experienced personal violence in their daily life.
lives. However, the logic of respect that is ingrained in the habitus of both gym and street overrides the incapacitating elements of the boxing gym, as Frank not only confessed to being attuned to incidences of violent retaliation but also physically demonstrated his capacity for it when we were returning to the gym setting after our interview. Thus, I conclude that the appeal of boxing more generally, lies in its ability to hone and craft identities that are concomitant with accruing respect and commanding fear in others. These elements of respect and fear and how to maintain them, are ingrained in men like Frank. Identities that are classified as ‘respectful’ are crafted in the gym environment for the majority of men who attend, and are transposable across both gym and street. Accordingly, this becomes counteractive to the desistance promoting elements of the boxing gym, as the identities honed take precedence over the pro-social mechanisms that the gym can provide. Indeed, these themes will be further discussed in the next chapter as we turn our attention to Eric. He also demonstrates how the appeal of boxing is rooted in a sense of reconstruction both physically and mentally, and how these signifiers are somewhat impervious to desistance from violence and actually more finely attuned to a persistent violent habitus.
8. The Case of Simon: Reputation, stigma and ‘fate’

8.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the case study of Simon. It looks at the original and enduring appeal of boxing for him and also its relation to his early home life, including his relationship with his father. I discuss Simon’s upbringing in an environment surrounded by violence, and offer insights into how this may have contributed towards Simon’s understanding of violence. I conclude by discussing whether or not the sport of boxing has any influence on the way he views and employs violence in his everyday life.

8.2 Simon’s Story

Simon was in his mid-thirties and a professional boxer of white British descent. Fighting at light middleweight he was relatively small and stocky in appearance, and his shaved head and tattoos added to his overall demeanor of a fighter. He was in possession of many trophies and his photographs also adorned the walls of the gym. Yet Simon did not boast of his success like other men in the study, nor did he chide the amateurs, which was common practice amongst the professionals. He was a sensitive interviewee and also slightly nervous: he constantly checked in with me with regard to his answers being “right’ and seemed anxious about what I thought of his ability to communicate. This became apparent throughout the interview as he disclosed that he was “street smart, but put a piece of paper in front of me and game over”. In fact, Simon seemed quite concerned about his ability to communicate with those he perceived as “cleverer” than him, and he often referred to himself as “thick” and incapable of doing anything other
than boxing. He left school without any qualifications after long spells of truancy and “just signed on” until he “got picked to fight for England and made it”.

Simon grew up in a relatively deprived part of the city with his parents and sister. His dad was also a professional boxer and according to Simon he could often be seen out drinking and being “Jack the Lad on the beer after the boxing”. A dominant but absent figure in Simon’s life, his father often disappeared for days on end, even fathering another child with a local woman. Simon’s primary relationships were with his mother and sister who he claims are his “best mates”, going so far as to say that his sister “would back me up on anything”. Being three years older than Simon, his sister adopted the role of caregiver and substitute parent, and Simon often referred to his sister as “always looking after us as a kid and stuff”. Being raised within a pub as a younger child Simon talked of being surrounded by aggression:

“My dad liked to drink didn’t he, you know what I mean, but he wouldn’t even know he used to hit me, he would have forgot. There’s things...there’s things...like with my mum and all that. I lived in a pub didn’t I, I’ve seen my dad crack guys and all that, I’ve seen guys snap pool cues and start belting each other whilst I’ve been sat there. I’ve seen it all.

DJ: Right

Simon: “I lived in the pub for just over a year it was, it was from nine years old till ten. It was bad. We had a dog, a pitbull, and that used to be involved in the fights, all sorts, it was bad.”

He referred to his dad as “different” and “strong”, strong in the sense that he never saw him “back down or admit to being wrong”. Simon described not being frightened of
anyone but his dad, and when he found himself in altercations with the police as a teenager he would plead with them to take him anywhere but home:

“As a kid when I was getting into trouble, I wasn’t scared of the police or nothing. When other kids would go ‘shush’ here’s the police, I would think I’m more scared of my dad! I wouldn’t want ‘em to take me home to my dad. If we did mad things and the police would come, I would be like ‘please listen, don’t take me home yeah?’”

After our interview, this fear became more than apparent, as Simon practically ran down the street after me to clarify his anonymity and gain reassurances that his story would “never get out”. Simon’s story of boxing began with him not being at all interested in the sport. He talked of his dad being a journeyman, a ‘stand-in’ for professionals who drop out of fights at the last minute, therefore, rather than cancel the show and lose money, journeymen step-in and fight regardless of whether they win or lose (for a portrait of the journeyman, see John Schulian 1983). As a result of this profession, Simon discussed how he witnessed his father “broken” on numerous occasions after boxing matches, and this originally discouraged him:

“Seeing my dad come home with black eyes and all that, you know as a kid, and I would say: “what’s up?” And he’d been beat, or he’d won, you know…it just wasn’t something that I took to as a kid or anything. I know some things go over your head as a kid…. He never used to be just like ‘come ‘ere’, or give us a hug or anything. He was too strong”.

This seemed like a good place to ask Simon to tell me the story of how it was growing up with a dad as a boxer, as from the outset his father seemed like a strong presence in his life:

DJ: Tell me the story of how it was for you growing up with your dad being a boxer?
Simon: As a boxer? Flippin ‘Eck! My dad used to have...That’s how I was known as a kid, my dad just boxed. You know what I mean? He used to come home like I said with black eyes and things like that. I was just different you know, because my dad was always in training. And when he boxed he was out and that was it, so I didn’t really see my dad. When he was training it was always “shush get out of the house”, we had to be quiet. But I am sort of like that with my kid now. Whereas at the time I was thinking…but now I know, now I have a kid myself, so saying now to my kid you have to be quiet helped me understand where my dad was coming from.

Understanding where his dad was “coming from” proved to be important, as Simon was still confused why his father behaved that way towards his family, especially as his father “never remembers the beatings”. According to Simon, his father often asks him and his older sister what they “remember most about being a kid?” Simon “humours him and just tells him nice things”, to keep him from “feeling guilty”, therefore “avoiding any more drama”. Simon justified his dad’s behaviour throughout the interview as being symptomatic of being a boxer, and excused his lack of care and affection as inherent, especially due to his grandfather also being absent and abusive:

“With my dad it was different, he used to tell me about my granddad, he died now, but he used to be like ‘you come here’ and give my dad the belt, ‘what’s that for’ my dad would say crying, ‘before you do anything’ he’d say. You know proper old school and all that. Some of that was in my dad when we were kids. I’ve got another brother because my dad is with another woman, so stuff like that. We were just different. I have a kid now, but I didn’t see my dad all the time... now that I’ve had my little lad, I think it sort of opened my dad’s eyes a little bit because he loves my son to bits.

DJ: So he’s a granddad?
Simon: “Yeah he is the granddad now. I just think because my dad is strong, it is hard for him to say sorry if you know what I mean. In certain situations, you know, I’ve had a few cracks off my dad…”

Simon rationalized his own father’s behaviour by portraying the abuse as “being in” his father and handed down via a paternal lineage. This ‘genetic’ view was not uncommon, and echoes the literature on young men who view domestic abuse as normative behaviour (Mullender 2002; Gadd 2014), and in some respects Simon saw the abuse as a form of “tough love”. Being known as the “kid whose dad boxed” contributed towards Simon’s reputation as a young adult and he disclosed that on most occasions “people would leave me the fuck alone on the estate”. However, once the family had moved off the estate and into more comfortable middle class surroundings, Simon soon discovered that his dad’s boxing career negatively impacted on his schooling. At this point I felt it important to ask Simon about his school days, as he referred to himself as not being particularly “academic”, and it was during his last years of school that he took up the sport of boxing:

“When I was living in *town* and then we moved to the outskirts and I moved school and all that, and obviously at that age I didn’t know anyone, it was hard. When I moved all my mates were still in previous *town* but I used to go and see them. I knocked about with some lads, I still see them now, they come to the gym, they used to box and they said: “why don’t you come boxing?” This was in my last year of school and they said: “come box, your dad boxes”. It all started from there really, then it changed everything I did, because I’m not academic me, and I thought…I used to watch boxing and all that, and when I was just leaving school I thought what am I going to do? And I thought I’m going to box, that’s it I’m going to box. Then I was asking my dad loads of questions, watching tapes; getting out all my dad’s old tapes. I just loved it. It changed everything. It changed me that was it.
DJ: How did it change you?

Simon: I wasn’t going out with my mates, you know, when they were all going out drinking on the streets, I wasn’t doing any of that. I was going home to get up early in the morning to go running. It changed everything. All my mates eating rubbish, it started at my last year of school and everyone was eating shit and I was like ‘no, I’m not having it’

DJ: You said you weren’t particularly academic, how was school for you then?

Simon: I didn’t like it. Honestly I couldn’t do anything. Maybe coz the school I went to at first has been shut down now, that was a crazy school. Cars used to get blown up all the time and everything, you used to get robbed walking down the street at nighttime or whatever, you know when you’re just mooching (hanging out) as a kid. Then I have gone to this other school, which was proper Catholic. Any mither (trouble) and that was it, you got detention or had to pick up litter. It was just mad. When I moved schools I had no friends, so I was just sort of different.

DJ: Different?

Simon: Yeah definitely, I got suspended and everything, a few times for fighting in school, but I was not boxing at the time when this was going on. They used to have one yard on this side and one on that side and I used to cut through. Something happened, someone said something and it all started like that. I started fighting with one of the older lads, I was in the third year and he just came up to me and I started fighting, saying that I thought I was ‘hard and all that’.... but I was getting done for things because my dad was a boxer.... you know what I mean? There was things going on in school, and I obviously wasn’t as academic as other kids, they had different backgrounds to me, I think they were a bit wealthier; that was my perspective anyway. They had better clothes than me and
everything, they were a bit more well off and I was different in that way. I don’t think they understood where I was coming from, you know, the teachers and all that...

From the above account we can see that Simon feels a sense of difference; he refers to this difference on more than one occasion within the first ten minutes of the interview. Arguably, the difference hinges upon his father’s occupation and Simon’s feelings of inadequacy as a result. Clearly for Simon the image of his father was inexplicably bound up within his image of ‘difference’ at school, compounded by a move from his original place of education to that of a Catholic one where any sign of misbehaviour was immediately penalised. Furthermore, moving from an area where his previous school was nostalgically described as “crazy”, Simon felt judged amongst his new school peers.

This new school instilled a sense of inadequacy in Simon as he described those that attended as “wealthier” and “in better clothes than me”, also, the kudos placed upon Simon as a result of his father’s occupation was not forthcoming in the new school as he found his peers challenging as opposed to fearful and compliant. Without friends, and “back up”, Simon felt isolated, and the power he once wielded in the previous school and on the estate as a result of being the son of the “local famous boxer” began to diminish. He further described the teachers as not understanding where he “was coming from”, and I detected a sense of loneliness in Simon as he recounted feeling “less academic”, and “from a different background”. He described this as:

“...It wasn’t like the other kid’s mum and dads and all that. That is why it was hard for me at school, because they were with their mum and dads and I was just like....I wasn’t out looking for sympathy, but I used to think: ‘you lot are just different to me, you lot have had a silver spoon...so for me, I used to do mad things to get money and stuff...pinching
Simon’s sense of inadequacy in relation to his dad’s career and family’s wealth permeated into his feelings of isolation and envy. In new school surroundings Simon started to equate success with affluence and academic ability; facets he admittedly was without. Additionally, his fragile sense of self-worth came under attack as he sensed his difference from other children’s parents, thus “doing mad things” to either attract attention to his loneliness or create legitimate wealth through illegitimate means. Feeling this sense of difference due to the school move, Simon talked of how his dad “tried to better us by moving to this area” but described the process as “gutting”, therefore leading to periods of absconding as Simon described how he “would get on m’bike and fly back to the estate” where he could “feel at home with people who get me, people who are like me”.

Originally being born into a “working class household”, Simon remembered growing up on the council estate with his mother and sister. His father was described as “hard” and “unpredictable”, and Simon would talk of his sister running up the stairs to hide when she heard her father was due home:

Simon: “Me and my sister would be messing about, having a laugh and that, and my mum would say ‘your dad’s coming home in a minute’, my sister would leg it up the stairs scared shitless.”

DJ: Right

Simon: “Like, some people talk about their past, about being a kid and it being a laugh and everything. I had a laugh with my mates, but some things...I think I only got to see my dad proper when he has had a fight and got some money, and then he would buy us
something. But apart from that he would be out on the piss and everything you know what I mean. So that now he’s the granddad, I mean my granddad probably did the same with him when he was a kid, it’s probably all he knows, but I don’t want to be like that with my kid. I’m with my kid everyday and that, but my dad…flippin ‘Eck, I was a kid...”

Being with his son daily was important to Simon, as he talked of reading to him everyday and “fighting at top level to give him everything he wants”, whereas Simon only ever saw his father sporadically and then he “usually passed out pissed on the chair”. This led Simon to talk of wanting to create a “different scenario for my little lad”, and whilst “being out for a bit on the piss after a fight and that, I still come home to my little lad every night”. While not always present in the family home Simon’s father became very well known within the surrounding area, and the local community apparently “respected the family name”.

Winlow (2001:23) describes how being a “local celebrity would meet the desires of most ‘hard’ men”, and I would argue that Simon’s father fits the bill. Indeed, the cultural importance of a family name is exceptionally strong amongst working class males (ibid), and in this respect, Simon’s family name became synonymous with boxing and also violence when his father was employed as a local pub landlord. Simon argued that: “not every family could run a boozer on a rough estate”, and felt that it was during this time that his father was at his most violent and unpredictable:

“Obviously because he was drinking a lot, my dad was at his worse when we had the pub. He would scream at us all the time, and swing for us. He had to be like that though, because if people thought they could take the piss, they would. People from the estate knew not to kick off but if we got some out-of-towners in then it would kick off”.
Simon described how his father would employ his mates to sit at the end of the bar and “back him up if it went off”; paying them in “free booze” and “lock ins”, which comprised of copious amounts of drinking outside of licensed hours. The pub became renowned as a “proper dodgy gangster pub”, and Simon’s dad assumed the mantle of local “hardman” with ease. The pub therefore became a site for Simon’s father to further establish his identity in the community, and he ruled over the estate by engendering a sense of fear and respect among its residents, as Simon would describe how people would generally be overly polite to his father or simply “cross the street when they saw him coming”. Winlow (2001) among others (See Feldman 1991; Katz 1988; Hobbs 1995) describes the ‘hardman’ as a man dedicated to violence, one with first hand knowledge of its historical and cultural potential, thus “marking him out from others whose daily strategies feature the avoidance of conflict” (Hobbs 1995:51). For Simon senior, daily conflict was a part of everyday life, as Simon describes how his dad “enjoyed the buzz of it, he loved to drink and ruck you know what I mean, that’s why being a journeyman suited him; he got paid for fighting!”.

8.3 Working Class Habitus and Boxing

Simon’s father was an absent violent man who capitalized on his aggressive style of behaviour to earn a living as a journeyman and also as a pub landlord. Violence was an integral theme in the childhood of both Simon and his father and has evidently played an essential part in forming their adult identities. The identities of Simon’s father and subsequently Simon junior are “situated around a cultural frame of tough, resourceful masculinity that transcends both economic epochs and generational responses to communal problems” (Hobbs 1995:29), as evidenced by Simon’s father’s immediate
violent response to any “kicking off in the boozer”, and Simon’s ability to enact violence and “switch it on when need be”.

Simon junior bore his father’s name with a sense of status and respect, and when on the council estate and amongst like-minded friends Simon would obtain kudos as the son of a boxing champion, often disclosing that he was “never one of those kids that got robbed walking down the street at nighttime”. However, when faced with a different set of peers, those who attended his new school and not necessarily familiar with Simon’s father’, Simon felt inadequate and judged for his father’s occupation, often finding himself reluctantly fighting to defend the honour of his family name which no longer resided in a habitus where it carried a sense of fear for those who heard it. Moreover, it began to represent difference and disrespect for Simon as the family name became equated with “roughness”. Being known as the kid whose dad boxed became to symbolize something less than admiration in Simon’s new school surroundings, and something that he felt made him “different”. “Getting done for things because my dad was a boxer” began to take shape within Simon’s narrative as he relayed anxieties about moving areas and changing schools:

“ I got pulled to one side one time and the teacher was saying…. one of my dad’s fights was on the news one time, you know on [local Granada news], it had kicked off down in *city* in the audience. It was massive and that was my dad’s fight, that. Obviously my misbehaving in school wasn’t particularly me, I think in certain situations the teachers just pinpointed me out all the time because of my name. I got pulled to one side one time and they were asking me: ‘what’s going on at home?’ But I think they were just different, you know the way I was brought up with my parents, and the way they were brought up with their parents. That school wasn’t me you know what I mean. It just wasn’t...All the way through that school, all the way through I wasn’t meant to be in that school”.
Simon constantly reiterates his difference in ‘that school’ and sees himself as incompatible based on his father’s occupation as a boxer and his own class positioning being at odds with the other children. As a result of the televised incident above, and a perceived sense of “difference” Simon began to seriously misbehave.

“I think because of the news bit, I think it just got all out of proportion from there, you know what I mean. Obviously my dad made the news with the boxing and all that because the fans have kicked off, all hometown lads. But from then on school wise, it was different.”

DJ: Different how?

Simon: “I wasn’t like proper proper naughty or anything but things went missing a lot. A teacher’s purse went once and straightaway I was blamed!

DJ: Right

Simon: Yeah and I was like ‘it wasn’t me sir’, ‘but you got seen walking down the corridor Simon’, and I was like ‘and?’ I got detention that day and had to go isolation or something, and I’m coming out of there and funnily enough a teacher’s purse got nicked…”

DJ: Right

Simon: Because of the news bit, I think it just got all out of proportion from there, you know what I mean…I knew older lads didn’t I as well, people who never did anything, just sat in the house, so I would chill with them instead of going school.”

DJ: How long did you do that for?
Simon: “My mum and dad still don’t know I did that, yeah they don’t know I did that. I did it for a bit, I did it enough so if letters came to the house my big sister would always sort it. We are good mates me and my sister you know.”

Simon’s sister obviously bore the same surname as their father, yet did not internalize the same sense of pressure or ambivalence that Simon did. Simon put this down to her leaving the new school after six months and not really having to deal with the aftermath of the incident making local news, yet it is arguable that Simon’s sister felt less pressure than Simon did when it came to “defending the family name”. When Simon did attend school he said he felt “disrespected” as teachers would refer to him by just his surname. Simon interpreted this as disrespectful as he saw it as a further reference to his dad’s reputation:

“I used to say things or…I used to say to teachers you can’t say that…. as they would say things like ‘oi *surname* this that and the other, and I used to say ‘I’ve got a first name!’ ‘Stop answering back’ they’d say, and I’d be like I’m not behind the door I know what you mean you cannot go around saying things like that, I know kids give lip, but they can’t be speaking to people like that, whereas I used to get done for it all. The other kids would be saying: ‘I cant believe you just said that’ and I’d say: ‘I’m not being cheeky or ought, I’m telling them to treat me with some respect’”.

Simon felt persecuted at school for his father’s violent legacy, and I would go so far as to say Simon like others in the sample, was hyper-vigilant to issues of disrespect. This is evidential in his narrative when he refers to “getting done for it all”, and how the teachers would refer to him by his surname only. In fact, Simon disclosed only “getting on” with one teacher; he was the sports teacher and therefore familiar with Simon’s father’s occupation:
“One teacher he was alright, he was a sports teacher, he was alright with us, but he wasn’t there long. I think because he knew my dad was a boxer and had seen my dad’s fights, he was alright with us”

This was the only connection Simon discussed having within the school, as sport was a common discussion point and a potential bonding element in the relationship. Simon’s mixed feelings about his father’s career becoming apparent as he felt the sport teacher admired his father’s occupation whereas the others were repelled by it. By developing a bond with the sports teacher Simon began to feel accepted in the school, however when the teacher left after a year Simon began to seriously truant. Because of this loss of attachment and allegations of stealing from other staff members Simon decided that he had had enough and never went back. Not attending school in the final year gave Simon plenty of time on his hands, and this is when he first started to box. Discouraged by his father in the beginning, Simon started to attend the local gym with his older friends. Having been told boxing is “hard” by his dad Simon inevitably threw himself into the sport wholeheartedly:

“It’s probably one of them; when your dad says no, you say yes. If he had of said ‘yeah go do it’, I probably would have said ‘no I’m not doing it’. It wasn’t the fact that somebody says ‘don’t do it’, I just liked it, I enjoyed it, you know feeling good about myself after the gym and that. It was when I am sparring with kids who have already had ten fights and I’m getting the better of them that I thought I should be doing this”.

“Feeling good” about himself was the most important thing to Simon at that time, and ironically, he chose the sport that defined his father and subsequently labeled him as the “rough kid”. Nevertheless, the determination shown by Simon in the first year of boxing

---

16 After the interview had finished and the voice recorder was switched off, Simon admitted to stealing the teacher’s purse with his friend.
gained him a place on the England team, and he described this event as “proof that I was capable of something, proof that I was worthy”. Simon went on to become a national champion, and when asked about any regrets to do with truanting from school Simon said he did not care, and could not do “anything other than boxing because I got fuck all else going for me”. This led me to believe that Simon was not as confident outside of the ring as he was in it, and coupled with his ability to disparage himself academically I would suggest that Simon invested in boxing to overcome his feelings of both vulnerability and low self-esteem. Additionally, I would argue that boxing was familiar territory to Simon, and as much as he shied away from the sport originally, having seen his dad “broken” on numerous occasions, the habitus of home life and rejection from new school peers directed Simon into an occupation that sat comfortably within a social world and environment where violence was a ‘cultural expectation’ (Wolfgang 1959). This cultural expectation therefore making Simon as famous at boxing as his dad was at being the local ‘hardman’.

Truanting from school and hanging out with the older lads, allowed for Simon to hone his boxing skills in the local gym, and also reinforced his status as the local hardman’s son, therefore creating a further distance between the middle class children due to sit their exams and Simon’s sense of self-esteem regarding these. The boxing gym became Simon’s “sanctuary”, which is a common narrative among young men who struggle at school or in environments where they do not necessarily feel safe. Accordingly, the gym often becomes an “island of stability and order” (Wacquant 2004:31) when their lives become complicated or disjointed.

The dedicatory approach to the gym as a result of the routine and order it provides, detains and incapacitates young men, and in Simon’s case it stopped him “from drinking on the streets with his mates and getting into bother”. However, the habitus and masculine
discourses pervading the gym environment are not that dissimilar from the environment that young men say they wish to escape, and for Simon, while no longer stealing from peers and teachers, disclosed that he would not be afraid to “call upon his dad and his mates” if he ever needed to. As Anderson (1999:94) observed in his study: “violence was not always used, but always a possibility”. Indeed, Simon understood that “violence possesses a multiplicity of meanings within working class cultures that elevate its importance in everyday life” (Hobbs et al 2003: 223) as a result of growing up with a father like senior, and therefore was complicit in these “traditional images of masculinity and violence that are played out from within networks based upon the family” (Hobbs 1995:108). Simon was not afraid to harness the cultural environment and violent inheritance that defined him and his father as it assisted in not only allowing Simon to “call upon the firm”, but further facilitated the transformation of cultural capital into pugilistic economic capital (Bourdieu 1977:183) in the form of boxing as a career.

8.4 Discussion

Simon was a vulnerable and likeable character. We spent hours talking about his life both formally and informally, and when he had the reassurances that his story would remain anonymous, he relaxed and opened up. His relationship with his father was at the root of Simon’s vulnerabilities and identity, and he was often referred to as ‘*name* junior’ in the gym as most of the other members “remembered his dad’s heydays”. Arguably, Simon would rather forget his dad’s heydays as these were the times when his father was at his most absent and abusive, evidenced by his memories of seeing his father with ‘black eyes’ and being told to get out of the house, which for a small child I can imagine was very unsettling. Due to his father’s reputation and subsequent news reports berating the
fighting amongst his father’s supporters, Simon was unable to escape the shadow of his father’s name and reputation as local ‘hardman’. While this worked for Simon on one level- protecting him within a violent milieu that saw young men being robbed- it further worked against him when he had to change areas and school.

Citing differences due to wealth and family upbringing Simon felt different in his new peer group, even resorting to stealing to accrue status within an environment that he perceived as wealthier than him; particularly those designer labels and cultural artifacts that young people aspire to own. Paul Willis (1977:39) in his classic study Learning to Labour states that “shortage of cash becomes the single biggest pressure” in young men’s lives, as it provides evidence of their ability to ‘make it in the real world’, proving their ‘essential nature’ as ‘males’; a practice that reproduces a specific type of white working-class masculinity. Struggling academically was also something Simon discussed as he talked of other children’s parents being different and encouraging, whereas he felt his parents took no interest in his school record. It is not uncommon amongst working class boys to view academic achievement as emasculating (ibid), and I would argue that Simon felt more comfortable adopting a traditional white working-class mentality that places onus on manual not mental labour (ibid).

I would further argue that Simon adopted a more manual occupation such as boxing, not only because of structural determinations but also due to low self-esteem surrounding his intellect and academic abilities, as Simon constantly referred to himself as ‘not academic’, even calling himself ‘thick’ on numerous occasions. Indeed, the internalisation of the guiding habitus facilitated a withdrawal into an informal world of boxing and truancy for Simon, as he developed a “differentiation from authority” and rejected the mental labour of qualifications for more manual masculine occupations commonly favoured among Willis’s “lads” (1977:65). Furthermore, the impetus to box was also an additional
mechanism by which Simon could manage both the stigma accruing to him via his father’s reputation, and the attendant vulnerability he felt in his younger home life.

Until Simon discovered boxing for himself he believed there was ‘fuck all else’ going for him, and in this case it would be easy to attribute his decision to box as simply a way to gain status. Yet Simon’s decision to box was more about feeling good to militate against feelings of low self worth, while being subject to social determinants that dictated that masculine manual pursuits were appropriate for working class lads like him. As Willis (1977:174) states “structures which have now become sources of meaning, definition and identity provide the framework and basis for decisions and choices in life”. This view of cultural forms and reproduction according to Willis is part of a necessary dialectic of reproduction that inevitably condemns a good proportion of working class kids to a future of manual work, and in Simon’s case it would certainly ring true.

Alongside feelings of low self-esteem came a change of school, as Simon’s networks of support within his friends became uprooted as his father sought to better his family’s lifestyle with a change of area. This is evidenced by Simon absconding from his new home and cycling back to the council estate where he felt more accepted and supported for his father’s occupation than judged and shamed for it. In his new school fighting and stealing became a way for Simon to stake a claim when he felt inadequate, particularly when older boys would approach him asking him if he thought he was “hard” like his dad. Simon was quick to lay blame at the feet of other boys, yet I sensed that Simon was equally as responsible for the violent altercations as part of a systematic defense mechanism designed to conceal feelings of inadequacy and also uphold the “family name”. Moreover, this was supported by the ancillary conversations I had with Simon when he would state that: “attack is the best form of defense”.

218
Aggression and fighting are part of ‘accomplishing masculinity’ for some young men (Messerschmidt 1997), and I would argue that Simon’s aggressive responses were most certainly a way to maintain his masculinity, and part of a systematic defense of vulnerability and inadequacy as a result of his own academic ability and father’s occupation. For Simon, vulnerabilities presented themselves in the form of intellectual ability and wealth, which became exacerbated with a change of school. Simon’s ‘difference’ as a result of the latter became heightened, as he perceived himself as vulnerable to attack from both pupils and teachers. “Not knowing where I was coming from” evidenced his sense of loneliness, as he found himself without friends and subject to hostile taunts from other children as opposed to them “respecting the family name”.

The appeal of boxing therefore, facilitated the maintenance of the family name as “hard”, while also allowing Simon to achieve monetary success when he felt there was “nothing else” he could do. Employing the only resources available to him Simon felt that boxing was a way to prove he was ‘good at something’, prove he was ‘worthy’. The fact that Simon referred to boxing as ‘changing everything’ is a direct reference to how he invested in the sport for reasons other than just enjoying it, and “beating men who had already had ten fights” allowed Simon to feel a sense of achievement when he felt he lacked in other areas.

By participating in boxing Simon was also able to develop a relationship with his father, as he talked of ‘getting out all his dad’s old tapes’ and ‘asking him loads of questions’. Simon seemed to now understood where his dad was ‘coming from’ as he was the one who found himself asking his own son to be quiet in the house. Nevertheless, he was keen to distinguish himself from his father’s drinking and violence, but made excuses for it under a misguided genetic theory of paternal lineage; believing that this was the key facet
that has led him to perform at a level his dad could not; evidenced by his earlier statements surrounding his father’s dinking and lack of success.

Simon’s formative social environment and experiences of violence allowed him to draw upon cultural resources where necessary, and it is arguable that recruits to the profession of boxing carry forth forms of cultural capital that reflect their socialization as contemporary working-class men, acutely conscious of their physicality and drawing on violence and its negotiation in their everyday social world (Hobbs 1995; Hobbs et al 2003; Winlow 2001).

Violence was an integral part of both Simon and his father’s life, with physical resilience and competence in relation to male-on-male violence (See Connell 1995) being considered a crucial concern and ideal within working-class masculinities (see also Willis 1977). According to Winlow (2001) and Jones (2000), class is a key tool in understanding both the social and cultural determinants of violence and its meanings to participants, therefore, for working class males such as Simon and his father violence is often an aspect of their cultural environment and inheritance. So much so, that it has a major influence upon their social and cultural understanding of everyday life (Hobbs 1995; Winlow 2001).

Indeed, for men like Simon, violence served as a resource to be called upon at anytime, his “dad’s firm” just being a “phone call away”. Granted, while Simon did not necessarily engage in day-to-day violence as his dad had done in his ‘heyday’, his gendered and class-specific cultural socialization led to a heightened sense of violence that allowed for him to understand the complex interactive preludes and precursors of violent behaviour (Winlow 2001). This in turn, assisted Simon in choosing the sport of boxing, as the remnants of industrial employment cultures, once stripped of their potential for communal action in both the workplace and workplace dependent neighbourhoods has provided an ideal pool
of apprentices to the ranks of occupations such as boxing and organized crime (Hobbs 1995). Further, as we have seen in this case study, boxing becomes the ideal vehicle for men like Simon and indeed his father, to transform the cultural capital of working class violence into economic capital in the form of belts and titles. And for Simon in particular, it provided the perfect route into meaningful employment, because without boxing, Simon really did think he had “fuck all else” going for him.
9. The Case of Eric: Violence, Boxing and the Damaged Emasculated Body

9.1 Introduction

In this case study I will further discuss masculine discourses in relation to the body. I will demonstrate how Eric also embodies his masculinity through the medium of sport, thus accomplishing masculine ideals that favour domination, violence, endurance and winning. Additionally, I will argue that the accomplishment of these ideals can and does lead to injury and anxiety for Eric, as I consider how injuries and violence are thought of as commonplace in the gym environment and how these are negated through fear of emasculation.

I will argue these points by employing the case of Eric, illustrating his career in the sport of boxing and how this impacted on his life-course and relationships both in and outside of the gym. Indeed, I begin with Eric as a small child, discussing his first experience of injury and violence, and subsequently, his first experiences with boxing. I follow this with his narrative of winning the Light Middleweight British title, and therefore, finish with his present story as a boxing coach ten years after relinquishing his belt. Moreover, throughout the case study, I present Eric’s subsequent understanding of violence and why boxing was initially appealing for him, particularly as this has resulted in him participating in the sport for over 30 years.

9.2 Eric’s story

Eric’s was the first face I saw when I entered the gym to begin my research. And I came to realise over the six months that I spent in the boxing gym, that Eric was the gym. He
spent everyday there, training the professionals, encouraging the amateurs, and scouting for further talent. At 51 years old Eric looked good, his sculpted torso, and ability to do hundreds of sit-ups was enviable, as the younger professionals and amateurs remarked. Boxing gyms have implicit hierarchies, and the trainer’s past victories and titles place them at the top. Their photographs adorn the walls, and belts and trophies are usually on display for all to see. Much of the discussion centres on the trainer’s heyday, and this serves to encourage the dreams and aspirations of the younger men in the gym. Indeed, not dissimilar to Wacquant’s (2004: 35) observations in a boxing gym when he wrote: ‘In both layout and adornment, the gym constitutes something of a temple of the pugilistic cult by the presence on its walls of the major fighters, past and present, to whom the budding boxers from ghetto gyms devote a selective but tenacious adoration.’

Exalted to heroic status as an ex-champion, Eric was the mentor, the sage, and the executioner to the young men who so desperately wanted to make it to the top of the boxing pyramid. It is with this status that he commanded the gym; whether it was the choice of music to be played as the pugs rhythmically hit the bags, or the berating of members if they owed any money for unpaid training. Eric cracked the jokes, commanded the attention, and was fundamentally the eyes and ears of the boxing gym. Indeed, everything related to the gym - from its lack of finances, to the men’s salacious gossip - was passed through Eric, sometimes in pursuit of his wisdom, other times simply just to spread rumours.

Although boxing gyms are competitive environments, and Messner (1992) would argue that men’s friendships are impoverished by competition and aggression, I would argue that there is a specific cohesion within the gym. The men who attend are generally quite friendly with one another, and the trainer is most certainly the lynchpin. However, Messner (1992) argues that the intimacy created within masculine sports is a ‘covert
intimacy’, an intimacy that is characterised by doing together, rather than mutual talk about their inner lives. Indeed, the intimacy is created by talk of external facts: football, community relations, and diets, therefore inner lives are rarely discussed, unless it is at the expense of a boxer’s wife or girlfriend.

Messner’s (1992:232) argument is therefore convincing when he suggests that ‘male friendships fit into an overall system of power’, particularly as the trainer is the one who either makes or breaks friendships and careers. Accordingly, men flock to the trainer with almost cultish abandon, further supporting the work of Wacquant (1995b: 81) when he writes: ‘Trainers often become surrogate fathers to their understudies, devoting inordinate amounts of time and energy to resolving love affairs, financial difficulties, and other private quandaries.’ Most certainly, the trainer is the pivotal member in the gym, as he does not just teach the young boxer’s how to punch, he also mentors them, ‘fathers’ them, and repairs their physical capital with icepacks, plasters, and soothing encouragement.

9.3 The Beginning of a Boxer: Eric’s Trajectory

When I asked Eric to tell me the story of how he became a trainer, he took me back to his birth. Born in 1961 to Jamaican parents, the first thing Eric disclosed was that his parents thought he was not going to survive. Born with ‘under-developed lungs’ and acute asthma, Eric was given the last rites less than 24 hours after his birth. Surviving the night, and pulling through, Eric grew into a young boy believing that he was ‘a very sickly child’, and therefore not capable of doing much. Under medical care throughout his childhood, Eric was instructed to participate in sport as a way of benefiting him\(^\text{17}\), and it

\(^\text{17}\) Whether the benefit was to Eric medically, in terms of his asthma, or whether it was psychological in terms of him combating his overarching belief in being a ‘sickly child’ remains to be asked.
was through the doctor’s advice that Eric began his long career in sport. School sports became a starting point for Eric, and it was through the 1500 metres that Eric demonstrated his ‘determination to win’.

‘Never in class, and always kicked out for messing around,’ Eric said he left school with only a few qualifications, mainly in metalwork and other technical craft skills. Having left school, and devoid of the structure and daily routine it provided, Eric began to create his own excitement. Among his group of friends Eric was the quieter one, so when his friend showed up in a stolen car he ‘didn’t know what to do, I suppose’. Succumbing to the influence of friends and worried regarding their opinions of him if he did not, Eric went along for the ride. It was only after the police caught him and he got a ‘good leathering from my dad’ that Eric realised he needed a new distraction. With encouragement from his mother, a few qualifications, and a regret for not trying harder at school, Eric left the surrounding area and applied for an apprenticeship in the north of England. Then during this time in 1977, he first walked through the doors of a boxing gym.

Still presenting with ‘severe breathing difficulties’ Eric struggled to keep up with the other pugilists in the gym and the stronger boxers would leave him wheezing by the side of the road as he did his best to fit into a new city and a new sport. With his aforementioned ‘determination to win’, Eric was not swayed, he carried on running and showing up to the gym every week. However, being away from his childhood sweetheart, who Eric had married upon leaving school proved too difficult, so he returned back to his original neighbourhood to start a family and settle down. With an apprenticeship in welding under his belt, and a taste for boxing, Eric signed up to the gym that in the future he would come to jointly own with Marcus.
Eric continued to box on an amateur level throughout the late 1970s and started a family with his long-term partner. Engineering during the day and attending the gym in his spare time, Eric developed a ‘wicked punch’ and won his first 11 fights as an amateur by knockout, and it is with this punch and reputation that Eric was offered the opportunity to turn professional. Nonetheless, not everyone was as pleased as Eric regarding his choice to turn professional, as it meant a full-time career in the sport, with little chance of ever ‘making it big’. Eric’s mother who had always been Eric’s ‘rock’ refused to attend any of his fights as ‘she thought it was crazy and barbaric and completely unnecessary’, as she never understood the concept of ‘men just pounding each other in the head’. However, Eric was determined to disregard his mother’s opinion of boxing, and decided: ‘To box to the best of my ability, train hard and not fool around.’ Here began Eric’s 30 years career in boxing.

9.4 Physical Capital and the Boxer’s Means of Production

To be successful at professional level, a boxer must thoroughly commit and place himself under the aegis of the gym in a monastic fashion. Known to sleep in the gym, Eric, amongst others, would lock themselves in overnight to be able to train when the other men would be at home with their families. This dedication to the sport is, according to Eric, is what ‘separates the winners from the losers’.

Arguably, Eric’s dedication was self-destructive. Having started his professional career and succeeding in winning his first few fights, Eric began to increase his training regime to the point where it would affect his asthma. Finding himself unable to sustain the demands of the ring, Eric would secretly use his inhaler between rounds and ‘to this day nobody knew I was suffering, nobody ever said anything’. Indeed, this idea of suffering
became a common theme within Eric’s narrative, as he navigated his way through a tumultuous boxing career that has now left him permanently scarred.

Boxing is a body-centred sacrificial universe, and when Joyce Carol Oates (1987:5) said, ‘Like a dancer, a boxer “is” his body, and totally identified with it’, she could not have been more perceptive. Boxer’s bodies are obsessive organisms, templates and instrument of their lives, their whole existence pivots around the sculpting, moulding, and manipulation of the body. Pierre Bourdieu (1986:241) referred to this concept as ‘accumulated labour’ the appropriation of social energy in the form of reified or living labour, and from Bourdieu I borrow the term ‘physical capital’.

Much like fixed capital, physical capital has inherent structural limitations, including a life expectancy, and as the recently deceased Emmanuel Steward from the world famous Kronk Gym in Detroit put it: ‘The body is like an automobile, it’s got so many miles in it and that’s it’ (in Halpern 1988:278). Boxers like Eric are entrepreneurs in physical capital; they transform the value of their bodily investment into social capital in the form of recognition, titles and financial rewards. Moreover, the body becomes the boxer’s means of production, the somatic entity that transforms itself into monetary value through constant appropriation. For boxers like Eric however, this sense of dependency on their body and its inherent temporality can have catastrophic effects, particularly when no longer meeting the demands of a sport that places emphasis on physical capital. Wacquant (1989) identified that boxers carefully manage the investment of their physical assets over time, yet for Eric, being eager to please and worried about ‘keeping-up’ regarding his ‘breathing difficulties’ this proved not to be the case.

It is not just for the obvious fiscal rewards that boxers invest so heavily in the sport. By using Eric’s case among others, I will argue that this investment in physical capital and
social capital is not only imbued with a sense of recognition at a structural level, but it further operates at a deeper psychic level for some men who partake. In short, boxing becomes a very personal activity for some of these men like Eric, so much so, that when they lose or become too injured to box, feelings of unworthiness or loss creep into their psychic make-up.

To unpick the reasons why Eric physically scarred himself for the sport, and unearth the psychic investment that he had resting in boxing, we must return to his childhood and the concept of being a ‘sickly child’ as this was something that Eric would return to time and time again in his narrative. There was a sense of ambivalence with Eric as in one moment he identified greatly with sickness, arguably almost enjoyed it, yet at other times he regularly worried about it. The fact of being given the last rites at birth was something that stuck with Eric, and it was with this ‘fighting spirit’ that he found himself in a situation that went against his better judgement regarding his physical well-being:

I remember going into my first pro-fight, and I wasn’t very happy as I had injured my hand in sparring a few days before I was due to have my pro-debut. I went to the doctors and they told me something had gone and maybe it wasn’t such a good idea that I fight, and should rest it until it healed. I kept on training, and the hand was still hurting-every time I threw a punch. The pain! I didn’t really want to fight this guy because of my hand, but because of all the ‘fuss’ that everybody had made, arranging the fight-saying I would beat him, I went against my better judgement and fought.

This judgement call may have left Eric with a trophy but it also caused him a scaphoid fracture so terrible that a surgeon told Eric that he would never box again. When I asked Eric how he felt about the latter he said ‘had no regrets’, and to my surprise he told me how he continued boxing as soon as the plaster cast was off his right hand. Indeed, using
the left hand as a substitute Eric was back in the gym within two months, continuing to box against the advice of his own surgeon and better judgement. Thus, Eric’s investment in boxing, as well as being a way to acquire physical capital, also grew to self-destructive levels as he often over-rode his own sense of personal safety; a common theme among pro-sportsmen (Connell 1985; Sabo 1986). To attempt to understand why this was the case, we must delve deeper into Eric’s story.

9.5 Think You’re a Big Man Do You? Eric’s Relationship with his Father and the Appeal of the Gym

Eric was always close to his mother, he was named after her deceased brother who died in childbirth, and this was something Eric felt he had to live up to. Eric was one of six children and it was ‘from birth that my dad took an instant dislike to me, and that never subsided until I became a “big man” and I was British champion’. Indeed, Eric felt his father’s dislike for him throughout his life, and it was only through succeeding at boxing that his dad started behaving differently towards him. Nonetheless, according to Eric, ‘It was too late, as he had already made me feel that way towards him, that no matter what he did or said I was never going to change the way I felt.’ What led Eric to this conclusion lies at the heart of his investment in boxing, and it was not until one Saturday morning while watching football on the television that he realised just how much his father disliked him:

*I remember this particular day, I must have been around 13 or 14 and was watching Grandstand on T.V. I was intently watching as I loved sport at the time, and my dad was saying something to me whilst drinking this can of lager. You’ve probably done it yourself where you are watching something and not really paying attention to what they’re saying*
and all I remember is that can of beer hitting me on the side of the head and I was on the floor shaking and thinking, ‘What’s all this about?’

It transpired that Eric’s father tried to strangle him that day, all the while screaming at his son: ‘You think you’re a big man do you? Then fight with me.’ It was only through the intervention of Eric’s mother that he said he escaped.

Eric: *He jumped on me and was choking me, I thought that was it, I thought it was over. My mum came downstairs and dragged him off in the nick of time.*

DJ: *Otherwise he would have killed you?*

Eric: *Oh absolutely. He has tried to kill me a few times in anger.*

This was revealed to me in the fourth interview I did with Eric, and it explained a lot in terms of his process and investment in boxing. Previously I had thought that Eric boxed to a destructive level to prove something to himself and others about being a classed as a ‘sickly child’, but it further transpired in this particular interview that Eric also boxed to defend himself against his father’s murderous rages, as he expressed how he was ‘terrified of his father’ until he ‘knew how to land a good one and see a man sleep’.

Indeed, Eric made sense of his father’s violence through the idea of him being a ‘sickly child’. In Eric’s mind it justified his father’s behaviour by saying that not only was it cultural, but that his own sickness as a child diverted his mother’s attention from his father, and this resulted in his father harbouring a ‘jealous hatred’ for him. I expressed that this must have been extremely difficult for Eric and he agreed, yet, the inherent lack of care for his own body, found him justifying his father’s behaviour with a strange ambivalence:
It was hard, but if you don’t know any difference you just take it, but growing up was miserable, he was very strict and ruled the house with the belt.

Eric believed he was the only one to suffer the wrath of his father. He was convinced that his childhood illness was the source of disdain, and yet, throughout the long conversations I had with Eric, it transpired that his father also beat and hospitalised his younger brother, threatened Eric’s mother, and sexually abused his sisters. It was a harrowing tale of familial abuse. It was only once Eric had left school and began his apprenticeship away from the family home that he discovered boxing, and when he returned back to the neighbourhood he confronted his father safe in the knowledge that he could defend himself:

I remember one time when I came home to visit my mum, and I was lying on my bed with my brothers. We could hear the banging of my dad coming up the stairs, and we glanced around real quick to make sure everything was tidy as he was a bit military. He comes into the bedroom and he has an angry face, it was obvious he was looking for someone to pick on. He comes over to me and starts hitting me in the chest, I’m trying to keep my cool and I can see my brothers aren’t going to do anything. There is only so much I can take of this as he is hurting me, and I am not taking this anymore, I jump up and scream, ‘Right this is the last time you put your fucking hands on me, come on!’

From this excerpt we can glean that Eric had found the strength to retaliate, his experience of boxing had contributed towards a new line of defence. It had provided him with the confidence to stand-up to his father, become a ‘big man’. Accordingly, Eric associated this idea of being a ‘big man’ as being willing to fight, and also as a way to gain some form of acceptance from his violent father. Yet, underneath all that bravado Eric felt ‘afraid’, his father ‘scared him shitless’. However, Eric was determined to never let ‘him
put his hands on me again’ and standing up to him that day ‘changed my life surrounding him’. Indeed, Eric disclosed that this was the last time his father attacked him, whether that was attributable to the retaliation, or simply because Eric moved out of the family home remains to be seen, yet somehow, the display of violence that Eric showed to his father became a turning point in Eric’s life.

Eric further disclosed that the only time his father showed any acknowledgment that Eric was his son, was when his photograph was in the local newspaper, having won the British title the night before in front of a packed audience. Only then did Eric’s father proclaim any love or care for his son:

*Well when I became champion he was proud innit. He would say: ‘This is my big boxing son, my son be a boxer man.’*

Now that Eric had secured the British title and therefore demonstrated his ‘toughness’, his father became intent on showing the community just how tough his son was, however for Eric, this recognition was ‘too little, too late’:

*My father would try and parade me up and down the street. I would think: ‘I’m not under any illusion here, I’m not letting it go, I know why all of a sudden you like me, it’s because I make you look good!’*

At this point, and in receipt of the British title, Eric had proved all that was necessary to his peers in terms of his boxing prowess, yet this deep-seated hatred for his father never subsided, as Eric had no qualms in stating that he ‘hates him to this day’, and is ‘glad he’s dead’. Boxing therefore came to be the only facet of Eric that his father accepted, whereby his demonstration of ‘toughness’ through acts of violence won his father’s respect. However, boxing, while providing a medium to obtain masculine honour and
respect, while also earning a living, did not come without its own pitfalls for Eric, as he struggled to reach the pinnacle of his career and father’s acknowledgement. The bodily sacrifice and psychological problems this caused Eric throughout his journey produced their own set of problems, as he found himself struggling not only for acceptance in the family home, but also in the local professional boxing fraternity.

9.6 The Boxing Bulimic: Eric’s Bodily Destruction for a Sense of Acceptance

In the current gym, there was a collection of fighters that all began their professional careers at the same time, and Eric said he felt ‘part of something big’. He felt like he ‘fitted in’. Post injury and with extensive surgery to his right hand, Eric began to box professionally again, developing his left hand to the point that ‘it became my signature punch, and left many a man sleeping on the canvas’. However, underneath this bravado was an insecurity that would haunt Eric, as he found himself struggling to meet the expectations of his trainer, and keep up with the physical demands of a professional career. For Eric, this sense of ‘fitting in’ and acceptance became a huge investment for him.

Turner (1984: 112) writes: ‘Successful images require successful bodies, which have been trained, disciplined, and orchestrated to enhance our personal value.’ Further, Bartky (1988:77) believes disciplinary practices are representational means for establishing a ‘structure of the self’, and a sense of self as distinct and skilled is critical to the establishment of a secure and stable identity. For men like Eric, it is easy to see and hear in his words how the manipulation and appropriation of his corporeality became his personal value and how his sense of embodiment had a destructive outlook that took self-harm, pain and endurance as a focal point.
I remember fighting that kid on the wall up there, on that photograph above you, that was a big night, I was tipped to win. And would you believe it? I messed my weight up\(^{18}\). My weight wasn’t good. I was messing around eating and in the end I had to make myself sick! A lot of people don’t know that, you’re the first person I’ve told that I did that.

Almost with a sense of shame, Eric seemed to be embarrassed that he resorted to self-induced vomiting to lose weight, and when I asked him why he went to such lengths he returned back to the idea of ‘not wanting to mess up, not wanting to let people down’, but I also sensed he did not want to lose the money either. This bodily destruction seemed like a common theme within some of Eric’s decisions based on physical health, and it seemed that he would rather self-harm and abuse his body, than cope with a sense of failure or loss of expectation placed upon him by his peers and trainer. Wiley (1989: 227) calls boxing: ‘Assault and battery with deadly weapons called the fists of man’, and this assault can leave irreversible damage on one’s own body and that of competitors. Men like Eric seem to disregard this idea, putting their bodies through damaging practices such as bulimia and self-harm, indeed, Eric was willing to sacrifice his physical health for the sake of acceptance and occupational success. However, this wasn’t just about occupational success; there was a deeper level of investment based around Eric’s sense of identity and personal value that led him to this bodily abuse. And I would argue that this was a destructive method whereby Eric was able to accomplish his masculinity and gain acceptance from others for doing so.

Wacquant (1995a) claims that boxers come to conceive of physical corrosion as part of the pugilistic order of things, an acceptable price to pay, and one that they believe they

\(^{18}\) Weight is a contentious issue within any professional boxing gym, ‘making weight’ is imperative to fighting in your category-heavyweight, lightweight etc. Yet some practices such as ‘drying out’ to lose weight are seen as very unhealthy; starving your body of water for 24 hours is common, as is extensive periods in saunas to ‘dry out’ before weighing in for competition.
can significantly minimise through hard training. This would certainly form part of the argument in the case of Eric, as being in the company of men with similar dispositions allowed for the flourishing of a culture that thrives on endurance and bodily pain. Furthermore, Goffman (1959: 85-102) states that the ‘government of the body is a collective enterprise requiring team-work’, and for Eric, the appropriation of his body was not only his responsibility, but also the responsibility of his peers and trainers. Moreover, it was with this expectation and need for acceptance that he found himself sacrificing his health for the good of the gym. Indeed, the surgery on his fractured scaphoid was still apparent. Eric said: ‘It never got better, I just learnt to cope with it’ as he navigated his way through his professional career. Regardless, not everyone was sympathetic towards Eric’s injury, least of all his trainer:

*Sometimes my trainer could be quite harsh towards somebody with an injury, he was of the notion that ‘you’ll be alright get on with it’ that type of thing. He just didn’t have time for it. He would say: ‘Don’t be soft’, push me in that direction, he just wasn’t very sympathetic to people who had injuries.\'*

This was an interesting point in Eric’s narratives, and I felt this was the crux and justification for Eric’s bodily abuse. It became apparent within Eric’s story that the coach ‘was a winner who bred winning into you and he bred hard work and determination’, and that any weakness - be it injury or otherwise - would not be tolerated within his boxing gym. This became a bone of contention (literally) for Eric and ultimately the reason why he left this particular gym, as he found himself unable to cope with further abuse from a man who was also collectively referred to as ‘dad’.

*Eric: He used to call me horrible names.*

*D.J.: Such as?*
Eric: A wimp - all kinds of horrible things - saying that I didn’t want to fight, that I didn’t have any bottle. Because I had an injury he wasn’t very sympathetic towards it, and you can ask any of the lads and they will admit that he could be a bit horrible.

It seemed from Eric’s story that the escapism he found in boxing merely replicated the horror at home. Eric endured the abuse from his trainer as he had to endure the abuse from his father, and I found it interesting that he potentially craved acceptance from abusive men. Indeed, by investing in masculine discourses that demonstrate toughness and working through pain, Eric was able to obtain the acknowledgement he so desired, but this came with a price, and in Eric’s case it was his physical safety. I therefore posed the question to Eric whether or not he thought that his trainer had his best interests at heart? Eric felt that he did not, even going so far as to say that:

This is what people were saying, but I ignored it, I believed in him 100%, even though at the time he used to give you a hard time.

Regardless of this, Eric endured the abusive relationship with his trainer and continued to be successful under the chosen gym, however, during the preparation for the highly anticipated British championship Eric’s mother became seriously ill. Hospitalised due to a stroke, Eric’s mother started to rapidly deteriorate and Eric found himself juggling palliative care with pugilistic training. Two weeks before the big fight, Eric’s mother passed away and he said he ‘didn’t grieve in the way you normally would for a parent’.

I didn’t grieve. I didn’t have time. I had to take care of the funeral and train for the fight in two weeks so I had a lot going on. I was angry but I was keeping it in, I wasn’t letting it out because I was training for the fight, and I knew if I trained hard for this fight I could win! So I put away all my grieving problems and just got stuck in and trained hard.
It later transpired that Eric’s was to lose the ‘fight of his life’ this time. He put this down to weight loss attributable to stress and the toll of his mother’s death on his mental state. Indeed, the pressure to win cost him his health, both physically and mentally:

_The emotions that I was fighting with were, ‘I’ve got to do this. I’ve got to do this’. My mum has just passed away and this is the biggest fight of my life and I’ve got to win! My mum would have wanted me to win._

Ironically, his mother never wanted Eric to be a boxer, yet now after her death Eric constructs the idea that his mother would have wanted him to win. And I would argue that this construction was merely a justification for his deep-seated need to prove himself, and therefore be accepted in spite of the berating from his coach for having an injury. Moreover, if Eric could win the British title, then his entry into the coveted Boxing Hall of Fame would be guaranteed, and with that would follow acceptance from his father, trainer and peers. As it would be the case, Eric lost that night, and even though he went on to win the title in the end, by his own admittance, he believes now that he should have never stepped into the ring that first night.

_Eric: I was no longer thinking boxing strategies, I was thinking just knock him out! I had this red mist raging over me, and my trainer is driving me on to go out there and knock him out! I kept thinking whatever he tells me to do I’ve got to do it. The fear of me losing the most important fight of my life when I’ve just lost the most important person in my life made me reckless._

It was only after the loss of the fight that ‘the real problems started’ for Eric. He disclosed feeling ‘angry, hurt and an overwhelming sadness’, and that he found it hard to distinguish whether that was attributable to the loss of the fight or the loss of his mother:
I was devastated as you could imagine. I didn’t want to box again. I thought this is it. I’ve had enough. I got beat in the most important fight of my life. My mum has gone. And I remember being out on the rooftop and walking to the edge and looking over and thinking I’ve had enough.

What prevented Eric from suicide that day was the thought that his mother would have classed the attempt as ‘the easy way out’. And I found this to be of significance in Eric’s narrative, as it again demonstrated his external locus of evaluation when determining his sense of self-worth. It seemed for Eric that what people thought of him was more important than what he thought of himself. This external locus thus provided him with the justification to train instead of grieve, permanently injure himself to avoid ‘making a fuss’, and tolerate abuse from significant others in the form of fatherly figures. This was to change however, when Eric confronted his trainer just as he did his father previously. Post suicidal feelings, and the desire to ‘take another shot at the title’ Eric found himself the brunt of his trainer’s aggression for the last time:

Eric: Things started to change, and my trainer said something to me at the time that made me not want to be here anymore.

DJ: What did he say to you?

Eric: He said: ‘You could have been a good fighter, you could have been a great fighter, if you had more balls.’

DJ: Really?

Eric: He said: ‘I could have been a better fighter I had had more balls, a bit more bottle about me’, and I went home that night and I cried. I was devastated. It could have been anything else but the fact that he said I didn’t have ‘balls’, after everything I had been
The concept of ‘heart’ in a boxing gym is not necessarily one of a physical nature, to have ‘heart’ is to imbue a sense of physical toughness and courage, ‘an uncompromising sense of masculine honour, and an expressive stress on personal performance and style’ (Abrahams 1970). Thus, for Eric’s trainer to say that he ‘had no heart’ was received by Eric as a direct attack on his masculine honour, and in Eric’s words ‘it was an insult to me as a man’. ‘Balls’ in this sense of the word refers to a man’s testes, and the concept of having ‘balls’ is to represent a strong sense of masculine courage and virility. Indeed, for Eric’s trainer to use the term ‘had you had more balls’ signifies that he thought Eric was cowardly and feminine. To be perceived as having ‘no balls’, therefore, signifies that you possess feminine qualities and lack sexual potency, qualities that are associated with subordinate masculinity.

Connell (1995:54) writes: ‘The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained - for instance as a result of physical disability’, thus, Eric felt that his masculine gender came into to question as a result of his injury and loss of the British title. Indeed, this was enough of an insult for Eric to leave the gym and never return until his trainer died a few months later.

Moreover, not only was this an insult against Eric’s corporeal gender performance, it symbolised his place in the hierarchy of masculine order. Further, according to Connell (1995:54), the institutional organisation of sport embeds definitive social relations. Competition and hierarchy among men, and exclusion or domination of women, are social relations of gender that are both realised and symbolised in bodily performances, ‘the performance is symbolic and kinetic, social and bodily, at one and the same time, and
these aspects depend on each other’ (ibid). Accordingly, Eric felt disempowered on many levels by his trainer, not just on a somatic level, but also on a deeper cultural and class level.

9.7 The Boxer’s ‘Heart’ and the Controlling of a Monster - Eric and Violence

Outside the Ring

Having left the gym as a result of the trainer’s insults, Eric found himself ‘lost’ and ‘unsure of what to do with myself’. Resorting to labouring on a building site to ‘feed the family’, Eric started to reconstruct his sense of masculinity through physical labour, and a few months later, Eric got offered a chance to start boxing again under a different trainer. ‘Needing to fight,’ as ‘I had no fucking money and couldn’t turn it down,’ Eric entered the ring for the first time in the six months since his old trainer died. With a ‘different outlook’ and ‘feeling better about my mum and stuff’ Eric agreed to another fight for the British title. However, as he was ‘not fighting fit’, Eric became worried that he would ‘let people down’, and once again, dieting and training became Eric’s obsession. With little time to re-orientate himself with the world of professional fighting, Eric found himself having to lose four pounds in 24 hours to make the weight for the second title fight. Anxious at being overweight, Eric disclosed that he resorted back to his bulimic habits, and ‘knowing he had to do it’, he sat in a sauna overnight to ‘dry out’ and lose the extra pounds he needed to be able to step back into the ring:

I was due to get £600 for that fight and I was skint, I knew I had to do it. So I sat in the sauna all night sucking ice and making the body sweat. I lost 3 pounds that night but I was ill, seriously ill.
Again, this seemed like another example of abuse Eric inflicted upon himself to demonstrate a sense of masculine determination. The destruction that Eric was willing to subject his body to manifested itself in Eric’s psychic make-up as he reinvested in the sport of boxing, and re-entered the pugilistic world that he so desperately desired acceptance within. Interestingly, Eric’s phrasing in his description of making ‘the’ body sweat as opposed to making ‘my’ body sweat, chimes with White and Sweet’s (1955) work around pain and disembodiment. They reported that patients almost universally describe pain as ‘it’ as opposed to ‘I’, and that the painful body is often experienced as something foreign to the self. Leder (1990: 77) would go so far as to say: ‘To experience the painful body as merely an “it”, that which is separate from the essential self, yields some relief and re-establishes one’s integrity in the face of an overwhelming threat.’ And in the case of Eric this would certainly make sense.

Eric eventually won the British title he so desperately wanted, and his entry into the boxing elite was complete. With this experience, and almost 20 years in this social world, Eric retired from the sport as a contender, and turned his hand to coaching. Working within the gym that he left some years ago after the disagreement with his trainer, Eric found himself in the position that his deceased trainer had abused when Eric was a young boxer. Determined not to make the same mistakes, Eric sought young boxers wanting to turn professional, with a sense of instilling his learning and success into the next generation of pugilists.

Thus, I was interested in what part of Eric’s narrative was pertinent to him, and what elements of it he would be inculcating in the young boxers now under his tuition. Interestingly, it transpired that what was pertinent to Eric was the same issue that his previous trainer berated him for:
Eric: Trying to teach somebody a bit of heart, a bit of courage can sometimes be difficult. I remember a part of my career, I wouldn’t say I was lacking heart, it was just a little bit lacking aggression, the aggressive bit was lacking.

DJ: Is that essential for boxing?

Eric: I’m talking about that killer instinct, the ability to hurt somebody beyond all reason.

From the above excerpt it seemed that Eric associated ‘heart’ with ‘heartless’ a way to secure and confirm courage by demonstrating his aggression. I felt that Eric learnt his aggression as a result of wanting to fit into the boxing fraternity, as he disclosed that he had sessions with a sport psychologist to help him develop this ‘killer instinct’. Indeed, Eric felt that he had too much compassion within the ring, and this was an interesting point, particularly when he referred to himself as a ‘controlled monster’. This is reminiscent of the work of Jack Katz (1988:243) when he discusses the masculine metaphor of ‘heart’ as the ‘readiness to take action’, contrasting with that of the feminine image of ‘losing self-control’. For Eric, I would argue that this ‘controlled monster’ performance was a further way to secure his masculine identity as a result of being told he had ‘no balls’. More importantly, I wanted to find out whether or not this ‘controlled monster’ reared its ugly head when outside the ring:

One time I nearly knocked somebody out, but he was taunting me and being a cheeky bastard. It was at a fight where I was in the audience, and I heard him say to his mate ‘there’s Eric he’s not that good’.

According to Eric, the man in question insinuated that Eric was not worthy of his British title, and inferred that his career would be soon over as he ‘had too many sick days’. This enraged Eric, as it was reminiscent of his trainer’s berating comments, and indicative of
Eric’s lack of self-belief and subsequent disembodiment. Indeed, Eric had invested so much of his identity into the winning of a British title, that any threat to this achievement was immediately seen as a threat to his identity.

As a result, Eric justified his aggression outside of the ring in defence of his fragile newfound identity (Matza 1964), just as he had neutralised his father’s aggression in the past. Zimmerman (1998:90) argues that identities are ‘transportable’, and these identities are enacted when relevant to a situation. For Eric, as with many of the men in this sample, it transpired that issues of identity and disrespect were classified as the most important pre-cursor to violence, and for men like Eric with low self-esteem, issues of disrespect became heightened and therefore defended against at any cost.

9.8 The Logic of Violence: Transposable Attitudes from Ring to Street

Identities became a focal point in boxers’ narratives, as I listened to stories of violence both and outside of the ring. Spending significant amounts of time in the boxing gym, allowed me a glimpse into not only boxers’ professional lives, but also their personal lives. In between rounds, and over lunch, the men would discuss football or their own families, and with that, Eric frequently discussed his son. Relaying tales of how Eric Junior ‘couldn’t control his temper’, and ‘he doesn’t know where he gets it from’, Eric would discuss with me how he worried for his son and the influence of local gangs in the area. I tentatively asked Eric whether he thought he was anyway influential in Eric junior’s bad temper:

DJ: Do you think it might have anything to do with you being a boxer?
Eric: I don’t know where he gets it from, he has some aggression issues, but I can only think that he is of the age now were I can’t go get the belt and whack him no more.

DJ: Really?

Eric: Yeah, I give them a slap before they say anything, because I know that if I don’t threaten them with violence and just be the nice guy with all talking, then they are not going to respect me and tell me the truth.

It transpired from Eric’s narrative that he also ‘ruled the house with a belt’, and while he argued over the course of our many interactions that he ‘wasn’t a strict parent’ like his father was, it did become apparent that he had inherited some of his traits. Thus, it seemed from Eric’s narrative, that he also viewed violence as a solution to a problem; particularly ones that may have involved a confrontation with those who Eric felt had been disrespectful towards him. Indeed, for Eric, it seemed that the past humiliations of his father’s murderous rages were still bubbling under the surface, leading him to re-enact the same methods as his father to ensure that his children respected him and always told him the truth. Hall (1997); Winlow (2001); Hobbs et al (2003); Winlow & Hall (2009) argue that men who carry with them ingrained visceral dispositions towards violence, that are arguable products of socialisation in climates of aggression, domination and insecurity, come to value violence and its rehearsal at the centre of their own self-identity, and this would certainly hold some truth for Eric.

Moreover, being defensive in nature, the core logic of respect can act as a justification for men to react impulsively in their defence of it, and respond aggressively to what they perceive as a threat. Thus, revisiting the truth of an event becomes a crucial process in grasping the essence of the now, and according to Winlow & Hall (2009) individual’s
subjective memories of past humiliations often means violent men address unfolding social interaction as a means of taking control.

Accordingly, this allows for men to rewrite the past and emancipate themselves from previous failures, therefore maintaining and ensuring respect and the identity that goes with it. In this case therefore, Eric’s violence against his own children and the retaliatory messages he transmitted in the gym to his younger professionals allowed for him to rewrite the past and take control. Furthermore, the masculine discourses that Eric became complicit in, now dominated his overall thinking, as he not only embraced the culture of the gym as a way to distance himself from the emasculating concept of once being a ‘sickly child’ and also ‘not the toughest of kids’, but also as a way to craft a new identity as someone who ‘doesn’t take any shit from no-one no more’.

9.9 Discussion

From the case study presented, I argue that Eric suffered an abusive childhood that haunts him to this day. Seeking out boxing when freed from the abusive environment of the family home, Eric saw an opportunity to invest in not only his social capital (when training for an apprenticeship in welding), but also his physical capital to help ward off feelings of vulnerability and defend against future attacks. Further, seeing himself as a ‘sickly child’ led Eric throughout his life to believe that this was the reason for his father’s abuse, and I would argue, a contributory factor in the further abuse of his body through sacrificial and unhealthy pugilistic practice. Moreover, the masculine discourses inherent in the boxing gym provided a medium by which Eric could accomplish his masculinity in line with masculine sporting ideals. The aegis of the gym therefore,
allowed Eric to prove to himself and others that he was capable of overcoming his fear through enduring and investing in physical capital enhancing routines.

With this ‘determination to win’, Eric crafted an identity of a champion, so much so, that when his newfound identity came under threat he retaliated with violence, and/or plunged into suicidal thoughts of unworthiness and loss. This sense of unworthiness was something that Eric struggled with throughout his career, as he constantly strived for acceptance, whether in the eyes of his father or the eyes of his trainer. Indeed, Eric psychically and physically invested in the sport of boxing so much, that he maimed himself in the ring to avoid ‘making a fuss’, and upsetting his trainer. This lack of care for his own body contributed towards Eric going against his better judgement throughout his boxing career. A sense of craving for acceptance and a constant need to prove himself, led Eric to risk his body in performance, ultimately scarring him both emotionally and physically for the rest of his life. Once his entry into the elite world of boxing was complete however, and his father no longer viewed him as a punching bag, Eric’s identity as a ‘sickly child’ started to become a distant memory. Having said that, threats or perceived incidents of disrespect could somehow upset Eric’s fragile identity as a boxing champion, and thus lead to potential violent outbursts in the defence of his ego, further demonstrated by his story of how he wanted to ‘kill’ a fellow boxer when he taunted Eric about his ‘sick days’.

Indeed, researchers focused on the occurrence of aggression posit that some individuals feel a psychological need to engage in violence when they feel their identity is being threatened (Wolfgang 1959; Luckenbill 1977; Katz 1988; Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Toch 1992), and for men like Eric, they are thought to use aggression as a compensatory measure to boost a dwindling ego, and/or their social status (Young 2002). In this case, Eric, who was unsure of himself to begin with, and subjected to ridicule and humiliation
throughout his early life, has been arguably left with the view that his earlier identity as a sickly child was worthy of abuse. And it was only until he became ‘a big boxer man’ in his father’s and trainer’s eyes did he hold any self-worth and positive self-affirmation, thus, developing a tenacious relationship between boxing and his ideas of self-worth.

As a result of this relationship, any slight or perceived incidents of disrespect, not only fractured Eric’s sense of identity, but had the propensity to trigger aggressive outbursts in the name of it. More importantly, Eric saw no problem with this, as he neutralised his violence outside of the ring and ‘denied victim status’ (Sykes and Matza 1957) to his son and others who challenged him. This was because he felt that his ‘respect’ and personal consideration were in jeopardy, and therefore excused his behaviour as simply ‘not taking any shit from no-one no more’. Moreover, Eric’s reasoning and justifications for violence are further complicit in masculine discourses that not employ the body in the pursuit of winning, but also view violence as a viable solution to a problem when outside the ring, commonly seen in the work of Kreager (2007) and Messner (1990).

These sporting discourses therefore reinforce the logic of street based violence when they suggest that men should be able to defend their honour regardless of the cost to themselves (Neff et al 1991; Goffman 1967; Katz 1988; Anderson 1999), and also, be able to endure a beating at the hands of others if necessary (Winlow 2001). For men like Eric, their understanding of violence becomes intertwined with discourses that speak to violent retaliation; whilst not always deployed it is important to maintain a semblance of violence and therefore employ it when necessary. Furthermore, these discourses also recommend the employment of the body in the domination of another; accordingly, these recommendations become heightened for some men, particularly those, like Eric, who is pre-disposed to shame (Scheff and Retzinger 1991). Finally, this can be counterproductive when assessing the impact that boxing has on desistance from violence, as the rewards
proffered in the maintenance of masculine identities of this nature override men’s abilities to desist, particularly when faced with threats to their self-identity and self-worth.

These themes of identity and self-worth are explored further in the final case study, the case of Marcus that I turn to next. This study looks at how Marcus combined issues of self-identity with extreme competitiveness in the gym, and how this ultimately became self-defeating. It also explores how Marcus found a significant other in the gym in the form of Paul - his trainer. However, this was a temporary pro-social measure as Marcus relays stories of competitive violence both in and outside the gym walls.
10. The Case of Marcus: Boxing, Competition and Desistance

10.1 Introduction

In this particular case study I discuss Marcus’s story. I demonstrate how boxing incapacitated Marcus during his career, and how the significant other he found in his boxing coach bonded him to the gym and ultimately developed his attachment to the sport. However, the competitive element of boxing and the ‘win at all cost’ attitude fostered by his coach created a central theme in Marcus’s life that was both destructive and ultimately self-defeating. Furthermore, I illustrate with Marcus’s case study that the gym only reinforces and encourages violence and is not part of a process of desistance for him, as Marcus discusses how he was involved in fighting both in and outside the gym walls.

10.2 Marcus’s Story

Marcus was a 42-year-old black male. He had been a successful heavyweight professional boxer in his twenties and was in possession of a title. His current occupation was as a personal trainer and boxing coach, and he was the key-holder to the gym where the research was based. It was difficult not to spot Marcus, he stood at least six feet tall and recognition was apparent everywhere; from his championship photographs adorning the walls or people constantly referring to him with his boxing pseudonym rather than his given name. Marcus had an intimidating presence, and in my opinion, he exuded an air of potential violence, as he often relayed tales of how even in his forties, he could ‘still mix it with the big boys if it came to it’. Accordingly, Marcus was both feared and admired by
those that attended the boxing gym, and I sensed nervousness from some members whenever he stated that he was ‘in a bad mood’. Throughout the period of my research I never once witnessed Marcus being challenged for his antagonistic behaviour, even when he referred to some of the other men as ‘girls’, ‘pussies’, or ‘house niggers’¹⁹, and it became apparent from the time that I spent in the gym that Marcus set the tone. This tone was one of fierce competition, discipline, and intimidation, and those in attendance behaved accordingly and often followed Marcus’s lead. Thus, it became evident that Marcus was a pivotal member in the boxing gym, and also a role model for the aspiring boxers, however, this was not always positive, as I demonstrate throughout his story.

Indeed to illustrate this point further Marcus was from the area where the gym was situated and the community was fully aware of his boxing success. This was evident by the amount of people who stopped him in the street to talk, or waved as his expensive car drove by. Winlow and Hall (2009:291) expand on this point when they state: ‘Spectacle of contemporary consumer culture is to be struck by the brutal excess of social competition, in which the individual’s performance is judged in relation to consumerism’s systems of status symbols.’ And for Marcus, the car and adoration it received formed part of a masculine competitive strategy that ensured he was always viewed triumphantly.

In addition, Marcus also talked of ‘creating a legacy’ after his trainer passed away from cancer in 1994 and how he hoped to replicate the community activism that his trainer had fostered after the local riots in 1981. It was in the period just after the riots that the gym opened and Marcus’s trainer was at the helm; encouraging young men from the area to ‘get involved’ and ‘make something of themselves’, even offering to let young men train

¹⁹ Marcus used this particular derogatory name towards black men he felt were ‘softer’ than others. He distinguished between ‘house’, and ‘field niggers’ in the context of slavery, thus stating that those who were champions and dedicated to the sport worked in the ‘field’, and those that did not meet his standards worked in the ‘house’.
for free in the hope they would just show up. Originally, Marcus was not interested in the
sport of boxing; he played basketball at school and found general sports ‘likeable’, but
never considered boxing during his earlier years. Marcus had wanted to be a police officer
when he was younger, but ‘there wasn’t that many black people in uniform back then’.
Instead he enlisted in the army prior to turning professional but left after six months due
to racism:

_I was gonna go in the army, but I went down there and only did six months training as
they were so racist. It was bad - all ‘nigger this, nigger that’._

Having now left the army disheartened Marcus reported that he just ‘wanted to mess
around on the streets with his boys’, and it was not until a friend suggested that they go to
the local boxing gym that Marcus paid any interest in the sport:

_I came here to this boxing gym because my friends were here, and I thought I can do that
better than you - we had competition in the gym, you know what I mean? I can throw that
better than you, next you know you’re fighting. It could have been any gym. I didn’t know
it was a boxing gym before I got here. Next thing you know there’s a competition in the
gym, and competition breeds competition don’t it. The more people want it hard - you
want it harder - that kind of thing, and I think that’s instilled in you already no-one can
put that into you._

Marcus talked of wanting to be the best, and competition being ‘inbred’. He proclaimed to
‘want it hard’, and with this, his hunger for success became the driving force in his
motivation for attending. With this hunger, Marcus went on to have 60 fights as an
amateur and eventually turned professional in 1990, going on to win the coveted title in
1992. Marcus felt he originally demonstrated his ‘unbelievable desire to win’ when in the
amateur ranks, and he still has small excerpts from the local newspaper on his bedroom
wall. After winning his first amateur fight and appearing in the local newspaper, Marcus knew then that he wanted to pursue a professional boxing career:

*Before that you know, through my life in school - it was nearly this nearly that - I’d always come second or something like that, and then I gave up and started messing about on the streets. Then I’m at the gym having my first fight and I won! I knocked him out. It was in the paper - really little piece - said I beat him that’s all it said, and I thought the whole world knew about it! That was the stem of it, the foundation of everything else that came, that feeling always stays with you - that first fight.*

Winning at an amateur level spurred Marcus on. He explained how he tasted ‘little bits of success as an amateur’ and how this made him ‘believe in anything’, and just before turning professional, Marcus said he had a ‘really good feeling about things’, particularly as ‘doors starting opening’ for him:

*When you win certain things in the professional ranks you know it is a lot better than the amateur ranks - it overcomes everything. When you starting winning titles and people recognise you, it’s more like for me a belief. You never thought a passion that you could really get to - people get there and before you know it - you’re getting there! One day you’re a nobody and now you’re a somebody. This happened to me, it wasn’t no game no more. I look back and think Jesus man, I was there and now I’m here.*

There was a hint of disbelief in Marcus’s success; he could not quite believe it was happening to him, as he talked of ‘coming from where you come from, from the street, never done, never been nothing’, and how his local reputation meant everything to him at the time. For Marcus, being the local champion was more important to him than the belts and trophies, as he equated success with being ‘recognised’, feeling like ‘he was the man’ now that he had made a name for himself in the amateur boxing world:
I thought I’m superman. That feeling you get when you win, you always stick with it. You might have had something before but it would have been a struggle, this here now (gesticulates around the gym) this is being recognised. That is a tremendous feeling, even if it is a little bit in the newspaper.

It became evident through Marcus’s narrative that the original appeal laid in the competitive element of the sport. However, he cites his trainer as a driving force in maintaining his interest and desire to win, as he discussed how his coach would lock young amateurs in the gym in a bid to see who was the toughest, and who had the most willpower:

Paul used to give us discipline in the gym back then, he made us stay in here to give us discipline. We were all young guys, about 18, 19 and we had none, Paul said to us ‘you’re moving in here’, so he made us live in the gym for 2 weeks and made it a competition. It started with 14 of us, then 9 after a week, then 6, then just me! I lasted 10 weeks. It was awful but it gave me discipline and I won.

Marcus went onto say that had he not had that discipline instilled in him by Paul, ‘God knows where I would have been now’. He further believed that Paul’s influence was as a result of harnessing the competition in him, and that men are naturally competitive. Moreover, being part of a group also gives you a sense of belonging that bonds you to your teammates and makes you feel ‘part of something’, however, he was quick to point out that ‘boxing is an individual sport, and it’s down to you, if you lose it’s your fault, if you win it’s your glory’. Marcus did however acknowledge the role of the coach as crucial in the development of any boxer, so much so that he admitted to never boxing again when Paul died in 1994:
‘I just fell out of love with boxing when Paul died, the love disappeared. He was a father to me, he taught me about life, I always felt safe when he was around.

This may have been the case for Marcus, but Paul’s influence was not always positive. The messages transmitted by Marcus’s significant other promoted a sense of competition that was not always healthy and Marcus adopted his coach’s value system without question. As a result, Marcus found himself fully submerged in the competitive world of boxing and therefore inculcated its value system and ethos to the fullest degree.

10.3 A Sense of Competition: How the Messages Transmitted in Boxing Gyms Can Potentially Promote Violent Behaviour

As Marcus’s narrative started to unfold it became evident that his boxing coach was a major influence on Marcus’s life. He talked of how Paul was his ‘number one’ and that without him he would be ‘nothing’. Paul harnessed Marcus’s competitive element and apparently put it to good use, guiding and encouraging Marcus to go on and win the British title only three fights into turning professional. Marcus believed that Paul saw something in him, and when talking to the older members in the gym who remember those times, they often referred to Marcus as Paul’s ‘blue-eyed boy’. Paul plucked Marcus from ‘nowhere’, as Marcus attested:

Coming where I come from - from the street - never done nothing, never been nothing, I don’t know, you might have been something but it would have been a struggle, Paul gave us a shot, saved my life that man.
Moreover, Marcus felt that Paul taught him about life and gave him direction, so much so, that even though Paul passed away 20 years ago Marcus disclosed that he thought about him everyday:

*I never tire of talking about him, he was my role model, he was most of our role models then, I think about him everyday, and my dad’s died but I think about Paul more than I think about my dad.*

Marcus went onto discuss how it was not necessarily the boxing what initially attracted him to the sport (which was proving to be a reoccurring theme among the men in this study) but cited the ‘family atmosphere’ of the gym as part of the appeal. As previously mentioned, the feeling of being ‘part of something’ was important to Marcus, and he felt that for once in his life he had ‘a sense of belonging here in the gym’. However, the competitive element that Paul fostered that Marcus often discussed led me to believe that the messages bestowed upon Paul’s fighters were not always conducive to pro-social behaviour. There were also stories from others, particularly Eric’s, which told of Paul emasculating young men for lack of stamina, or how he would also lack in empathy when fighters lost matches or accrued injuries. Thus, it seemed that Paul was happy to be a role model when others followed his orders and lived up to his ideas of a competitive masculine role. If this was somehow not possible, for whatever reason, Paul could apparently be ‘cruel’, and sometimes humiliated young boxers in front of the whole team.

For Marcus however, Paul could no wrong and as a result he consistently showed up at the gym in his quest for recognition and guidance from his coach. Nevertheless, it was not long before Marcus started to become recognisable for something other than boxing, as at this time, the local newspaper started to also report on Marcus’s involvement in a serious crime, and one that tainted his reputation just prior to him turning professional in 1990:
Marcus: I got wrongly accused when I was an amateur boxing of nine attempted murders and I got locked up.

DJ: You got accused of nine attempted murders?

Marcus: It was stupid, it was when all that gang stuff was going on. I was hanging around with certain boys and the police nicked us on the street and said we tried to kill these doormen. They let us out after locking us up in jail for four months. I was lucky really, because I was there at the scene. I was driving the guys and dropped them off, then I went home, and then nipped to the shop for a Mars bar, and someone said that was the car there. I said 'no' coz I was with this guy, and that guy, and they just picked us all up and threw us in jail.

Marcus eventually sued the police for wrongful imprisonment, and received a pay out of nearly £60,000. He felt that the police had stolen six months of his life, and no matter what, he could not be reimbursed for time lost. Furthermore, this incident of false imprisonment hampered Marcus in his quest to turn professional, as Marcus felt that the time he spent detained in custody altered his chances at success. Although still successful regardless of this, Marcus blamed the police for ‘taking away his summer’, and that ‘no amount of money can make up for that, it was simply wrong’.

Moreover, Marcus felt that the police still victimised him because of his ethnicity, and he began to talk of how even now as an adult they still ‘pick me up for nothing’:

The other day police have a problem, was following me, I used to think, is it me? Even if you see one person, everyone pretty much knows me, especially round here so I thought, should I join the police force and make a difference? The other day I’m parked up on half zig-zag, half road, this nosey copper going past in a truck with horses could of gone past
but pulls up, and I had an old woman with me, you know just dropping her off at the shops. This guy comes out of his truck storming up to me, so I open my door and say ‘What’s your problem?’ He says, ‘You and your car are parked on zig-zags’, and I’m like, ‘I’m just dropping this old lady off here and she can’t walk and I’ll be gone in a sec’, and he starts shouting his head off ‘get over there and ner ner ner’. So I says, ‘I’ll tell you what, no problem man I’ll move it’, he starts walking off, so I say to the lady, ‘You get out here’, he hears the door open and comes marching back ‘What did I tell you to do?’ The guys also starts screaming, ‘Do you know who I am?’ And then I try and stop him from getting into the car. I just snapped then you know what I mean? This is what happens. There is no need for all this commotion, all the street has come out and all the rest of it, there is no need for him to carry on like that, none at all. And that just changed my mind completely about the police. I might be wrong but I feel sorry for all these young guys getting caught like that everyday for nothing to do with them. Anyway, ‘I’ll give you a ticket,’ he says, ‘give me your registration and all that’, and I said to him, ‘come round the corner and we’ll have it out there’. I wouldn’t have it, as they get you so wound up, and they wonder why the riots and everything kicked off, when they’re going on like that.

From the above extended extract, it is arguable that Marcus feels like he is victimised by the police, going so far as to cite the riots as a justifiable reason for his community’s perceived victimisation. Moreover, the above illustrates how Marcus neutralises his own sense of responsibility to avoid blame. As his narrative started to further unfold, it transpired that this was an on-going issue for Marcus, his violent altercations with the police and his refusal to take any responsibility for his actions, which I believe was a further element in his quest to win. According to Marcus, the police were allegedly racist or just plain vindictive, whereas in fact, he was actually a persistent offender when it
came to incidences involving violence and the police, freely discussing how in his youth he had been involved in similar occurrences:

*I got done for police assault also in the past, weren’t my fault. It was a long time ago and I was shoplifting - both me and my cousin. They grabbed him and grabbed me and threw us in the cells. Put the handcuffs on behind us and four of them came in the cell and head-butted me, he ended up knocking his tooth and cutting my head open so I got done for the assault. Anyway, he came in and was shouting, ‘You black bastard, I’m gonna knock the shit out of you.’ They beat the shit out of both of us, and they wouldn’t take the cuffs off. Typical shit, not my fault but I got charged.*

Interestingly, Marcus was quick to state that this particular incident was before he actually started boxing, because prior to joining the gym he was ‘just running around on the streets’, therefore evidencing the gym’s capacity to act as a potential ‘hook for change’ (Giordano 2002). Marcus also wanted to maintain a sense of being a good role model for the younger men in the gym, and indeed he felt that he was, regardless of his prior convictions or recent dispute like the one mentioned above. Additionally, I felt that Marcus wanted to replicate his trainer Paul, unaware that the messages that Paul bestowed on his pupils were not always pro-social. Thus is some respects, the messages transmitted by the coaches in the gym environment are diametrically opposed to that what they are trying to achieve. I therefore probed into Marcus’s story and asked how he felt he was a good role model:

*I look like a boxer, as people imagine, I look the part. I’ve been around, and can get through to some people you know. I mean I’ve run from the police you know what I mean. Before I was boxing, most of my stuff was before I was boxing.*
This was not necessarily true, as Marcus - though wrongfully accused - was involved in gang violence in the local community during his amateur career, often stating that he ‘mixed in with those guys’ at the time. Moreover, Marcus’s recent dispute with the police officer was testament to his ambivalent attitude concerning law and order, originally wanting to join on the one hand and resentful of wrongful imprisonment on the other. Thus I became interested in how Marcus perceived his behaviour towards the police, and how boxing may/may not have contributed towards this. I therefore asked Marcus to tell me what it was about boxing that was appealing enough to stop him ‘running from the police’:

I joined the gym and that was that. I mean, I know right from wrong and I tried things and they didn’t work out and I ended up in trouble, so who knows. I wasn’t a callous kid.... then I found boxing. I was up at 6am then every morning religiously because I constantly wanted to win! Girls were no more, use to see my friends coming home from girl’s houses in the morning and I’d be out running. Made me feel good. It’s called ‘sacrificing’, and when you go up to fight I know in my mind without a doubt that I have done everything possible to win - to beat him.

It started to transpire that Marcus even though involved in sport religiously, did when the opportunity presented itself, become embroiled in the violence enfolding his community at that time. Marcus was also relatively vocal in his dislike for the police, and could often be heard to shout phrases such as ‘them and us’, and I felt this tapped into Marcus’s sense of competition as it arguably added weight to his sense of opposition, as something or someone that can be defeated. Indeed, the salt in the wound for Marcus regarding the most recent altercation with the police was the police officer allegedly screaming in his face: ‘Do you know who I am?’ As Marcus felt that the police officer was somehow signifying inferiority on Marcus’s part, and therefore threatening his sense of ‘being
somebody’ in the local community. This for Marcus was the infuriating final straw and when he disclosed how this incident made him feel, he stated that he ‘would go to jail for something like that’:

*I would go jail man, in my book you’re either right or you’re wrong and I was 100% right there. And I wouldn’t regret it either. I’m serious I wouldn’t. I’d go jail to be right, I’d die doing it. Simple as. 100% die for being right. So jail is minor you know what I mean? And that’s what I said to that copper, ‘Come round the corner, you and me,’ because I thought that was what was gonna go on, they’re all gonna come down and I’m gonna get that in first. You know what I’m saying?*

As the narrative unfolded it became clear to me that Marcus felt that he was ‘100% right’ in this case, even though he admitted to being parked illegally. Furthermore, it demonstrated how he views conflict, as something black and white, something as simple as being ‘right or wrong’. I would therefore argue that this viewpoint sits comfortably with a self-concept that demands to be a constant winner, so much so, that Marcus would ‘die’ to achieve this. I therefore concluded that Marcus felt so aggrieved at the prospect of being perceived as a loser (while being undermined in full sight of his own community that he desperately craved recognition from) that he chose to retaliate first. This is keeping in line with not only his ideas of self, but with the expectations of a community that values honour and the use of violence in the defence of identity (Blok 1981; Katz 1988; Winlow 2001; Winlow and Hall 2009).

Additionally, as a result of previous events surrounding his false imprisonment, Marcus felt that he had evidence of the police being wrong on more than one occasion, and therefore felt that he would ‘go to jail’ just to be ‘right’. This led me to believe that Marcus used past events as an excuse to enact violence in the present. I would argue that
Marcus felt justified in his offer of violent resolution towards the police officer as he viewed the potential of a jail term as insignificant against his overall quest to be ‘right’, his quest to simply win the argument. Moreover, he employed his local reputation for violent enactment as a defence mechanism, and invested in the threat of violence as a means to solve a problem regardless of the consequences or the status of the victim.

Furthermore, while having prior convictions for police assault as a younger man (although disputable), I felt that Marcus felt more than justified in his threat of violence, particularly if he perceived the attack as a racist one. Also, Marcus’s need for recognition seemed to reside behind many of his motivations for violence, and I felt that newspaper headlines of either his boxing success or violent retaliations against the police was something he felt proud of. Indeed, it was the violence itself that Marcus felt proud of, as this reinforced his self-concept and further enhanced the community’s perception of him as a local boxer and someone not to challenge or compete against. This sense of recognition, competition, and potential for violence was at the heart of Marcus’s identity, and any challenge to this was usually met with force. The competitive element that Marcus had acquired since school and pre-boxing was ultimately fostered by both Marcus and his trainer, and proved to be successful in the ring. It was most certainly employable in the winning of titles, however, outside the realm of sport, Marcus’s sense of competition was both destructive and self-defeating. Indeed, the competitive messages inherent in the gym, and also the main source of appeal for Marcus, served not only to win him the British title but also a series of offences involving police assault and alleged attempted murder. Thus, I would argue that Marcus while seeking the approval of his boxing coach, and recognition from his local community, had internalised a sense of competition to the point of destruction, so much so, that it clouded his judgement when faced with situations that required insight and the ability to look beyond simple terms of ‘right and wrong’.
Accordingly, I argue that the sport of boxing merely incapacitated Marcus at times when he otherwise may have been involved in serious crime. This is evidenced by his capacity for violence when not physically present in the gym. Indeed, the religious dedication he showed, combined with encouragement from his trainer guaranteed Marcus’s attendance at the gym, and had he not been present it would seem from Marcus’s narrative that he would have been involved in further crimes. Moreover, the messages transmitted in the gym environment, and the hyper-masculine discourses promoted by his trainer and peers contributed towards Marcus viewing violence as a successful method in his pursuit of winning. Additionally, when challenged outside of the gym, Marcus would justify his retaliation as necessary in the defence of either his community or identity, therefore, neutralising or distorting the incoming messages to support his self-concept and provide excuses or reasons to maintain his identity as a winner. This was done regardless of other people’s feelings or job roles as Marcus was too invested in himself as a champion and recognised community activist to empathise with anyone else.

10.4 Discussion

I have argued with Marcus’s case study that the sport of boxing is not conducive towards promoting desistance from violence, and the values transmitted between both gym and street sat comfortably with Marcus’s viewpoints and behaviours. I have demonstrated how the hyper-masculine messages of competition, instrumental violence and lack of empathy transmitted in the gym environment contribute towards some men viewing violence as an acceptable solution to a problem when it is not. In the context of the gym environment men receive a complex ever-increasing mixed set of messages that they have to show ‘heart’, courage and violence, and these messages promoted and bequeathed by
significant others in the boxing gym, not only contribute towards young men viewing violence in this way, but also further create self-concepts that cannot bear to lose.

This dichotomous viewpoint is what allows men who box to justify and employ violence in the pursuit of winning, not only in the ring but outside in the wider community where they live. This is compounded by the fact that most of those in attendance lack the social capital to be perceived as a ‘winner’ in any other light. Thus, those that are perceived as ‘losers’ generally invest in becoming winners via the mechanism of money status and fame which boxing seemingly offers. In Marcus’s case, becoming a winner meant at all costs, indeed, as he previously attested: ‘Never been nothing, never done nothing,’ prior to boxing. Accordingly, boxing becomes a huge investment for men like Marcus, and once they experience the feeling of success they will employ whatever method is guaranteed to maintain it. In the gym, and more so in the ring, this method is one of violence and intimidation, and for Marcus in particular this was particularly difficult to relinquish when he stepped outside of the ropes and the gym walls.
11. Discussion

11.1 Introduction

To conclude, I will discuss the overarching themes that emerged from the findings and also the case studies of Frank, Marcus and Eric. I will briefly discuss the commonalities of each case and also the differences, and summarise my overall conclusions in relation to both the appeal and desistance potential of boxing. I argue that the gym and ‘gym life’ incapacitate to the extent that they consume men’s time but offer little in the way of positive behavioural change or cognitive transformation. The discourses inherent in the gym and in the broader habitus of these men reinforce a self-concept that views violence as a solution to self-perceived problems of masculinity. Boxing traps men in a culture of ‘respect’ and constructs habits of proactive and reactive violence that are inimical to criminal desistance. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for the sport, and for future youth policy and practice, and close with a statement of study limitations and discussion of ways forward for research.

11.2 Findings in Relation to the Enduring Appeal of Boxing

The enduring public appeal of the boxing gym resides in an ill-conceived notion that it can offer a ‘way out’ for the majority of those that participate, indeed, in this research, men often perceived the sport as capable of helping them overcome some form of economic, social or academic barrier. In the words of the professionals, boxing was about ‘money, status and fame’, and ‘getting out from round ‘ere’, therefore it was personal for most of these men, and even the amateurs saw the gym as somewhat more than a place to just ‘let off steam’. However, beyond the veneer of these status accomplishments and
'routes out of poverty' statements, boxing also offered a way for men to deny vulnerability, and invest in specific discourses that contributed towards them achieving what they deemed to be 'respect'. The masculine discourses inherent in this social world reinforced this ideal, and was supportive of a habitus that most of the men had previously heralded from. A habitus that placed emphasis on physical capital and potential for violence to not only gain a sense of respect, but also increase their sense of status among peers both inside and outside the gym setting.

Men viewed the concept of 'respect' as being coterminal with 'fear', and the idea of being disrespected or perceived as weak, as so abhorrent that they would do anything in their power to avoid it. This was demonstrated not only in the ring- whereby men would fight through pain to achieve a sense of valour but also on the street, as men would call upon these discourses and the 'code of the street' (Anderson 1999) to negate a sense of responsibility for their violent retaliations. This negation was achieved via neutralizing techniques that allowed for the men to maintain a masculine front, and place the responsibility for their actions elsewhere.

As demonstrated in the case studies, most of the men had suffered or been subject to violent abuse in their formative years within the community, the family, or both. As a result, the boxing gym represented 'an island of stability and order' (Wacquant 2004) and a place where men such as Marcus experienced a sense of control in an otherwise hostile and unpredictable world. For Eric or Frank, it provided a form of self-defense against environments where you had to be 'on your toes', and helped to create both ontological security and self-efficacy. As a result of the victim status that they had all accrued - in their own minds at least - boxing provided a physical, social and psychological space to invest in masculine discourses that confronted and defended against the certainty of future victimhood.
By investing in ‘physical capital’ and the creation of muscle, the men were able to present as individuals who would not tolerate victimisation nor be made ‘subject to the will of others’ (Connell 1990). Furthermore, the masculine accomplishments of competitive wins, strength, courage, and virility, all contributed towards the rejection of female elements (i.e. being a ‘pussy’), and through the disowning of these feminine attributes, Eric, Frank and Marcus et al were able to perform their masculinity in line with hegemonic sporting discourses. Indeed, by risking the body in performance (Feldman 1991) and demonstrating bodily capital, these men were able to present as the epitome of ‘hardness’- the opposite of feminine ‘softness’- and that which is fearful.

Woodward (2004:7) has argued that ‘men’s boxing evokes hegemonic masculinity’, a view this data strongly supports, as boxing is most certainly an investment in a gendered habitus that creates distance from a subjective interpretation of the feminine ‘other’. Indeed, to be classified as feminine is to be classified as subordinate in these men’s eyes, and this leads to a fear of being disrespected and subject to the will of other males. Accordingly, the concept of being ‘respected’ becomes aligned with their sense of masculinity, as Eric attested - when his trainer referred to him as ‘having no balls’ he said ‘it was an insult to me as a man’. Additionally, I also would argue that this construction of the feminine other as fragile, vulnerable and subordinate, is the main reason why the majority of men in this sample disliked the idea of females boxing; it threatened their sense of masculine accomplishment, and blurred the lines between masculine and feminine subject positions.

By investing in the masculine discourses that boxing seemingly evokes, men are able to maintain an illusion of invincibility while accomplishing their masculinity in a climate that places emphasis on respect. Furthermore, most of the men prior to signing up emerged from environments where respect and being respected formed part of their
everyday life. Indeed, being respected formed a huge part of these men’s self-concepts and identity, and their understanding of violence as a tool in maintaining this was more or less formulated prior to joining the gym. I would therefore argue that boxing and the physical capital it produces, allows men to reinforce a sense of respect by commanding a sense of fear and obedience in others. This is done through establishing a reputation for effective violence, and exploiting cultural cues that demonstrate that they are both adept at it and unafraid to use violence.

As Robins and Cohen (1978) among others (see Katz 1988; Blok 1974; Daly and Wilson 1988; Winlow 2001) have argued, working class men are more likely to be socialized within a framework that places violence close to the concept of the male self. As a consequence, violence is often treated as personal resource that informs and advises social interaction. Boxers develop self-concepts that are consistent with ideas of respect, honour, and winning, further combined with an external locus of evaluation that places emphasis on robust and dominant masculinities. Hence, the environment, the significant others (peers, trainers, parents) and the conditions of worth inherent in the gym, contributes towards the way an individual views and understands violence and desistance.

Furthermore, the occupational culture that forms the habitus of a professional boxer, can become so deeply ingrained in ideas and presentation of self, that violence and retaliation as a means to ‘maintain face’ (Goffman 1959; Katz 1988; Anderson 1999) overrides most forms of desistance. Marcus, in particular demonstrated this, but also Ricky the upcoming professional, and Frank after our interview. Arguably, this is because the identity of a boxer and the occupational culture of boxing itself place violence central to the concepts of the male self, and as (Maruna 2001:17) observes: “Sustained desistance most likely requires a fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self”. For men who identify as boxers, combined with the rewards they could be set to lose if
domination, winning and violence were not adopted as strategies, desistance could prove to be too difficult. This is because it is not considered as an option in their self-project, nor is it seen as a method to adopt in a habitus where violence and respect are given precedence.

Partly through self-defense and partly through fear of being perceived as a loser (economically, socially, and academically), Marcus, Eric and Frank, among others, all invested in boxing for reasons that allowed them to re-shape a sense of their own masculinity. Frank, aside from being beaten by his father felt pressured by the gang violence that enfolded him, and therefore saw boxing as a way to escape it without compromising his masculinity. Eric’s fear was closer to home, with an abusive father that tried to murder both him and his brother, therefore, he invested in boxing to overcome his fear of being a future victim and also as a way to stand-up to his father when the time came. For Marcus, the competitive element of the gym provided opportunities for him to feel like a ‘winner’, particularly in an environment at that time that was fractious concerning issues of ethnicity and race. Hence, boxing offered a site for these men to deny a sense of inadequacy by investing in becoming winners, this in turn, allowed them to reconfigure a self-concept that took winning and success as a central theme. And, crucially in terms of initial appeal in hooking them in, it helped to distort any incoming messages that spoke to prior victimhood, and therefore helped in their personal quest to achieve what they perceived as appropriate masculine, physical, and economic status.

11.3 Findings in Relation to the Desistance Promoting Potential of Boxing

The gym was an important site for the men in this study. As previously discussed, it offered a space that many men interpreted as safe and secure. The gym was always busy
and the men in attendance devoted huge amount of time to their weekly (and sometimes
daily) workouts underlining the ascetic nature of the sport; boxing provided a habit-
forming and maintaining and, ultimately, an incapacitating function in their lives.

Most of the men in attendance had at some point been involved in crime. In the gym they
openly discussed their trajectory of offences, such as petty crimes like selling unlicensed
DVD’s in the gym to the more serious issues of being accused of attempted murder and
police assault. Yet, a large majority of those in attendance saw the gym as an activity that
‘kept them off the streets’, conveying an impression that boxing alone, was somehow
responsible for their current lack of involvement in crime. However, this did not prevent
them from possessing attitudes that were favourable to the ‘code of the streets’ (Anderson
1999), whereby violence was viewed as a resource for enforcing and upholding this code.
Indeed, this code was embedded in these men’s outlooks, and was often called upon when
men felt that they were somehow being threatened or disrespected. This was adhered to
across the sample, from the trainers through to the amateurs, as men often discussed how
they retaliated to reinforce an identity that would not tolerate abuse, or become subject to
attack.

As much as the trainers encouraged the young men to refrain from illegitimate violence
by discouraging acts of revenge, issues concerning disrespect and emasculation were
defended against. Men legitimized their violence as part of maintaining their male
identity, as any threats to their self-concepts and social status were too painful to bear,
particularly if victimhood was already evident in their personal history. As a result, they
neutralized and negated their violence as part of the code, as imperative in the
accomplishment of their masculinity in a domain that takes respect very seriously.
As Ward and Maruna (2007) have suggested, submissive individuals may lack the skills to assert him or herself sufficiently to get basic respect needs met from others. This lack of capability can lead to increased subjective emotional experiences of frustration and humiliation that may be relieved or comforted through aggressive release. Boxing contributes towards this idea, as the men involved in this research had mostly suffered humiliating abuse and lacked the capabilities to assert themselves prior to signing up. Boxing therefore acted not only as a cathartic mechanism by providing a comfort release for their latent aggression, but also allowed the participants to gain respect through aggressive means.

Members in authoritative positions constantly maintained this idea, as trainers were also complicit in the discourses and habitus of the gym culture. Attachment figures in the shape of trainers and other sporting role models therefore played a significant role in the formation of attitudes of those that they supervised. And while illegitimate violence was generally discouraged, it was also condoned, particularly when maintaining valued masculine identities. Seen in this light, the trainers and role models within the gym culture contributed towards the formation of attitudes that were not necessarily conducive to desistance from violence. This was evidenced through Eric’s story, as he justified the beating of his own children as part of a warped strategy that apparently encouraged them not to lie. Frank in his story also denied any wrongdoing, viewing victims as worthy of his retaliation and also subordinate to his career as a bouncer, all the while, maintaining an image that has no room for empathy. Moreover, Marcus, Ricky, Jonny, and Dave, all present in the gym environment, all at some point or another, admitted that if they were faced with a potential threat to their status they thought twice about retaliating in a violent manner. This was evidenced more than once by altercations both in and outside the ring.
as these men employed their physical capital to dominate their opponents and defend their social status.

However, structurally, boxing acts as a social arrangement/activity that can enable or limit action as part of the desistance process. As Sampson and Laub (1993) have argued, commitment to work, mutual ties and employers all increase informal social control, and for some of the professional boxers this was most certainly the case. Men such as Ricky, Jonny, and others, often stated that they ‘didn’t go out much these days’ as boxing took up such a large part of their time. Nonetheless, when faced with scenarios when out running, or backstage at boxing matches when the opponents’ entourage seemed to be ‘taking the piss’ both Ricky and Jonny abandoned the concept of control and set about defending their identity in an aggressive way. Additionally, when these young men did ‘go out’, particularly after a ‘big win’, challenges from others drinkers generally resulted in fights, as both Jonny and Ricky confessed to being involved in occasional illicit fighting with what they termed ‘weekend warriors’.

In the main however, the involvement in the gym setting detained the men and provided an habitual activity that was both rewarding and demanding, as the culture and habitus of this social world allowed men to share similar assumptions, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour that were passed on from one generation to the next. Having said that, trainers such as Eric and Marcus saw no problem with violence when defending ‘honour’, and this inevitably formed part of the gym’s culture, and therefore, the men they taught.

Giordano (1986) argues that the more attractive individuals value membership in a group, the more likely they are to accede to group influences in order to maintain or enhance their social standing (for further discussion see Warr 2002). If this is the case, it is arguable that the likes of Ricky, Jonny and other young professionals will be susceptible
to the influences of their trainers and peers as part of maintaining their position in the gym. Bottoms et al (2004:377) further argues that “desistance cannot be considered outside the social context in which it occurs”, and therefore deviance is also likely to be shaped by social context with opportunities, cultural views, self-identity, friends and the activities of social control agents all likely to play their part (see Cressey 1964; Bandura 1977; Cloward and Ohlin 1960). This was evidenced by demonstrations of violence outside of the ring by Marcus, Frank, Eric and Ricky and Jonny, and also towards those amateurs they deemed as subordinate in the ring.

In the same way that social context affects the professions to which young people aspire (Willis 1977), the language they speak, their faith, the ways in which they are victimized and other aspects of daily life, the men in this study mostly originated from socially disadvantaged areas within the city and most had left school with little or no qualifications. Furthermore, the social links outside of family life and the gym were scarce; as men would often state that boxing was the ‘only friend’ they had, therefore reinforcing the impression that the gym acted as some form of stability for these men however fragile that may be. Thus, I sensed that boxing as an ‘only friend’ was interpreted by these men as a form of stability and reassurance, indeed, with boxing men had a sense of control and ownership in a climate where they felt powerless, and this was an important discovery.

Nonetheless, some of the men had part-time jobs outside of the gym, based in security work or ‘grey’ economies involving cash-in-hand laboring or building work, but these were usually casual and transient. Accordingly, the ‘attachment communities’ (Bottoms et al 2004) of work, marriage, friends and education were limited and men often spent substantial amounts of time in the gym as a result. Accordingly, this gym community did create a social cohesion, and as Putnam (2000) has argued these aspects of community
spaces have the power to create change from within as they have the capacity to ‘bridge social capital’. In this case, the community space of the gym enhanced men’s physical capital with little regard for the social unless it compounded their sense of masculinity. In other words, men were happy to engage in careers that reinforced the masculine discourses of the gym such as bouncing, security or personal training, whereas, other avenues were usually classed as ‘white collar’ and therefore disassociated with the body and a sense of ‘hardness’.

Men such as Marcus, Eric, and Frank, all made careers out of boxing and later as trainers, with many of them stating that boxing provided opportunities where others were non-existent. And arguably, without the sport, men like Frank, and particularly Marcus, professed that they could have seen themselves either in prison or dead. Viewed from this perspective, it would seem that boxing provides some opportunities for men with limited options. However, the desire to offend, or the motivation to react violently in certain situations still exists for the men in this study, as they view the concept of retaliation as part of their identities and self-concepts. Working from this premise, the parameters of social control become limited, as there is a need for an integral cognitive shift as part of the desistance process (Giordano 2002). As discussed previously, it is these cognitive elements that provide lasting change in the meaning and desirability of deviant/criminal behaviour, and although boxing provides a ‘hook for change’, it does not provide a site for positively valued themes, nor does it provide an outline for a replacement self (ibid).

What boxing does provide is a culture that is based on hegemonic masculine sporting discourses and attachments figures that are complicit within it. Furthermore, the informal control mechanisms that boxing provides are only one side of the coin, as the habitual patterns and time spent in the gym environment contribute towards the formation of attitudes that are complicit with masculine and working class codes. Thus, boxing
merely incapacitates and diverts young men away from crime by virtue of detainment, and offers little by way of cognitive transformation, evidenced by the data that suggests that the masculine discourses of this social world over-ride theories of incapacitation and pro-social development, as the men presented in this study would not think twice about engaging in retaliatory or defensive behaviours outside of the gym setting.

11.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

Throughout this study I have tried to establish whether the sport of boxing can be employed as a strategy for criminal desistance, particularly the reduction of violent behaviour and attitudes among young males. It is often thought that boxing has the potential to reduce criminal activity, and that young people can personally benefit from participating (Sampson 2009), and this is true, to some extent, as boxing has the ability to engage, inspire and provide opportunities for young men (and women) when others avenues seem blocked or unattainable. Additionally, sport and physical activity has great meaning for those that box, and the gym provides a cohesive site that brings varying communities together that otherwise may not get the chance to meet, therefore, potentially reducing barriers to engagement and building relationships among segregated communities. Furthermore, participants experience rewards from strenuous exercise and many of those interviewed discussed how exercise contributed towards feelings of increased self-esteem. The sport also gave participants a sense of belonging, loyalty and support, and members often discussed how peers and trainers in the gym acted as second parents or brothers and sisters.

However, as discussed in the literature review, in the last decade, several research reviews have been commissioned by government to examine the evidence for sport’s claimed
benefits (Collins et al 1999; DCMS 2002; Coalter 2005). The general consensus of these reviews is that there is a lack of robust research-based evidence on the outcomes of sports participation. As Coalter (2008:79) has suggested, ‘policymakers lack the evidence required to make informed policy decisions and to connect sport issues to other policy priorities’ which, he goes on to say, is as a result of methodological problems, due to a lack of control groups and longitudinal research. The research that does exist divides itself into two main categories: research on programmes seeking to use sport with ‘at risk’ populations to prevent crime, commonly referred to as ‘diversionary activities’; and also, research on programmes that use sport to rehabilitate offenders, commonly referred to as secondary or tertiary forms (for further discussion see Brantingham and Faust 1976).

Evaluations of both of these approaches suggest that the salience and popular appeal of sport can be effective in attracting young people to programmes and I do not disagree. However, evidence has demonstrated that sport itself is part of a process, and not an end in its own right, therefore, its benefits needs to be managed sensitively and with the right workforce for the task (Nichols 2007). This will require an awareness of the process and an ability to match the needs of the participants with the experience and benefits that sport can offer. Furthermore, considerations of the perceptions of sport are also imperative to its success in reducing criminogenic attitudes, and success requires an awareness of boxing’s association with masculine discourses and physical risk. Hence, it is important to unpick the underlying cultural messages transmitted in hyper-masculine arenas and provide young men with positive role models who they can identify with; thus, providing positive alternatives to the dominant hegemonic prototype commonly seen in gyms.

DCMS (2002) argue that sport can have a positive impact on behaviour, and can therefore lead to reduced offending when employed as part of a wider developmental programme of education and support. Indeed, it is hoped that by achieving improvements in personal and
social skills, a process of change will be stimulated that will impact favourably on the participant’s offending behaviour. However, as stated previously, there is little to suggest that participation in sport alone will reduce offending, as there is a real difference between using sport as part of a programme to deliver positive social outcomes and assuming that sport will automatically deliver these on its own. The beneficial impact of participation in boxing is hard to measure, as it may eventually appear as one of a number of linked positive changes in an individual. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the effect of one particular activity in isolation from other factors, such as change in family circumstances, change in peer networks or relationship patterns, and also the commencement of employment. One area however, were there is a clear consensus, is that of the coaches and their impact on sporting environments and outcomes for participants.

A recent YouGov report in April 2011 (CSJ 2011) discovered that 87 percent of people believe good coaches can improve the lives of disadvantaged young people, and research in the USA (Jackson et al 1999) found that young people expressed a stronger preference for coaches who provided social support, encouragement, and who adopted a more empathic, democratic approach to coaching compared to their parents.

McCall and Simmons (1978) further suggest that a crucial function in any relationship is that of providing identity support, as individuals see themselves in a variety of roles whereby it becomes important that others provide them with enough support to maintain visions of roles they rank highly. In the gym environment the roles promoted by the coaches were ones of a competitive nature, which sometimes came at the expense of individual’s welfare. This is because competition is often seen as an imperative part of sporting activity, and that by taking part in lessons about winning and losing will somehow enhance an individuals understanding of ‘fair play’. This idea therefore,
presumably becomes transposable to wider arenas, and the lessons learnt in sport can be translated and applied when the gloves are off.

Undoubtedly, the culture of the ring did enforce a version of fair play, and men when confined to the rules of the sport did adhere to these versions and responded well to the setting of boundaries. However, these versions are not necessarily transposable to the outside world, as the men in this research particularly Frank, Jonny, and Ricky—while respectful and obedient to the rules in the gym viewed the sport as a form of domination, or as a resource in maintaining valued identities, arguably not dissimilar to the versions exalted in the ring. Thus, the version of ‘fair play’ that is commonly touted as a method by which desistance can be achieved is a misconception when applied to boxing and other hyper-masculine combat sports. This is because, sporting activity in a boxing gym involves an element of aggressive competitiveness, and I would argue that this is what makes it appealing, as young men in the gym saw boxing as a way to further accomplish their masculinity. Accordingly, the environment of the gym is equipped to support this idea, as Kidd (1990:37) has argued, “the current debate about boxing—under radically different social conditions—is still about competing masculinities”, and therefore, there is little scope for the full expression of differing masculinities in boxing, just as there is a reluctance to see women’s participation at professional levels.

Indeed, as in every other sphere of Western culture, the broad range of actual masculinities are subordinated in public discourse and institutional expectation, to a single dominant or hegemonic masculinity which is highly competitive, homophobic, and misogynistic. Thus, given the inordinate pressure to win, the emphasis upon measurable achievement as opposed to intrinsic satisfaction and aesthetic creativity, and the well-established dependence of the commercial sports upon male audiences, hegemonic masculinity in boxing becomes difficult to combat.
Moreover, the prevalence of these hyper-masculine discourses in combat sports ultimately leaves this research with one outstanding question: how do we combat hyper-masculine violent discourses in boxing? This is a difficult question to answer, and even more difficult to embed in practice, but ultimately imperative to the success and future direction of combat sports in the youth focused sphere of welfare based approaches. In other words, sports targeted towards youth provision either primary or secondary forms of diversion and reform, need to consider the implicit messages transmitted through aggressive competitive sports if they are to be successful in reducing criminogenic attitudes and behaviours.

There are no magic solutions to the situation described, as it is deeply rooted in long-established patterns of socialization and human interaction, moreover, it is perpetuated and maintained by both powerful and political interests. We cannot dismiss boxing, nor would we want to, yet, if boxing is to be taken seriously as a diversionary activity that can assist in the personal and social development of young people, with an aim to help promote desistance and understanding of violence, more work needs to be done. Considering the Department of Culture Media and Sport (2013:12) confirmed a £40 million increase in funding to extend the 2012 Olympic sport legacy to 2017, with an aim to “increase school sport and regular participation in competitive sport”, issues concerning sport’s short and long term effects on young people’s attitudes needs to addressed. Indeed, boxing alone, received £1,171,195 worth of funding from Sport England’s Olympic Legacy programme in 2012 (Amateur Boxing Association of England), therefore funding numerous amateur boxing clubs across the U.K.

I believe that it is possible to challenge the hegemonic masculine discourses evidenced and perpetuated in combat sports, however, this needs to be a top-down approach. By this I refer to the coaches and trainers, as they need to be the starting point. They could start
by actively questioning the pervasive masculine bias in the boxing world, as the language and discourses of these combat sports are rife with words and phrases that unconsciously reinforce the male dominant gender order. Challenging sexism and homophobia as Burstyn (1999) has attested would be imperative to making a change, as would positive female role models in the boxing world. Having said that, this is an on-going fight, as recent evidence suggests that boxing is still a male only preserve, whereby a group of female boxers/coaches have complained to the Commonwealth Sporting Committee at its apparent lack of funding and support for gender equality in the boxing world (Lewis 2014).

What is important here, is the fact that as athletes learn to dominate one another in the ring/field, so do they learn to dominate women and other men in the changing room with talk of male conquest and homophobia. Furthermore, coaches should change the way sports and boxing is viewed. Combat sports are often seen as masculine battles, and competition forms part of a discourse that views opponents as enemies as opposed to co-contributors. It is no wonder that many discourses on combat sports call upon military speech and gladiatorial imagery as a way to evoke competition. A sports culture that did not place so much emphasis on winning and therefore emphasized an exploration of skill, creative interaction and appreciation of one another would be much less repressive. As one of the policy makers in this research attested “non-contact boxing would be less aggressive but arguably also less attractive”.

Both male and female coaches delivering boxing training, especially post-Olympic 2012 fever, and the fact that Nicola Adams, the first female boxer won gold, could go someway to start readdressing the gender imbalance in this field. This therefore, may help to challenge those individuals who commonly view violence as a male self-expectation and a viable solution to a problem when their masculinity is assumedly brought into question.
If women can be seen to be successful at boxing, and it can be looked upon as a sport that is accessible to both genders, then the misconception that boxing is a ‘male only preserve’ (Dunning 1986) can be challenged. There is no doubt that the gym is an important site for young men, and increasingly young women, and the attachments formed in it can contribute towards feelings of safety, security, involvement and commitment. However, what is important is the culture that is fostered, as the boxing coach generally dictates this, it would make sense for this cultural change to begin with them.

Yet as it stands, the relationship between coach and participant in the gym where I observed and participated in was non-conducive to the development of these attributes as the trainers themselves were ingratiated in the culture of sporting masculine domination and the search for respect. Thus, the masculine discourses inherent in combat sports became cyclical and ever-present as the men consistently reinforced and accomplished their masculinity in space-occupying dominant ways.

Importantly other research by Joliffe and Farrington (2007) on the impact of mentoring on re-offending suggests that even long-term mentor/mentee relationships were not statistically significant in terms of reducing offending. And while these scholars recognised that mentoring is often viewed as influential in increasing life success for those ‘at risk’ of offending, criticisms are also apparent at how increasingly confident the Criminal Justice System seem towards mentoring when there is a seemingly large gap in rigorous research design that lacked control or comparison conditions (ibid). Thus, I align with Joliffe and Farrington (2007) when I suggest that mentoring can be successful in reducing offending, (particularly when combined with a successful ‘hook’ such as boxing). However, only when it forms part of a number of interventions given, whereby behaviour modification, supplementary education and employment programmes are established, and the mentor themselves are in a position to actively challenge aggressive
dominant behaviours as part of a process of lasting change. For all their good intentions the coaches presented in this study, would perhaps not be ideal candidates for this role, as their understanding of desistance and violence is clouded by their own scarred histories.

Accordingly, the task of providing a better sporting experience across the spectrum, especially for young people and more especially, for those who are coming to the gym from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds requires a more rounded approach to sport’s coaching. The key to this is through the coaches themselves, and their personal understanding and experiences of violence, and therefore, how this is disseminated and transmitted in the gym environment for the young people to absorb. In short, would you be comfortable knowing a young person was under Marcus’s wing?

It is a misguided assumption that taking part in boxing will automatically result in individuals developing a sense of discipline and control, or learning lessons in dealing with success and failure. Instead what matters more than participating in an activity is the way in which it is presented. If we value participation in sport and boxing for alleged ability to develop outcomes for young people, it makes sense to ensure that coaches and trainers are able to present activities in a way that increases the likelihood that legitimate violence in the pursuit of winning is correctly understood, and not embedded in men’s identities as a way to achieve respect and status.

Sport alone, will not be sufficient to counter criminal activity, as the social bonds formed with attachment figures such as coaches, is often viewed as an essential element for the internalization of values and norms, and therefore, related to the conception of internal personal control (Hirschi 1969). By developing this coach-athlete dyad in more positive and forward thinking ways, and emphasizing the relationship as a vehicle to develop internal personal control could be a contributory factor in the quest to promote desistance.
from violence among young males. Thus, by developing Hirschi’s concept of commitment and involvement - which boxing clearly has potential to do - coaches have the power to foster environments that challenge misconceptions around competitiveness, homophobia, and misogyny.

Indeed, given that an important condition for the development of individuals through sport is regular attendance at a programme or club, it is important that the sporting environment is one to which young people are keen to return. Yet, this has to be a constructive approach if the environment is to have any impact on positive outcomes for young people. Based on research in the field of youth development, Sports Coach United Kingdom (SCUK) used their document: Coaching the Whole Child in order to outline what they see as the key criteria to producing outcomes through coaching young people. Adapted from Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) they are outlined as: positive view of one’s actions and capability, internal sense of self-worth and being good at things, positive bonds with people and institutions, respect for rules, correct behaviour and integrity, and finally, a sense of sympathy and empathy for others, regardless of gender, sexuality, race or class. If these elements could be achieved, and these documents disseminated and embedded in sporting clubs of this kind, then I believe there is hope, and a future for boxing as an engagement tool and a potential vehicle for change.

11.5 Limitations of the Research and Implications for Theory

All research has limitations. I appreciate that the ‘knowledge’ of the social world that I have accrued is only a small part of understanding what this world actually means to individuals who partake. More importantly, I acknowledge that as a white female researcher in a social world that is mainly dominated by men, that my gender subject
position may not be the best equipped to understand the meaning and habitus of these men, as they negotiate their understanding and positioning in this competitive hierarchical world. Accordingly, the accounts and narratives of these men were always situated within the particular power relations of this research.

As Lois Presser (2009) has stated, the interview and subsequent narrative constructions are consequential to men’s narratives of self, including my response to their power plays. In other words, the ongoing understanding of gender relations, particularly in the social sciences, must go beyond simply writing the researcher into the research, and therefore pay more close attention to the exchanges of dialogue within them. Hence, how did the men wish to be seen by a female academic researching their understanding of violence? And subsequently, were their responses and actions part of a further construction and accomplishment of their masculinity in the interview process? Indeed, missing from this data is a systematic investigation into how gender power relations between interviewer and participant become part of interview data, and as one of many female researchers (in particular Presser 2005; Woodward 2008; Trimbur 2009) further research ought to consider these ‘research effects’.

Research into boxing that has deployed an ethnographic symbolic interactionist approach has much to offer, as it is particularly productive in exploring the embodiment and routines and rituals of everyday life. Feminist critiques, although rarely applied to boxing, have a great deal to offer when addressing strategies for resolving some of the methodological problems that have emerged, particularly those concerning validity that underpin subjective/objective dualism, and it is these that I attempted to call upon in my research. Despite my ‘insider’ status, it was quite explicit concerning my gender positioning, and this became markedly clear in my research, because regardless of my level of expertise, or the knowledge that I had managed to accrue, I could not adopt a
gender-neutral stance. Indeed, women can only go so far in ‘doing masculinity’. This may be because the masculinity that is enacted in the boxing gym is predicated upon a history of risk-taking, danger, adventure, the practice of physical force and exclusivity, all of which constitute the making of traditional masculinities. These masculinities are therefore, juxtaposed with bodies with which they are associated, that is, men’s bodies as perceived by those who box. Moreover, researchers, whether situated as women or men, inhabit lived bodies that are also constituted through the practices of gender, therefore reflections upon the gender identity and positioning of the researcher helps to illuminate the representations of masculinities that emerged in the research process.

To conclude, men who box despite common social structural circumstances take various approaches in their interpretations of how they can act as individuals in relation to the obstacles that structure and are structured into their daily lives. In short, identity formation, and the development of both desisting and recidivist identities are thus, a function of the individual’s interpretation of his place in the social structures he is presented with. These differences in interpretation and consequent action therefore suggest that desistance, while of obvious importance, tells us little on its own about the range of ways in which pugilistic men interpret and negotiate their place in the world. Hence, in this research I tried to remain open to the possibilities of interpretation, and focus more on the understanding of violence that men possess, as opposed to just measuring levels of violence prior to or post joining the gym. This in some respects limited my ability to speak clearly, and I acknowledge this, when ascertaining whether or not boxing contributes towards a process of desistance. However, the knowledge gained and recommendations made are valid when considering the future relationship between sport and crime. This is because policy makers and politicians are still wringing their hands when trying to solve the complex problem that is desistance from violence,
especially among young disenfranchised men. While boxing may present as an attractive option it is not always the best avenue for these young men, as the findings in this particular study demonstrate that boxing is not always the most effective tool.
12. References


Besant, W (1899) *East London*, (London 1901)


Daly, M and Wilson, M (1988) *Homicide*, New York: De Gruyter


Gadd, D (2014) ‘Working with Young Men at Risk of Domestic Abuse Perpetrators: Practice Implications of the From Boys to Men Project’ ESRC funded project. Published by University of Manchester School of Law June 2014. [www.boystomenproject.com](http://www.boystomenproject.com)


Hartmann, D (2001) ‘Notes on Midnight Basketball and the Cultural Politics or Recreation, Race, and At-Risk Urban Youth’; *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 25:339-71


Mason, G and Wilson, P (1988) Sport, Recreation and Juvenile Crime, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra


McDowell, L (1997) *Capital Culture: Gender at Work in the City*, Oxford: Blackwell


Mead, G.H (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago


Robins, D and Cohen, P (1978) *Knuckle Sandwich*, Harmondsworth; Penguin

Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What exactly is a youth development program?


Rubinstein, W (1973) *City Police*, New York: Ballantine


Schafer, W.S (1975) Sport and Male Sex Role Socialisation, *Sport Sociology Bulletin*, 4, 47-54


Schulian, J (1983) *Writers' Fighters and Other Sweet Scientists*, Kansas City: Andrew and MacMeel


Wacquant, L 1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*.


Wolfenden Committee (1957) *Sport and the Community- The report of the Wolfenden Committee on Sport*, London: Central Council of Physical Recreation

Wolfgang, M.E (1959) *Patterns in Criminal Homicide*, New York: John Wiley and Sons


