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**Hanging Out and Hanging About: insider/outsider research in the sport of boxing**

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### **Abstract**

This article offers reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the field of research, within the sport of men's boxing, which is strongly characterised by polarised oppositions; between winning and losing, success and failure, women and men and, perhaps most importantly for the researcher, 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. It is this interrelationship between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and the embodiment, not only of the practitioners of the sport, but also the embodied presence of the researcher, which is used here to explore methodological questions about the research process and debates about how the researcher is situated in relation to the research site, by addressing questions about ontological complicity that are implicated in the distinction between 'hanging out' and 'hanging about' at the gym and as part of the culture of boxing.

Key words: boxing, lived bodies, embodiment, gender, masculinities, 'insider', 'outsider', situated knowledge.

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on different aspects of ethnographic research on the sport of boxing. This includes my own research experience and that of other ethnographers. In my own experience, as a white, middle class woman who has always followed boxing, but never practised the sport, working at a men's boxing gym has involved, making a television programme and observing and interviewing boxers as an academic researcher. The latter dimension of field experience has resulted in my reviewing the wider cultural terrain in which meanings about boxing are circulated. Within this terrain personal stories are situated within contexts of public narratives about the sport. Accordingly, the reflections I offer are based upon an overall research process, which includes experience of the local arena of the gym and the wider field of men's boxing as a sport. I argue, in a view not shared by everyone who has

undertaken ethnographic studies, that the local boxing experience must be considered by researchers in relation to the wider sporting field of boxing.

Figure 1

Getting started in the gym



The examples of the voices of boxers are drawn from my study of a gym in the North of England (Woodward, 2004) as well as those of boxers cited by other, ethnographic studies. My main focus in this paper is upon the situation of the researcher in producing knowledge and, in particular the embodied interrelationships between the researcher and the subjects of the research. The researcher carries embodied distinctions, for example of gender, race, ethnicity, dis/ability and class, all of which are constitutive elements in the research process. Bodies are central to boxing, but most research concentrates on the boxers' bodies and devotes less time to analysis of the embodied researcher except as a participant in the bodily practices of the sport. The most productive and interesting work in boxing, especially ethnographic work, such as that of Loïc Wacquant (for example, 1995a, 1995c, 2004), has focused upon the routine body practices of the sport and of the researcher as part of the field

in which he is immersed, rather than reflecting upon the distinctive embodiment of the researcher. Immersion is, of course, recognized as a key strategy of the qualitative researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2003) and is part of a long tradition in anthropology and sociology, which enables the researcher to ‘get inside’ the field of inquiry.

Boxing presents a special and distinctive field of inquiry within the sociological and cultural study of sport. It has a contradictory presence in contemporary culture, because supporters are aware of the censure it provokes. However, men’s boxing still invites participation and the desire to buy into the hyperbole that the sport attracts among commentators and researchers. To be able to say that you ‘hang out’ with boxers, as ‘one of the guys’ supports an identification with a powerful, long-standing version of masculinity. The networks through which the culture of boxing is forged remain reminiscent of the *Fancy*, the term used to describe the amusements of sporting men from diverse social backgrounds, in the Regency period in the early nineteenth century in Britain, especially in London (Egan, 1812). Pierce Egan’s pugilistic writing in the *Boxiana* series (1812-1829) described not only the theatricality of pugilism and the spectacle of fights, but also the social networks where identifications with masculinity through sporting, drinking and gambling pursuits at times transcended differences of social class. ‘Hanging out’ may be contemporary parlance, but what it describes is a very similar networking process that has long been part of the constitution of particular versions of masculinity. This leads me to a consideration of the role of the researcher and the relationship between being ‘inside’, however this is configured, and being ‘outside’, in the process of carrying out research and producing knowledge.

Boxing raises some significant issues about the processes through which knowledge is produced, especially about the relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research and about how the logic of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ is constituted. Boxing invites such dualisms and privileges notions of inclusion and exclusion as one of the defence mechanisms in play in a sport that is so often under attack in the public realm. In some ways

all boxing research is 'inside' to a greater or lesser extent. My questions suggest a re-thinking of the relationship between the insider and outsider status in different boxing contexts, in the gym and beyond. The insider/outsider tension invokes another, namely that between objectivity and subjectivity. Whilst insider participation may facilitate greater insights, the researcher could be implicated in excessive subjectivity and in privileging one position. By addressing the issue and making the tensions visible I seek to suggest some alternative approaches to carrying out research and in the pursuit of useful findings.

## **Boxing**

Men's boxing has traditionally involved high participation by men from black, minority ethnic and impoverished backgrounds. The traditional narrative of the sport providing a route out of the ghetto or from the wrong side of town to self-esteem and even great wealth remains pivotal to boxing (Sammons, 1988). This rags to riches (or at least poverty to self-respect) story is crucial to the heroic legends of boxing heroes and to boxing films, including the *Rocky* series and *Cinderella Man*, the bio-pic based on the career of the unlikely 1930s' world heavyweight champion, James J. Braddock. However, the sport is beset by contradictions, between racism and opportunity, discipline and excess, beautiful bodies and those that are fractured and damaged, and between traditional masculinities and the transformations in gender identities that are taking place in contemporary societies. The gym brings together some of the sport's diverse components, especially routine training and celebrity.

Figure 2

The trainer, the accountant, the star (Junior Witter, WBC welterweight champion) and the manager



Boxing also involves extremely rigorous physical training programmes in the gym. The sport brings together the routine of the gym and the spectacle of public contests; it combines everyday embodied practice and public stories of celebrity and heroism. These heroes might be people personally known by the boxer, such as a family member (often a brother), as claimed by cruiser weight world champion Johnny Nelson, or more visible, global, all time heroes like Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson, or they might be more local, national heroes like Lennox Lewis or Chris Eubank.

Young men who box frequently cite a boxing hero who was their inspiration, as illustrated by these boxers at a north of England gym<sup>1</sup>:

Well, it was Ali of course, not just the fights, not just how good he was as a boxer. It was him' (Johnny, black boxer).

I first got really interested in boxing when I saw the Bruno / Tyson fight in 1989 and I've followed it very closely, ever since, been following most fights (Roger, white boxer, from south east England).

I were just a skinny kid at school and I used to get bashed around a bit and pushed about...at the same time Tyson were on his way up and I used to get up at three o'clock at morning and watch Tyson, so I thought I'd give it a go (Dave, black boxer, from Manchester).

I was working in a fitness studio and Chris Eubank actually came and opened the fitness studio for us and I was speaking to him and he put me onto Brendan Ingle and got me boxing, so I really owe it down to Chris Eubank (John, white, Yorkshire boxer).

Boxing combines the aspirations to heroism which attract boxers with the embodied practices and the daily physical grind of training. Dreams of success are, however, firmly grounded in a material reality of embodied social, economic and cultural disadvantage

### **Bodies and Embodiment**

The routine body practices of boxing cover a range of activities:

There's pad work...just shadow boxing, footwork, combination punching and there's easy bag work as well as sparring and, of course you've got to work at keeping fit (Dave, black boxer).

The punishing regime of the gym is not only physically demanding, it also involves techniques of the self, (Foucault, 1988) expressed both through body practices enforced upon themselves and control in relation to others in order to satisfy the demands of the trainer and the sport. Boxers have to practise skills and to be at the peak of physical fitness to withstand the demands of the sport. Boxers have to meet the weight criteria and this may involve restricted diets and constant efforts to reduce food and fluid consumption before a weigh-in. These self-regulatory techniques involve regulating weight; boxers are classified by weight and to fight outside one's weight category invites disaster. Injuries may be more routine than dramatic, with hand injuries in training being the most common injury in the sport.

Figure 3 getting ready to train



The technologies and practices of boxing involve classifications of the self by the body; not only through weight categories. Boxing bodies are saturated by disciplinary techniques and are highly regulated and self-disciplined through a set of routine practices and mechanisms. Thus the body combines body practices and the traditions to which they belong and is disciplined through techniques of the self. However, the boxing body bleeds, sweats and is injured. Whilst all sports focus on corporeal engagement for practitioners, boxing involves more physical contact than most and crucially is premised upon the aim of physically injuring an opponent to the point where he can be knocked to the canvas and counted out. The converse aim is to avoid injuries to one's self. Boxing is physical for spectators too; they are drawn into the spectacle and, as Vivien Sobchack argues in relation to film (2004), spectatorship is a corporeal practice in which all the senses are implicated. The researcher too is physically situated, although, if not a participant, at more of a distance than the spectator of a fight. Although in less dramatic an experience, the researcher in the gym witnesses the regimen of physical exertion in sparring or bag work, which nonetheless can be powerful.

You can smell, hear and see the experience. At a fight this is enhanced and the spectators' reactions are also physical sensations. Boxing reminds us of the flesh at every turn. Joyce Carol Oates suggests this is embedded in the genealogy of boxing:

When the boxing fan shouts 'Kill him! Kill him!' he is betraying no peculiar individual pathology or quirk but asserting his common humanity and his kinship, however distant, with thousands upon thousands of spectators who crowded into the Roman amphitheatres to see gladiators fight to the death. That such contests for mass amusement endured not for a few years or even decades but for centuries should arrest our attention.

(Oates, 1987:42)

Bodies clearly matter, both as the fit, successful body and, of course, through the threat of the damaged body that every boxer fears. Having to negotiate a body that is impaired creates a completely different experience of the world and of the self than having the previously experienced athletic, powerful body. The world reacts in different ways to the impaired from the fit strong body. The meanings of this body are not written on its surface, nor will the experience be the same for everyone. The human body is ambiguous; subject to natural laws and to the human production of meaning. The body is crucial but it is 'not enough' to explain human existence even in such dire situations, situated as limited to the material body itself.

It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject becomes conscious of himself and attains fulfilment - it is with reference to certain values that he valorizes himself. To repeat once more: physiology cannot ground any values; rather, the facts of biology take on the values that the existent bestows upon them (de Beauvoir 1989: 76).

Boxers gain success and status by taking control of their bodies through rigorous training regimens. The risks of the sport and the very real threat of physical pain and possibly damage in the ring and in training might suggest that boxers need to exercise enormous control, which could be expressed as 'mind over matter' in common sense parlance. The relationship

between mind and body has been of concern, beyond the study of sport, to sociology and cultural studies in general, (Turner, 1996, Shilling, 2003, Crossley, 2001, Young, 2005). Boxing offers an important site for the development of understanding about how ‘we are our bodies’ in a form of ‘direct embodiment’ (Wacquant, 2004:60) where there is no distinction made between mind and body. Increasingly sociologists prefer the term embodiment because it overcomes the problem of either having to separate mind from body or of marginalising the physical dimensions of identification. The merging of mind and body offers a useful means of understanding, not only how, but also why people subject themselves to such punishing training regimes and participate in what seems to be so brutal a sport. How do they keep going when common sense might suggest it would be impossible not to throw in the towel?

It is not surprising that sports sociologists have drawn upon phenomenological accounts to theorize the body. Relatedly, feminist critiques of the body and theories of embodiment have deployed phenomenological approaches arising from the work of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, although their focus has not often been upon sport. From this approach, bodies are crucial to an understanding of selfhood and the processes through which people position themselves and are positioned within the social world.

The body is not a *thing*, it is a situation... it is the instrument of our grasp on the world, a limiting factor for our projects (de Beauvoir, 1989: 66).

De Beauvoir’s approach, which has significant parallels with Merleau-Ponty’s, informs many related critiques and focuses upon having a specific kind of body and the meaning which that body has for the situated individual. However, de Beauvoir foregrounds the gendered dimensions of the situation *and* the situated body. Thus, in my work, the boxer’s body, like that of the researcher, constitutes a material embodied self, which is re-created and lived through the experience of gender, along with body practices and other narratives of identity, in the gym, or in the ring. The body practices and the comportment of the boxer, like those of the researcher draw upon gendered ways of being. This approach provides a way of bringing together the natural, material body and the situation which re-creates the lived body. Bodies

are not 'just' in a situation, nor are they merely objects of empirical or scientific inquiry, although, science can both describe and treat bodies. Bodies are more than this. The concept of the 'lived body' provides a means of enabling:

a situated way of seeing the subject based on the understanding that the most important location or situation is the roots of the subject in the spatial frame of the body' (Braidotti, 1994:161)

However, the deployment of Merleau Ponty's phenomenological approach within the field of boxing has focused more upon the body and its practices than upon the situations – especially those that are gendered – of the lived body. Wacquant's practice based approach is influenced by Merleau Ponty's account, citing the phenomenological concept of the 'lived body' (Wacquant, 1995c:531n 59) in order to address, not only the question of how boxers engage in their sport but why. Wacquant deploys this approach through which Merleau-Ponty sought to overcome mind body dualism and in order to understand boxers' 'willing embrace and submission to the pain and rigour of their chosen sport' (Wacquant, 1995a: 88). He claims that:

The boxers' *desire* to fight flows from a *practical belief* constituted in and by the immediate co-presence of, and mutual understanding between, his (re) socialised lived body and the game...The boxer wilfully perseveres into this potentially self-destructive trade because, in a very real sense, he is inhabited by the game he inhabits. A veteran middleweight who has "rumbled" on three continents for over a decade and who reported breaking his hands twice and his foot once, persistent problems with his knuckles (because of calcium deposits forming around them) as well as a punctured ear drum and several facial cuts necessitating stitches, reveals his ...acceptance, made body of the states of pugilism when he fails to find cause for alarm in his string of injuries: "Sure you do think about it, but then you regroup yourself, start thinkin', you can't, *it's in your blood so much*, you can't, you been doin' it so long, you can't give it up" (Wacquant, 1995a: 88)

Such statements that boxing is 'in the blood' are reiterated by men who box in myriad situations. Many boxers told me that it was 'in their family', 'my brothers all did it' and one man of 59, whose boxing career had been terminated by a detached retina in his early thirties, thought he needed to come to the gym regularly and train because 'it's my life'. Wacquant's argument is that mind and body are one through 'the shared belief in, and collectively manufactured illusion of, the value of the games (real) men play-becomes progressively instilled and inscribed in a particular biological individual (Wacquant, 1995b:173). It is through routine practice that embodied selves are re-created. This 'practical belief' is not simply an effect of mind that involves deciding to engage in the sport and exercising the necessary rational powers of decision making to put it into practice. 'Practical belief' is not a state of mind but the means through which 'we learn by body' (Bourdieu, [1997]2000:141).

Wacquant's account is persuasive in describing the processes of embodied attachment which take place, for example in training regimes and the commitment of boxers to their sport. Boxers *are* their bodies and only become boxers through practice and physical engagement. It is not possible to differentiate between mind and body or body and self. Such ethnographic accounts give high priority to body practices and demonstrate how engagement in the pugilistic activity of men's boxing works, especially in terms of the stoicism, resilience and courage of boxers who keep going in spite of injury and pain, which are deeply embedded in traditional masculinity. Similarly, as Iris Marian Young argues, women have incorporated ways of doing and ways of being into their comportment, noted in sport through the body practices of 'throwing like a girl' (Young, 2005). The body practices of men who box are not merely learned; what they do is who they are and these identities are gendered through iterative practice. Yet, Wacquant's account assumes rather than explores associations with masculinity and suggests a universal embodiment which fails to accommodate the specificities of gender. A generic and universal mind body elision is assumed. What may not be accommodated is disruption. What happens when either, mind and body are not one, or

when everyone is not part of the same system of practical beliefs? How far does the researcher have to be part of the regime of body practices to understand them? Gender offers a significant site for disruption. Boxers' 'practical beliefs' (Bourdieu, [1997] 2000: 141) are specifically gendered and constituted through a particular version of masculinity. This is not to say that either women cannot 'do' masculinity, or certainly that women cannot box. They can and do in increasing numbers (Women's Boxing Archive Network, 2005). On my last visit to the Sheffield gym, in February 2008, I encountered women for the first time.

Figure 4: Mother and daughters



Women's boxing has, however, been described as conforming to the 'softer' regimes of the bodily practices of femininity (Lafferty and McKay, 2005) rather than as 'doing' masculinity; to paraphrase Young (2005), 'soft boxing' might mean throwing punches 'like a girl'. The associations of the embodied practices of boxing do have implications for the researcher who cannot, at least in some sense be un-situated in relation to gender classifications. Men may have to establish their credentials within the masculinities that are enacted at the gym

(Wacquant, 2004) and/or by 'hanging out' outside the gym (Beattie, 1996) and women are positioned as gendered by their very presence.

Young's feminist phenomenological approach, which deploys the concept of embodiment, attempts to redress the imbalance in Merleau-Ponty's work by focusing on gender and, in particular the specificities of women's embodiment. Young challenges the universal account of the gender neutral body implied by Merleau-Ponty and claims that the female body is not simply experienced as a direct communication with the active self, but it is also experienced as an object. She suggests that there are distinctive manners of comportment and movement that are associated with women. Young attributes these different modalities; firstly, to the social spaces in which women learn to comport themselves. In terms of sport this involves constraints of space and repeatedly acting in less assertive and aggressive ways than men. Conversely, from this it might be deduced that men acquire those embodied practices, as in boxing, which are aggressive. Secondly, Young suggests women are encouraged to see themselves through the gaze of others including the 'male gaze', as developed in the work of Laura Mulvey (1975) and to become more aware of themselves as objects of the scrutiny of others. The aspirations to the heroic body of the successful boxer might be viewed as informing the dreams and the practices of men who box. Whereas, young women practise the comportment of femininity, young men engage in the techniques of masculinity, embodied in the 'hard man' image of the boxer. Social space is constituted by body practices and culture in which psychic investments are made; the gym is not a world apart. Within gender binaries, not only are women expected to be less physically aggressive, but also their anxieties might assume corporeal expression. This could be in the form of 'soft boxing' or covering their eyes during scenes of violence, whether in the cinema or on screen, or at a fight. Spectatorship too is gendered and being able to watch cinematic scenes of violence is also constitutive of some versions of masculinity. I have been asked more frequently if I can 'take' the violence of boxing films than tolerate an actual fight. Social space is constituted by body practices and a culture in which psychic investments are made; the gym. Researchers are also situated within

gendered spaces and are constructed and constitute themselves within embodied frameworks of gender.

### **Inside Outside**

Those who conduct the investigations and generate knowledge are also complicit in the processes through which knowledge is re-produced. Whilst individual research projects do, of course, outline their methodological approaches, I wish here to address the more general issues that are raised and which derive from a consideration of boxing research. This is also designed to progress the arguments of those whose research into sport draws upon feminist perspectives, including those, such as Free and Hughson (2003) and McKay, Messner and Sabo, described as 'pro-feminist' (2000). Such work engages with masculinities in a way that makes men visible as men, rather than assuming men as the homogenous, non-gendered norm of humanity, moving beyond the female/male binary and putting women into the discursive regime of sport. I would include the lived body of the researcher too.

Not only work carried out by women, but research within an avowedly feminist framework, has been subjected to criticisms of excessive ontological complicity and on occasion of essentialism, for example in the criticisms levelled at French feminist work on embodied gender difference such as the earlier work of Luce Irigaray, who has argued that the notion of gender cannot embrace the specificity of women's embodiment (1991). She demands the recognition of embodied gender difference and presents a powerful critique of the lack of recognition of women's bodies and women's lives in western culture. This is one aspect of the criticism that has been made of feminist work in relation to its epistemology. The other stresses methodology, for example where the starting point of research is women's experience (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Smith, 1997). In particular feminist standpoint epistemology, a hotly contested conceptualization, has been criticized, for example, by Wacquant, as holding 'that women's subjugation puts them in a privileged position to produce true knowledge' (1993: 497). Similarly, the development of Chicago School ethnography, involving the

participation of men in boxing research might suggest a similar, albeit largely unacknowledged, privileging of the researcher's position.

What underpins my interest is the tension implicated in the situation of the researcher. The insider/outsider dichotomy and that between objectivity and subjectivity on which some of these dilemmas are predicated, are based on far too crude a polarization. The research process can never be totally 'inside' or completely 'outside', but involves an interrogation of situatedness and how 'being inside' relates to lived bodies and their practices and experiences. There are myriad ways of being 'inside' in boxing, although actually engaging in the sport physically is the most dramatic. What is often missing in the debate on methodologies, however, is recognition of the gendered experience of all the lived bodies involved, however they are classified or classify themselves.

The majority of ethnographies conducted in boxing have been carried out by men (Beattie, 1997; Sugden, 1996; de Garis, 2000, Wacquant, 2004, 1995a, 1995c) as have the great boxing books (O'Connor, 2002, McIlvaney, 1996, McRae, 1996, Hazlitt, 1982, Mailer, 1975, La Motta, 1970), especially the biographies of Muhammad Ali, (Kram, 2002, Marqusee, 1999, Remnick, 1998, Hauser, 1991, Ali and Durham, 1976). Similarly, histories of the sport and expositions of its social significance, (for example, Sammons, 1990, Early, 1994, Gorn, 1986) have male authors. Joyce Carol Oates's is something of a lone voice in the canon of great boxing books (1987). There has been work done on gyms where women box (for example, Mennesson, 2000) but women researchers are more likely to conduct research by observation and interview, rather than emphasizing participation (for example, the research of Lafferty discussed in Lafferty and McKay, 2005). A recent history of boxing has a female author (Boddy, 2008) but no particular focus upon gender. Few ethnographies of sport by male researchers acknowledge or make visible the researcher's gendered identity and maleness often passes unquestioned (Wheaton, 2002). This complicity does not only apply to ethnographic accounts. It extends into other areas of sports research where there is participation in and collusion with the gendered sporting culture even if there is not physical

involvement by the researcher in the actual sporting practices (Messner, 2002). Ethnography is one particularly pertinent approach to research, which may, be subject to the question of ontological complicity (Merleau Ponty, 1962) as is the production of authentic 'truth' or an inside world, sometimes couched in terms of the objective subjective dualism, which have much wider application outside sports research. In order to interrogate the collusions of masculinity, consideration of immersion has to address the status of different texts and the relationship between ethnography, interviews, historical accounts and analysis of other texts, including the public stories that might include the press, film and television media and literary sources (Woodward, 2007a).

### **Gendered Access to the Field: situated researchers**

The destabilization of gender identities is proposed by postmodernist research approaches, which seek to challenge the fixity of a gender bound self and body (Butler, 1993, 1990, Foucault, 1988, Gatens, 1996, Grosz, 1994). However, boxers along with other people who actively participate in sport – do not share these fluid categorizations but adopt classifications based upon gender differences, often involving polarized oppositions that are perceived to be firmly embedded and embodied. Related dualisms extend beyond the routine practices of the gym into the networks through which boxing culture is forged (Beattie, 1997, Sugden, 1996). Gender differences can be exaggerated at men's fights, for example through the presence of attractive, scantily clad young women acting as 'card girls' (Oates, 1987), in films and in literature (Woodward, 2007a) where there are powerful associations with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Gender is thus a potentially significant factor in the research process through the complicities and collusions of masculinity (Connell, 1995) and the disruptions of femininity.

At a pragmatic level, access to the research site of men's boxing gyms can be difficult for women. There are strategies to gain entry and others to ensure continued acceptance. Given

the sexualized positioning of women within boxing, for example where female partners of male boxers would be seen as distracting the fighter and reducing both his energy and concentration, there are wider implications. This is translated into the presence of any woman in the gym. Consequently, one research positioning is to be the maternal figure, an extension of a family figure, like the mothers who deliver small boys to youth sessions, or the family members of the trainer, who is thus not threatening and largely seen as asexual (Woodward, 2004). For women, the maternal figure is relatively unthreatening and can elicit responses which elaborate upon the fear that boxers do experience, rather than a reiteration of machismo which could be more likely with a male interviewer. When discussing women's boxing, rather than rehearse arguments about women's physical frailty, many of the boxers I spoke to asked me if I would want my daughters to box ( I have two sons, but nobody asked if I would want them to box). This is changing with the recent inclusion of some girls at the gym<sup>ii</sup>.

Another research positioning is as the gender neutral outsider. Being associated with other agencies such the news or television media for initial contact can be very useful (Woodward, 1997). Having worked with a BBC production team making a television programme at the gym where I later went on to conduct my academic research was a distinct advantage in gaining access. This advantage persisted in some ways through the research because the 'outsider' distinction of social class allied to generation and gender meant that some of the gym's more famous members thought I must be from a TV company or a national newspaper, and approached me, when I was 'hanging about' at the gym. 'Hanging about' did become sufficiently routine to render me invisible at times. 'Outsider' status has to be negotiated and acknowledged explicitly and this has worked in other situations where I have been involved in work in largely all male environments, such as professional football (soccer) (Woodward, 2007b). Distancing had to be embraced as my distinction as researcher was constituted as outsider in terms of gender, class, generation, biography and locality, signified by comportment, appearance, manner of speaking, accent and dress, as well as how I have positioned myself through personal disclosure. My visible presence has been marked by

difference, for example at the men's boxing gym or at the premiership football training ground.

Figure 5: The researcher and the trainer



What can be called the 'outside' is complex, nonetheless. Sugden's *Boxing and Society* includes a range of tales of adventure and his own involvement in risky and threatening activities, but he also goes some way towards acknowledging his own position and reflecting upon his relationship with the field. He argues that for the researcher, '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' (1996: 201). Sugden acknowledges the demands and dangers of his chosen strategy and admits that some of what he did was the direct result of his 'outsider' rather than his 'insider' status and that he experienced fear as a result. This is an important stage in the process of engaging with situatedness. As Sugden says in his conclusion:

We need to develop empathy with our subjects without getting emotionally tied to them...A few of my simple rules might help: be upfront about the research role...we are interested in naturally emergent (or concealed) social truths, not good stories.

(1996:211)

Sugden acknowledges that he is not an honorary member of the gym even if his situatedness does not extend to cognition of the complicity in masculinity that implicates him in the field. Masculinity in sport is re-instated and enacted around the networks which configure the 'insider'/ 'outsider relationship. Sugden recognizes the need to acknowledge situatedness, although, telling 'good stories' also provides raw material for the sociologist and is, therefore, part of the research process and should be valued

As is well-noted, ethnographic access is not limited to the moment of entry into a social world; it is an on-going process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2003). In conducting ethnographic research into boxing, given the location of most boxing gyms in ghettos and economically disadvantaged locations, health risks in the ring or in sparring are not the only problem the researcher might have to fear. Gyms may be situated in the vicinity of a range of illegal or quasi legal practices, yet being a boxer might offer some protection from related risk (Sugden, 1996). For a researcher who is accepted as 'one of the guys', in Wacquant's case, belonging to a particular trainer's group, 'one of DeeDee's boys' (2004: 10) the danger of attack by those who live in the neighbourhood is greatly reduced. Others can occupy the protected space of the gym, as illustrated in my experience of making a television programme. The television company camera crew was assured safety of their expensive equipment, left at the gym, which was, as is usually the case for boxing gyms, situated in one of the poorest parts of town, while they went out for lunch. The open gym was a safe place to leave such valuable equipment in this community because the crew was under the protection of the trainer - 'because you're working here in the gym' (Woodward, 1997).

Personal involvement in the body practices of the sport is a key means of gaining access and one of ethnography's major strengths. However, participation is not everything, nor does it necessarily access a more authentic 'truth' than observation and interviewing. Again, as Wheaton (2002) points out, few ethnographies of sport by male researchers acknowledge or make visible the researcher's gendered identity; maleness passes unquestioned. Wheaton draws upon her own experience as an 'insider' in her ethnography of windsurfing and she reflects upon her insider status, arguing for the critical distance that is also a vital part of ethnography. Although there have been assertions in favour of the superiority of the status of the 'outsider' and a privileging of 'objectivity' in the continuum that has been constructed from complete participant to complete observer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) this separation of the inside and outside is problematic. As Wheaton argues, the dualism of 'inside' and 'outside' has limitations but the recognition of differently situated positions does highlight the necessity for reflection about the researcher's own situation. The accounts of male 'insiders' in sport, especially in the case of sports like boxing, are interesting for their insights into the collusions of masculinity because of the personal investment made in these gender identities at the research site.

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.

(Morgan, 1992: 87)

However, throughout the research process there may be collusion in a particular version of masculinity which goes unnoticed and unrecorded when the researcher and the protagonists at the research site are engaged in the same, competitive, embodied project. The disruption of gender difference, for example, may promote more explicit reflection upon the differentiated body of the researcher, although a focus on the different bodies that are included in the research process could also be productive if there is no such disjuncture. The embodiment of boxing and the implication of the body in the activities and practices of the agents may make it difficult to disentangle the diversity of the dimensions of masculinity. Active engagement affords greater insights into the corporeality of the sport and, in the case of boxing, more

effectively addresses the question of how it is possible to keep going in what can be so violent and painful an endeavour. This is demonstrated particularly well in Wacquant's book *Body and Soul*.

However, the more active the 'joining in', the less room there is for a distancing from the research site and for reflection upon and acknowledgement of the researcher's situated relationship with what is being researched. Feminist approaches that acknowledge the position of the researcher have the advantage of being explicit and direct in re-instating 'situatedness'. Similarly, the reflexivity with which the researcher seeks to understand her or his responses can be productive. Valerie Walkerdine's albeit small scale, reflections on her experiences of watching a *Rocky* film yields some insights into the ways in which identification works through different strands that include class, ethnicity and gender (1986). Just as Walkerdine argues that theories of identification have to take on board the fantasies of the spectator and what is brought to the viewing, as well as what is represented on screen, the researcher has to acknowledge and engage with their own situation, what they bring to the research and how they might be complicit in the field of study. A focus upon the *situation*, which includes the lived body of the researcher, in which the inside/outside binary is configured, is more useful than attempting to unravel the logic of the dualism itself.

Donna Haraway has suggested a solution to the problem of the slippery nature of competing knowledges by claiming that privileged knowledge should be abandoned in favour of partial visions and what she calls 'socially situated knowledge' (1991: 188). Partial knowledge includes embodied knowledge that is produced from multiple perspectives. Sport is always implicated in the wider social, cultural terrain through diverse networks. Haraway holds onto the possibility that some knowledge and some partial visions may be more reliable than others, thus retaining the requirement that knowledge be subjected to critical evaluation. This approach has been criticized, for example by Ramazanoglu and Holland, (2005) as failing to specify the criteria by which some knowledge is to be judged more valid than others.

However what is useful about it for my purposes is the necessity that is asserted of situating the researcher who seeks knowledge and the recognition that knowledge is both partial and situated.

### **Personal Public**

Despite being epistemologically problematic, the 'insider' role is well rehearsed within the cultural study of sport. Sugden (1996) acknowledges a debt to the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in the UK, in developing Chicago School ethnography to accommodate the socio-structural and power-related elements which frame sub-cultural experience and which are somewhat neglected in earlier ethnographies, including Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1955).

The dichotomised rubric of insider and outsider is inaccurate in many ways, being too concerned with differences between researchers and their subjects and less with commonality (Wheaton, 2002), which does not have to focus only upon body practices. Boxing is much more than the body practices, however skilful and dramatic in the gym or in the ring. These practices are embedded in a set of cultural practices and relationships. The insider and outsider status of the researcher is closely connected to other debates about the process of producing knowledge through the research, for example the interrelationship between objectivity and subjectivity. Because boxing is a contentious social activity, insider status may be conferred to some degree by the researcher being seen to lend support to the sport against its detractors. This is articulated in complex ways. The immersion of what Wacquant calls the 'observing participant' (2004: 6) may invoke, on the one hand, a perspective that is taken from the subjective position of the researcher and may therefore lack distance and objectivity, or on the other hand, may provide deeper insights which enrich the findings and create a more accurate picture of the field. Ethnography privileges the insider, placing the researcher within a twenty first century re-articulation of the *Fancy*, privy to disclosures about associated activities, outside the ring and the gym, such as gambling, dog fighting and,

in some cases, bare knuckle fighting. However, these practices and networks are very specifically gendered, in ways that are not always acknowledged. One way of exploring some of the processes through which these practices occur is by reviewing the traditional dualism between objectivity and subjectivity and looking at how related problems have been addressed by feminist approaches, taking into account claims of bias and of the need to address situatedness very seriously.

As Ramazanoglu and Holland point out in the context of feminist methodologies, those who challenge the primacy of objectivity in the objective / subjective dichotomy are in a contradictory position. The researcher who eschews the dominance of the model, which asserts the possibility of objective truth, still has to make a valid claim to the observations made and explanations offered about the nature of the social world being investigated (2002). For feminist researchers, their project is to produce knowledge of what gender relations are as a basis for emancipatory action that is in some way more 'true' than pre-existing, partial, patriarchal or male-centred knowledge. 'They still have the problem confronted by all social researchers of making their knowledge believable' (ibid: 47).

'Outsider' status may offer the opportunity to claim greater objectivity whereby the researcher avoids the privileging of 'insider knowledge' but this may also have to be countered by the more limited access to the understandings of those who box. 'Hanging out' provides the chance to overhear intimate exchanges that are not specifically addressed to the researcher, but access to such insights can be gender based. De Garis (2000) describes revelations and intimate exchanges in the showers which are not, of course, accessible to a woman researcher in the gym. However, without reflection on the exchange, involving identifications with what could be seen as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), the insights produced may demonstrate more about the collusions of masculinity than about boxers per se. Accordingly, the physical presence of the researcher may distort the 'authenticity' of the exchange. It may pose questions about which masculinity is implicated in

the collusion. There is always some separation between the researcher and the subjects of research – although this can seem to be overcome by the collusions of masculinity – which passes without comment, even when exchanges and encounters are witnessed when ‘hanging out’ rather than just ‘hanging about’. My point here is to indicate the relevance of the gender specific experience of the researcher especially, and to illustrate both positive and negative gendered dimensions of ontological complicity which are linked to the debate about the relationship between objective and subjective experience of doing research and producing knowledge. Power and knowledge are always implicated in the process of doing research.

## **Conclusion**

Although I have used some dualisms to frame the debate, I have also demonstrated the limitations of making such distinctions. It is these very binaries which constitute the polarized logic of separation. Whatever the theoretical preferences for fluidity and the transgression of boundaries of the ethnographer or qualitative researcher, this approach is less likely to be shared by the subjects of research in sport and the dualisms through which people live their lives have to be accommodated. Boxing is characterized by dualisms; success and failure, fit bodies and damaged bodies, routine training and public spectacles, men and women. Empirical evidence demonstrates a note of caution in making universal, ‘insider’ claims and indicates the need to acknowledge spatial and temporal particularities and to recognize the distinctiveness of the different sites at which knowledge is produced. These sites include the situated researcher as well as the subjects of the research. A critical consciousness of the differences of lived bodies is possible through methodologies that take on board the partiality of knowledge and the situated researcher. The contribution of feminist and pro-feminist debates about how knowledge is produced, point to the necessary inclusion, whatever research methods are adopted, of a situated perspective.

Researchers are still situated in the field of research and gender is a key component in this positioning of lived bodies. Although boxing offers particularly marked gendered polarizations, there are nuances in the relationship between the researcher and participants that are too easily obscured. Exploring some of the mechanisms through which dualisms are forged does not necessarily reveal these nuances. Furthermore, the acknowledged existence of nuances does not discount the necessity of providing some kind of general criteria by which research findings might be evaluated. What has been demonstrated as more problematic is the suggestion that the research process through its empirical location in the gym might provide a spatial separation of personal and public worlds and between routine everyday practices of training and the dreams that are fed by more public representations of boxing celebrities and heroes. These dichotomies can be misleading and I have argued for a greater recognition of the interrelationships between discursive opposites, both conceptually and spatially. Only in this way can we understand the routine masculinities in boxing that are built upon the configuration of an 'insider' world, one embedded in cultural collusion and the social networks which re-produce the culture of boxing and its body practices.

The stories that are told in the gym and which provide the substance of boxing legends are material to its culture. 'Hanging out' in the gym, on the way to the fight, and in some of the quasi-legal and even illegal activities that take place outside the ring, and the gym in the wider arena of a twenty first century version of the *Fancy*, offer insights into a social world that may be less immediate for those who 'hang about' and do not have the means to collude in that culture. However, they cannot pass unmarked and without reflection, even by ethnographers who do not participate in the body practices of the sport. Being primarily an 'observing participant' and being immersed in a research site has the enormous advantage of the immediacy of 'being there' and in addressing the routine performance of masculinity. In regard to boxing this facilitates a grasp of the embodied practices that make it possible, indeed essential to keep going even though one is experiencing extreme pain and distress, like the wall in distance running, or transition in childbirth. However, there is a space between

immersion in the field and the role of the researcher which requires some acknowledgement of the situatedness of the researcher in the process.

Research into boxing, which has deployed Bourdieu's approaches, has been particularly productive in exploring embodiment and the 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 out of the tensions between the inside and the outside and between different forms of claims to validity which underpin the objective / subjective dualism. Oates is an example of a woman who writes about boxing from, in one sense, an insider position, although not as practitioner, but as a very committed fan. She does not write from a feminist perspective and adopts a very negative attitude towards women who box; they are dismissed as parodies in a sport which, she insists, is 'all about men' (1987: 72). Despite her 'insider' status, she is quite explicit about her gendered situation. This illustrates how women are marked in sports writing and, whatever their level of expertise, cannot adopt a gender neutral stance nor even be silent. Women can only go so far in 'doing masculinity'. This may be because the masculinity that is in play in boxing 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 tied into the particularities of the bodies with which they are associated; that is men's bodies as perceived by those who box.

Material bodies constitute important elements in understanding processes of identification and recognition, even misrecognition is based on these material categories. The suggestion that all knowledge is situated provides a route into reflection upon the position (situatedness) of the researcher as well as that of the subjects of the research. This approach also avoids a reductionist view of bodies, allowing for consideration of the lived experience of individuals within the social practice of boxing. Researchers, whether situated as women or men, inhabit lived bodies that are also constituted through the myths and practices of gender. Reflection

upon the gender identity and positioning of the researcher helps to cast light on the representation of masculinities that emerge from the research process. This is not to devalue the research, but to situate the knowledge so produced and acknowledge its partiality. There has to be some reflection on 'hanging out' as well as on 'hanging about'.

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<sup>i</sup> At the South Yorkshire gym in the north of England where I conducted my research (Woodward, 2004) boxers adopted classificatory systems, which differentiated between white boxers who were local, i.e. from Sheffield, those who were from the region, Yorkshire, and others who had travelled from other parts of the UK, and from around the world to train at this gym, with a trainer ranked by *Ring* magazine as among the top 10 in the world, in 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Girls have recently started attending the gym at open training sessions. The gym has always been a very democratic place with world champions training along with young boys, amateurs and men who box just to keep fit, with no intention of fighting competitively. However, recently transforming gender roles outside the gym have impacted on those inside and girls have been allowed in to train. The trainer says that he hopes for a woman champion, but women, as yet lack a place in the heroic myths of boxing and their status remains marginal and clearly differentiated. The kinship networks articulated in men's experience are absent in women's and women's inclusion is sometimes framed in terms of providing a means of gaining confidence and self respect through engagement with the disciplines and practices of boxing.