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Being in the Field: Doing Research

Reflection on a moment

In 2010, I was involved in making a film, *A Bloody Canvas*, about art and boxing. I was not only a consultant on the film but also appeared in several scenes, including one where I am interviewed in the gym where I had carried out some of my research, interviewing and observing those who boxed and trained boxers. Boxing has been the empirical focus of a large part of my work over the last ten years and I also contributed to the Art and Sport project prior to the 2012 Olympics¹. Although I had already reflected upon the position of the researcher in relation to the field in some of my work on methodologies, actually seeing myself in the field in the film was a bit of a shock. As such, it generated a whole range of thoughts about being both inside the field, as someone firmly included and part of this film which was shown to the public, and yet also quite outside the social world and culture of boxing. In that viewing the film made me aware of my embodied presence within the film and its narrative, it also made me newly conscious of my outsider status as a middle class, white older woman.

One scene had particular impact. The wife of the artist Sean Scully, who was the main protagonist and inspiration behind this exploration of art and boxing, enters briefly, carrying a small child, and then disappears. The film itself seems to be all about men, with only this one very traditional view of women. Yet there I am in the middle of it, an embodied presence among the men who box, have boxed or follow boxing, as part of the sport's wider culture. Unexpectedly, then, I had the experience of seeing myself as the subjects of my research might see me. It was an experience

that called to mind, quite dramatically, the puzzle of being there - inside the field, and yet outside it at the same time. My body is what makes me 'there', but mine is of course a *particular* body and one which renders me an outsider.

Anthropologists in particular have often highlighted the *value* of outsiderhood as a way of bringing to the surface those aspects of culture and a society which might be less evident to its 'insiders' (Just 1978). In work on the anthropology of western organizations, for example, Hirsch and Gellner refer to the challenge of gaining access as a source of 'important insights into the way particular places are locally conceptualized, bounded and resourced' (2001:5). Yet insiderhood remains important, not just in terms of being accepted, but also in the more difficult area of 'fellow-feeling' that Laws (1990) describes as essential to the interpretation of data - something she struggled with in her feminist exploration of men's conceptualisations of menstruation. It is within the context of these debates that I locate my own research journey, one that is distinctive in its capacity to foreground the *embodied* dimensions of these issues that are more often discussed simply in terms of cognitions or competing discourses.

Insider/outsider and embodiment

Arguably, as researchers, we are always 'outside', since our craft involves the distance necessary for reflection and analysis. Yet our position as an outside researcher requires particular kinds of insiderhood, some achieved, some given, as I go on to describe. While this chapter draws from a personal research journey, it also connects to the wider practice of crafting knowledge and so demonstrates what qualitative research can achieve. Over time, the journey I describe has taken me from a critical analysis of motherhood to research on boxing and boxing culture. In both

these areas, bodies matter, with, at particular points, the bodies of both mothers and boxers understood culturally as ‘at risk’. For example, as the history of childbirth makes clear, its status as a ‘risky’ process has been profoundly entangled with competition as to whose knowledge and experience of the birthing body has primacy: the physician’s, the midwife’s or the mother’s (see Martin 1987; Scully 1994). Similarly, as I describe below, boxing has become a focus for medically-grounded disapproval to the extent that a call for its prohibition as a dangerous sport has been made. Moreover, at particular points both motherhood and boxing also involve exclusions of the bodies of members of the opposite sex; as Draper argues, the privileging of *bodily* change as a key marker of transitions to parenthood results in men’s ‘biological exclusion’ from this process (2003:744), while, conversely, in the boxing gym, very few women have been visible (or included), as I note below.

In sum, each sphere of research, in its own way, has much to say about the gendering of human beings. Thus, as a female researcher working among bodies marked as ‘at risk’, in settings where the privileging of particular kinds of bodies results in particular ‘biological exclusions’, there is little by way of neutral ground upon which to stand and engage with my participants. I cannot, therefore, remain unaware of my own embodiment; indeed I cannot escape the discomforts and difficulties described below. They are, nonetheless, key to the scope my research fields have had for fostering new insights into the centrality of the body in the constitution of gendered identities.

I begin, though, with the implications of all this for qualitative researchers, whether they gather data through interviewing or participant observation, or some combination

of both. What my research journey has brought home to me is that all such researchers are likely to encounter aspects of the often troubling relationship between insider and outsider field locations. For me, this tension has particular resonance in that I started my research journey with a thesis on the place of birth, at a time in my life when this also mattered enormously to me personally. Mine was a comparative study of the impact of the location of childbirth in different parts of the world, weighted in favour of an evaluation of quantitative data, but nonetheless inspired by personal, subjective investment in the topic at a time in my own biography when I was planning to give birth to my third child at home. However much quantitative data I used to support my argument, as a researcher, I was irrevocably positioned as an insider (Earle and Letherby, 2003). While the outdated belief that quantitative data can only stem from ‘an independent, extraneous or etic standpoint’ (Rapport and Overing 2007: 346) is persistent, it is telling that my embodied identity as a mother of two children at that time and pregnant with my third overrode its status as a form of verifiable truth.

For me then, as a feminist academic, insiderhood evoked a set of anxieties that were shared by others working in the field of motherhood at that time, one where embodied experience constitutes a primary focus. To acknowledge one’s embodied presence within this field, and indeed to conceptualise that embodiment, raised, however, the twin dilemmas of essentialism, where everything is reduced to flesh, and unreflecting subjectivism. Indeed, motherhood, which Luce Irigaray (1985, 1991) has described as the dark continent, has long been a bone of contention within feminist politics: recognition of its relevance in women's lives brings the risk of privileging an embodied experience in ways that suggest a biologicistic and essentialist understanding

of sexual politics. Indeed, these same issues continue to surface within critiques of the third wave of feminisms too (Gillis et al, 2007). To acknowledge the materiality of the flesh and of bodies potentially reduces women to their corporeal qualities and capacities. In this mix of diverging orientations, biology and embodiment become confused (Rose, 1984, Woodward, 1997a).

If, however, we move forward some years in my research journey to when I began my study of boxing, we find a different set of difficulties emerging from the relationship between insiderhood and outsiderhood.. Feminist researchers working on motherhood may well find its corporeal nature a political and theoretical challenge; an awareness of embodied identification with other women who have children can deter or disrupt important work in this area. By contrast, much research on male sport, and boxing in particular, has not only failed to examine its gendered dimensions, but has uncritically celebrated its emphasis on embodiment and its associated capacities and vulnerabilities.

Traditionally, male sociologists researching boxing have participated in the body practices of the boxers (Wacquant, 1995, 2004, Sugden 2006) whereas female sociologists largely have not (Heiskanen, 2012). However, as observing participants (Wacquant, 1995, 2004), such men have not necessarily reflected upon, or even acknowledged the gendered status of their collusion with the field (Wheaton, 2004, 2013). In this way, then, they simultaneously collude in the networks of hegemonic masculinity that are particularly evident in boxing (Woodward, 2006, 2008).

In an attempt to capture what might be seen as the gendered, primordial forces of boxing, the writer Joyce Carol Oates asserts its status as 'real', or in possession of en fleshed capacities which, in their intensity, are shared by motherhood (Oates, 1987). Much as I admire Oates' work and her commitment to boxing, I disagree with the simplicity of this equation, its opposition of the real to drama and the binary logic of identifying women with childbirth and men with boxing. Nonetheless, in both these modes of being in the world human beings' embodied resources are prominent, particularly the powerful entanglement of the flesh with the making and understanding of relationships and social inequalities. As such, both motherhood and boxing are reminders that a focus on embodiment and the place of bodies can engender productive research, in their cases through both parallels and differences. Researchers themselves are not ghosts in these machines; they are material, embodied selves with embodied capacities and the bearers of embodied characteristics, like gender, class, disability and race - as well as being part of the flow of the dialogic relationship between researchers and the field of research. Moreover, as Jenkins argues, compared with the more ambiguously body-based categorisations of 'race' and disability, gender is 'based on a *general* difference of embodied *type*'. In his view, '[t]here are non-constructed, natural differences in the embodiment of female and male humans which no amount of mating and mingling can modify' (2002:121). Given the centrality of the sexed body to gendered identity, then, it is precisely the embodiment of gender that my problematic insider/outside status helped reveal.

Moving into sport

Sport, the field in which I now do much of my research, offers ample scope for acknowledging the centrality of corporeality to debates about social relations, as

outlined above. Boxing, however, is distinctive among sports for a number of reasons, not least the centrality it affords to flesh and the synergy of mind and body (Wacquant, 1995, 2004). Although all sport is based on the binary logic of sex/gender, with clearly bounded female and male categories, boxing is *particularly* marked by these dichotomies even though heroic female figures, like gold medal winning Nicola Adams, have begun to emerge since the 2012 Olympics (Woodward, [2013](#), 2014). Moreover, sport in general affords little space for explicit celebration of transgression, or engagement with the diversity and plasticity of sex and sexuality which permeates postmodern feminist thinking (Butler, 1990, 1993). Boxing culture, then, is marked by a binary logic that reproduces itself across a range of embodied characteristics and capacities: the broken and the beautiful body; success and failure; danger and the management of risk; legality and illegality; amateur and professional; winners and losers; heroes and villains. Not least within this list is the binary logic of gender that serves to divide and define women and men. It is particularly evident in professional boxing where the main purpose of the encounter in the ring is to knock your opponent unconscious and to avoid suffering this fate yourself. The dangers of boxing and its traditional association with tales of triumph over tragedy by escaping poverty, particularly among migrant young men, mean that the sport is marked by heroic legends and narratives. Women ~~have been~~ were largely excluded from these through the twentieth century.

If, in addition, we consider the broader canvas of gender politics, boxing can also be seen as a component of more pervasive narratives of masculinity. As a particular form of hegemonic masculinity, it requires the coexistence and collusion of those on the periphery, commentators, trainers, spectators, journalists, fans, as well as those in the

ring or in the gym (Connell, 1995). Sex/gender is thus profoundly entangled in this sphere of research and, as I argue, in the production of knowledge within and about it. In relation to the bounded and distinct gender categories constituted through boxing, then, my work poses a number of questions about what happens when the researcher is outside in one sense, that is as a practitioner, and yet inside in other ways; for example, in the pleasure and excitement I derive from watching boxing and the knowledge of the sport I have as a fan, albeit an ambivalent and unconventional one. Here I address three of these questions: firstly, the ethical and political dimensions of boxing's status as a sport that is disapproved of on grounds of risks to health; secondly, the implications of an insider role for awareness of embodied gender identities; and thirdly, the researcher's responsibility towards data on marginalised or illegal practices.

1. Risk and danger

Importantly, and perhaps paradoxically, boxing carries *ambivalent* meanings; its practices of excitement and danger have made it subject to considerable approbation. Many people, including doctors and those in medical professions support the prohibition of boxing on health grounds. Viewed from within the sport, those who express disapproval of this kind are outsiders, whereas a researcher who seeks entry to boxing, in some form (and follows it) becomes an insider at particular points. To what extent, then, does this form of insiderhood imply acceptance of boxing's risks to health?

To address this question, we can consider the diversity of forms that insider status can take; it can be achieved by being a fan or follower of the sport but also, most

importantly, by not being seen to oppose its continuation. However, if the researcher, seeking to gain access to both the practice and culture of boxing, does not ally herself with those who support its prohibition, she might face ethical and political questions about the contingency of her affiliations in the research encounter, their fluid, iterative nature.

This issue, of the researcher's allegiances within a contentious sphere of practice, illustrates the situated, nuanced nature of a more pervasive tension between insiderhood and outsiderhood. When the researcher shares membership of the same society as those among whom they are working, this tension is particularly likely to make itself felt. For example, for UK researchers studying informal ritual practices such as clairvoyance or spiritualism, 'the question of belief seems to present itself with great urgency' (Warner 1996: 150). Such researchers are frequently required to declare whether or not they themselves believe in the spirit world. If they declare they do not believe they are well received by fellow academics, but are likely to lose the trust of those they are working alongside. Warner explains this urgency as an aspect of a post-Enlightenment commitment to verifiable truth, one less likely to trouble the anthropologist working on magical beliefs in a non-Western society, yet highly relevant to those working in their own culture.

In the specific case of reflexively navigating the difficult ethical and political terrain between supporting and opposing boxing, the gendered embodiment of the researcher is likely to come more clearly into focus, however. Is a male researcher's *support* for boxing more likely to be assumed and just taken for granted? By contrast, is it more likely that a woman researcher will be assumed to be against boxing because of

gendered assumptions about feminine squeamishness and women's dislike of violence?

Boxing is a very particular field of research, albeit one which speaks to many wider methodological concerns. As a sport it is contentious and often closed to those deemed to be outsiders. Traditionally this category of outsiders has often included women, for example in the gym. Boxing is thus an exciting field of research, especially for someone who is keen to focus upon sexual politics.

2. Embodied gender awareness: the I and the Me

I first gained access to the gym through making a BBC television programme about bodies, embodiment and identity (Woodward, 1997), which I followed with a series of interviews and observation, and 'hanging about' in the gym (Woodward, 2008) getting to know the trainer, his family and the boxers. The reflections that arose during this process, when combined with my ethnographic work and my textual analysis, especially of cinematic representations of boxing, shed further light on issues of insiderhood and outsiderhood and the nature of the researcher's gendered identity.

The film itself (*A Bloody Canvas* (RTE, 2010), ~~Caravaggio, 2010~~) endeavours to capture some of the exuberance and passion of boxing as well as its darkness through an exploration of links between boxing and art. The darkness of boxing goes hand in hand with its oppositional forces of light and dark and its deep contrasts of success and failure, noble art and brutal destruction, as well as its criminal associations (McRae, 1996). As noted above, for Irigaray (1985, 1991) darkness can also be

associated with motherhood in that it has remained invisible historically, a dark continent marginalised from other aspects of human experience, a topic on which women themselves have been silenced. In her choice of the adjective ‘dark’, however, Irigaray’s work does point towards some of the synergies between the two seemingly diametrically opposed fields of research in which I have worked.

As I note above, making this film provided me with the strange but intellectually exhilarating experience of not only being in the field but also of witnessing myself represented as in the field, yet also outside it. My position as an older, white, middle-class woman who is well aware of the costs of boxing to its participants’ health is ambiguous and deeply contradictory. I have however, become increasingly comfortable within a social world where I am now accepted, not entirely but within limits, and as a known, ~~familiar~~sympathetic -figure. In boxing it *helps* that I am an older woman who is also a mother and thus not sexualised as a younger woman might be, particularly within an environment imbued with the values of hegemonic masculinity (Woodward, 2006, 2008). However, as a researcher I am, nonetheless, never completely inside the field. Even the most participant of ethnographers, such as Wacquant’s observing participant (Wacquant 2004), is still not dependent on the remuneration to be gained from turning professional and is still able, not only to stand back to observe and reflect but ultimately to retreat to academe. This applies to most research, especially that which is conducted with those on the margins of society who may be engaged in illegal or quasi legal practices (Atkinson and Young, 2008).

The process whereby the researcher becomes an accepted figure within a particular social environment, in my case as someone sympathetic to boxing culture, rather than

as a boxer myself, was evident in the visual, symbolic systems of the film. I am not only the film's academic advisor; I am there on screen talking to the boxers and to camera (RTE, 2010).

The boxers too carry the enfolded inscriptions of their craft and of years of practising their sport (or noble art). For many, their faces bear scars or bruises. Viewing the film makes me particularly aware of the gendered nature of the ageing body. Older men who have boxed are likely to be indifferent to ageing; their broken noses and scars carry the status of trophies, evidence of having been there, of once being a contender. By contrast with them, my own bodily inscriptions of age and ageing potentially undermine the status women accrue through a youthful bodily appearance (Hockey and James 2003). As indicators of my outsider status, these embodied markings lead me to feel, briefly, like an imposter since evidence of the passage of time on the female face is no match for the layering of the scars of pugilism. This response alerts me to my difference from the men I am talking to. It makes me aware that my academic status cannot readily be discerned or made visible through my appearance. I appear simply as an older woman, I am not signified even as an academic researcher, and so my outsider status seems even more obvious. The boxers, by contrast, bear embodied evidence of the professional status they inhabit, while I do not present a professional persona at all, only my private self.

This experience of seeing myself in the act of carrying out research is unique, one made possible only through the capacity of photographic technology to fix the moment and make it open to scrutiny. It can be compared with researchers' customary processes of gradually coming to see themselves through the eyes of their participants

and slowly recognising what these identifications reveal about participants' categories of thought. Only over time, for example, was Okely (1996), able to observe the degree to which she had achieved an insider status among the Traveller Gypsies she was studying by checking the reactions of the Home Counties householders to her appearance on their doorsteps asking for scrap and rags. Arguably their faces constituted another kind of mirror, but one requiring a considerably greater degree of interpretation.

What I see in the film ~~reminds me~~ is resonant of the work of George Herbert Mead's formulation of the self as incorporating the 'I' and the 'me' (Mead, 1934). He argued that the self is made and remade through the interaction of the inner world of the 'I' and the 'me' which is, in turn, shaped by social relationships with others and the wider social world. The self then has two components, the 'I' which is the active inner agent and the 'me' which is the socialised persona, formed through interactions with others. The 'me' is always an idea of oneself that is reflected back to one through the eyes and actions of others. Mead goes further than this because the 'I' and the 'me' do not stand in isolation from one another but also have an ongoing, iterative relationship which means that one's sense of self is never entirely fixed or rigid. In witnessing myself in the film I gained a better sense of my 'self' through an understanding of the 'me'. This, I gradually understood, is how others ~~saw~~ might see me on screen. My research relationships were therefore suddenly visually re-presented, revealing the different intersecting axes of power, such as social class, race, ethnicity and generation. ~~But it~~ It was gender however, that ~~which~~ -came across most strikingly as the element which defined me in the dominant narrative of the film. Depending on the

field in question, then, different aspects of who we are provide points of both connection and disconnection with those who participate in our research.

To see oneself from the outside, as I did in this film, is a reminder of the situatedness of the researcher and of the need to be attentive to positioning oneself. Being invited to participate in the film provided me, as a researcher, with access to another part of this research field. As researchers we have some recognition within the academic world, but also require access to the social worlds we investigate and at least some acceptance there. In this instance I felt it went further than simply acceptance however; I was receiving recognition within the field itself as someone with expertise. This experience of witnessing myself as the embodied researcher thus foregrounds the ways bodies are implicated in the research process. In sport, gender and its assumptions and boundaries shape what researchers can do to achieve acceptance; male researchers are more likely to 'join in' with uncritical enthusiasm, but women may have had fewer choices in many sports environments.

3. The researcher's responsibility: a situated approach

I took up the opportunities offered by making this film enthusiastically because it allowed me greater access to boxing culture, particularly as someone who cannot even pretend to be a regular participant in the sport. Since researchers have to take advantage of whatever opportunities are offered to get into the field however, the knowledge thereby crafted may come under suspicion as corrupted or possibly distorted. Again, in my ~~twin~~ experiences of researching motherhood and boxing this dilemma has presented itself in very different ways. Ethnography and interviewing can involve disclosures of intense personal experience some of which, in the case of

my work on motherhood, I chose not to publish (Woodward, 1997). In other words I made ~~certain~~ ethical decisions about the personal or intimate material I would make public. In turn, boxing culture and the social world of the gym often involve associated and peripheral illegal activities which present other kinds of dilemmas for the researcher. In this case there is not only the problem of publishing what could be incriminating material, but also the ethical dilemma of whether or not to state one's own position within this social world.

Feminist methodologies are a useful resource here, offering a situated approach (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002) and strategies for situating the self of the researcher in relation to the subjects and field of research (Woodward, 2009, 2012). In order to be situated the researcher has to take a position which may mean that she has to find ways of separating aspects of herself from the collective 'we' of the social world under investigation; in this instance, as part of the team making the film, either the boxing gym or the wider boxing culture. As I have noted elsewhere, this demands a strategy such as the one Sophie Woodward and I adopted in *Why Feminism Matters* (Woodward and Woodward, 2009) and in *Being in the Academy* (2012) where, in order to accommodate the situated researcher, we used 'I-Sophie' and 'I-Kath' to allow connections and acknowledge differences among women across generations through a located, situated self. In this respect, however, it is also important to recognise that bodies are situated by social forces, that the 'I' is inevitably enmeshed with the 'me', that is 'the internalised attitudes of significant others' (Jenkins 2004:18); in this case the team making the film, as well as the men who participated in the life of the gym, and in the wider boxing culture. As Simone de Beauvoir argued, bodies themselves are situations (de Beauvoir, 1989, Moi, 1999) that can

incorporate and *shape* social forces. In other words, material bodies and the ways in which they are seen stand in a dynamic relationship to one another. The ‘I’ is not simply malleable. As Jenkins argues, ‘Your definition external definition of me is an inexorable part of my internal definition of myself – even if I only reject or resist it – and *vice versa*’ (2004:25). In other words, while the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ co-exist, each potentially possesses the power to shape the other. Moreover, despite the potential vulnerability of the ‘I’, in this case as a result of their gendered embodiment, the specificity of the ‘I’ or first person pronoun stands to gain much through the political project and solidarity of the gendered ‘we’ or first person plural pronoun.

In my research on boxing deliberately situating oneself, in an embodied sense, involves the to and fro of affiliating myself as an insider with the culture of the gym as well as distancing myself, and being distanced, from some of its more troubling elements and contradictions. It is an approach that draws on the embodied agency of the researcher and locates her or him in relation to the field, a move that through explicitly positioning the researcher simultaneously avoids the distorted dichotomous position of opposing subjectivity to objectivity (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 2002). In my own case, however, what is important is an awareness that a situated approach must somehow *encompass* the assemblage of sometimes contradictory forces: of following and supporting the sport, while not practising it and also being conscious of its elements of brutality and sometimes being too frightened to watch. Feelings, commentary and analysis are mixed up in a dynamic complexity which defies simple binaries. Through reflexive awareness, however, the researcher can achieve the necessary mobility or flexibility to draw insight via their multiple forms of locatedness..

Conclusion

In this chapter I have raised issues about the role of embodiment in the process of crafting knowledge, something relatively neglected in accounts of researchers' status as both insiders and outsiders. This has been achieved by focussing on the dynamic relationship between the researcher and the field of research through reflection upon the often circuitous paths which my own work has taken me. While the particular empirical fields through which my journeys have taken me, seem unrelated, reflection reveals surprising symmetries and points of connection. One of the consistent but also most disruptive strands is the problem of bodies and embodied presence.

Research into bodies and embodiment has not always been attentive to the embodied presence of the researcher in the process of making and remaking knowledge. It is feminist critique and the journey which different feminist approaches have taken which has enabled me to take some of the risks that are sometimes involved in thinking what seems unthinkable. To exemplify the value of this approach I used - three dimensions of working with an awareness of my own gendered embodiment: firstly, reflection upon the ethical ~~issue~~implications of the researcher's affiliation with the beliefs and values of those among whom they are working; secondly, the insights to be gained from a reflexive awareness of the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' of identification; and thirdly, the challenge of accommodating oneself to research opportunities whilst retaining intellectual integrity, which can be addressed by situating oneself in an embodied sense.

Putting bodies into discourse is disruptive for a number of reasons. For example, there is anxiety about the threat of biological reductionism and essentialism with which feminists have had to grapple. More recently, the feminist corporeal turn has most productively theorised this anxiety, highlighting the importance of earlier feminist work in order to permit an understanding of social worlds, processes and relationships which includes material bodies.

In addition, whilst women's gendered identities have been marked in fields of research which have been mainly populated by men, the idea of the relevance of sex/gender for *all* participants has not been readily assimilated into either practice or analysis. Focusing upon bodies and the capacities of flesh provide a valuable strategy for raising questions about how sex as well as gender is implicated in the process of carrying out research. Incorporating bodies into the analysis makes us attentive to the ways in which the researcher is always situated. What matters is recognising the points of connection and acknowledging one's situatedness whilst endeavouring to create new possibilities and opportunities.

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¹ The Art of Sport was a Lloyds Bank (then LloydsTSB) sponsored project which brought together young athletes hoping for selection and success in the 2012 Olympics and early career artists, some of whom were working specifically on sport. These included Will Rochfort one of whose paintings was taken up as a signature work of the games by the project, and Ben Dearnley whose sculptures drew on Classical ideals of Olympism (Woodward, 2009). Promotional, fund raising events were held at prestigious venues such as Heathrow terminal 5 and the bank's premises in the City of London, where its private banking clients were able to purchase works of art and to meet some of the young athletes, described as 'local heroes'.