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**'The Thrill of the Fight' - Sensuous Experiences of Boxing –  
Towards a Sociology of Violence**

**by**

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**A Doctoral Thesis**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis employs ethnographic methods to examine lived experiences of sports violence, particularly, the ways in which action in, and around, a boxing ring can be psychologically and physically significant. Crucial in this regard is the social conditioning of such experiences. Here, norms and values that dominate the framing of sports violence are informed by participants' assumptions based on traditional understandings of gender and class. In this way, social processes associated with masculine identities and the working classes inform what was considered possible, permissible and pleasurable. It is contended that phenomenologically informed accounts of such pleasurable experiences of violence remain relatively underrepresented within research examining sports participation. The central focus of this thesis is to provide such an account within a boxing environment. As such, the observations and interviews presented in what follows contribute to the sociological study of sports violence in particular and violence more generally. Alongside this substantive dimension, there are also conceptual, theoretical and methodological contributions that can inform future sociological study in the area and more broadly. Specifically, the contention that experiences of sports violence tend to contain a mimetic dimension and a figurational or processes sociological interpretation of such experiences, are empirically evaluated. The naturalisation of biological interpretations of masculinity as a popular means of explaining and justifying acts of violence is explored. The embodiment of social processes, including masculinity, is theorised using figurational sociology, specifically employing the interconnected concepts of habitus, figuration and established/outsider relations. Methodologically, notions of 'insider'/'outsider' knowledge are reconceptualised using Elias' discussions of involvement/detachment.

The sports violence masculinity complex is proposed as a means of conceptually framing the social processes that contour the pleasurable experiences of conducting, and being the target of, violence. This overarching frame is linked to local factors that also impinge upon the gym space. With these social fault lines explored, a phenomenologically sensitive account of sports violence is presented. In this way, it is hoped that some of the theoretical pitfalls of other, arguably asociological, examinations of emotion and sensation are avoided. Using field notes and interview extracts a 'warts and all' picture of gym life is painted. Particular attention

is paid to sensuous experiences of 'working the bag' and sparring. Here, significant physical markers and emotional expressions are detailed. Inside and around the ring, men learned the techniques and tactics of mimetic violence. These experiences enabled a socially conditioned, controlled decontrolling of emotional controls and the elicitation of physical sensations that generally remain off limits during the relative emotional and physical staleness of their 'work-a-day' lives. It is contended that the experiences detailed within this thesis and the theoretical frame used to interpret them can inform future work examining sports violence and violence more generally.

# **'The Thrill of the Fight' - Sensuous Experiences of Boxing – Towards a Sociology of Violence**

## **Chapter One – Introduction**

### **1.0 Thesis Introduction**

This thesis concerns experiences of engaging in certain forms of boxing violence in a gym in Woodford<sup>1</sup>, a city in the East Midlands of England. Detailed observations and interviews were obtained over a two-year period of ethnographic research at Freedom Gym<sup>2</sup>, which is a boxing and weightlifting gym open to the general public. The central purpose was to explore the emotional and physical significances of mimetic violence. Of concern are the sensuous experiences of conducting, and being the target of, such violence. It is contended that these actions form an essential component within the construction of boxing as a site for the expression of forms of masculinity (de Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2006). The intention was to make sense of the apparent enjoyment and significance which boxers obtain from their engagement in violent acts (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2004). The evidence presented here adds to knowledge within the sociology of sport by way of its explicit focus upon the physical and emotional significance of violence. It is also hoped that the theoretical and conceptual tools, which frame the exploration of these experiences, have an application within the study of violence and the sociology of the body more generally.

In this regard, figurational or process sociology (Elias, 2000 [1939]) is employed as a means of exploring lived sensuous experiences and habituated behaviours as shaped by long- and short-term, wide and local social processes. Specifically, Maguire's (1992) work on the quest for exciting significance (QES) within leisure activities frames the interpretation of boxing violence. Here, the largely mimetic nature of the vast majority of such violence is theorised as an essential component of the meanings and significances of training in, and around, the boxing ring. In what follows, a range of literature is discussed in brief as an initial means of contextualising the landscape that frames this study. An outline of the thesis is then presented.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the sensitive nature of some of the themes discussed in this thesis, where names of places or persons could be used to aid identification of individuals, pseudonyms will be used.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed description of Freedom Gym will be presented in Chapter Three

## 1.1 Sensuous Experiences of Boxing

I'm eager to get it on; after all. I've been waiting for this moment for weeks – is it strange to get excited at the prospect of getting smacked in the noggin? (Wacquant, 2004; 71)

In these remarks, Loic Wacquant is discussing his eagerness to engage in mimetic violence. Violent encounters, along with the physically and mentally injurious consequences that often accompany them, have been the subject of much academic interest (Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003). In the majority of such research, violence is constructed and experienced as a morally iniquitous and harmful phenomenon (Galtung, 1981; McCarthy *et al.*, 1975; Morrison, 1986; Peled, 1998; Heitmeyer & Hagan, 2003; Lackey, 2003; Mysterud & Poleszynski, 2003; Feld & Feldson, 2008). Indeed, “even when used metaphorically, the word violence has overtones of irrationality and excess” (Cauchy, 1992; 210). Notwithstanding such important work, and the emotive nature of the term, there can be other interpretations of such phenomena. As Wacquant's account shows us, not all acts defined as violence occupy a damaging position within people's lives. Experiences of violence can be interpreted and experienced positively and instil opportunities for self-realisation and enjoyable emotional, social and physical significances (Beattie, 1996; Chase, 2006; Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Katz, 1988; Kerbs & Jolly, 2007; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Skrapec, 1997; Wacquant 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 2004). Arguably, the social sphere in which the expression of such experiences is most common is the world of sport. As Young (2000; 391) notes:

Only a cursory glance at the nature and organisation of sport is necessary to demonstrate that many of our most popular sports, both at the recreational and elite level, are immersed in cultures of aggression and violence.

The vast majority of such violence in heavy contact sport settings, is constructed as a necessary “part of the game” (Smith, 1983; 86). Indeed, Smith (1983; 86) notes:

Large segments of the public, despite the recent emergence of sports violence as a full-blown ‘social problem,’ continue to give standing ovations to performers for acts that in other contexts would be instantly condemned as criminal. An examination of sports violence that fails to consider these perspectives [of players and spectators] ‘does violence,’ as it were, to what most people, not to mention those involved with criminal justice systems, regard as violence.

Smith's comments are as relevant today as when he was writing in 1983; sports violence is still a contentious issue that continues to produce conflicting experiences, moral judgements and public opinions. This contestation is perhaps no greater than between those occupying

'inside' and 'outside'<sup>3</sup> positions within sports worlds. Here, the perspectives of some 'insiders' often offer accounts of violence that challenge the widely-held assumption of violence as morally and legally reprehensible (Audi, 1971; Armitage, 2003; Dunning, 2008 [1983]; Smith, 1983). Attempting to shed light on these experiences, sociologists have contributed much to our understanding of; violence in professional sport (Coakley, 1989; Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Hutchins & Philips, 1997; Young, 1991, 1993, 2000); the relationship between violence and masculinity (Bryson, 1987; Connell, 1990; de Garis, 2000; Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Messner, 1990; Woodward, 2006; Young *et al.*, 1994); violence as a manifestation of a socially conditioned need to experience emotional significance (Maguire, 1992; Pringle, 2009); and, the sociogenesis of violence as a part of the modern institution of sport (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Kimmel, 1990; Sheard, 1997). These overlapping, complex and interdependent processes, which do much to frame participation in contact sports, have been shown to hold an important function within the making and remaking of violent masculine identities (Connell, 1985; de Garis, 2000; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 2002; Woodward, 2006). Here, the sensuous, physical and psychological experience of violence provides a means by which certain identities are generated, maintained and validated (de Garis, 2000; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1991; Wacquant, 1995c; Woodward, 2006). It is these expressive experiences and their place within the social significance of sports violence that are the focus of this study.

The majority of heavy physical contact in sports such as rugby union and league, boxing, American football and to a lesser extent basketball and association football, does not transgress sub-cultural norms of acceptability (Dunning, 1990, 2008 [1979]; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 1990; Smith, 1983; Young, 1993, 2000). As such, these acts of mimetic violence can serve as opportunities to produce emotions and physical sensations that bear similarities with those experienced in 'real' violence<sup>4</sup>. Expressions of athletes' positive experiences of such violence are littered throughout literature within the sociology of sport (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Messner, 1991; Pringle, 2009; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Young *et al.*, 1994; Wacquant, 2004). However, the sensuous and emotional significance of these experiences are less well documented. As such, the "carnal pleasures...[and] extreme

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<sup>3</sup> Problematics associated with these binary terms will be explored in Chapter Three

<sup>4</sup> These connected notions of 'real' and mimetic violence will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two

sensuousness” (Wacquant, 2004; 70) of violent behaviour, experienced in sporting encounters, remains relatively under-researched. A point of departure for this research is an assumption that such sensuous, emotional experiences, as highlighted in various academic disciplines and research contexts (Gilgun, 2008; Katz, 1988; Howes, 2006; Lyng, 1990; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Monaghan, 2001b; Stoller, 1997; Skrapec, 2001; Serres, 1998; Schinkel, 2004; Wacquant, 2004), are an important component of the interwoven interpretations, meanings, significances and experiences of sports violence (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Goodger & Goodger, 1989; Maguire, 1992). As such, it is contended that they form a necessary building block within a sociological understanding of participation in sports violence specifically, and violence more generally. The relative absence of these experiences within the literature examining player violence points to an opportunity to explore the exciting significance of such phenomena and expand our sociological knowledge in this area. This is the context in which this thesis is presented.

Notwithstanding the experiential gap in the literature, some researchers (Chase, 2006; Messner, 1990; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Young *et al.*, 1994) have touched on the emotional and sensuous experiences of sports violence without necessarily portraying the significance therein. Take the following example:

I'll wrap somebody up and I really nail them, it's like right before I do it, this adrenaline rush, all these endorphins just suck out of the centre of my body and kind of engulf me. It's a big high for me to make those hits. It's very intense to me (Alex cited in Chase, 2006; 238).

Reference is made here to a popular biological understanding of physical and psychological significance of a tackle in rugby. In Pringle and Markula's (2005; 483) work, similar emotional and physical sensations can be observed:

“Primary school rugby was exciting,” Willy informed us, “and I think that the physical contact side of it made it more exciting, you know: the tackling, the fending – trying to rip the ball off someone.” He further suggested, “We felt good about playing rugby at lunchtime...because we took hits, scratches, grazes and stuff.”

In both the works in which these examples were presented, violence was not the explicit focus. Rather, these examples were used to contextualise participation in contact sports. Here, we see the significance that both participants and researchers attached to violent experience as a key element within contact sports. However, as Pringle (2009; 211) argues in relation to the pleasure gained from rugby violence:

Pleasure can be regarded as a productive force in the constitution of the social significance of sport and desiring sport subjects, the organization and use of sport pleasure has been a relatively marginalized topic of examination.

Other works, perhaps due to their theoretical groundings, have paid more attention to the emotional significance of engaging in sport generally and violent sport in particular (Dunning, et al, 1988; Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Maguire, 1992). Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) *Quest for Excitement* presents a socially conditioned need to experience a controlled decontrolling of emotional controls. Sport, and other leisure activities, provide a context for the relatively legitimate expression of such experiences. Maguire's (1992) discussion of the quest for exciting significance (henceforth, QES) advances Elias and Dunning's work, by suggesting that more attention be paid to the opportunities for 'self-realisation' experienced through sports participation and spectatorship. In stressing the need to maintain conceptual space for identity formation, maintenance and validation, Maguire (1992) has increased the potential of Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) original thesis to more adequately frame the significance of a variety of leisure forms. Through framing sport and exercise using the QES, researchers have situated the physical, emotional and social significance of such experiences (Atkinson, 2008; Dunning, et al, 1988; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Pike, 2000). It seems then, that the QES can theoretically and conceptually frame the "carnal pleasures...[and] extreme sensuousness" (Wacquant, 2004; 70) of player's participation in mimetic violence. However, such emotional and physical experiences, have not, as of yet, been sufficiently empirically examined using the QES. This is perhaps surprising considering the central position which violence occupies within research outlining the concept (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Maguire, 1992).

Here, we find the convergence of two absences within the research on sports violence. Firstly, despite the wealth of research in the area (Young, 2000), relatively little work has paid explicit attention to the sensuous and emotional significance of sports violence (Pringle, 2009). Secondly, the QES, a concept which offers a sophisticated means of framing the interwoven physical, psychological and social significance of such action, could be evaluated by an empirical exploration of sports violence. These gaps represent an opportunity to explore the significance of mimetic violence in the lives of participants in heavy contact sports. Such an exploration, as is presented within this thesis, probes participant's experiences of 'doing'

violence and enacting a QES. As such, it adds empirical depth to the work of Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and, latterly, Maguire (1992), while partially filling the experiential gap within the literature examining mimetic violence.

Although these absences within our knowledge of sports violence provide justification for the examination presented here, the taken-for-granted acceptance of the injurious nature of such experiences also informs the motivation to better understand such experiences. As Smith (1983) and Young (2000) remind us, mimetic and at times 'real' violence is common within heavy contact sports. These experiences can be assumed to be an essential 'part of the game'. As such, a critical account of mimetic violence that does not maintain conceptual space for sensuous and emotional significances, cannot be considered to be based on a sufficiently adequate understanding of the lives of those who engage in heavy contact sports. If we are to more fully understand the motivations to put ones body at risk through participation in sport and the role that enjoying violence plays in the construction of gender difference, then a more adequate knowledge is crucial. Although no political or moral stance as to the appropriateness of mimetic violence within modern societies is adopted within this thesis, it is hoped these that the knowledge presented here can help better inform those who wish to make such statements. In this way, debates concerning sports violence can be based on a more adequate understanding of lived experiences. In what follows, a brief outline of this thesis will be sketched out.

## **1.2 Thesis Outline**

Building upon this Introduction, the research within the substantive area is further contextualised in Chapter Two with reference to a range of contemporary theoretical and conceptual debates. Initially, through a review of literature, some foundational issues associated with defining violence and sports violence are explored. Here, philosophical, moral and sociological understandings of the term 'violence' are discussed. This initial step frames a review of the sociology of sports violence literature. Here, the main tenets of Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) understanding of the sociogenesis of modern sports are described. Building upon the work presented in their book, *Quest for Excitement*, Maguire's (1992) explorations of the emotional significance of sport are then discussed. This QES is suggested

as a theoretically sophisticated means of framing the socially conditioned, physical and psychological experiences of sports violence. Following this, gender and masculinity issues are discussed in relation to the structuring of action in, and around, the boxing ring. Masculinity is theorised and sport worlds are discussed as being examples of 'male preserves'. Sociological literature that explores the masculine-dominated sub-culture of boxing is then reviewed. These interconnected streams of sociological research act as points of departure for this thesis. Gender and class based social frames, that it would seem are pervasive within heavy contact sports, are outlined. With these substantive literature contributions laid out, a theoretical framework is described. Here, central conceptual tools within figurational sociology are described. In particular, habitus as a means of interpreting the embodiment of social processes is explored in detail. These theoretical and substantive areas are then synthesised into what is termed the sports violence masculinity complex, which in conjunction with the QES, figuration and habitus, acts as an overarching frame to interpret the experiences of sports violence.

Chapter Three explores the methodological debates which contextualise this thesis. The techniques, issues and practicalities of conducting ethnographic research within a boxing club are discussed. Here, Elias' writing on involvement/detachment and established/outsider relations are examined in the light of contemporary debates within similar works in the field. To conclude the chapter, the ethical and moral issues of conducting research in a violent sub-culture are explored. Within Chapters Four and Five, a detailed picture of Freedom Gym is sketched out. The aim here is to provide a sense of the ways in which experiences of mimetic violence are contoured by social processes and local dynamics. These chapters describe, in detail, the norms and values that dominate life at the gym. Specifically, images, mythologies, demographics and the social hierarchy are explored within Chapter Four. Here, the notions that the gym is a 'real' place in a 'gritty' urban area are explored alongside a description of training in, and around, the ring. Building upon this picture, Chapter Five focuses explicitly on the masculine frame that dominates Freedom Gym. This space is described as a heterosexual male preserve in which attendees believe that 'real' men dominate. This notion of 'realness' is supported by the boxers' beliefs that they are naturally predetermined to enjoy expressing some form of violent physicality. The description of dominant subjectivities is

continued through a discussion of the established boxers' understanding of boxers' bodies and the 'correct' way to engage in sparring. To conclude the chapter, alternatives to these dominant values are explored via an examination of notions connected to age, boxing ability and domination in sparring. Together, Chapters Four and Five represent a partial, but detailed, picture of aspects of Freedom Gym which shape and contour life in, and around, the boxing ring.

Chapter Six concludes the findings presented within this thesis. Initially, the ways in which boxers framed their understanding of violent experiences is discussed. The mimetic nature of the majority of this action, in and around the ring, is a central theme that runs parallel with their beliefs about the biological basis for their emotionally and physically significant experiences. Following this, the richness of such boxing action is explored via a detailed examination of training at Freedom Gym. It is here that the relative lack of experiential data within accounts of sports violence is partially addressed. The thesis is summarised, and arguments are advanced in Chapter Seven along with some concluding remarks. Building upon the brief discussion of literature within this chapter, a more extensive review will be conducted in what follows.

## Literature review

### 2.0 Introduction

Within this chapter, the main themes, concepts, research and theory that are salient within this examination of violent experiences at Freedom Gym are discussed. Initially, work which attempts to define violence, and sports violence in particular, will be explored. Within these philosophical, political, moral and academic debates, a set of issues is highlighted that provides a sensitising basis from which to begin the sociological study of boxing violence. Following this, research that has attempted to explain sports violence will be reviewed. This work provides a context for the current study and identifies concepts and themes that have been usefully employed within similar research. Building on this section, the QES will be outlined. Relatively recent critiques aimed at the QES are then addressed. Research examining the role the gender order has played in framing contemporary experiences of sport violence is then discussed. Remaining within the field of gender studies, Connell's theoretical and conceptual contributions are then examined. Literature within the sociological study of boxing is then reviewed contextualising the present study amongst similar research. Following this, a theoretical frame informed by an Eliasian approach to sociology is outlined. Here, the connected concepts of figuration, established-outsider relations and habitus are discussed. Critical observations of habitus are engaged with. Due, in part, to its popularity within the academic community, Bourdieu's work on the subject is located within this analysis. To conclude, the previously outlined substantive, conceptual and theoretical discussions are partially synthesised as a frame for this study.

### 2.1 Defining violence and sports violence

The term 'violence' is perhaps one of the most emotive words in the English language (Cauchy, 1992; Galtung, 1981; Platt, 1992). The affects engendered by the use of the term vary greatly, from trepidation to fear, excitement to anguish. This variety in emotional responses reflects the diversity in meanings, memories and contexts that are invoked when people engage with the concept of violence (Imbusch, 2003). Indeed, popular and academic understandings of violence are generally complex, ambiguous and, at times, contradictory. As Litke (1992; 173) argues:

Violence is intriguing. It is universally condemned yet to be found everywhere. Most of us are both fascinated and horrified by it. It is a fundamental ingredient of how we entertain ourselves (children's stories, world literature, the movie industry) and an essential feature of many of our social institutions. In most parts of the world, it is notoriously common in family life, religious affairs, and political history.

The ambiguity and complexity of the concept has been linked to its complicated etymology, the closeness of related concepts (power, aggression and conflict) and the need for multiple subcategories within definitions of violence (Imbusch, 2003). The far-reaching and diverse nature of the concept of violence is not inconsequential:

This happy combination of relatively vague descriptive content, coupled with negative moral and emotional connotation, makes the word violence ideal for use in polemic discourse. The former feature of the term allows it to be extended to realms far beyond its basic connotation while the later features enhance its usefulness as a means of evoking negative emotional responses and moral judgements in relation to the behaviours to which it is extended (Platt, 1992; 187-188).

With the increasing employment of this vague but polemic term in the media and academia alike, its descriptive power can be reduced (Platt, 1992). There is, therefore, a need to peel back some of the layers of meaning which can cloud the concept in order to increase its use in an academic sense. To gain a degree of analytical clarity, attempts must be made to move beyond the various implicit understandings of violence. Here, the goal is to provide some degree of clarity to an opaque concept by engaging with issues and problems that have been highlighted in the philosophical and sociological literature on violence. In this regard, a conceptualisation of violence, and particularly the violence associated with sports, will be offered based on definitions and typologies within the extant literature.

## **2.2 Definitions of violence**

What actions, phenomena and events can be subsumed within the term 'violence'? In short, what is violence? Beneath this simple question, lies a long history of philosophical debate (Sorel, 1961), which is yet to reach a definitive conclusion. Within the extant literature in the field, two salient, and interconnected, positions consistently resurface and provide foundations for sometimes opposing, sometimes complementary, definitions of violence. Firstly, a definition is employed which focuses on the perpetrator, and the intentional, destructive force which they project towards someone or something (Audi, 1971; Litke, 1992). Henceforth referred to as 'violence as force' (Bufacchi, 2005), this is perhaps the most

commonly used and popular understanding of violence (Coady, 1986). Audi's (1971: 59) definition provides a useful starting point:

Violence is the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous physical struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp, caustic psychological attack upon, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property.

Such an understanding of violence is deployed in a 'restricted' (Coady, 1986) and 'descriptive' (Platt, 1992) sense. In this way, specific actions and behaviours can be clearly marked as 'violence'. Applying violence in this manner allows researchers to increase analytical clarity by focusing on the physical and psychological acts of violence.

A second definition of violence focuses on the victim, and the violation of that person. Henceforth referred to as 'violence as violation' (Bufacchi, 2005), this shift in focus enables a far broader conception and utilization of the term (Garver, 1977). *Anything* that transgresses the individual can now be considered violent. Clearly, the verb 'to violate' can be interpreted in many varied ways. As such, there are subtle and stark differences within the applications of this definition of violence. Salmi (1993: 17) offers an overarching position: "[violence is] any avoidable action that constitutes a violation of human rights, in its widest meaning, or which prevents the fulfilment of a basic human need". This 'wide' (Coady, 1986) and 'expansive' (Grundy & Weinstein, 1974) conception of violence enables the morality traditionally associated the term to be employed polemically towards diverse phenomena (Platt, 1992). Subsuming the majority of physical and psychological violence, but not confined to such manifestly destructive acts, this definition "has effectively sensitised large numbers of persons to the morally dubious status of many social structures and practices" (Platt, 1992: 189).

Attempts have been made to contrast, delineate and prise apart these interwoven definitions. Keane (196, 66) argues against the use of 'violence as violation' when he tells us that; "attempts (such as Johan Galtung's) to stretch [violence's] meaning to include 'anything avoidable that impedes human realization' effectively makes a nonsense of the concept". For Platt (1992), the moral significance of the term, which has resulted in its extended use to denote violence as violation, detracts from the power of the term to describe violence as force. Bufacchi (2005) seems to accept the existence of two ideologically different

approaches to violence. These subtly different forms of violence may be separable philosophically and conceptually but, within lived experiences, they exist to greater or lesser degrees as complex balances and blends (Dunning, 2008 [1986]). Therefore, it should not be our goal to find the 'true' or 'correct' usage of the term - Goldstein (1983, 2) makes the point that "no single definition of violence (within sport) is either possible or desirable" - rather we are attempting to find a conception which is guided by previous literature, theoretically informed and empirically useful. With these two divergent notions of violence in hand, and an understanding of the philosophical assumptions which underpin them, typologies of violence will be examined to anchor this philosophical debate within extant social phenomena.

### **2.3 Typologies of Violence**

Galtung's (1981) call for an exhaustive and mutually exclusive typology may be a step too far for such a complex phenomenon. As previously discussed, the concept resists easy categorisation and definition. However, engaging with the process of typological classification can provide the thematic and conceptual grounding essential to a foundational knowledge of the violence concept. In this way, the difficulties, overlaps and inadequacies of implicit understandings of violence can be revealed. It is possible to thematically separate forms of violence into six substantively differentiated, although never completely discreet, categories. Of these categories, *direct interpersonal violence* is perhaps the one most commonly associated with the concept of violence (Audi, 1971; Coady, 1986). This physical violence is manifest in attempts to harm, abuse or kill others. Directly aimed at the body, this violence is mostly intentional and may contain both instrumental (calculated/deliberate) and expressive (emotional/reactive) violence (Dunning, 2008 [1983]; Imbusch, 2003). Although intimately tied to direct interpersonal violence, *psychological violence*, implies a lack of physical harm, in its place the damage caused through violence is aimed at the psychological level as the central focus (Audi, 1971). Here, gestures, symbols, words and images are used to illicit painful emotions in others (Cauchy, 1992; Dunning, 1986; Imbusch, 2003). Attacks directed towards an individual's identity could also be interpreted in this way. At this point, it needs to be stressed, once again, that the complex phenomenon of violence does not easily lend itself to such attempts to delineate and categorise. In a conceptual and analytical sense, the separation of the physical and psychological aspects of violence may indeed have some use.

However, applying such separation to lived experiences fails to represent adequately the multifaceted experience of violence. Consider, for example, the physical *and* psychological torment of torture techniques. Any account that does not draw out the dynamic balance between the physical and psychological characteristics of such experiences must remain necessarily incomplete. However, there are clearly cases in which the balance is predominated by one or other form of violence. In these cases, a partial conceptual separation may be necessary in order to grasp certain salient components of each form of violence.

The previously described experiences can be further contextualised by *institutional violence*, this state-sanctioned violence is typically carried out by the military and police forces (Dunning, 2008 [1983]; Imbusch, 2003). The often taken-for-granted legitimacy that can accompany such acts is problematised when the term violence is used to describe them. Indeed, the construction of such legitimate, and therefore legal, uses of violence contains many contradictions and can seem, to some extent, arbitrary. Examples of the death sentence, means of restraint by police officers, treatment of prisoners of war, police tactics during riots and demonstrations highlight the political sensitivity that accompanies such violence. Within 'civilising' societies these forms of legitimised violence persist, to some degree, where other forms of physical and psychological violence have gradually come under stricter internal and external control (Elias, 2000 [1939]). Institutional violence provides an important layer to an analysis of violence, it sensitises us to the often-arbitrary nature of the legitimate/illegitimate dichotomy of violence. The forms of violence described thus far can be defined using either the 'violence as force' or 'violence as violation' conception. The fault line between these two conceptually different forms begins to widen when *structural* and *symbolic violence* become part of the analysis.

Within structural violence (Galtung, 1969), the essence of 'violence as force' is removed and replaced by a focus on the violation of a victim or victims (Garver, 1977). Here, violence is a product of anonymous social structures. Poverty, marginalization, alienation and oppression are hallmarks of such violence, indeed, it could be said that any inequalities between groups within society can be considered as structural violence (Galtung, 1969). There is a danger

here of reifying social structures and removing any trace of the dense interdependencies that characterise the human interactions that cause such violence. Notwithstanding the need to be aware of such reification, employing the term structural violence, with its value-laden moral undertones, enables sociologists and other academics to highlight and challenge these less-manifest forms of violation.

Linked to structural violence is symbolic violence; "a power which presupposes recognition, that is, misrecognition of the violence that is exercised through it" (Bourdieu, 1991: 209). Bourdieu (1991) uses the term to describe the discrimination which is inherent within taken-for-granted social institutions such as religion, the state, language and the gender order. Such violence is veiled and concealed behind unspoken, perhaps unconscious, acceptance of the norms and values attached to social institutions (Bourdieu, 1991). Structural violence can be inconspicuous due in part to its ubiquitous nature. By contrasting direct interpersonal violence with symbolic violence we can see the markedly different applications of the two previously-discussed philosophical positions on violence. In this regard, 'violence as force' can generally fit within the wider conception of 'violence as violation.' However, in what follows, an example of 'violence by force', which cannot be considered violation of the person in quite such an obvious sense, is presented. As such, it proves to be one of the contentious issues remaining within the definitions of violence (Audi, 1971).

*Ritualised violence*, of which contact sports such as boxing, rugby league and union, ice hockey, and wrestling are examples, is substantively different from the previously described forms of violence. This staged violence, that which is within the formal or informal norms of acceptability, is often expressly theatrical in nature and holds a significant symbolic and sub-cultural component. Such violence involves a move away from the malicious intent to cause physical or psychological harm towards action targeted at achieving some other (generally socially acceptable) objective (Dunning, 2008 [1983]). Often mimetic of direct interpersonal violence and engaged in predominantly on a voluntary basis, ritualised violence includes elements of martial art demonstrations, sadomasochism (Chancer, 1992), professional wrestling (de Garis, 1999) and contact sports (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). These rituals are fundamentally different from the violence of which they are a mimesis. The 'make believe'

settings provide a socially legitimate form of (mock) violence. Importantly, such ritualised violence is able to engender similar emotions and sensations to those experienced during 'real life' violent encounters, while avoiding some of the physical, psychological and social dangers (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Maguire, 1992). The emotions produced during ritualised violence "are the 'sibling' of those aroused in real-life situations" (Maguire, 1992: 105). This form of violence is substantively different to 'violence as force' due to its mimetic nature. Also, such violence does not easily fit within the 'violence as violation' definition. In Audi's (1971; 59) words:

In most usual cases, violence involves the violation of some moral right ... there are cases, like wrestling and boxing, in which even paradigmatic violence can occur without violation of any moral right.

However, ritualised violence "can involve elements of, or be transformed into, non-ritual violence" (Dunning, 2008 [1986]; 225) in both a 'violence as force' (professional wrestlers taking personal vendettas into a performance) and 'violence by violation' (an athlete being pressured into harming their body in violent play) sense. Once again, we see here the complex nature of the concept of violence. Applying any form of strict definition or typology to frame such experiences may reduce the potential to portray an accurate picture of these multidimensional experiences. In this way, the focus of the present study is to be ritualised violence, however, elements of other forms of violence impact, to some degree, on the social environment. Therefore, a definition that remains sensitive to them is required. Based on the problems and issues of defining violence, a workable conception of sports violence will now be suggested.

## **2.4 Sports violence**

For Young (2000), the concept of sports violence is an elusive one. It is only when people are challenged to define the concept that the previous taken-for-granted and implicit understanding of sports violence are thrown into doubt. This is as much the case for sports fans, members of sports governing bodies and athletes as it is for academics (Young, 2000). Typologies of sports violence have been proposed as a first step within the process of producing some level of analytical clarity (Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Smith, 1983). Smith's socio-legal typology of sports violence is implicitly based on a 'violence as force' definition. He finds four types of violence based on a scale of legitimacy. *Brutal body contact* is described as

“significant bodily contact within the rules of a given sport” (Smith, 1983; 34). Such acts are in effect legal under the laws of the land. *Borderline violence* may be widely accepted in the game, but still violates the official rules of the sport and the law of the land. *Quasicriminal violence* is more or less unacceptable and violates the rules of the sport and laws of the land. *Criminal violence* violates the informal norms of players, officials and fans and can often be pursued as a criminal case (Smith, 1983). These four categories enable the interpretation of substantively different acts of sports violence. However, through its focus on legitimacy, Smith’s work is not sensitive to some of the philosophical and conceptual problems and issues previously discussed. Within his socio-legal framing, much of the complex and overlapping nature of sports violence experiences are reduced and stripped away. Within the present study, where the richness of violent encounters is of crucial importance, Smith’s typology is insufficient to adequately frame such experiences.

Dunning’s (2008 [1983]) examination of sports violence offers a far broader foundation from which to work. He constructs a typology by defining a set of polarities and balances between salient elements within ‘violence as force’. In this way, violent phenomena are not categorised as mutually exclusive types. Rather, a grasp of the inherent complexity, dynamism and fluidity of such experiences can be gained. Sports violence is now conceptualised as a balance between ritual/non-ritual, legitimate/illegitimate, physical/psychological, intentional/accidental and instigative/reactive instrumental/expressive, components (Dunning, 2008 [1983]). Each act of violence is then a blend between combinations of these intertwined polarities. After noting the multilayered nature of sports violence, Dunning (2008 [1983]) turns his attention to the ritual dimension that is the defining characteristic of the vast majority of sports violence. This ‘mimetic’ component is the means by which sports violence maintains a degree of separation from other acts of violence by force.

Dunning’s (2008 [1983]) typology offers a rich point of departure from which to begin an analysis of sports violence. His focus on a variety of elements and sensitivity to the interaction between them allows the multitude of layers within each violent experience to be explored. For the purposes of this study, the primary focus will be on ritual violence, henceforth mimetic violence. Dunning’s typology reminds us that such experiences contain a complex intertwining

of other dimensions of violence. As such, Dunning's work will provide the basis from which sports violence will be defined in this study. In what follows, the academic field in which this study of mimetic violence takes place will be contextualised by exploring some of the extant literature in the area.

## **2.5 Sociology of Sports Violence**

"The concept of sports violence is elusive" (Young, 2000; 383). In this way, the same issues, which provide unstable conceptual foundations for the study of violence, underwrite the study of sports violence. Dunning's (2008 [1983]) typology directs us to the multitude of experiences within sports violence that cloud the already opaque definitions of violence. It is within and between the fluctuating and dynamic conception of sports violence as ritual/non-ritual, legitimate/illegitimate, expressive/instrumental, that this research project will be set. It is the contested definitions, experiences, opinions and interpretations of sports violence that mark the area out as a rich sphere for academic inquiry. Various researchers from a multitude of disciplines have been drawn to such an inquiry. Each discipline elucidates a specific set of correlates, factors, causes and determinants. This review of the literature will begin by providing an overview of two theoretical positions that have traditionally been employed to explain violence in general, and sports violence in particular.

## **2.6 Catharsis Theory**

Popularised by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1963) but first appearing within Aristotle's writings (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]), catharsis theory is grounded in an understanding of human behaviour as being determined by innate, natural drives that require some form of expression. Sport violence, and sport in general, from this perspective, perform a cathartic function that allows the socially safe release of natural drives and instincts (Curry & Jobu, 1983; Goranson, 1980; Sipes, 1973; Thirer, 1978). Dunning (1990, 1999, 2008 [1979]) argues that the belief in sport's cathartic function seems to have originated in the nineteenth century, particularly in British public schools, as a means of venting excess 'energies' and as a means of building character and self-control. Such an interpretation is pervasive in the popular understanding of contemporary experiences of sport. Gruneau and Whitson (1993; 177) suggest that within the subculture of ice hockey, fighting is seen as providing "a

controlled and symbolic outlet for aggression that might otherwise manifest in more serious forms". The version of catharsis theory proposed by Lorenz is sensitive, at least in part, to the social context in which such experiences take place (Dunning, 2008 [1983]). For Lorenz, sport "can be defined as a specifically human form of non-hostile combat, governed by the strictest of *culturally developed rules*" (Lorenz, 1960: 241, emphasis added). This sociological awareness is often overlooked when people engage with Lorenz's catharsis model, indeed, his work seems to be collapsed into a simple frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dunning, 2003; 2008 [1983]). Once relieved of this cultural dimension, catharsis theory becomes a narrow causal explanation, where the frustration of natural drives results in aggression. Venting such frustration by watching or taking part in sports violence performs a controlled release of this pressure.

Such simple behaviourist models of violence have two main critiques. Firstly, Goranson (1980; cited in Smith, 1983: 126) argues that to claim watching sports violence "drains off feelings of aggressiveness in the watcher is as illogical as arguing that watching someone eating a sumptuous meal drains off feelings of hunger". Secondly, there is evidence to suggest that watching and/or taking part in sports violence increases the likelihood of the spectator or participant engaging in violence (Rees, Howell & Miracle, 1990; Rees & Miracle, 1984; Smith, 1983; Widmeyer & Birch, 1984). Essentially, such critiques are targeted at the reduction of complex social behaviours into simple stimulus responses. The social significance, which Lorenz (1963) partially draws out in his analysis, is lacking within work that models human behaviour as determined wholly by natural drives. As Dunning (2003; 908) argues:

Where the standard behaviourist studies of sports and catharsis seem, then to go astray, is through working with an overly simple, reductionist, mechanistic, ahistorical and insufficiently sociological/relational model of human behaviour.

What is required then, is a balance between an understanding of the biological components of human behaviour and the processes of socialisation and social learning, which are an essential aspect of the human maturation process (Elias, 1987). Work examining this learning process has provided a body of evidence that suggests that contemporary sports are sites at which certain acts of violence are legitimised, rewarded and encouraged (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Guttman, 1994; Messner, 1990, 1992; Prain, 2000).

## 2.7 Social learning

The pioneering work of Michael Smith (1975, 1983a) examines sports subcultures as sites that produce violent behaviour:

From this perspective, aggressive behaviours are viewed as products of environments that arouse aggressive sentiments, provide role models of aggressive behaviour, and place people in situations where aggression visibly 'works' and is rewarded and that sanction and even applaud aggressive behaviour (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; 177).

Violent subcultures have been shown to provide participants and spectators with an education in violence (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Here, violence observed in revered sports persons and imitated by sports participants is reinforced by coaches, spectators and team-mates (Robidoux, 2001; Smith, 1975; Weis, 1978). In this way, violence begets violence. From this social learning perspective, such subcultures produce personalities that identify strongly with certain violent behaviours. The norms and values that shape sporting identities provide a context in which behaviours, considered deviant from 'outside' such subcultures, are encouraged, revered and rewarded (Hughes & Coakley, 1990; Donnelly & Young, 1988). Indeed, Bredemeier, Shields & Smith (1986) argue that sports environments produce 'bracketed moralities' within which participants may experience a sense of separation from the rest of society. Within these subcultures, over-conformity to the values set out by a performance sport model induces a form of positive deviance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Here, then, certain forms of violence are no longer interpreted using the morally negative judgement normally reserved for such acts. Violence, especially that which abides by the informal and formal codes of the game, is then sanctioned, legitimised and normalised (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Smith, 1983).

During the processes of socialisation into sporting subcultures, the role of the 'athlete' can become significant in terms of the participants' construction of identity (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Donnelly & Young, 1988). Within heavy contact sport, the normalisation of violence can then become an essential component of an individual's successful identity construction (Donnelly & Young, 1988). This process of identity adoption may involve a re-interpretation of violent experiences. In this regard, Ewald and Jiobu (1985; 147) argue that, "what the outsider perceives as self-torture, the insider redefines as enjoyable and worthy of pursuing for its intrinsic rewards". Within subcultures that sanction and promote violence, individuals may

actively interpret violent experiences as enjoyable, expressive and rewarding. This thesis has much to offer our understanding of the (re)production of sports violence. However, within this social-psychological tradition, research examining these learned identities, is rarely connected to the sociogenesis of the societies and subcultures within which such violence exists (Gruneau, & Whitson, 1993). As a result, explanations of sports violence which rely heavily on social learning theory can be static and lack focus on the wider social processes that shape and frame the socialisation of athletes and the dynamic, negotiated nature of such subcultures. The following section will draw on work that focuses on the sociogenesis of modern sport to explain how violence has become a central theme within certain sports.

## **2.8 The Sociogenesis of Modern Sport**

“The face of violence, like other forms of social behaviour is contoured by socio-cultural forces that vary in time and space” (Smith, 1983a; 25). Here, Smith makes explicit the need for sociologists to account for the historical development of modern sport, in order to appreciate social processes that shape and frame contemporary experiences of sports violence. The figurational sociology of Norbert Elias (2000 [1939]) has been a central theoretical stream from which such a historical dimension has been explored. For Gruneau and Whitson (1993), elements of both the catharsis and social learning thesis co-exist within the developmental approach of Elias (2000 [1939]) and Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]). However, Elias and Dunning’s work offers much more than a synthesis of such work. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to describe their work as containing catharsis theory in the form that it has been discussed previously. Their contribution to the academic understanding of sports violence is worthy of further examination.

Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) place the development of modern sport within wider social transformations within which modern sport forms emerged from early folk games, contoured by intertwined processes of industrialisation, technologisation, parliamentarisation and state formation (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). These games, and the societies in which they existed, were relatively violent in comparison to the contemporary western model of sports and indeed western societies as a whole. These changing patterns of violence represent for Elias (2000 [1939]) an aspect of the ‘civilising process’. Such ‘civilising processes’ are

produced as interdependency chains between social groups and individuals lengthen, causing an increase in what Elias (2000 [1939]) has termed 'functional democratisation'. This involves:

... a change in the direction of decreasing power-differentials within and among groups, more specifically, a change in power between rulers and ruled, the social classes, men and women, the generations, parents and children. Such a process occurs mainly because the performers of specialised roles are dependent on others and can, therefore, exert reciprocal control (Dunning, 2008 [1979]; 216).

Groups and individuals moved from a partitioned or segmental bonding, characterised by low interdependence and minimal need to interact, towards a functional bonding, which produces an increase in the strength and frequency of social relationships (Dunning, 2008 [1983]). The greater reciprocal dependency, which this process engenders, increases the need for internal and external control of, amongst other things, violent behaviour.

How then, does this relate to contemporary experiences of sports violence? Increases in functional bonding over time have reduced the opportunities individuals have to express violence by increasing the amount that groups and individuals rely on one another for survival. Here, a gradual decrease in violence accompanies the gradual increase in human interdependencies. This process is by no means linear; instead, changes over time follow wave-like ebbs and flows. Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) tracked one such wave when they traced the decrease in the social acceptance of violence that occurred across the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in England, and other European societies. This continuing process has done much to frame contemporary experiences of sport. Smith (1983a; 30) suggests some of the factors that contribute to increased violence within pre-industrial societies:

The social organisation of some earlier societies – the lack of strong authority, the multiplicity of close-knit autonomous groups, the dominance of war and the warrior class and, it should be added, a primitive technology necessitating that violence be mainly face-to-face – led to a level of socially permitted expressive violence that would be regarded today as unspeakable.

As industrialising societies became increasingly differentiated and individuals became increasingly dependent on each other, the violent behaviours that Smith (1983a) and Elias & Dunning (2008 [1986]) argue characterise pre-industrial society and early forms of sport, begin to be increasingly codified, controlled and formally and informally restricted.

A key element in this process was state-formation. This involved the monopolisation of the use of force and the right to tax, along with political pacification and centralisation. With the greater power and control wielded by the state, the requirement for individuals to take the law into their own hands was reduced. Dunning (1990; 66) argues:

An aspect of the European civilising process that is of central relevance for the development of modern sport has consisted of a tightening in the normative regulation of violence and aggression, together with a long-term decline in most people's propensity for obtaining pleasure from directly taking part in and/or witnessing violent acts.

Here, Dunning ties wide social changes to individual's and group's behaviours, feelings and experiences. In this way, he is able to track developments in the personality structures, or habitus, of individuals. The habitus, conceptualised by Elias (1996, 2000 [1939]) as a socially-learned second nature, allows Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) to explore the development of modern sport without recourse to dichotomous explanations tied to an over reliance of either an agentic or structural explanation. By applying such attention to the intertwined physical, psychological and social processes (Elias, 1987) that contour human behaviour, Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) are able to avoid static, causal, explanations of sports violence. Indeed, heavy contact, so ubiquitous in some modern sports, is now conceptualised as originating over time as a result of a multitude of planned and unplanned processes (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). This process sets the tone for the shape and form of the majority of contemporary Western sport.

Within this general 'civilising' process, the violent characteristics that typified the early development of sport, slowly came under increasing levels of control. The codification of a variety of sports increases the level of internal (habitual) and external (rules, codes) restraint expected from participants. The increasing routinisation of life, which is a corollary of civilising processes, increases the socially conditioned 'need' for a 'safe' sphere for the generation and release of emotions. Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) argue that the observable changes in sports such as boxing, rugby, fox hunting and association football all show a development and prolonging of emotional tension balances. In this way, a central feature of modern sports is seen to be the 'arousal of pleasurable forms of excitement' (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). This 'shift to risk' serves the function of satisfying, at least temporarily, a socially-conditioned emotional need to experience excitement (Maguire et al, 2002). Heavy contact in sport is

interpreted as one means of engendering the emotions to which Elias & Dunning (2008 [1986]) and later Maguire (1992) draw our attention. Violence in contemporary sport, from this perspective, is seen as a relatively controlled form of emotional decontrolling, which is of increasing importance in societies that have placed a stronger need for the control of such experiences in other parts of life. This excitement is then crucial to participants' experiences of sport and sports violence. As such, it forms a central feature of the figurational analysis of sport.

## **2.9 Quest for Exciting Significance (QES)**

Using Elias' (1987) work on the emotions and Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) research examining the development of modern sport, as a base, Maguire (1992: 104) outlines a "socially conditioned need to experience a kind of spontaneous, elementary, unreflective yet pleasurable excitement". From this perspective, the emotions engendered through sports participation are significant in terms of identity formation, presentation of self and self-realisation (Maguire, 1992). Maguire proposes the QES as a sophisticated means of framing the multiple functions that sport serves in people's lives. To gain a rich appreciation of the components and assumptions that form the QES, the origins of the concept will be traced. Following this, critiques aimed at the QES's ability to frame the significance of sport and sports violence will be addressed.

In the *Quest for Excitement*, Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) contextualise the contemporary experience of sports within a rich account of the sportisation of English folk pastimes. As previously discussed, this development sets the tone for contemporary sporting experiences. Attempting to understand the appearance of modern sport during the eighteenth century among the English upper classes, Elias and Dunning, according to Maguire (1992; 103), conclude:

...that all these cultural forms [cricket, football and fox hunting] mark attempts to prolong the point-like pleasure of victory in the mock-battle of a sport and are symptomatic of a far-reaching change in the personality structure of human beings and that this in turn was closely connected with specific changes in the power structure of society at large.

The manner in which Elias and Dunning explore links between long-term social processes and personality structures (*habitus*) is insightful. Here, their thesis is implicitly tied to Elias' (2000 [1939]) earlier work examining the civilising process. They find that:

The social standard of conduct and sentiment, particularly in some upper-class circles, began to change fairly drastically from the sixteenth century onwards in a particular direction. The ruling of conduct and sentiment became stricter, more differentiated and all embracing, but also more even, more temperate, banishing excesses of self-castigation as well as of self-indulgence (Elias and Dunning, 2008 [1986]; 21).

Long-term social changes, driven by increasing interdependency chains, produce a need to control both internally and externally such things as the unfettered release of emotions. This process, and its effect on displays of violence, has been discussed in the previous section regarding the development of modern sport. It suffices to say that the long-term processes of industrialisation, technologisation, parliamentarisation and urbanisation, Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) argue, resulted in an increased pacification of the western societies that they examined. This results in relatively highly-regulated and contained cultures that, in turn, produce relatively predictable and emotionally consistent lives. Within such a complex social milieu, partaking in sports and other phenomena such as listening to music, taking drugs and attending the theatre, serve the function of de-routinising the “emotional and psychological drudgery of restrained, civilised social life” (Atkinson, 2008; 167).

Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) differentiate between phenomena that engender emotional experiences. There are ‘serious’, perhaps life-threatening, activities and events such as natural disasters or physical assaults that produce an emotional reaction such as the ‘fight or flight’ response (Dunning, 2003). Then there are those ‘mimetic’, less ‘serious’, activities, of which sport and leisure are perhaps the most common examples in contemporary western societies, that engender affects which resemble those in the former but in a ‘playful and pleasurable fashion’ (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). Such social spaces are designed “to move, to stir the emotions, to evoke tensions in the form of a controlled, well-tempered excitement without the risks and tensions usually connected with excitement in other life situations” (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; 49). This is not to say that the feelings and experiences produced in these mimetic activities are risk free. Indeed, the tension-balance between risk and safety is a key element of the ability of a sport to engender significant and pleasurable emotions and sensations (Maguire, 1992). Take boxing as an example; would

regular participants, and indeed spectators, derive the same emotional significance from a bout if there was not a real (even though controlled) risk of one of the athletes getting hurt? It is perhaps worth noting at this stage, that Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) work on the 'sparetime spectrum' is a valuable resource that provides a frame for the QES. These works should be read in conjunction with each other. However, there is not the space here to fully engage with this side of the QES.

To avoid conceptual misinterpretation of the mimetic function of the QES, it is worth quoting Maguire (1992; 105) at length:

'Mimetic' activities vary considerably both in terms of their intensity and style but have basic structural characteristics in common: that is, they provide a 'make-believe' setting which allows emotions to flow more easily and which elicits excitement of some kind imitating that produced by real-life situations, yet without its dangers or risks. 'Mimetic' activities thus allow, within certain limits, for socially permitted self-centredness.

Here, Maguire (1992; 105-106) points to sport's expressive function, which provides a socially accepted means of experiencing feelings of self-fulfilment. He goes on to discuss the emotions that such experiences elicit:

Excitement is elicited by creation of tensions: this can involve imaginary or controlled 'real' danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness and/or joy. This controlled decontrolling of excitement lies, for Elias and Dunning (1986), at 'the heart of leisure sports'. The different moods evoked in this make-believe setting are the 'siblings'; of those aroused in real-life situations. This applies whether the setting is a tragedy enacted at the Old Vic or a soccer match played at the Stadium of Light. They involve the experience of pleasurable excitement which is at the core of most play needs. But, whereas both involve pleasurable excitement, in sport, but especially in 'achievement sport', struggles between human beings play a crucial part. Indeed, some sport forms resemble real battles between hostile groups ... The mimetic sphere, though creating imaginary and staged settings, forms a distinct and integral part of social life. It is no less real than any other part of social life.

Contemporary forms of sport then, from this Eliasian perspective, serve the purpose, within societies with a greater degree of control over affective behaviour, of providing a socially acceptable place for the generation and release of emotion in a *relatively* safe environment. The relativity is key here, for Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and Maguire (1992) are not implying that sports offer a completely risk-free generation of emotions, although at times, Elias and Dunning's use of language does not make this completely obvious.<sup>5</sup> Rather, they point to the relative control of risk during mimetic phenomena in comparison to 'real' activities. In this regard, a leisure activity such as bungee jumping clearly contains some inherent risks,

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, within the 2008 edition of *Quest for Excitement*, Dunning (p3) draws attention to this lack of clarity in Elias original introduction to the book.

but these risks pale in comparison to the certain physical damage a person would experience if they were to illicit similar emotions and sensations without the bungee cord. This is not to suggest that the mimetic element of sport and other ritual forms of violence cannot transform into more 'serious', less-controlled, phenomena. Think for example of the boxer who retaliates after he is caught with a right hook after the bell has sounded, the ensuing altercation with multiple punches, grabs and throws involving both corner-men and fighters cannot be considered to have the same qualities of their previous actions and behaviours which remained within the rules of the bout. Clearly then, mimetic, controlled danger can become 'real' due to safety equipment failure or through escalation of the 'realness' of aggression and physicality. Here, then, the complex and dynamic nature of the relationship between mimetic and 'real' experiences of exciting significance in sports violence comes to the fore. Notwithstanding this complexity, it is clear that mimesis is an integral part of an athlete's participation in sports and sports violence.

Maguire's (1992) work on the social significance of emotions is seen as an important addition to Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) research. The QES is conceptualised by Maguire (1992) as offering multiple avenues for the generation, expression and renegotiation of symbolically significant experiences. Social processes, which shape the QES, are expressed through the symbolism and form that sports take. In this way, "...sports encapsulate symbolically the social natures, relations, and identities of the collectivities that generate them" (Goodger & Goodger, 1989; 257). Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) situate gender relations by way of the attention they pay to the role a 'manly style' plays in the conditioning of the quest for excitement. Gender relations have contoured the shape of modern sports (this relationship will be outlined fully in a subsequent section), this effect is no less apparent in the social conditioning of the QES. Indeed, Maguire *et al.* (2002; 192) states:

...the quest for excitement is bound up in gender relations and the changing balance of power that contours and shapes the character of the global sport experience. Both achievement sport and leisure sport involve the quest not simply for unreflexive excitement, but also for exciting significance. The symbolism attached to the sporting body should not be overlooked. Nor should we neglect the study of the gender order and the commodified forms of pleasure provided by global media sport.

Attention to the social significance which frames the emotional experiences in sport (Atkinson, 2008; Goodger & Goodger, 1989; Maguire, 1992) has increased the ability of Elias and

Dunning's original thesis to account for the important place such phenomena hold within people's lives. The implication of this is that the QES is tied to participant's biographies, socialisation and habitus (Maguire *et al.*, 2002). Here, we find a complex relationship that cannot be reduced to an explanation based on a simplistic conception of socialisation or participants behavioural traits. Atkinson (2008; 177 - emphasis added) draws out the complex intertwining of agency and structure in this process with reference to a triathlon figuration:

The case study of triathlon underscores the importance of how individual and community tastes and preferences for specific brands of athleticism are patently influenced by the life histories people carry into sport. *Triathletes' collective penchant for the sport cannot be separated from the broader social patterns and relationships in which the athletes are situated.* Predilections for their physical activities are also, of course, moulded by processes within sports groups that reaffirm the 'civilised' habituses of participants.

From this processual viewpoint, the QES provides a framework that is sensitive to the expressive, creative, self-fulfilment experienced through sports participation, while simultaneously appreciating that such phenomena are moulded, shaped and conditioned by pervasive social processes (Maguire, 1992). Indeed, the QES can be used to plot a course between romanticised, essentialist (Huizinga, 1949) and overly-critical, deterministic (Brohm, 1978; Hock, 1972) accounts of sport and sports violence. Specifically, within this study, the QES is used to frame the "carnal pleasures [and] extreme sensuousness" (Wacquant, 2004; 70) of boxing violence. Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and, subsequently, Maguire's (1992) work, provide a theoretically sophisticated means of interpreting the observations required to advance the sociological study of sports violence.

However, Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) work has been the target of some critical observations (Ferguson, 1981; Gallmeier, 1987; Horne & Jary, 1987; Jary, 1987; Zolberg, 1987). Dunning and Rojek (1992), Goodger and Goodger (1989) and Maguire (1992) adequately address these critiques, which generally seem to be generated as a result of an insufficient understanding of the complexities of Elias and Dunning's main arguments. In what follows, two more recent, and connected, critiques that are empirically based on observations that have conceptual similarities to the research being proposed in this project, will be addressed.

Stranger's (1999) account of the 'aesthetics of risk' probes emotionally and physically powerful experiences of surfers. Stranger is to be commended for his focus on the 'profound aesthetic quality' that is integral to surfers' interpretations of risk taking. However, conceptually, Stranger employs a relatively uncritical, and arguably asociological, version of Huizinga's (1949) work. In his eagerness to account for embodied experiences, Stranger, loses sight of the social processes that condition such phenomena. Here, the QES has much to offer as a tool for framing such experiences. However, Stranger (1999), in rejecting Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) quest for excitement, offers two critiques (Stranger's critiques are equally applicable to Maguire's (1992) QES).

Firstly, Stranger (1999) points to Elias and Dunning's discussion of 'collective effervescence', which they describe as a key element of the pleasure derived from sports. For Stranger, this 'team spirit', or camaraderie, makes Elias and Dunning's work inadequate for interpreting the individual pursuit of surfing. However, regardless of surfing's status as an individual activity, experiences of community will undoubtedly form an aspect of the past-times significance. Indeed, such a community spirit was shown in Atkinson's (2008) figurational examination of the individual sport of triathlon. Indeed, regardless of this misunderstanding, there is no reason to suggest that the QES cannot adequately frame the most individual of experiences, as Maguire (1992) notes, the QES contains a blend of motility, sociability *and* mimetic activities.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, Stranger (1999) takes issue with the conception of risk within the quest for excitement. For Stranger, Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) model of sport removes risk altogether. This critique disregards the risk/safety tension balance that Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) describe as being at the heart of sporting experiences. Instead of referring to Elias and Dunning's research for evidence to support his claims, Stranger quotes Fry's (1991) conception of risk in modern sport:

As a sport becomes rationalized, risk is reduced in reality and by perception. Presumably, risk, daring and uncertainty have no place in modern society, and, therefore, no place in sport (Fry, 1991, cited in Stranger, 1999; 266).

This line of reasoning not only conflicts with Elias and Dunning's research, it is also based on a skewed picture of contemporary experiences of sport. It would be logical to assume from

this fundamental absence of mimesis that Stranger's (1999) account leaves no conceptual space for substantive differences between surfing and other activities that produce similar emotions. If that were indeed the case, surfers would be equally at home engendering feelings of fear and exhilaration by jumping from a tall building without a parachute, as they are riding down ten-foot waves. This example may seem dramatic, but without differentiating between the *relatively* safe production of emotions through mimetic activities, this is the conceptual landscape that remains. Ending his critique of Elias and Dunning, Stranger (1999; 266) states that; "one way of understanding these risk-taking leisure activities is flagged by Elias (1986; 26), who says that studies of sport which are not studies of society are studies out of context". Immediately following this quotation, Stranger ignores Elias' words by failing to situate experiences of surfing's 'aesthetic qualities' within the social processes to which Elias refers.

A connected critique comes from Pringle (2009) who conducts a Foucauldian examination of heavy contact in rugby. In this account, Pringle prefers Stranger's (1999) work to Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) thesis as a means of exploring the aesthetic of rugby physicality (Pringle also refers to Maguire's (1992) work on the emotions but only on a very superficial level). Pringle continues Stranger's critique of the mimetic function of sport, insisting that his interviewee's "rugby stories do not fully resonate with this [mimetic] argument" (224-225). However, in a later passage he quotes 'Colin' as telling him:

The view in my mind is that each Saturday I go to war, and that's the way I look at it. And ... talking to myself like that makes me focus and zero's me in because...there's that intensity ... It's about being physically able to push yourself to the limits but mentally going to the next level (Pringle, 2009; 224).

Clearly, Colin is implicitly aware of rugby's mimetic function, otherwise he would be literally going to war against his opposition. It is fair to suggest that some elements of violence in rugby, and sport more generally, move from the mimetic sphere toward 'real' confrontation and physical assaults. However, such events are not only unsanctioned by the formal and informal codes of the game, they are also in the minority. Indeed, Dunning's (2008 [1983]) typology of violence, within which the mimetic and the 'real' are not anathema but intertwined dimensions, enables the QES to frame these moments of 'real' sporting violence. These

experiences of violence seem to be the exception that proves the value of a mimetic conception rather than evidence against it.

Pringle (2009) rejects the quest for excitement, and by extension Maguire's (1992) QES, based on this critique. Logically then, his lack of differentiation between mimetic and 'real' violence should lead Pringle to present violence that is 'part of the game' and violence that transcends the informal codes of the game as all-of-a-piece. This is not the case; 'Morris' quoted by Pringle (2009; 227), draws out the substantive difference between forms of violence:

...I think there was a kind of acceptance, a kind of unwritten rule that kicking somebody in the head was kind of marked or moved from acceptable violence into non-acceptable violence.

Indeed, Pringle is not blind to this difference; however, he does not connect this data to his earlier, inaccurate critique of the *Quest for Excitement*. There are two fundamental and connected issues here. Firstly, Pringle does not seem to fully appreciate the richness and intricacies of Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) research. Secondly, Pringle also seems to have not engaged with the conceptual and empirical works that explore the definition of sports violence (Smith, 1983; Dunning, 2008 [1983]). The critiques of the *Quest for Excitement* outlined here do not detract from the usefulness of the concept<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, engaging with such critiques helps to highlight the ways in which Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and Maguire (1992) have presented a theoretically sophisticated model of the function and emotional significance of sport. However, it seems necessary to engage with an element within the QES in an attempt to ensure against the unwanted slippage towards a latent overemphasis on the biological element of the concept.

Centring the biological body within sociological analysis is traditionally fraught with conceptual and theoretical danger (Shilling, 1993). The QES is sensitive to such an undertaking. Key in this regard, is the manner in which Elias (1987) conceptualises the emotions. Here, we find an intertwining of biological, psychological and sociological processes. Indeed, from an Eliasian perspective, the separation of these elements of human life is a conceptual fallacy. These components of the QES, by their very nature, are interdependent, intertwined and must

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<sup>6</sup> Pringle's critical comments will be returned to in various places through this thesis

be thought of as such. This is evident in Maguire's (1992; 104) insistence that the physical and psychological components of the QES are "socially conditioned". However, it is possible for this intertwined conditioning to subtly slip, as can arguably be seen in Goodger and Goodger's (1989; 270, emphasis added) account:

Whereas tension excitement may intensify the symbolic significance of sport, that symbolic significance may imbue the tension balance of sporting encounters with special meaning and heightened emotionality. *Ultimately, both stem from deeply-rooted human desires – for excitement and understanding – and find expression in cultural forms that are shaped by the interplay of these desires with human cognition and the social context in which they exist.*

The subtle way that Goodger and Goodger (1989) separate and prioritise, 'deeply-rooted human desires', *could* point to a latent biological primacy within their work. Although they are quick to draw out the social context in which these desires exist, Goodger and Goodger's (1989) use of the term 'ultimately' could prioritise this biology in a way that is not in keeping with Elias' (1987) conception of the emotions. The work of Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and Maguire (1992) enables this conceptual minefield to be navigated in a sophisticated manner. However, the full implications of this undertaking are yet to be fully addressed. Indeed, Maguire (1992) calls for a wider multidisciplinary approach than that which has currently been employed to fully account for the psychological and physical sides of sports participation. Elias' (1987) work outlining 'the hinge' is useful in this regard, here, Elias makes explicit the interdependent nature of biological and psychological processes. It is not within the scope of this study to adopt the multidisciplinary approach that is required to fully realise Elias' (1987) intertwining hinge. An appreciation of the interdependent nature of the processes that generate social behaviour will insure against any deterministic over-emphasis being afforded to any single process. However, within this study, the social framing of emotional and physical experiences will be the main focus. Notwithstanding this cautionary critique, the QES provides a sophisticated means of framing the social, physical and psychological significance of sport and sports violence. In his way, the theoretical and conceptual inadequacies of the catharsis and social learning theories and Stranger (1999) and Pringle's (2009) work, are avoided. In this way, the complex processual development of sports worlds can be then located within the framing of lived experiences.

What then, according to the literature on sports violence, are the key social frames of these experiences of sports violence? Notions connected to the gender order have been described as significant within an understanding of sports violence. A substantial body of research has investigated the relationship between masculine identities (less so of female identities) and the acceptance, legitimisation, encouragement and reward of violence in sport. In what follows, some of the theoretical and empirical contributions that have been made in this area will be examined.

## **2.10 Gender and Sports Violence**

Boxing is described in colloquial terms as the 'manly art', this nickname suggests the sport shares close ties to the gender order, indeed, this link had also been shown in various research settings (De Garis, 2000; Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2006). In particular, knowledge informed by assumptions about male identities shapes the violent experiences that are explored within this research project. As such, an overview and definition of the concepts of gender and masculinity will be provided. Following this, the role played by masculinities and the gender order in shaping contemporary sports, in particular heavy contact sports, will be explored. Thereafter, ways in which processes of masculinity shape and frame sensuous experience of violence in, and around, the boxing ring, are discussed.

"Generally speaking, males behave more violently than females" (Smith, 1983: 47). Here, Smith describes, in a blunt fashion, the differentiation of violence along the social fault line of gender. He goes on to discuss some of the complexities, nuances and ambiguities that underlie his overview. In a similar, perhaps more theoretically sophisticated, manner, Connell (1995; 83) describes the same observable phenomena, "it is overwhelmingly, the dominant gender who hold and use the means of violence". Connell (1995; 83) goes on to suggest the central importance of violence in the making and re-making of gendered relations:

Two patterns of violence follow this situation. Firstly, many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance. Intimidation of women ranges across the spectrum from wolf-whistling in the street, to office harassment, to rape and domestic assault, to murder by a women's patriarchal 'owner' ... Secondly, violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men. Terror is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusion, for example,

in heterosexual violence against gay men. Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles.

Here, we find that violence can be employed in an overt and direct sense to secure physical dominance and as a key ideological tool for establishing and maintaining power dynamics between and within the genders. Violence then, Connell (1995) and others (Maguire, 1986; Messner, 1990; Dunning, 1986) would suggest, holds a crucial role within the making and re-making of the gender order. Not only is violence a tool of gender differentiation, it is also a means employed to code gender relations. In this way, relations between and within masculinities and femininities can be constructed, maintained, negotiated, subverted and challenged. Sports, and heavy contact sports in particular, are sites at which these processes take place (Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1990). Of particular interest to this study are the various masculine identities that are enabled and constrained by and, in turn, enable and constrain, norms and values within boxing subcultures.

Traditionally, academic study has been conducted using men, by men, but has not necessarily been about men (Brod, 1987). Research that assumes (white, western) maleness to be all-of-a-piece, over-generalises the experiences of men as the experiences of generic human beings. This picture distorts what, if anything, is universal to the human experience while hiding the experiences of men. In so doing, the study of men and masculinities is hindered (Brod, 1987). It is within this context that the recent academic focus on masculinities and femininities has blossomed. How then, should we begin to conceptualise gender identity? Connell's (2002, 1995) work provides a point of departure.

Connell (2002; 8) suggests, "in its most common usage ... the term 'gender' means the cultural difference of women from men based on the biological division between male and female". This dichotomous definition, according to Connell, is problematic as it does not account for the overlapping and contingent identities that characterise the gender order and does not allow for intra-gender difference. Connell (2002; 9) argues for a definition based on relations suggesting that, "gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act". He continues, "gender relations do include difference and dichotomy, but also include many other patterns ... It is a pattern in our social arrangements,

and in the everyday activities or practices which those arrangements govern". Gender is then, more than a social elaboration of biological sex differences. Indeed, gender is now conceptualised as a process of social relations operating between and within masculine and feminine identities. How then, have such masculine identities been defined?

## **2.11 Masculinities**

"'Masculinity' is not a coherent object about which a generalising science can be produced" (Connell, 1995; 67). This statement follows an examination of the main currents of research that have thus far failed to produce a single, coherent, conception of masculinity. This theoretical/conceptual landscape will be briefly described. The aim here is to contextualise research that examines violence and masculine identities and to locate the present study within wider theoretical debates.

*Essentialist* definitions of masculinity attempt to latch onto a feature that is defined as a core component of what is to be a 'man'. In this way, masculine behaviour may be defined as involving amongst other things risk-taking, irresponsibility, violence, courage and/or over-competitiveness (Connell, 1995). Regardless of which arbitrary essence is chosen to represent the core of 'being a man', this search for a "universal basis for masculinity tell[s] us more about the ethos of the claimant than about anything else" (Connell, 1995; 69).

*Positivistic* definitions are based on the search for statistically discreet differences between males and females. Here, the neutrally presented descriptions of 'male' and 'female' are, in fact, constructions of gender based on *a priori* assumptions. In this way, the positivistic "procedure thus rests on the very typifications that are supposedly under investigation in gender research" (Connell, 1995; 69). Positivistic and essentialist definitions of gender fundamentally negate the possibility of difference within gendered identities. In this way, "the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' [which] point beyond categorical sex difference to the way men differ among themselves, and women differ among themselves, in matters of gender" (Connell, 1995; 69) are made redundant.

*Normative* definitions of gender are sensitive to intra-gender difference. They offer a standard or 'normal' conception that allows for a 'scale' of masculinity and femininity. Such a scale is a move towards an understanding of the variations that mark out gendered relations. However, this blueprint for 'how a man should be' is often a stylised, romanticised portrayal of hyper-masculinity that is generally unobtainable by the majority of men (Connell, 1995). Such idealistic images of masculinity pervade the media in symbols such as John Rambo, 'Stone cold' Steve Austin (Pro Wrestler) and Rocky Balboa. These 'normal' versions of masculinity alienate the majority of men, in so doing, this definition of masculinity defines most men as un-masculine. Therefore, a normative definition lacks power to describe the lived experiences of most men. However, normative notions of masculinity are components within our understanding of the ideologies that shape male, and by extension female, identities. These stereotypical and hegemonic forms of gendered identity often shape in complex ways the 'common sense' understandings of what it is to be a man or women.

Challenging these static, arbitrary, and problematic definitions, Connell (1995; 71) argues:

Rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the process and relationship through which men and women conduct gendered lives. 'Masculinity', to the extent the term can be defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage, and the effects of these practises in bodily experiences, personality and culture.

Masculinity is now conceptualised as existing as multiple 'masculinities', this is more than simply semantics. Moving past the traditional binary, naturally occurring and sex-determined conceptions of violence, Connell urges us to think of masculinities as plural, dynamic, negotiated and relational processes, behaviours, ideologies and identities. This nuanced appreciation of the multiple nature of gendered identities should not detract from the observable dominance of some identities over others. In this way, Connell (1995) discusses 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity'. Hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1995: 76) suggests, is "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable". By contrast, 'emphasised femininity' is "defined around compliance (with the domination of hegemonic masculinity) and is oriented to accommodate the interests and desires of men" (Connell, 1987; 183). These dominant forms of gender identity are of particular importance within this study as boxing has been described

as a site for the making and re-making of traditional hegemonic gender roles (de Garis, 2000; Oates, 1987; Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004, 2001; Woodward, 2006).

Such domination, by definition, requires *subordinate* masculinities. Of these, homosexual identities are perhaps “bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (Connell, 1995; 78). These formations ebb and flow in relational power dynamics, and should not be considered constant in any sense. Within such relations, Connell also discusses *complicit* identities, which gain from the hegemonic position that certain masculinities hold in social hierarchies, without rigorously practising the patterns that mark out such identities. The resulting ‘patriarchal dividend’ is achieved by groups of men who form a relationship of complicity with hegemonic masculine codes. Connell (1995; 84-85) suggests:

It is tempting to treat them simply as slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity – the difference between the men who cheer football matches on TV and those who run into the mud and the tackles themselves. But there is often something more definite and carefully crafted than that. Marriage, fatherhood and community life often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority.

This complicity is an example of the negotiated manner in which the gender order shapes and frames lives. Connell further develops his framework by including a reference to the intersection between gender, class and race. Here, we find *marginalised* masculinities. Through, including this dimension, Connell (1995; 81) is attempting to situate gendered processes within wider social “configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships”. Such an attempt resonates with the overarching theoretical position that frames this study. In what follows, links between them will be made explicit. To summarise, hegemonic, complicit, subordinate or marginalised, masculine identities are inherently changeable, dynamic and negotiated and exist as relational processes intertwined with wide social figurations. In this way, Connell’s (1995) work avoids static conceptions of masculinities and provides a sophisticated framework from which to analyse the generation and maintenance of male identities that resonate with sports violence.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have relatively recently revisited the concept of hegemonic masculinities and assessed its relevance in the light of contemporary research. They argue that the main theoretical thread within Connell’s original work, when properly

applied, has stood the test of time. Components of Connell's work are updated, and elements and issues that should be addressed in further research are suggested. Three themes within Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) work are of key relevance for the present study. Firstly, the unpublished work of Poynting, Noble and Tabar (2003 cited by Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which describes protest masculinities, is referred to. This is a valuable addition to the previously discussed framework. Fitting within subordinate and/or marginalised masculinities, protest masculinities provide a challenge to the dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity. In this way, the capacity of Connell's framework as a means of conceptualising the negotiated and contested nature of gender relations is increased.

Secondly, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss the ambiguities and overlaps that exist within and between forms of masculinities. Here, men whom identify with hegemonic masculinities may appropriate behaviours, meanings and significances from other gendered identities in a pragmatic manner to attempt to gain and maintain a position of dominance. Such processes produce a weaving together of behaviour patterns, interpretations, norms and values into new masculine identities. Demetriou (2000) finds evidence for this negotiation process in the appropriation, by heterosexual men, of practices and styles traditionally associated with homosexual men. For Demetriou (2000), such hybridisation blurs the boundaries within the hierarchy of masculinity set out by Connell (1995). As such, the conceptual boundaries between substantively different masculinities can be considered to be porous, flexible and inherently dynamic.

Finally, Connell & Messerschmidt (2005; 832) also highlight the embodiment of masculinity as an area that requires further research. In this regard, they suggest hegemonic masculinity embodies "... the currently most honoured way of being a man ..." but that "... the pattern of embodiment involved in hegemony has not been convincingly theorised" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; 851). The concept of habitus can provide the conceptual tools from which this embodied process can be explored. This will be further discussed in a subsequent section outlining the concept of habitus. For now, it suffices to say that Connell's framing of gender provides us with a dynamic and process-lead understanding of masculinities, which, through negotiated and contested pragmatic practices, conceptualises the making and re-

making of identities. How then, has this gender order shaped and framed modern sports worlds and subcultures of boxing in particular?

### **2.12 Sport as a Male Preserve**

Gender relations have shaped the development of modern sport (Bryson, 1987; Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Dunning & Sheard, 1976; Messner, 1990; Messner & Sabo, 1990). The salience of this relationship is highlighted by Theberge (2000; 321) who argues that:

Historically, sport has been organised as a male preserve, in which the majority of rewards go to men. This arrangement is both the basis of, and a powerful support for, an ideology of gender that ascribes different natures, abilities and interests to men and women.

How then, has this unequal 'arrangement' been produced and reproduced? To address this question we need to examine the contexts in which the modern institutions of sport developed. Researchers have pointed to the crucial role the English public schools have played in the development of the gendered world of modern sport (Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Sheard, 1979; Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2000). The institutionalisation of organised games in public schools was "infused with a Victorian version of masculinity, which celebrated competitiveness, leadership, toughness and physical dominance" (Theberge, 2000; 321). Such games come to represent dominant symbols of masculinity and became cemented as *the* way to do sport in Britain and, eventually, throughout the majority of the world (Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994). This is one important way hegemonic values, attached to a traditional form of masculinity, have shaped and framed the development of modern sport.

As Connell's (1995) conception of gender would suggest, this was, and is still, a contested relationship. Notwithstanding challenges to this process, the lineage of dominant ideologies within the majority of sport forms, especially western performance contact sports such as boxing, rugby and soccer, appears to be traceable to such a development. What, then, drove the intertwined development of masculine identities and sport in such a direction and why have forms of violence maintained such a central role?

For Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]), the answers to these questions can be found within wider social changes that prevailed during this development. As lengthening chains of interdependency increase through processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, parliamentisation and modernisation, opportunities for men to experience material and symbolic proof of their dominant position within societies are diminished (Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Elias, 2000 [1939]). The resulting shift in power balance towards women was influential in the formation of male-only sports clubs as ideological “vehicles for the inculcation and expression of manliness” (Dunning, 1986; 271). Messner (1990; 204) agrees; “sport, as we know it, emerged as a male response to social changes which undermined many of the bases of men’s traditional patriarchal power, authority, and identity”. While we should be cautious here of ascribing planned and causal relationships in the way that Messner (1990) seemingly does, it is apparent that the erosion of traditional masculine power bases will have increased the need to supplant the ‘naturalness’ of male domination through other means.

This process had its counterpart in American society (Mennell, 2007) where the absence of a frontier to conquer, combined with “physical strength becoming less relevant to work, and with urban males being raised by females,” to produce the fear “that males were becoming ‘soft’, that society was becoming feminized” (Messner, 1992; 14). This ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Kimmel, 1987) prompted powerful groups to emphasise aspects of sports, and especially heavy contact, violent sports, that could act as symbolic ‘proof’ of male superiority over females (Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Crosset, 1990; Messner, 1988). A corollary of this process was the exclusion of women from such sports on the grounds that the physicality involved presented an inherent biological risk to their health and child bearing capabilities (Linskyj, 1986). This myth of female frailty provided a ‘scientific’, therefore ‘factual’, basis for women’s continued absence from sports, except those deemed physically and aesthetically suitable (Theberge, 1989). Here, we find Connell’s (1995) emphasised femininity dominating acceptable female versions of sport, with an emphasis on behaviours thought to be opposite to those of men’s sport. Theberge (2000: 323) suggests, “ ... this model confirmed the ‘myth of female frailty’ and offered apparent confirmation of the essential difference between the sexes”.

In this way, contemporary experiences of sport are shaped and framed by, and intern shape and frame, the sociogenesis of the societies in which they exist. Gendered ideologies and lived experiences within sports worlds can often exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship; violence holds a central position in this process. Gillett and White (1992; 363) argue that male physicality displayed through sport offers “a subtle form of symbolic domination rather than overt control, which contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of power relations inherent in the existing gender order”. The significance of this process is found in the association of “males and maleness with valued skills and the sanctioned use of aggressive/force/violence” (Bryson, 1987; 349). As such, the combination of skill, force and types of violence have become key components of hegemonic masculinities, especially within sporting environments (Connell, 1983, 1990, 1995; Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Messner, 1990, 1992; Whitson, 1994).

Messner (1990) has proposed that male athletes identify with their ‘bodies as weapons’, to harm and be harmed, provides material and symbolic support for the continued imbalance of power between genders. Images of athletes in sports media can further strengthen and compound notion about this type of powerful and aggressive masculinity (Sabo *et al.*, 1992). In this way, male experiences of mimetic violence can validate the social conditioning of identities associated with traditional, hegemonic masculinities. However, within contemporary sports worlds, it is not only those men who identify with traditional hegemonic masculinities that participate in sports violence. Returning to Connell’s (1995) framework, we must be aware of an overemphasis upon any one dimension, however dominant, of masculinity, such identifications fill but one part of the conceptual space required to appreciate the relationship between violence and gender. The relational and contested nature of difference between masculinities *must* also be considered.

As Connell (1985; 4) argues, “a crucial fact about men is that masculinity is not all of a piece. There have always been different kinds, some more closely associated with violence than others”. Sports in general, and heavy contact sports in particular, are sites where a battle for hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal values are fought (Connell, 1995; 1990). Foley (1990)

has depicted this dynamic relationship within American football. Examples of such contestations can be found in the sometimes-negative experiences of boys and men within sports violence. For Klein (1993) and Messner (1992), participation in such sports can be characterised by disappointment, frustration and resentment rather than the positive identity formation traditionally associated with men, boys and sports. Such works do much to map out the complex interaction between masculine identities and sports violence. To conclude this section, some of the ways in which masculine identities have been shown to contour the sensuous experiences of violence will be briefly explored.

The embodiment of a traditional, hegemonic, masculine style is especially evident within sports worlds where the language of physicality is dominant (Messner, 1990; Monahan, 2001b; Wacquant, 2004). In this way, bodily sense is a crucial aspect of male identity and developing physical presence can be an empowering exercise for men and boys (Connell, 1983; 1995). Connell (1987; 27) suggests, "what it means to be masculine is quite literally to embody force, to embody competence." Within heavy contact sports, a part of this embodiment is the ability to deal out and take violence in a skilled and courageous manner. Messner (1992) examines the social rewards that men and boys receive for engaging in heavy contact sports and tolerating the violence and physical and emotional pain that is produced through such participation. These social rewards are generated in combination with intertwined physical and psychological processes (Maguire, 1992; Pringle, 2009). The emotions that are produced in such situations are described by Gard and Meyenn (2000; 21): "Gender is felt, enjoyed and suffered through a literate body which learns the postures movements and social 'scripts' of masculine and feminine bodies." An aspect of such masculine identities can be the interpretation of certain violent experiences as socially, psychologically and physically pleasurable. In this way, Gard and Meyenn (2000; 29) suggest "that the physical contact that holds the potential for pain is not simply accepted as a necessary evil in an otherwise pleasurable experience". Violent behaviour, and sensations attached to these experiences, in this way, can be shaped by certain gendered identities into a set of positive, expressive, visceral and fulfilling phenomena. Here, we find an example of a socially-conditioned emotional significance. Think, for example, of the physical and social reactions a rugby player, or boxer, receives when he or she times a tackle or punch perfectly.

Team-mates and spectators may also 'feel' such actions with the player and reinforce them through encouragement and reward. The timed connection with body on body or fist on chin triggers physically and psychologically significant feelings. We find in these intertwining social, psychological and physical experiences the significance of sport in general and sports violence in particular (Maguire, 1992).

How then, can we go about exploring this embodiment of masculine identities within experiences of sports violence? As suggested by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the embodiment of masculinity remains relatively under-researched. This is perhaps due to the challenges that such an undertaking poses in a conceptual and theoretical sense (Crossley, 2001; Shilling, 1993). As previously mentioned, the habitus concept may offer a means of locating the embodiment of social processes. Indeed, work examining gendered habitus has been empirically and conceptually fruitful. Combining habitus with Maguire's (1992) QES, provides a rich conceptual tool kit with which to interpret the gendered, sensuous, experiences of boxers. The previously-discussed literature will be drawn together in a theoretical framework as this chapter continues. For now, the contextualisation of this study will continue through an examination of the research involving boxing.

## **2.12 Sociology of boxing**

Boxing has often been framed as the epitome of violent sport; "after all, in boxing you get extra points for producing extra brain damage" (World in Action, 1985; cited in Donnelly, 1988). In what follows, research exploring the social dynamics of boxing will be discussed. A brief discussion of the position boxing holds within contemporary Western societies will provide some level of contextualisation. Then, key sociological examinations of boxing will be described.

Forms of pugilism have been recorded in literature and symbols from antiquity (Donnelly, 1998). Links between these early fighting contests are more important symbolically than as a starting point from which to trace the development of modern boxing. In this regard, boxers and those reporting and writing about boxing invoke gladiatorial, Parthenonic, metaphors to frame action inside the ring (Sugden, 1996; Woodward, 2006). The basic form that

contemporary boxing takes emerged from prizefighting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Murphy & Sheard, 2006). The institutionalisation and codification of the sport, from its disorganised and unprofessional roots occurred during a time of industrialisation, urbanisation and parliamentarisation (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]). The general reduction in the brutality of life that these social changes produced can be seen in the planned and unplanned development of modern boxing (Murphy & Sheard, 2006). As the sport came under increasing pressure to be banned within these civilising societies, concessions were made that attempted to limit the physically damaging and bloody nature of prizefighting. Weight classifications, timed rounds, limits on the number of rounds, referees, penalties for disobeying rules, protective equipment for the hands, teeth and groin were all introduced (Murphy & Sheard, 2006). In this way, the modern form of boxing began to take shape.

The 'noble art' of boxing has been discussed as both a positive influence on, and direction for, youthful (male) energies and all that is the best of England (Chesney, 1972) and a "brutal anachronism" (Bailey, 1978; 25), which is exploitative and degrading (British Medical Association, 2007). Toperoff (1987; 185) captures the notion that boxing is an archaic remnant of a more violent time now passed:

Professional boxing is a throwback, a vestige of our dark, irrational past. That's one reason it is usually under sharp attack in a society that likes to believe it has evolved very different and superior values. You surely cannot reason people into an appreciation of boxing.

For groups and individuals that believe themselves to exist in a 'civilised' world, boxing can represent such an anachronistic anomaly. These groups tend to focus on developing knowledge geared to providing the justification for banning boxing rather than attempting to understand why people box (Donnelly, 1988; Wacquant, 1995c, 2004). The arguments against boxing being accepted as a legitimate sport usually fall into one of the following categories: medical (preventing damage to boxers' mental and physical health), paternalistic (attempting to stop the exploitation of boxers) and arguments revolving around the damaging effects boxing has on society (it is uncivilised and degrading) (Donnelly, 1988). Based on these assumptions, attempts to explain the brutality, immorality, alienation and exploitation, which from these standpoints characterises boxing, consistently overlook the voices and experiences of the sport's insiders (Wacquant, 1995c). The significance of these voices,

previously restricted to journalistic, literary and anecdotal accounts (Beattie, 1996; Early, 1994), have been situated within sociological research (Wacquant, 1995c; Sugden, 1996; De Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2006). In gaining access to those 'inside' boxing, sociologists have uncovered the stories of peoples whose appreciation for the sport has come through a practical involvement. For the majority of these pugilistic locals, boxing is not a 'throwback to an irrational past' but an essential, expressive and liberating experience which helps, to a greater or lesser degree, to define their lives (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004).

As well as drawing attention to these 'insider' experiences, sociological research has traced the historical development of boxing and located it among wide social processes (Donnelly, 1988; Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1996). Sugden (1996; 55) has paid particular attention to the political economy that he argues shapes boxing:

As the twentieth century progressed, throughout the developing world, pugilism's more sophisticated offspring - boxing - emerged as a product of a more complex, but nevertheless deprived, inner-city landscape. As the following case studies reveal, however, just as in the past, pugilism had been a noble art to those who practised and patronised it, boxing for those who are engaged in it today, means so much more than a fight for poverty.

For Sugden (1996), the economic restraints and lack of opportunities within the 'ghettos' that were home to the boxing clubs he researched, determine the popularity of boxing in these economically deprived areas. Notably, he concludes, "boxing is the cultural product of a global political economy which determines considerable social inequalities" (Sugden, 1996; 195). This line of investigation clearly has much to offer, however, within Sugden's analysis there are signposts that point to examples within his data that would suggest a less deterministic account. He states, "even if boxing exploits, it also liberates and, like most sports, it has an aesthetic quality which has intrinsic appeal to those who step in the ring" (Sugden, 1996; 189). Sugden also describes masculinity as a 'subtext' to his book. In this regard, he briefly draws our attention towards two components that other authors have found to be useful in their explorations of boxing. Here, Wacquant's (2004) research, which centres the 'aesthetic qualities and intrinsic appeal' that Sugden (1996) refers to, and De Garis' (2000) and Woodward's (2006) work examining masculinities in boxing, are seen as valuable extensions to our knowledge of the sport. These works will now be discussed.

Wacquant (1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2001, 2004) provides a rich understanding of the embodied world of boxing. He places the lives of boxers within wide structuring processes linked to the economy, class and race. In this regard, he argues:

Only by unpacking the logic of boxing's material and moral economy can one hope to disentangle how power and submission, constraint and agency, pleasure and suffering mingle and abet each other in such a manner that prizefighters may be at once their own saviours and their own tormentors (Wacquant, 1995; 169).

Like Sugden (1996), Wacquant picks out the importance of physically significant experiences to the lives of boxers. Importantly, he is able to more adequately conceptually and theoretically situate these experiences within his analysis, crucial in this process is his use of habitus. This 'pugilistic habitus' is a socially-learned second nature which boxers develop over time spent in and around the gym. The sophisticated usage of this concept enables Wacquant's analysis to maintain a central role for the boxer's body throughout his work on the subject. Explicit in this 'carnal sociology' is a sensuous ethnography (De Garis, 2000). Including large extracts from field notes allows Wacquant to describe the sensuous detail of the boxing experience. He argues:

One would need to call up all the tools of visual sociology or even those of a truly sensual sociology that remains to be invented to convey the process whereby the boxer becomes organismically "invested" by and bound to the game as he progressively makes it his – boxers commonly use metaphors of blood and drugs to explain this particular relation akin to mutual possession. For it is with all of one's senses that one gradually converts to the world of prize-fighting and its stakes (Wacquant, 2004; 70).

Wacquant explores the social, physical and psychological meanings that boxing holds for its practitioners. To understand the significance of the sensuous experiences of training, sparring, competing and being in the gym he locates them within socio-economic frames:

Pugilism enables its devotees to escape the realm of mundanity and the ontological obscurity to which their undistinguished lives, insecure jobs and cramped family circumstances relegate them and enter instead into an extraordinary, 'hyperreal' space in which a purified and magnified masculine self may be achieved. It does this first by thrusting them in the midst of a *luxuriant sensory landscape*, a broad and varied panorama of affect pleasure, and dramatic release (Wacquant, 1995; 154).

This analysis shares commonalities with the QES; indeed, Wacquant (1995c) makes reference to Elias & Dunning's (2008 [1986]) discussion of tension balances between emotional control and stimulation. For Wacquant (1995c, 2004), some of the significance of boxing comes as a result of the contrasting experiences it offers from the otherwise monochrome lives of its participants. Two interwoven issues can be drawn out from this analysis. Firstly, sensuous experiences of boxing are significant within the construction of

meaning that pugilists use to interpret their engagement in the sport. Secondly, socially-framed identities, key amongst which are notions connected to masculinity and class, frame and contextualise these experiences.

Wacquant's engagement with masculinity (or lack thereof) has received some critical comments (De Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2006). De Garis (2000) and Woodward (2006) explore the opportunities for the performance of multiple forms of masculinity within boxing and find Wacquant's work lacking in this regard. For De Garis (2000), Wacquant dismisses gender relations without the need for explanation. Indeed, while some of Wacquant's early work (1995a & 1995b) lacks discussion of gender, this cannot be said of all his work. However, the emphasis that De Garis (2000) and Woodward's (2006) place on gender relations sensitises us to the varying notions of masculinity that can be expressed through boxing. Such research represents a challenge to the assumption that a traditional notion of hegemonic masculinity is necessarily associated with boxing (Oates, 1987; Wacquant, 2004). Thus, a theoretically sophisticated conceptualisation of gender will be an important component of further work in the field.

De Garis (2000) and Woodward (2007) present the making and re-making of masculinities as a negotiated process. Their works spring from a critique of an assumed masculinity within previous boxing research. Indeed, much of the homogeneity within such studies may be traced to the similarities between the majority of researchers (white, male) and research settings ('traditional' gyms in economically deprived areas) (De Garis, 2000). De Garis' (2000) research took place in a commercial gym, as such; he found participants had different expectations and experiences from those which might be expected within a 'traditional' boxing gym setting. Woodward's status as a female within a boxing club gave her a view seldom described from such a setting. Together, their explicit focus on varieties within masculine identities enables them to explore the intricacies and subtleties of the gendered processes experienced within boxing settings. For example, De Garis (2000; 97) discusses the intimacy that characterises sparring sessions:

Sparring offers a space in which men may share a somatic intimacy that otherwise would not be socially sanctioned...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.

Such an explicit exploration of alternatives to traditional hegemonic masculinity is clearly not evident within Wacquant's research. For De Garis (2000), boxing presents an opportunity for males to experience physical and emotional contact that would usually be considered illegitimate. Woodward (2006: 67) exploring the relationship between boxing and traditional forms of masculinities, picks out, amongst other things, the important role the body plays in this relationship:

The beautiful body incorporates not only physical fitness, muscle, skill and good looks, but also a whole set of physical experiences through which this version of masculinity is forged. Muhammed Ali at his peak must be one of the best examples of this beautiful body, but the ill health that has dogged his later years, albeit which he denies to have arisen from his boxing experience, presents another dimension of embodiment (Woodward, 2006; 64).

Woodward (2006) highlights the physical experiences of boxing, which are also drawn out in Wacquant's (2004) work, and ties them to masculinity. She explores the disruptive role the sport may play in the lives of ex-boxers. The masculine identities of ex-boxers, so firmly tied to a powerful physicality, are challenged by the possible adverse physical effects of a lifetime spent in the ring. The preceding examples from De Garis (2000) and Woodward's (2006) research are important correctives to an overly-simplistic conception of gendered processes within boxing research. It is clear from such works that masculinity in a dynamic and plural sense shapes and frames experiences within boxing environments.

In summary, Sheard and Murphy's (2006) research maps the development of boxing as shaped by long-term social changes. Participation in boxing has been shown to be interwoven with economic, class (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 1995a, 2004) and gendered processes (De Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2006). All these works point in some way to the complex milieu of social interdependencies that characterise the dynamic world of boxing. In this way, lived experiences are far from determined by any one aspect of this world. Instead, negotiated processes of identity formation, expressive creativity and economic influences, amongst other things, co-mingle in an ever-changing flux of constraining and enabling balances.

What does all this mean for the study of violence? Although there is an inherent relationship between boxing and violence, it is important not to think of the two as interchangeable. Within

the sociological study of boxing, various forms of violence have played key roles within participants' and researchers' interpretation of the sport. However, there is much more to boxing than these violent exchanges alone. Indeed, the amount of time spent sparring and competing (where the majority of interpersonal violence is experienced) is generally only a fraction of that spent on solo training (De Garis, 2000; Wacquant, 2004). Two points need unpacking from this: firstly, due in part to the complexity of boxing practices, only infrequently have researchers delved deeply into the emotional and sensuous components of these mimetic violence experiences. In this regard, Wacquant (1995c, 2004) has been the most detailed, nevertheless, his work only briefly touches on the experiences which are focused on within this thesis. Secondly, to explore specific experiences of violence in boxing, a rich understanding salient social processes which shape and frame said phenomena is required. Without being able to situate mimetic violence within the wider social figuration in which the boxer operates, a deep and rich understanding of the significance of such acts is missed. In order to address the lack of sensuous experiences of violence within the sociology of sport literature and to engage more fully with these experiences than has been the case within the sociology of boxing literature, an express focus on these experiences is required. However, this focus must not come at the cost of an understanding of the boxer's social world. As such, it is necessary to frame the boxer's experiences of violence within rich biographical data, local dynamics and the wider social processes that shape their lives and violent encounters. In this way, a simultaneous narrow and wide focus is required. At this stage, a brief look at some of the conceptual and theoretical tools which will enable such an undertaking may be useful.

### **2.13 Theoretical framework**

Having laid out key literature and introduced some conceptual tools, a theoretical position that is capable of framing the data required to access the sensuous experiences of boxing violence will now be outlined. Primarily, this will be achieved through a reading of Elias' (2000 [1939]) figural sociology. Having already outlined the QES, key components from Elias' work will be discussed. Here, the figuration, established-outsider relations and habitus will be central. To conclude the chapter, a means of integrating the previously-described literature and figural framework will be suggested.

## 2.14 Figurational/Process Sociology

Elias' life works form the foundational principles of figurational sociology. He produced a collection of texts including; *The Civilising Process* (2000 [1939]), *What is Sociology?* (1978c), *Involvement and Detachment* (1987), *The Society of Individuals* (1991a) and *The Germans* (1996). He also produced, in collaboration; *The Quest for Excitement* (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]) and *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]). In these works, and others, Elias maps out empirically, conceptually and theoretically processes of social change and how such developments are related to human interdependencies. Importantly, it is this notion of interdependence that forms the foundation of Elias' work. Elias argued that human beings cannot be understood in separation from their long-term interdependent relationships with others. In this regard, he conceptualised such relations as existing only in dynamic, processual, figurations. Individuals then, exist not as *homo clausus* (closed boxes) but as *hominus aperti* (open people) (Maguire, 1992). In Elias' (1994; 214) own words:

The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is here called a figuration, a structure of mutually-oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other, first by nature and then by social learning, through education, socialization, and socially-generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only in figurations.

In this way, the figuration is a means of moving beyond a dichotomous separation of society and individual. A focus on interdependency enables a sophisticated conception of both the agent and the structure as existing in intertwined components of the interactions, behaviours, meaning, significances and experiences of human beings (Elias, 1991a; Maguire, 1999; Mennell, 1992). Mennell (1992; 251) argues that Elias;

...employed 'figuration' as a more processual and dynamic term, in contrast with expressions like 'social system' and 'social structure' which in common sociological usage are not only very static but also give the impression of referring to something separate from, beyond and outside individuals.

This is not to suggest that the term cannot be employed in an unsophisticated and reified manner. Rather, it is a means of sensitising us to ways in which our lives are given shape by fluctuating interdependencies. In Van Benthem van der Bergh's words (1971; 19, cited in Mennell, 1992), figurations should be thought of as "networks or interdependent human beings, with shifting asymmetrical power balances". For Elias, power is a property of *all* social relationships, as such, it is an inherent component of figurations. His conception of power is

based on his examination of complex power ratios within Court societies (2000 [1939]). This multidimensional nature of power was further developed in his micro-sociological exploration of the established-outsider relations within a small community in the East Midlands of England (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]). Here, the contours and fault-lines of power ratios between two groups of similar class and ethnic backgrounds enabled a detailed exploration of differentials in group cohesion and integration. In this way, the established group maintained a position of dominance due in large part to the control of certain positions of authority within the community and through family and friendship bonds. Through 'we-images' based on the 'minority of the best' and 'they-images' based on the 'minority of the worst', the established group idealized and stereotyped images of themselves and the 'outsiders'. In Elias and Scotson's (1994 [1965]; xix) words:

As the study of Winston Parva indicates, an established group tends to attribute to its outsider group as a whole the 'bad' characteristics of that group's 'worst' section – of its anomic minority. In contrast, the self-image of the established group tends to be modelled on its exemplary, most 'nomic' or norm-setting section, on the minority of its 'best' members.

Such stigmatisations became a part of the outsider group's 'we-image' and formed a part of the established group's justification of superiority. In this way, Elias and Scotson argue, power is generated and maintained through figurational dynamics not simply due to social differentials such as class, gender and ethnicity. This framing of power ratios that exist within established-outsider figurations provides a sophisticated understanding of the dynamic nature of social interactions while maintaining conceptual space for durable and resistant hierarchies. The norms and values generated via such relations frame and shape the lives of people who inhabit them. Indeed, images and stereotypes become reified through the embodiment of idealised notions created in such figurations. As Mennell (1992; 122) argues:

Where the balance of power between established and outsiders is extremely unequal, it is very common for people to believe that the differentials of power are inherent in the very 'nature' of mankind. This is one very old way in which established groups of people justify and legitimate their own power.

Arbitrary differences, based on little more than location and length of association can, in this way, become a significant part of a person's bodily deportment and identity. The perception that such social fault-lines are natural, further sediments and solidifies the difference. As might be expected, Elias discusses this processual nexus of society and body. Here, the

concept of habitus is used to navigate a path between deterministic accounts which over-emphasise either structure or agency. Such works will be explored in what follows.

### **2.15 Figurational Sociology and the Body**

Elias' most renowned work, his examination of civilising processes (2000 [1939]), tracks changes in social interdependencies across several centuries in various European societies. Here, societies became increasingly differentiated, through interconnected processes of parliamentisation, urbanisation, technologisation and modernisation, as such, individuals increasingly came to depend on each other for survival. This 'functional democratisation' brings about an equalising shift in societal power relations. In such civilising societies, individuals are increasingly inclined to be 'other' focused, and a greater degree of control over physical and emotional outbursts becomes the norm. As such, life moved in the direction of increased safety, control, predictability, meritocracy and rationality. This process was described earlier in relation to the development of modern sport. Elias' focus then, was on the 'sociogenesis' of modern Western cultures (2000 [1939]), an essential component of this was the intertwined process of psychogenesis of personality structures (1991a; 1996; Elias & Scotson, 1994). As such, a central tenet of Elias' work is that, as societies become increasingly 'civilised', there is a greater necessity for external (norms, standards, laws) and internal (cognitive and subconscious) control of behaviour. As a result, social processes are internalised, embodied and are expressed through individual's thoughts, actions and behaviours. Elias used the term 'habitus' to describe this socially-learned 'second nature'. Habitus forms a central conceptual and theoretical strand within this project. To fully appreciate the role of the habitus concept, the sociology of the body and sporting body will be briefly explored to contextualise the theoretical history of the term.

### **2.16 Sociology of the Body**

The mimetic, physical violence, which is the main focus of this study, is committed *by* bodies *upon* bodies. As such, the sociology of the body offers conceptual, theoretical and methodological insights that are necessary in developing this sociological study of violence (Messner, 1990). Sociologists who theorise the body have been at the forefront of conceptualising the embodiment of social processes (habitus). An essential point of departure

within an Eliasian interpretation of the body is the understanding that social structures are not reified entities but a production of human interactions and interdependencies (Elias, 1991). As such, the body is more than a 'cultural text' to be inscribed with meaning, it is a process, in and of itself, necessarily intertwined with social and psychological processes (Elias, 1987). This position maintains conceptual space for the role of sensation and experience within the socio-historical development of societies. As such, awareness of research in this tradition is an important part of the framework of this thesis.

There is a rich history of philosophical and theoretical debate within the sociological study of the body. However, a complex relationship exists between sociology and the body. This has led some researchers to question the ability for sociology to conceptually and theoretically place embodiment (see Turner, 1992). In this way, bodies "have tended to enjoy a rather ethereal, implicit role within sociology" (Williams & Bendelow, 1998; 10). This has been explained with reference to a predominant emphasis on social systems within classical sociology, efforts to distance explanations from biological determinism, philosophical assumptions that favoured the mind over the body and the male dominance of the discipline (Williams & Bendelow, 1998; Morgan & Scott, 1993; Shilling, 1993). The body has traditionally been the territory of the 'natural sciences' such as anatomy, biology and physiology. This is equally true within the sports sciences (Maguire, 1991). However, such disciplines do not have a monopoly of the ways in which we can know the body. Crossley (2007; 82) argues that the body:

... has another 'inside' that surgeons and neuroscientists cannot access; an inside comprising lived sensations which form the coherent and meaningful *gestalt* structures that are my consciousness of the world.

Attempting to counter the "disembodied perspectives of general sociology and sports sociology" (Loy, Andrews & Rinehart, 1993; 69) researchers such as Frank (1991), Hargreaves (1987), Maguire (1993), Messner (1990), Shilling (1993) and Theberge (1991) have brought the body to the fore in their research. For Hargreaves (1987; 141), the body provides the "most striking symbol, as well as constituting the material core of sporting activity". Indeed, the sporting body provides the sociology of sport with an opportunity to "emphasize to the parent discipline the importance of the body in understanding human agency" (Maguire, 1993; 28). Maguire (1993) draws our attention to the ways that empirical

observations within sporting environments can inform a more adequate understanding of the body's role in social theorising. He identifies five interconnected aspects of the sporting body. Here, notions of the biomedical, commodified, disciplined, symbolic and stratifying bodies combine to frame our understanding of the athlete's body (Maguire, 1993). Indeed, it is argued that the figurational sociology that Maguire (1993) used to frame these discussions enables a sophisticated means of theoretically placing the body within a social analysis. For Maguire (1991, 1993) and other figurational sociologists (Goudsblom, 1977), the body is an important aspect of studying people 'in the round'. He suggests:

The phrase 'in the round' sensitizes the analysis to the idea that human beings in 'modern' societies do not just have a class, ethnicity or a gender, but are a complex amalgam of many social identities. They are also more than simply 'cultural beings'. The phrase 'in the round' highlights how the biological, psychological and sociological dimensions of human beings need to be grasped as interconnected. (Maguire, 1993; ??)

These comments based on the analysis of sporting bodies can do much to inform the sociology of the body more generally<sup>7</sup>. Within sporting activities it is relatively easy to, literally and conceptually, 'see' embodiment as "the daily lived experience for humans of both having a body and being a body" (Luton, 2000; 50). Indeed, the body is our point of view on the world (Leder, 1990) this is emphatically emphasised in sports settings in which the body is required to feel, act and be acted upon. Here, a body is not simply a material base to be socially determined, or a set of organs of which the medical and sports sciences can have knowledge, it "is not just one thing in the world, but a way in which the world comes to be" (Leder 1992; 52). It is argued then, that a focus on the sporting body can provide an effective means of probing phenomena that might enable a more adequate conceptualisation of the body within social theory (Maguire, 1993).

In a recent article, which challenges some of his previous conclusions, Crossley (2007; 81) argues that a wealth of sociological research escapes the inherent dualism and disembodiment that have been part of the "conceptual architecture" of philosophical thought since Descartes and Plato. Social researchers' traditional explorations of behaviours, actions and interactions result in a focus on "phenomena which are neutral with respect to the

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a figurational framing of the body can do much to address recent calls for social research to appreciate the 'intersectionality' of human behaviours, bodies and society.

mind/body problematic and transcend it" (Crossley, 2007; 81). In this regard, Shilling (1993; 9) suggests:

It is our bodies which allow us to act, to intervene in and to alter the flow of daily life. Indeed, it is impossible to have an adequate theory of human agency without taking into account the body.

Exploring behaviours and actions, sociologists have been placing the body in their work without necessarily referring to it (Crossley, 2007). Nevertheless, the body and embodiment has been absent from social research in the sense that:

Like the reader who overlooks the physical inscriptions on the page before them in order to follow the meaning embodied in those inscriptions, sociologists have overlooked the embodiment of agents and actions in order better to get at meanings, purposes, interests, rules etc. embodied by them (Crossley, 2007; 84).

Crossley (2007) argues that sociologists have allowed embodiment to fade into the background, so they can focus their attention on meanings and interpretations. In this respect:

A foreground of meaning, purpose etc. is right and proper. A sociology which pushed meaning and purpose, norms, etc. into the background would be deeply flawed. We are not forced to choose, however, between meaning and embodiment. We can focus both upon the mindful and the embodied aspects of social life (Crossley, 2007; 84-85).

Indeed, it is an analytical fallacy to attempt such a separation. This lack of focus on the meaning of bodily acts is a traditional critique of phenomenological research (Layder, 2006). Indeed, Stranger's (1999) examination of the 'aesthetic of risk' reviewed earlier, is an example of research that has highlighted bodily experiences at the cost of a sophisticated understanding of the social significance of such phenomena. Habitus then, can be a means of avoiding such a conceptual over-emphasis.

## **2.17 Habitus**

The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) is most commonly associated with the development of the habitus concept. Indeed, Bourdieu produces insightful work on the area of embodiment, and for those following a Bourdieuan framework, habitus is a central organising concept. He uses a game analogy to unpack the concept:

The habitus as the feel for the game is the *social game embodied and turned into a second nature*. Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of a good player. He quite naturally materialises at just the place the ball is about to fall, as if the ball were in command of him – but by that very fact, he is in command of the ball (1990; 63 – emphasis added).

The concept of habitus is a means by which theorists can conceptualise the ways habituated behaviours and experiences are shaped and framed by social processes. Habitus also

occupies a central position within Elias' work. This "second nature and embodied social learning" (Dunning & Mennell, 1996; ix) allows Elias to move between the dichotomous agency/structure debates with a theoretically sophisticated appreciation of the indiscreet nature of these phenomena. In this way, Elias (2000 [1939]; 366) showed that the civilising processes of Western societies had a pronounced effect on individual bodies:

The basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of people can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From this interdependence of people arises an order *sui generis*, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.

The increased demand upon members of civilising societies to control behaviour produced "an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control" (Elias, 2000 [1939]; 368). Bourdieu's (1990; 53) work on habitus was based empirically on the (re)production of class-based embodiment:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produces the habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representation.

The habitus concept has been the target of some critical observations (Adams, 2006; Crossley, 1995, 2004; King, 2000; McNay, 1999). Such comments have mainly been aimed at Bourdieu's work, due largely to its relative popularity rather than its inadequacies in relation to Elias' (2000 [1939]) work. For example, King (2000) finds that Bourdieu's attempts to use habitus to move past agency/structure, subjective/objective debates can retreat into an objectified view of social structures. In his words:

If the habitus were determined by objective conditions, ensuring appropriate action for the social position in which any individual was situated, and the habitus were unconsciously internalised dispositions and categories, then social change would be impossible (King, 2000; 427).

In this way, it is possible for habitus to be used in a deterministic manner in which social structures are recreated without negotiation or challenge. Such an error is avoided within this study, by ensuring that foundational aspects of Elias' figurational sociology frame the use of the habitus concept, in the same way that King (2000) turns to Bourdieu's own practical theory (1990) as a means of moving past critiques of habitus. A similar process can be achieved with Elias' conception of habitus by maintaining focus on Elias' principle conception of individuals as necessarily interdependent. McNay's (1999; 96) argument resonates with King's comments and can act as a point of departure for this debate:

The very means through which individuals are controlled also provides the foundations for autonomous action. In other words, resistance emerges from within the social and not from some extra-social or unconscious source.

In this way, habitus – the socially-learned second nature – can be thought of as a set of fluid, mutable, contested, negotiated, enabling and constraining social frames that can be employed differently in varying contexts and which carry with them the opportunity for expressive, original and virtuoso performances. Bourdieu proposed two ways in which agency might be found within habitus, which will briefly be explored below.

As well as his work on the 'practical theory', Bourdieu explicitly describes two means of locating agency and social change within habitus. These are the 'reflective habitus' and 'moments of crisis'. The reflective habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) is proposed as a form of 'consciousness raising' for social actors, which allows them to critically 'see' their habitual actions. In this way, the opaque manner in which social norms are intertwined with people's habituated behaviours is de-mystified. Such habituses can be found in some academics and political activists (Crossly, 2003). However, this reflective habitus is, never-the-less, still a socially-framed way of thinking about the world and, in this regard, it can still operate on a pre-reflexive level. Indeed, the habitual behaviours that are reflected upon and potentially challenged as a result of the reflective habitus, are replaced by a new form of socially-shaped behaviour, which may or may not be the target of such critical reflection.

Bourdieu also points to moments of 'crisis' as triggers that can bring forth agency within habitus. Here, the doxic (taken for granted, common sense) views that correspond to a given habitus are thrown into doubt by a change in objective conditions. In Bourdieu's (2000: 19) words:

[Habitus] is part of how society reproduces itself. But there is also change. Conflict is built into society. People can find that their expectations and ways of living are suddenly out of step with the new social position they find themselves in.

Dynamic social situations can then cause individuals' embodied, common-sense assumptions about the world to be challenged. Events, such as changing employment, meeting new people, travelling, or the death of a close relative, could prompt people to question their previously-held beliefs about how their world is organised. We must be sure not to think of habitus as 'suspended' during times of crisis (Crossley, 2003). Rather, the habitual ways of

interpreting the world can be thought of as being in state of relatively greater flux, thus providing the opportunity for other norms and values to frame social life. In this way, the social actor may reject certain elements of their habitual behaviour and begin the process of forming a new or modified habitus.

Bourdieu's writings on the reflective habitus and moments of crisis are useful additions to the habitus concept. They are a means by which we are sensitised to agency and social change springing from the habitual frames of social life. However, perhaps more significant in avoiding the determinism described by King (2000), is a return to the fundamentals of Bourdieuan (1990) and Eliasian (1991) sociology. Bourdieu's conception of habitual behaviours as a 'feel for the game' is a simple but useful means of maintaining agency within habitus. This interpretation resonates with his assertions that social actors are not determined by abstract rules and structures, rather, they actively interpret and re-interpret their social worlds (Bourdieu, 1977). For King (2000), Bourdieu's practical theory, which shares fundamental assumptions with Elias' figurational interdependencies, is the key to maintaining this fluidity within habitus. He suggests:

[Within] his practical theory, individuals are embedded in complex, constantly negotiated networks of relations with other individuals; isolated individuals do not stand before objective structures and rules which determine their actions but in networks of relations which they virtuosically manipulate (King, 2000; 421).

Habitus is understood as a predisposition to act in certain ways, such a framing is actively negotiated by social actors. In this way, interdependent individuals interpret the 'correct' way to act in dynamic complex processes. By adopting the basics of the 'social game', agents as "virtuosos" (Bourdieu, 1977; 79), are able to practically improvise behaviours based on their intimate 'sense for the game'. Elias (1991; 182-183) describes a similar conception:

The social habitus of individuals form, as it were, in the soil from which grow personality characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of society. In this way, something grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others and which is certainly a component of their social habitus – a more or less individual style, what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of a social script ... the individual bears upon himself or herself the habitus of the group, and ... it is this habitus that he or she individualises to a greater or lesser extent.

Elias (1991; 209) continues this linguistic theme when describing habitus as, "like a language, both hard and tough, but also flexible and far from immutable, it is, in fact, always in flux". The language metaphor draws attention to the dynamic nature of habitus. Variations in the use of

words, accents, novel and innovative twists on traditional meanings and interpretations of language provide us with a means of understanding the constraining *and* enabling nature of habitus. As Crossley (2001; 94) suggests:

Habitus predisposes agents to act in particular ways without reducing them to cultural dopes or inhibiting their strategic capacities. Like game-playing skills, the structure of habitus facilitates the competent pursuit of specific goals.

Here then, the habitus concept can be used in a manner that avoids the simple reproduction of social structures and maintains space for expressive and novel socially-framed behaviours.

As such, this study, with its focus on experiences of mimetic violence, can contribute towards the continuing debate surrounding habitus, sociology of the body and agency and structure.

As Atkinson (1999; 166) has insisted:

Few empirical examinations of how habitus forms though complex and nuanced interaction processes actually exist ... Further still, extended subcultural, ethnographic or otherwise micrological studies of habitus formalities and operation processes are rare, even among sociologists of sport whose work may implicitly or explicitly revolve around the concept.

This thesis focused on the boxer's body as a means of conducting such an enquiry. As such, it is hoped that further light will be shone on issues of embodiment. These observations will enable the continuing evaluation of the habitus as a theoretically sophisticated frame of such phenomena. Used in conjunction with the previously-outlined concepts of the figuration and established/outsider relations, habitus provides the theoretical structure to frame the lived experiences that are the focus of this study. In what remains, this chapter will be concluded by a partial synthesis of the theory and literature that has been presented.

## **2.18 Sports Violence Masculinity Complex**

Within this chapter, key research examining the sociology of sports violence and boxing has been discussed and a theoretical framework has been outlined. To conclude, the sports violence masculinity complex (henceforth SVMC) will be described as a means of combining elements of this literature into a concept informed by figurational sociology. In this regard, Wolff's (cited in Maguire *et al.*, 2002; xiv - emphasis added) writings on art, can act as a point of departure:

All action, including creative or innovative action, arises in the complex conjunction of numerous structural determinants and conditions. Any concepts of 'creativity' that deny this are metaphysical, and cannot be sustained. But the corollary of this line of argument is not that human agents are simply programmed robots, or that we need not take account of their biographical existential or motivational aspects...*I will try and*

*show how practical activity and creativity are in a mutual relation of interdependence with social structures.*

Exciting experiences of mimetic violence within Freedom Gym are then necessarily intertwined with a set of social frames. Creative and innovative actions inside and outside the ring are at one and the same time constrained and enabled by these figurations. This framing is an ongoing process that moulds the day-to-day lives of the men who attend Freedom Gym. In turn, their habitual behaviours and perceptions are the medium through which these social frames are reproduced, negotiated and, at times, challenged. In skilled performers, “this process is so well integrated that performances appear ‘natural’. Yet, these performances are, in reality, the product of both long-term socialisation processes and the sports worlds that enable and constrain such learning” (Maguire *et al.*, 2002; xv). Specifics of the ‘sport world’ examined within this study are explored in Chapters Four and Five. Within this section, a means of conceptually placing the long-term social processes that frame the majority of contemporary, western, heavy contact sports is suggested.

A central organising feature within the research examining sports violence is the gender order, and specifically, masculine identities (Dunning, 1986; Dunning & Maguire, 1996; Messner, 1990; Woodward, 2006). As previously outlined, the gender order has been intimately tied to the development of the contemporary pattern of sports participation. Here, researchers have drawn attention to forms of hegemonic masculine identity that find significance and meaning within violent sporting encounters. In this way, sports in general, and heavy contact sports in particular, are linked with powerful and at times aggressive behaviours. Indeed, many sporting subcultures can be considered ‘male preserves’ in which patterns of traditional masculine behaviour still dominate (Sheard & Dunning, 1973). In these sports worlds, physical and psychological strength, the ability to protect oneself, family and friends and a functional understanding of the body as a machine-like instrument tend to be rewarded and encouraged (Messner, 1990). A specific dynamic, related to traditional assumptions attached to boxing, impinges on the gendered process within this study. As Woodward (2006; 28) argues, “many boxing histories include the association of boxing and honour in the classical world and foreground the centrality of pugilism in the construction of courageous and honourable masculinity”. Such notions about masculinity can then come to

dominate the norms and values that frame local sporting habituses. This embodied, socially-conditioned, second nature can then be perceived to be common sense and even natural. The social hierarchy of such figurations is shaped by established/outsider relations and contains many intersecting dimensions. As highlighted by Maguire (1993), sporting bodies are multidimensional and must be studied 'in the round'. Kimmel and Messner (2001; xvi) remind us:

Masculinity is constructed differently by class culture, by race and ethnicity, and by age. And each of these axes of masculinity modifies the others. Black masculinity differs from white masculinity, yet each of them is also further modified by class and age ... The resulting matrix of masculinities is complicated by cross cutting elements; without understanding this we risk collapsing masculinities into one hegemonic version.

It is, of course, important to remain open and sensitive to the nuanced nature of the SVMC. Indeed, due to the traditional linkages between boxing and the working classes, this study will foreground notions connected to class within this masculine framework. In this regard, Sugden's (1996; 24) research is useful:

By the middle of the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, and increasingly in other parts of the world, urban poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination and relative deprivation had been established as the common denominator of prize-fighting and subsequently professional boxing.

Class and other figurational dynamics are placed within the SVMC as a part of the established/outsider relations. Elias and Scotson's (1994 [1965]) micro-sociological exploration of power provides the means to address Kimmel and Messner's (2001) concerns of an overemphasis on a narrow conception of masculinity. The SVMC is then suggested as a sophisticated means of locating the substantive research in the area of sports violence within a figurational theoretical frame. Throughout Chapters Four and Five, this complex will form the basis from which the framing of the lived experiences of exciting mimetic violence inside Freedom Gym will be outlined.

## **2.19 Summary**

Within this chapter, definitional and typological discussions of violence and sports violence have been explored. Engaging with this debate is an essential component within any attempt to advance the sociological study of sports violence. Here, the mimetic nature of the majority of sports violence has been highlighted; the importance of this observation becomes apparent within the later counter-critique offered of Stranger (1999) and Pringle's (2009) work.

Following this, research examining sports violence was discussed. The QES was outlined as a means of conceptually 'placing' the lived experiences of emotional and physical significance that are the focus of this study. It is also suggested that such an examination provides a useful addition to Maguire's (1992) work on the emotions in sport. Research that maps the role of gender relations in framing sports violence was then reviewed. Here, Connell's work was described as a sophisticated frame from which to conceptualise masculine identities. The contextualisation of the study was concluded with an exploration of the sociological research examining boxing. The main themes and principles of figurational sociology were then outlined. A theoretically sophisticated conception of habitus was described as a means of avoiding an overly-structural account of boxing experiences. To conclude the chapter, substantive research and theoretical contributions were combined within the SVMC to act as a partial frame for the mimetic experiences at Freedom Gym.

## Chapter Three

### Being Nosey – The Troubles of a Violent Ethnography

#### 3.0 Introduction

Within this chapter the techniques, issues and practicalities of the ethnographic method employed in this study are discussed. Initially, a brief outline of qualitative methodology and its development within the contemporary academic landscape is presented as a means of contextualising the methodological debates that frame this study. Following this, Elias' writings on method are examined. It is argued that the fundamental principles of figurational sociology present useful and sophisticated points of departure from which to think about methodological issues. Here, Elias' discussions of involvement/detachment and established/outsider relations are discussed. These debates are then located within the current issues encountered during this study. Ethnographic observations and reflections are explored and related to similar work in the substantive area. The practicalities of conducting an ethnographic investigation in a gym environment are then outlined. Here, the means by which observations and interviews were obtained and recorded are described. To conclude the chapter, a discussion of some of the ethical and moral issues that occurred during this study are explored, including a discussion of pain, injury and violence in research.

#### 3.1 Qualitative research

Given that human social behaviour is not reducible to static patterns and relations and is contoured by the myriad, cultures, meanings and perspectives it produces, a qualitative methodology may be most well-suited to exploring the contextual nature of human interactions (Hammersley, 1989). Amis (2005; 11) argues that this ontological view point:

... might predispose analysis of the social world to take a qualitative form ... [as such] within the interpretive paradigm, qualitative approaches have been dominant and have generally drawn on interviewing as a major method of data collection.

This is not to suggest that quantitative research has no place within the study of violence, far from it. Indeed, there is a vast collection of such work within criminology studies. However, Atkinson and Hammersley (1994; 251) suggest that, in contrast to qualitative research, quantitative methodology "seeks to reduce meaning to what is 'observable'; that it treats social phenomena as more clearly defined and static than they are and as mechanical products of social and psychological factors". Within the present study, the focus on sensuous

experiences of violence, which consist of a considerable variety and complexity of subjective meanings and interpretations, clearly does not lend itself to such a method. Denzin and Lincoln (2000b: 3) describe qualitative research as being a:

... situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

This rejection of positivistic, ontological and epistemological assumptions is a hallmark of such research. In this respect, the 'truth' is now conceptualised as multiple, partial and necessarily incomplete as opposed to being universal and absolute (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, the search for causal, mechanical, static and isolated variables is resisted within a qualitative research paradigm, which, instead, attempts to "recognise the fluid and intricate interactions between people and the socio-historical worlds in which they exist" (Silk, 2005; 5). The merits of a qualitative approach are drawn out in Hammersley's (1989; 1) interpretation of the social world:

Human behaviour is complex and fluid in character, not reducible to fixed patterns; and it is shaped by, and in turn produces, varied cultures. Adopting this conception of the social world, qualitative method often involves an emphasis on process rather than structure, a devotion to the study of local and small-scale social situations in preference to analysis at the societal or psychological levels, a stress on the diversity and variability of social life, and a concern with capturing the myriad perspectives of participants in the social world.

Definitions of what constitutes qualitative research are plentiful. Indeed, so plentiful that researchers seem unable to agree on a single definition. For Strauss and Corbin (1990; 17) qualitative research can be understood in a broad sense as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other kinds of quantification". By defining qualitative research in terms of what it is not, Strauss and Corbin (1990) draw attention to the role quantitative research, and indeed positivistic assumptions, have played in the production of contemporary qualitative methodologies. It is perhaps more useful, at this point, to track the development of such methodologies instead of striving after an unequivocal definition. In so doing, an understanding of the process that has led to the current methodological landscape is sought.

### 3.2 The Development of Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) identification of eight overlapping 'moments' provides a means of interpreting the development of qualitative research and provides an academic context for the method presented in this thesis. The key to understanding this field is to consider qualitative research as a set of principles shaped by conflicting assumptions as to the nature of what we can know (ontology), and how we can know it (epistemology). In this regard, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point initially to a *traditional period* (early 1900s), in which qualitative researchers worked within a positivistic paradigm, in an attempt to unveil an objective truth. In the *modernist phase* (the post war years to the 1970s), attempts were made to standardise and formulate qualitative methods in an apparent reflection of the rigor of quantitative approaches. At this time, post-positivistic arguments that challenged the appropriateness of such methods for accessing the complex and subtle social interactions of human beings began to surface. Following this phase, a period of *blurred genres* (1970-1986) saw interpretive arguments gaining in credibility and a range of theories and strategies being employed. Critiques regarding the author's presence within the interpretive text begin to be formulated. Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 18) ask:

How can the researcher speak with authority in an age when there are no longer any firm rules concerning the text, including the author's place in it, its standards of evaluation and its subject matter?

During this time, challenges to the positivistic assumptions, which framed qualitative research, began to crystallise. With the positivistic foundations of the traditional qualitative method beginning to falter, came a *crisis of representation* (mid 1980s), where authors "sought new models of truth, method and representation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 18). Here, issues of objectivity, validity and reliability come to the fore. During this period, there is much reflection on, and reassessment of, the ontological and epistemological assumptions that frame qualitative research. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) make reference to works such as that by Stoller and Olkes (1987) as examples of the process of reappraisal. With critiques of previous qualitative research, framed by traditional writing practices, mounting, Stoller chose "to produce a different type of text, a memoir, in which he became a central character in the story he told" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; 18). Connected to this crisis of representation was a crisis of legitimation and praxis. This 'triple crisis' consisted of challenges to assumptions regarding the ability of researchers to represent lived experiences, the criteria for evaluating and

interpreting (legitimation) such experiences and the role of social researchers in effecting change (praxis) based on such unsecured foundations.

Within the *post-modern period* (early 1990's), authors struggled with this 'triple crisis'. Grand narratives were rejected in favour of local, small-scale interpretations. Researchers wrestled with new and challenging ways to represent the 'Other' within their work. The *post-experimental moment* (1995-2000) produced a variety of novel attempts to express the lived experiences in poetic, visual, autobiographical, performative and multi-voiced forms. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 20) find the *methodologically contested phase* (2000-2004) to be a period of "conflict, great tension, and in some quarters, entrenchment". Finally, Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 20) describe the *future* (2005-) in which we must "confront the methodological backlash associated with 'Bush science' and evidence-based social movements" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 20). Such a framing of the development of qualitative research, although "somewhat arbitrary" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 20) in parts, helps us to appreciate the tensions and issues which are of relevance today. From this development, we can draw some general points about the contemporary state of qualitative methodology. Firstly, there are myriad paradigms, strategies and forms of analysis and representation upon which qualitative social researchers can now draw. Secondly, the act of conducting qualitative research cannot be seen as a neutral act. As such, claims of positivistic objectivity must be rejected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). To frame an appreciation of the current 'moment' within the qualitative research tradition, Elias' discussions of method will be explored.

### **3.4 Insider/Outsider Knowledge**

Ethnographic researchers has been productive and successful in developing our understanding of boxing (Sugden, 1987, 1996; Wacquant, 1995a, 1995b, 2004; Woodward, 2004, 2006). Access to boxing environments by male academics has been constructed as a relatively simple process that causes a minimum of reactivity (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004). However, Woodward (2008) paints a different picture in her recent article, *Hanging Out and Hanging About*. Exploring the notions of insider and outsider positions within an ethnographic study of boxing, she stresses the dynamic nature of such research:

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' boxing, although actually engaging in the sport physically is the most dramatic (Woodward, 2004; 547).

This intimate immersion has enabled researchers to get 'inside' boxing subcultures to access somatic and experiential knowledge that may have been unobtainable to the 'outsider'. Active involvement offers a unique insight into sports participation and, by extension, sports violence, however, this insight must be weighed against the relative strengths and weaknesses of the knowledge produced by an 'outsider'. In this regard, Maguire and Young (2002; 18) suggest:

The insider's account will provide, sometimes inadvertently, the minutiae and emotional resonance of what is being examined, the outsider's account is likely to provide a more detached view but may be distorted as a result of bias, such as class or gender bias, or a lack of detailed knowledge.

As the 'minutiae and emotional resonance' of violent experiences are the focus within this study, the 'insider' role was eventually adopted within the research environment.<sup>8</sup> These twin notions of 'insider' and 'outsider' knowledge have been a key part of the debate about objectively/subjectively produced knowledge. Here, the 'insider' position has been associated with a subjective viewpoint, while the outsider position is associated with that of objectivity. This simplistic reduction collapses a complex social relationship into a false dichotomy. Indeed, the roles 'insider' and 'outsider' do not necessarily produce either more subjective or objective knowledge. However, engaging with the debate in this area can help to prise apart the idea of 'insider' and 'outsider' and the relevance of these concepts to research. As a means of doing this, Elias' work on involvement and detachment provides a sophisticated framework.

### **3.5 Involvement/detachment**

As Mansfield (2007; 123) suggests, "proponents from each side of the [objective/subjective] polarity argue either that sociologists should be 'value free' (objective), or that it is inevitable that sociological researchers will be 'value laden' (subjective)". Such polarities have been critiqued by Elias (1987c) and others using his work (Dunning, 1992; Maguire & Young, 2002; Mansfield, 2007). The insider/outsider, subjective/objective debate is reconceptualised by Elias (1987c) as being more adequately explored as 'involvement' and 'detachment'.

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<sup>8</sup> This processes of adoption will be further explored as this chapter continues

Underpinning these observations is Elias' (1991) challenge to enduring conceptions of human beings as *homo clausus* (closed people): individuals that exist in separation from others. In this regard, Elias starts from a position conceptualising human beings as *necessarily* interdependent, as *hominus aperti* (open people). Accordingly, human beings, by their very nature, cannot exist as total outsiders completely cut off from the social world, they can *never* be totally objective. In this way, social researchers' "very participation and involvement is itself one of the conditions for comprehending the problem they are trying to solve" (Maguire, 1988; 189). Furthermore, the opposite position of the total 'insider' is also rejected. Dunning (1999; 246) quoting Elias explains:

According to Elias (1987: xxxvi), 'the capacity for detachment is a human universal'. That is, it is a constitutive feature of *Homo Sapiens* and involved in such ostensibly simple activities as making tools or weapons. That is the case because, in order to undertake such tasks, 'human beings have ... to detach themselves to some extent from their immediate internal or external situations'. In other words, making artefacts of these kinds is not, as such, a means of stilling hunger. It involves 'the capacity for distancing oneself from the situation of the moment, for remembering a past and for anticipating a possible future situation where the work of one's hands ... might be of use.

From this position, the generation of completely objective, and indeed subjective, knowledge becomes an impossibility. As such, the search for an objective social reality is replaced with an attempt to explore subjective interpretations in a relatively detached manner. Elias proposed the notion of involvement/detachment as a more adequate means of tackling the issues of insider/outsider, objective/subjective knowledge. Elias' choice of words is important, by using terms that resist absolute categories, he enables insider/outsider knowledge to be conceptualised as existing along a continuum. In this regard, "it is better, he maintained, to think in terms of fluid and complex balances" (Dunning, 1992: 244). Thus, within an Eliasian framework, conducting research is a dynamic process of negotiating the relationship between involvement and detachment within the research environment. Within an ethnographic method, this balance swings towards a greater degree of involvement. As Mansfield (1992; 124) has argued:

Involvement is a necessary requirement if ethnographers are to be able to understand the realities and identities of the members of different sports groups, to make that which seems strange become familiar.

Based on her marrying of a feminist standpoint with figurational sociology, Mansfield explores the emotional involvement that, to some degree, characterises all sociological research. Her conception of *involved-detachment* presents researchers with "a source of motivation and

'insider' knowledge, while at the same time striving to maximise a degree of theoretical, methodological and practical detachment by critical self-reflection of personal commitments" (Mansfield, 2007; 135-136). Mansfield (2007; 136) goes on to suggest, "working with involved-detachment may help in recognizing and understanding the particular biases of involvement in the research process as well as identifying research that is overly detached". How then, should this involvement-detachment balance be sought in a practical sense?

Elias (1987c) suggests a 'detour via detachment' as a means of achieving a balance between involvement and detachment. Here, he is attempting to maximise the degree of correspondence between subjective observations and interpretations, made by the researcher, and the lived experiences of those inhabiting the figuration under investigation. A part of this process is attempting to appreciate the colouring that the researcher brings to the social picture. By attempting to understand the social processes that, through a researcher's biography, frame their subjective view of events, Elias hope to appreciate the encroachment of personal bias, emotional attachments and individual and group interests that may contour the research process (Dunning, 1992). However, we must be wary of falling into the positivistic trap of searching for a single hidden truth that lies under layers of subjective interpretations. We are, in fact, striving to explore, at one and the same time, participants' subjective lived experiences, and the researcher's subjective framing of these experiences. In this way, the 'detour via detachment' can enable the researcher to appreciate more adequately the co-production of participants' lived experiences.

To illustrate the importance of a 'detour via detachment', Elias (1987) refers to Edgar Allan Poe's story *A Descent into the Maelstrom*, in which three fishermen are caught at sea in a deep whirlpool, one is swept overboard to his death, the second is paralysed with fear, while the third, although scared, maintains enough 'detachment' from the situation to begin to assess a means of escape. Elias (1987c; 46) concludes his description of this story this:

The fisherman, in short, found himself involved in a critical process which at first appeared wholly beyond his control. For a time, he may have clutched at some imaginary hopes. Fantasies of a miracle, of help from some unseen persons, may have crossed his mind, after a while, however, he calmed down. He began to think more coolly; and by standing back, by controlling his fear, by seeing himself, as it were, from a distance like a figure on a chess-board forming patterns with others, he managed to turn his thoughts away from himself to the situation in which he was caught up. It was

then that he recognized the elements in the uncontrollable process which he could use in order to control his condition sufficiently for his own survival.

Unpacking this metaphor, we see that, by moving along the involved/detached continuum in the direction of a greater level of detachment from his situation, the fisherman was able to see in a clearer light the objects that made up his social world. In this way, the social researcher must attempt to 'step back' from their necessarily involved position in order to 'see' the social maelstrom through a more critical lens.

Mansfield's (2007) work provides a useful addition to Elias' preceding thoughts on method, especially within research that demands the closeness required of ethnography. In this way, "the theory of involved-detachment provides a sensitising framework for blending the roles of inquirer and participant" (Mansfield, 2007; 125). In Maguire and Young's (2002; 16) words, "at one and the same time, the sociologists-as-participant must be able to stand back and become the sociologists-as-observer-and-interpreter". Viewing the research setting using a 'detour via detachment' enables the researcher to strive for an informed balance between the strengths and weaknesses of both relatively involved and detached positions. As this chapter progresses, the practicalities of applying this methodological framework will be explored. For now, a focus on the importance of Elias' (1987c) notes on method will be maintained.

### **3.6 Theory and Evidence**

Elias' (1987c) work on involvement and detachment can also inform debates about the relationship between theory and evidence. As previously discussed, the researcher is not only considered to be an intrinsic component within a qualitative methodology, he/she is also understood as a individual who carries a certain biographic history which shapes and frames their interpretation of the world they inhabit. As such, researchers enter any social environment with a set of necessarily *a priori* assumptions. These ways of thinking cannot be completely bracketed out and isolated in any simplistic sense. As a result, notions of 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), that is, theory springing from data untouched by researchers' interpretations, are challenged and problematised. In Maguire's (1988: 188) words:

Figurational sociology rejects both the imposition of 'grand theory' onto evidence and 'abstract empiricism' uninformed by theoretical insight (Goudsblom, 1977). Rather, the

process of theory formation and empirical enquiry are seen as interwoven and indivisible.

Here, Maguire also challenges the use of theory uninformed by empirical data. In this regard, a necessary part of the research processes is the appreciation of the “mutual contamination of theory and evidence” (Maguire, 1988; 188). Applying such thinking to an ethnographic study, Hamersley and Atkinson (1995) insist that initial ‘foreshadowed problems’ can provide useful sensitising tools to some of the phenomena that are likely to be witnessed. As such, the preceding literature review provided a conceptual and theoretical foundation that framed empirical observations within this study. This interplay between literature/theory and empirical experiences was an ongoing concern throughout the research process. The key then, is to enter the research environment with a flexible and critical appreciation of what previous researchers have discovered as opposed to static and immutable *a priori* assumptions (Elias, 1978). The researcher is then understood as an essential component in the production of knowledge; indeed, the researcher is now an interpreter rather than a transmitter.

### **3.7 Researcher as Interpreter**

The final aspect of this involvement-detachment debate to be explored here is the researcher's role as interpreter. For De Garis, knowledge is (co)produced in a dynamic process between the ethnographer, ethnographic participant and research environment. In what follows, he discusses such a production within a gym setting:

In the gym, there are the wrestlers, the ethnographer, boxers from the gym who are watching wrestlers, as well as an assortment of other observers – journalists, photographers, and spectators. *All contribute to a cooperatively evolved performance ...* Hemphill (1995) suggests that sports spectatorism, of which doing ethnography may be considered one form, be reinvisioned so as to understand performers and spectators as *coproducers* of meaning through performance (De Garis, 1999; 68 - emphasis added).

De Garis is drawing attention to the often-implicit role the researcher plays in not only shaping the social landscape, but also, the interpretation, generation and subsequent dissemination of knowledge. This resonates with Elias (1987c) and Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) depiction of the social researcher as being necessarily involved with their field of investigation. Without appreciation of this process, especially within research requiring a high degree of involvement, the knowledge produced can be presented in a manner that is not sensitive to the potential bias and influence the researcher may have imparted. Such critical observations

were outlined earlier in regards to Wacquant's (2004) work on boxing. By challenging the acceptance of such situations, Elias and others aim to increase the degree to which knowledge that more adequately resembles the social realities that participants experience, is produced.

Traditional positivistic ways of judging the adequacy of qualitative research, are then, challenged by such debates. Firstly, admitting and, secondly, describing, the researcher's role in the production of knowledge fits within the later moments of qualitative research as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). Such an undertaking undermines attempts to triangulate a single point of objective truth within ethnographic accounts (Silk, 2005). As Elias (1971; 365) tells us, "no type of knowledge can ever be in its structure and development totally autonomous in relation to the structure of the groups who use and produce it." The pursuit of law-like, immutable truths, for Elias (1971), is a residue effect of a Newtonian understanding of scientific knowledge. Instead, he argues that:

...what practising scientists test if they examine the results of their enquires, both on empirical and the theoretical level, is not whether these results are the ultimate and final truth, but whether they are an advance in relations to the existing fund of knowledge in their field (Elias, 1971; 358).

In calling for this processual understanding of knowledge, Elias also suggests the social framing of knowledge production must also be understood. As van Krieken (1998; 140) notes, "the production of scientific knowledge should thus be regarded as integrally bound up in historically specific relations of *power* within particular social settings, characterised by fluctuating power-ratios between the various groups of scientists and non-scientists." With such notions in mind, Elias constructs the scientific endeavour as a quest for increased levels of 'object adequacy'. Here, the search of 'objective truth' is replaced by an appreciation of the ways in which the dichotomous understanding of complete objectivity/subjectivity is an analytical fallacy. Indeed, Elias (1971; 365) argues:

There is no zero-point of subject- or object-relatedness of knowledge, there are only different stages in the development of knowledge to which one can refer, crudely expressed – as our language is still underdeveloped in this respect – by means of terms such as 'more' or 'less', as 'greater subject-centeredness' or 'greater object-centeredness' or 'greater object-centeredness', as 'greater-autonomy' or 'lesser-autonomy' in relation to the subjects of knowledge.

This framing of knowledge as never existing in an objective sense separated from the environment and agents that produced it frames an understanding of the researcher as

interpreter. In a discussion of the adequacy of evidence, perhaps more focused on historical documentation than participant observation but nevertheless still relevant, Maguire (1988: 191) notes:

... the task is to subvert or escape the ways of thinking and feeling in which the documents were conceived and the aim is to provide an account which is more adequate and more consistent, both internally and in relation to other areas of knowledge, than previous accounts.

In attempting to understand the 'ways of thinking and feeling' that shape ethnographic research, we can hope to produce knowledge which is "more adequate ... internally" (Maguire, 1988; 191). In this way, the quest for partial but relatively more adequate truths is supported by the interplay between theory and evidence, and the researcher's attempts to interpret the world through a 'detour via detachment'. We are then striving to reveal theoretically-informed, subjective and partial interpretations of dynamic, lived, social experiences, which, through a 'detour via detachment', can be said to resonate more adequately with empirical observations.

In the above, a partial picture of the methodological landscape that provides the context for this study has been explored. Key within this frame has been Elias' work on the object/subject, insider/outsider debate. The rest of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the practical ways that these methodological issues have impacted on the present study.

### **3.8 Locating the researcher**

An initial step in applying Elias' thoughts about method is an attempt to place the researcher within the environment under investigation. First, elements of my own biography, that have a clear relevance to the choice of research setting and method, will be discussed. Secondly, my relatively 'involved' position within the gym and how it enabled me to access one particular way of knowing the local boxing setting is explored. Wheaton (2002) argues that ethnographies of sport conducted by male researchers rarely acknowledge the researcher's gendered identity. Indeed, Woodward (2008) has made this critique in relation to Wacquant's work on boxing. Woodward (2008; 557), examining the researcher's place within the research setting, concludes thus:

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.

Such reflection is an acknowledgement of what Haraway (1991; 188) has called 'socially situated knowledge'. Without outlining the situated and partial nature of research, we fail to adequately explore a key constitutive element of the knowledge that has been produced. As such, in what follows, attempts are made to locate my personal biography in relation to this thesis.

I have been involved in a variety of sports for the majority of my life. Indeed, I like to think of myself as relatively 'sporty'. It could be said that my sport participation has usually followed a traditionally masculine and westernised manner of engaging in sport. I have been raised on a diet of 'healthy competition' at school and in a variety of sports clubs. Most physical activities that I have attempted I have usually taken to with some degree of competence. However, I have never been involved in any heavy contact sports. At my comprehensive school, we never played rugby and, although encouraged by my parents, I did not take up a martial art while I was a child. I did play football regularly throughout my teens and early twenties and always enjoyed the physical side of the game, however, this was usually played between friends and lacked what might be defined as tough or aggressive play.

Along with this participation, I have also been an avid spectator of sports, in particular ice hockey. As a teenager, I would go with my father to watch the local team. As a young adult I began regularly attending football matches and revelled in the playful displays of aggression such experiences offered. The physical side of sport intrigues me. As a boy, I would play rough games at school and would participate in the odd schoolyard 'scrap' from time to time. As a man, I continue to play such rough games from time to time with my friends, especially when alcohol was involved. It is not uncommon for my friends and I to 'play' with mimetic violence in social situations. Indeed, fighting has always caught my imagination; during my undergraduate degree, I started attending a boxing session and worked in a gym with someone who was a fan of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fighting. At this point, I started to follow some of the higher-profile fighters and events that were taking place, in both boxing and MMA.

When the opportunity presented itself to conduct research examining sports violence, boxing was one of the possible avenues that interested me. After discovering an experiential gap in the literature, it seemed that my own interest in the sport, coupled with my enjoyment of the physical side of sport more generally, could form the basis of an interesting and useful account of sports violence in boxing. The 'extreme sensuousness' of boxing, which forms a central focus of this thesis, guided a methodology that would afford me close access to such experiences. As Woodward (2008; 552) argues:

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.

With corporeality a central focus of this research, an 'insider' or relatively involved position seemed to offer a suitable vantage point from which to observe the environment. As such, I hoped to participate in boxing so as to sample for myself the 'extreme sensuousness' that Wacquant (2003) describes. Although there is a valid methodological argument for my choice of participatory observation as a means of data collection, there are also personal factors that have shaped this process. Here, my biography intertwines with methodological justification, personally, I wanted to try boxing. In this way, the significance that I attach to participating, and conducting research, in boxing is tied, amongst other things, to elements of my own masculine and class-based identity. These points require some unpacking.

Morgan (1992; 87) notes; "qualitative research has its own brand of machismo with its image of the male sociologist bringing back news from the fringes of society, the low depths, the mean streets". De Garis (2010; 935) agrees:

Ethnographers valorise those who leave the comfort of the library and ivory towers to 'get their fingers dirty' in the field. Hardships in fieldwork are the ethnographic 'rite of passage', the more severe the hardship the more prestige accorded to the professional reputation.

Morgan and De Garis both challenge the vaunted position that such ethnographic research occupies in the eyes of some academics. Indeed, during the fieldwork for this study I have ventured outside of my ivory tower and encountered some related risks and dangers. I have many stories to tell of my hardships in the gym and I have enjoyed discussing stories from my 'boxing Ph.D.' with friends, family and colleagues. At times, marks of my participation in

mimetic violence have happily been worn around the gym, at work and while socialising. I have experienced a certain amount of masculine pride in my ability to step into such an environment and 'hold my own'. The aim is not to undermine the research presented here by describing the ways in which my experiences fit within the previously described critiques of macho ethnography. Rather, by laying bare some of the positive experiences and identifications that I have encountered, the aim is to highlight the situated and partial nature of the knowledge that is to be outlined in the remainder of this thesis. What must also be considered alongside these comments is my ability, through a 'detour via-detachment', to be critically aware of the subjective lens through which I view the research environment. Indeed, although I will not deny that I identify with some of the masculine and class-based positions that will be outlined within the following substantive chapters, this does not preclude my ability to offer a critical reflection upon them. This process of reflection will be discussed further as this chapter progresses. What follows seeks to further engage with De Garis' critical observations.

### **3.9 Privileged knowledge**

De Garis (2010; 935) connects notions of machismo in research to a wider argument about privileged authorial claims to authenticity. He argues:

During the last decade, more attention has been paid to the ethnographic body with particular attention to physical risks in 'dangerous' field settings. A growing body of sport ethnography is following the trend towards privileging embodied experience by embracing participatory ethnographic roles.

In his deconstruction of the 'bloody nose', he challenges authors' claims to 'really know' their research environment based on their willingness to be the object of violent acts. In particular, he takes Wacquant (2004; 941) to task:

Wacquant ... makes no explicit connection between having his nose broken and 'native understanding'. Wacquant suggests that active participation in the ring is vital to cultural understanding. But what, in particular does one learn about the dynamics of boxing culture from being punched? Is the broken nose evidence of dues paid to becoming a 'real' boxer or the result of the transgression of cultural codes? Or did somebody simply personally dislike Wacquant? Though tacit, the intimation is that the broken nose supports Wacquant's 'insider' status.

Wacquant (1998; 4) insists that "paying one's dues in the ring" is essential to gaining access and understanding boxing, thus privileging his research above that of others. De Garis' critical observation of Wacquant's epistemology, which at times seems to slip towards a privileging of

'insider' knowledge, is a useful corrective to the privileging of such an involved position. Wacquant (2004) seems to fall into the fundamental ontological trap of constructing the boxing world that he had discovered as *the* exemplar of all boxing experiences. De Garis (2010; 941) is critical of the authoritative position that Wacquant adopts based on his willingness to engage in all aspects of gym life: "Though tacit, the intimation is that the broken nose supports Wacquant's 'insider' status". Wacquant is described by De Garis as an ethnographic 'fighter' attempting to out-do his academic opponents with claims of authenticity, rather than an ethnographic 'sparer' wishing to learn and cooperate with others in his field. De Garis' critique, although rather confrontational in its ferocity, is a necessary adjustment to Wacquant's notions of the production of such 'insider' knowledge. Without De Garis' critical comments, we may be left to conclude that Wacquant (2004) presents the final word on boxing subcultures. Indeed, we may also conclude that the only research that can purport to tell the 'real' experiential story of social phenomena has its methodological foundations in ethnographic participation. Clearly neither of these conclusions is satisfactory, however, there is more to be learnt from De Garis' critique of Wacquant's (2004) work. Based on my own experiences inside a boxing gym, two interrelated issues that may have combined to produce some of Wacquant's ontological problems will be discussed.

Firstly, a key contribution of Wacquant's (2004) work is the observations he made during his active participation inside the ring. Within the narrative that is revealed by Wacquant (2004), his personal involvement holds a prominent place and fills a void left by previous research about the physical and emotional significance of boxing and sports more generally. The sensuous sociology that Wacquant outlines, in which his personal reflections provide the reader with an excellent literal account from the embodied perspective of a 'boxer', may have been difficult to produce had Wacquant relied on second hand accounts from participants. Steven Lyng (1998; 224) has discussed similar difficulties he faced when attempting to "capture the phenomenological aspects of the risk taking experience". Lyng (1998) felt the need to become a participant in dangerous and illegal risk taking activities in order to appreciate the meanings that individuals attached to such experiences. However, Wacquant's (2004) and Lyng's (1998) intimation that their extreme physical participation supports their insider status and their subsequent claims to legitimately 'know' their research environment,

implicitly constructs research that takes a less participatory role as being less authentic. The ontological issue here is not that physical involvement was an important component of Wacquant (2004) and Lyng's (1998) work; rather, it is the assumption that such an involvement is essential to knowing the social world. Wacquant (2004) and Lyng's (1998) stories would have clearly taken a different form if they had adopted less extreme participatory roles, in this sense; their personal involvement was key to the exploration of the social worlds they discovered. Their ontological mistake was to find primacy in their adopted positions and to miss the myriad ways in which they could have gained access to participants' experiences. In so doing, they may have also overlooked the constraining elements that accompany such an involved role, which can serve to obscure aspects of the social environment.

Secondly, we must relate the 'vibrant physicality' (Monaghan, 2001b) that can accompany participation in boxing to the researcher's traditional sedentary environment. Although it is not clear how much Wacquant engaged in physical activity before embracing boxing, based on my experiences, and the account he presents, it is perhaps fair to assume that the physical and emotional world that Wacquant discovered had quite a captivating effect in contrast to his everyday life as an academic. In this way, the ethnographic researcher could be drawn toward a 'native', relatively involved, position by the 'drug-like' pull of their experiences in the field. From this overly involved position, it can feel like one has unearthed a 'truth' that has thus far remained undiscovered by the academic community. As such, Wacquant (2004) may have lost sight of the partial and situational nature of knowledge, specifically, that the 'truth' he had discovered was only one part of the pugilistic story told from a particular position. De Garis (2010) is perhaps less inclined to see the relatively emotionally vibrant experiences that other researchers may find due to his long physical career as a wrestler which seems to have accompanied his career in academia. Indeed, no attempt is made here to justify Wacquant's position, rather, this work attempts, in the light of De Garis' critical observations, to explore the circumstances of his research, in comparison to that presented here.

Although Wacquant (2004), at times, seems to slip towards constructing his work as offering the 'true' picture of boxing, his position within the gym did allow him to gain access to

experiences that have evaded other sociological accounts of boxing. Indeed, De Garis' (2010) comments glaze over the many times that Wacquant discusses a sophisticated ontology. Take the following example:

Only by establishing a bona fide presence in the local pugilistic universe could one hope to relax the manifold censorships, woven into the texture of the social and symbolic figurations that compose it, that systemically truncate the realm of the discoverable and the tellable (Wacquant, 1998; 4).

Wacquant's mistake was not to strive for such a 'bona fide presence', but to lack the necessary detachment to realise that there are many different ways that such a presence can be gained. In heeding De Garis' critique, I, and others using similar methodological techniques, are able to appreciate the multitude of involved positions that may also enable the collection of rich phenomenological accounts. Indeed, we are also sensitised to the constraining effects of such involved positions. Woodward's (2008; 547) work on boxing summarises this debate nicely:

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.

Indeed, by reconceptualising this debate using Eliasian terms of involvement and detachment (Elias, 1987; Mansfield, 2007), we can be sensitive to the partial and situational nature of knowledge and avoid conceptual slippage towards privileging an 'insider's' position. Certainly, Wacquant (2004) implicitly employed a measure of what Mansfield (2007) has described as 'involved detachment', without this, his account would have represented little more than a rich description of events. However, through formally removing the false dualisms of 'insider' and 'outsider' we are able to see more accurately the relative position that is taken by the researcher and, subsequently, the knowledge that is produced. In this way, by taking regular 'detours via detachment' I was able to 'see' the development of my own place within the gym figuration and how this affected the research presented here, thus hopefully avoiding the criticisms that have been aimed at Wacquant. Related to this understanding of the researcher's location, is the means by which Elias conceptualises the micro-sociological patterns of social hierarchies as consisting of established/outsider relations (Elias & Scotson, 1965). These figurational patterns will be explored in detail in Chapter Four. In what follows, the impact of these interactions on the research presented here is described.

### 3.10 Established/Outsider Relations

As highlighted in Chapter Two, Elias and Scotson's (1965) work exploring established/outsider relations is an important component of figurational sociology. Simplistically, the 'established' position within a social environment can be considered to be one with a high degree of involvement relative to the outsider role. Wacquant (2004), and the majority of ethnographers, gradually move towards the established position during the course of their time in the field. As this position changes, so does the viewpoint from which the research setting can be observed. Elaborating the researcher's position within this continuum not only aids an understanding of the social environment but also, in combination with involved-detachment, enables the reflection that is necessary if one is to avoid falling into the ontological trap of privileging 'insider' knowledge. This is an issue with which I contended during my time in the field. At times, I have found myself treading a difficult path between researcher and gym native. As De Garis (2010; 936) notes:

Sporting communities such as boxing and wrestling are defined largely (though by no means exclusively) by a physical practice, the ethnographic demarcation of self and other can become blurred. One can, at least marginally, become a 'boxer' or 'wrestler' by the act of boxing or wrestling.

Indeed, I did become a 'boxer' of sorts. Here, my background was an important aspect of my ability to enter the ring, and to find significance in the experiences I discovered. However, through regular reflection and note-taking I was able to find a balance that allowed me temporarily to see my increasingly established and involved position from a relatively detached viewpoint. I will outline the impact this process of moving from being a relative outsider to becoming someone with a relatively established position had on the practicalities of collecting data as this chapter continues. It suffices to say, at this point, that I worked hard to achieve the relatively established and involved position from which the research presented in this thesis is written. It required hours of training, sparring and hanging around and has afforded me a position from which a detailed story of events and experiences could be told. Is this the only way that such observations could have been collected? No. Is it the best way? Not necessarily. Did I gain personal satisfaction from my close involvement with boxing? Yes. Did this methodology successfully employ my physical skills and background to tell one part of the story from a specific local setting? Yes. Will this story resonate with others from different local settings and different experiences of violence? Perhaps. In this way, my

established position within the gym, although perceived as privileged on a personal level, enabled me to present a partial, but important, picture of the pugilistic experience. As such, I hope to avoid being the 'ethnographic fighter' who attempts to 'deal a knockout blow' to other works in the area with claims of authenticity and legitimacy. Rather, I aim to 'spar', in a collaborative sense, with the existing literature in an attempt to increase our ability to understand sports violence more adequately (De Garis, 2010).

In the above, my place within this thesis has been discussed. Here, the aim has been to allow the reader to appreciate, to some degree, the effect that my background may have had on the choice of research setting, methodological techniques and the production of the knowledge subsequently presented. Following this, any notions of the primacy of 'insider' knowledge have been deconstructed through an engagement with De Garis' (2010) critical examination of Wacquant's (2004) research. These arguments have been framed by Elias' notions of involvement and detachment and established/outsider relations. The following section of this chapter outlines the practicalities of entering the field and the development of a position from which detailed observations could be made.

### **3.11 Practicalities of Conducting a Violent Ethnography**

Within this section, the journey that has been undertaken in these past two years of fieldwork is mapped out. A description of the path travelled thus far gives the reader a sense of the thesis' empirical basis while also drawing attention to the methodological issues that have been encountered. The practicalities of ethical clearance, selecting and entering the field, forming relationships (established/outsider relations) and collecting data through observations and interviews are discussed.

### **3.12 Ethical Clearance**

As with any research project, a formative step in this study was to gain clearance from the University's ethics committee. This is an essential procedure which not only helps to maintain a moralistic and humanistic dimension within a researcher's thinking, but also helps to ensure the safety of participants and researchers alike. As was anticipated in a supervisory meeting, the ethical clearance for this project brought forward a unique set of issues that needed to be

addressed. The difficulties experienced during this usually straightforward process draws our attention to the perceived and real dangers involved in conducting ethnographic research in which violence was a key component. When initially completing the ethical clearance forms, the following question proved to be the largest obstacle to conducting the project:

To the best of your knowledge, please indicate whether the proposed study involves procedures which are likely to cause physical, psychological, social or emotional distress to participants?

Through my intended participation in the research environment, there was a high degree of likelihood that I, and the participants being observed and with whom I would be interacting, would experience physical, and potentially psychological, harm. As such, a positive answer to this question flagged an aspect of the research that would require further clarification before the ethics committee could grant clearance. Attempts to pre-emptively resolve this issue centred on the voluntary nature of boxing participation. As the participants were already engaging in boxing, the argument was made that my presence would not increase the level of risk the participants would be experiencing. After addressing a few concerns the ethics committee raised about health and safety, permission to commence the research phase of the thesis was granted.

This process had forced me to contend with a few stark facts about boxing. Firstly, boxing is one of only a handful of mainstream sports in which violent physical force is targeted directly at the opponent. Secondly, injury and pain are essential parts of participation in boxing if one wishes to go beyond simply practising techniques on punch bags. Thirdly, boxing is infamous for the damaging short-term and long-term effects that punches can have on a boxer's health. Before applying for ethical clearance, I had taken a rather cavalier and un-reflexive approach to my attempts to learn to box. Indeed (as will be outlined subsequently), I had already begun to take the formative steps down the pugilistic pathway by beginning to attend boxing sessions. It is perhaps surprising that as a student of the sociology of sport, hopefully possessing a critical eye for, amongst other things, athletes' taken-for-granted acceptance of violence in sports, that I found myself in a boxing ring without really considering the physical implications of engaging in the environment I had entered. Following my brief involvement in boxing, I resolved that the risks presented by the light sparring that I was engaging in were not only manageable, to a large extent, but were also a key element within the enjoyment that

I had already experienced. As such, with a slightly more salient and explicit understanding of the bodily risks I was accepting, I continued down the pugilistic path.

### **3.13 Entering the field**

As the first year of this study drew to a close, potential sites from which to conduct the research phase were being investigated. This search was initially driven by practicality rather than a theoretically guided choice of sample or location. However, with the phenomenological slant of the research, and my own motivation to learn the 'manly art' in mind, the opportunity to participate in boxing to some degree rather than simply observe was a priority. As such, a venue that not only catered for people who could already box, but also encouraged people to take up the sport, was being searched for. Having lived in the same city in the East Midlands for the majority of my life, it seemed logical to start the search locally. My close proximity to the city centre gyms would make spending time there far easier than if it was in a different city. Also, my accent and background, would 'fit' the local area, and could potentially aid entrance into the field, and the interpretation of local speech patterns and dialect. An Internet search revealed a couple of possibilities but there was some difficulty in contacting clubs and coaches. It seemed the telephone numbers were either wrong or were not answered. A session at a Leisure Center, that I found through the local council's website, was attended, the coach there told me that he hoped to move to a new venue in the coming weeks. This did hold some potential as a research site, however, around the same point in time a friend mentioned Freedom Gym. He had trained there in the past and had seen a boxing class advertised. I went to the gym on a Tuesday night, and, while there, I had a brief chat with a member of staff and watched five minutes of the boxing session that was in progress.

Freedom Gym was the most concrete lead. Boxing sessions on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays could be attended without joining the gym as a member. One of the sessions was attended the following week and again for the next few weeks. In this way, the gym's feasibility as a venue for research was assessed without much financial or time commitment. Other gyms in and around the city were researched with little success. As the weeks passed, more and more time was spent at Freedom Gym and relationships were formed that I could foresee providing a basis for this thesis. Although not a traditional boxing environment, as

described by Wacquant (2004), Sugden (1996) and as portrayed in countless film and literary accounts (Chandler *et al.*, 1996), I believed that the gym offered an opportunity to witness the experiences of violence that formed the empirical focus of this study. An early field note entry captures my initial thoughts on the gym:

When I arrived at the gym for Simon's<sup>9</sup> boxing session I walked into a vibrant, sweaty festival of hegemonic masculinity. An MMA class was running on the dojo, three guys were grappling in the cage, four guys were doing body sparring in the ring and all around them boys and men pushed weights while laughing, grunting and watching themselves and others in the mirrors. I took up a small space next to the ring and got myself ready for the session. Everywhere I looked there were men engaging in some form of strenuous physicality, bodies bashed bodies left right and centre. Other than the coach who was guiding the MMA session, no-one was obviously directing this masculine traffic, every three minutes the buzzer would call a halt to proceedings in the ring but other than that the whole space was seemingly controlled by an unspoken understanding of the ways these sorts of men should behave when in such a place. There was a complete harmony of ritualised violence and physicality, everyone knew what to do and when to do it (Field notes, 11/8/2009).

Eventually, the decision was made that Freedom Gym would be the place in which this research project would be conducted. The manager of the club was approached and details of the study were explained. I continued to attend the boxing sessions and took field notes to document the process. When ethical clearance had been granted, I started to spend much more time in the gym and began to take more detailed field notes. The two months that I had attended the gym without formally conducting research had helped me begin to develop relationships, and my own boxing ability. Being in the environment without the pressure to critically observe and form relationships may have helped me to slip into the gym without being immediately flagged as a 'researcher'. As the research journey continued, I would find out how closely intertwined my boxing ability would be with the relationships I formed at the gym.

### **3.14 Forming Relationships**

Initially, my attention focused on the people who attended the weekly boxing sessions. There was no discernibly typical attendee to these sessions, they were generally not members of the gym and the group had a high turnover rate. This made maintaining relationships difficult. I soon started to look beyond this group for two reasons: firstly, because the majority of the people who boxed at Freedom Gym did not attend the session. Secondly, I found that the sessions were covering the same techniques over and over again. I wanted to progress the

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<sup>9</sup> Simon was 35 years old, has lived in Woodford all his life and runs Freedom Gym's boxing sessions, he is self-employed and work elsewhere 'doing a few different bits and bobs'.

research, and my boxing ability. As a result, I joined the gym as a member so that I could start attending any time of the day instead of just when the boxing sessions were on. Once this was done, I was able to practise in my own time. A presence at the boxing session was maintained, but I gradually began to take part less and less. This freed me to train and socialise with people who were not connected to the boxing class, and to work on specific areas of my boxing technique that needed improving. I maintained a relationship with the group by making an effort to catch up with the coach and the people who were still attending. I still took part from time-to-time and often stepped in if there was an odd number attending the session. However, as my boxing ability advanced, so did my relationships with people beyond this group.

For the majority of the research phase, the gym was attended five or six times a week. A usual session would involve me being in the gym for around two hours. I would do this at varying times to get a sense for the gym throughout the day. I would sometimes train in the morning, go into town and record my field notes, then come back for an afternoon session. Initially, my time at the gym was taken up with drills designed to help learn the basic techniques. During this period, I made many field notes about the process of developing the pugilistic habitus and adopting the movements and mannerisms I witnessed at Freedom Gym. I gradually started to do light sparring with men that I had meet at the gym. At this point, it became apparent that I would be putting my body on the line throughout the course of this research. Gradually, I started to do more and more sparring with different groups. During this transition from relative 'outsider' to a relatively 'established' position, I formed many relationships with people who frequented the gym, some fleeting and some more durable. The process of building relationships was, at times, a slow and challenging one. The stereotypical view of a boxing club complete with an 'old timer' coach who knows everyone and everything within the gym walls, and can act as a focal point, does not resonate with Freedom Gym. As such, there was not an obvious gatekeeper who could help me meet people and gain acceptance with the gym's more established members. Familiarity proved to be my greatest asset in developing relationships. By spending a lot of time at the gym, I gradually became a familiar part of the scenery, pugilistic furniture perhaps. A field note extract describes this delicate process:

I had mixed success in making contact with people tonight, I find myself balancing on a very fine line between wanting to approach people to try and start forming a relationship with them and not wanting to be 'that guy' that always tries to 'chat' with people. The last thing I want when I'm training is to have someone coming up and asking me daft questions. I resolve this tension by playing a long game with the guys I see in the gym, by this I mean that I will try and gradually build the contact I have with people every time I see them. So one week I will nod to a guy I have seen around the gym, next week I might say "ay'up", after that I'll say "alright mate" and so on until I feel like I can try and strike up a conversation, or indeed, they start talking to me. At any one time I will be doing this with a few different people who I have seen around the gym, I suppose all I am doing is trying to make friends in a new environment without looking like I am the type of person who is desperate to make new friends. Obviously, with some people, this long game isn't necessary, as they'll happily start chatting from the first time I see them in the gym, but with others it seems essential (Field notes, 13/11/09).

As I formed these closer ties, I was able to get a fuller picture of the significance that participants attached to events that I was observing. A corollary of this process was the gradual habituation of the values and norms that framed life at the gym. This process of changing subjectivity will be explored as this chapter continues, but first the practicalities of data collection will be described.

### **3.15 Data Collection**

Initially, observations were recorded in the form of detailed field notes. While attending the gym, I would attempt to take in as much as possible of the day-to-day happenings. Returning home, I would retrace the session from start to finish and try to paint a colourful picture of my time at the gym. In the early stages of this study, I devoted a lot of time to documenting my own experiences. Areas of gym life that did not seem obviously to link to the study of violence were also documented. By 'casting a wide net', it was hoped that a narrow description of a *priori* defined areas of interest would be avoided. Field notes took a variety of forms from scribbles, designed to jog my memory at a later date, to long-winded, word-processed accounts of conversations and events in the gym. All the notes were compiled chronologically in two notebooks, and backed up by producing copies during regular photocopying sessions. As the research developed, I found it useful to take short notes on my phone during training sessions to aid the later recollection of events and conversations. I was able to sit on the ring apron and subtly record a series of words or sentences without drawing attention to myself, as would have been the case with a note pad or Dictaphone. At roughly two-monthly intervals, these field notes were reviewed and re-occurring themes were drawn out. This helped to

guide the literature that was being read at the same time and also highlighted areas of interest for further observations and conversations.

As briefly outlined earlier, my position within the gym's established/outsider relations changed as time passed by. This was accompanied by a change in the roles I could adopt from which to observe life in the gym. There are many such positions that the researcher can assume, ranging from complete participant to complete observer (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Initially, I was able to take a relatively detached/outsider position as a new member to the gym, this was supported by my lack of boxing ability. This position allowed me to use my inexperience and lack of knowledge to ask 'novice' questions and to view events, which would later become routine, as strange and novel. Take the following field note extract as an example:

During this afternoon's session, I watched a couple of blokes doing some body sparring. In their last round, they started really winding up their punches. There seemed to be real malice in the shots they were throwing, real power. When one landed a shot the other just seemed to wind up further on the next one, I was standing at the side wondering where this escalation would end up. It ended with them both throwing uppercuts at each other just before the buzzer went and then them falling into each other in an exhausted embrace. It's so odd to see two men beating on each other one second and then smiling and congratulating each other on their effort the next. What from the outside looked like a barely controlled display of violence one minute turned into a show of camaraderie, friendship and enjoyment the next (Field notes, 8/9/09).

After some time in the gym, I grew so accustomed to such events that I hardly noted them down anymore. As time went by, and my pugilistic experience grew, I was able to interpret the significance of such events for those experiencing them with a greater degree of accuracy. During reflexive moments, I went back over field notes of observations that were made before I had developed my own version of the pugilistic habitus, and partially lost the novel lens through which I had previously seen the gym. These 'detours via detachment' were an important mechanism that allowed me to 'see' the gym through a relatively detached lens even when I had adopted a more involved position.

As I became a more established member of the gym, I began to fill in some of the blanks that had been evident within my earlier observations. The closer relationships I had formed meant I could be involved in more conversations and ask more questions. As my experiences of boxing grew, I was able to appreciate what it felt like to be 'having a tear up' one minute and

then patting my opponent on the back the next. This more involved position was useful in allowing me to personally engage in the sensuous experiences of violence that are the focus of this thesis. Such experiences also aided me in probing similar experiences in others. However, this position did make it difficult to ask the 'novice' questions that had been very useful in the early part of my time in the field. While conducting interviews, I had difficulty, at times, getting my interviewees to explicitly discuss some elements of boxing as they assumed, quite rightfully at times, that I already knew what they were talking about. This was compounded by many of the interviewees employing a physical language to answer my questions and because the feelings and sensations that were enquired about resist easy description using words. This was evident during a conversation with a sparring partner:

Chris: What does it feel like to land a really good shot on someone?

Dave<sup>10</sup>: What, like when ya pop someone sweet?

Chris: Yeah.

Dave: It's err, like you know, it's like bam. [Leans forward and throws a right hand out toward my chin with his body fully behind it and withdraws before contacting me].

Chris: But what does it feel like, can you describe it?

Dave: It's fuckin' like, I dunno realleh, it's just good innit (Dave, field notes, 18/3/10).

During this conversation, I remember feeling that I knew exactly what Dave was talking about. At the same time, I was also keenly aware that I needed him to express his experiences using words that could be used in a written representation. During chats and interviews, I used my own experiences to coax people into discussing such physical events in more detail, but, time and time again, I ran up against this language barrier. Such a communication barrier is crossed daily by established boxers within Freeman Gym by a mutual understanding of shared experiences in the ring. However, it represents, at times, an insurmountable obstacle when the same men attempted to put into words the phenomenology of their fighting experiences. The techniques employed in attempts to move past these issues are discussed in the following section.

### **3.16 Interviews**

After around six months in the field, attention began to be focused on interviewing. Within the gym, there is a relatively stable group of boxers who use the ring most frequently and who also know each other well. This established group provided the majority of interviewees.

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<sup>10</sup> Dave was 25, he lived on the outskirts of a relatively affluent part of town. He works as a labourer but has made repeated attempts to return to college to study as a personal trainer. He has earned money from taking part in unlicensed boxing events around the Midlands. He is reknown for his 'chin' (ability to take a punch) and being very 'heavy handed' (punches very hard).

These men were relatively easy to access, as such, their stories were well-documented in field notes, I was also intrigued to explore the experiences of men that used the gym on an irregular basis. As opportunities to make contact with these infrequent users were limited, I had to be very proactive in attempting to organise interviews with them. On several occasions, I had broached the subject with people but did not manage to conduct the interview because I failed to confirm a date and time there and then. After a few such missed opportunities, I decided the best course of action was to ask for the potential interviewee's telephone number, this meant that I could follow up the initial discussion with a call the next day. After the success I had in forming relationships by using a very gradual approach early in the data collection period, this almost 'pushy' form of making contact felt awkward. However, the transient nature of some of the users of the gym meant I was left with very few options if I wanted this part of the gym's story to be told. Also, by this time I had gone some way to establishing myself in the gym and, as such, I was less wary of forming a negative reputation for myself. As a result, I managed to conduct interviews with a few of these more transient users of the gym.

Interviews were conducted with twenty-five people who train in the boxing area of Freedom Gym, five of whom were interviewed twice. The club's manager was also interviewed; he was able to reveal knowledge regarding the club's ownership and short history. Despite difficulties in confirming and conducting some interviews with participants who seemed reluctant to speak to me in this formal manner, the majority of the established members and a selection of the men who frequented the gym less often were interviewed. These interviews ranged in time from thirty minutes to two hours, with the majority lasting around fifty minutes. I conducted most of the interviews in a quiet corner of the gym after training sessions. This meant that I was able to capitalise on opportunities that presented themselves to conduct interviews while at the gym, rather than relying on participants to attend meetings arranged for later dates. I also knew that the interviewees were comfortable in this environment. Adding to this, I was able to note down many conversations and talk fragments while conducting observations in the field. These conversations, mainly between the established members of the gym, provided a really interesting insight into the lives of the men who attended the gym.

As I had less control over the themes that were discussed, these snippets represented a brief view into the lives of these men outside of the gym. Take the following example:

Gary<sup>11</sup>: I'm proud o'ya duck, no seriously, how long's it bin na?

Carl<sup>12</sup>: A week last Sunde, and I tell ya, I'm waking up feelin' full o'beans, not all depressed about going to wo'k. This is the start of a come back I tell ya, I even like working on the bag na, I used to fucking hate that.

Gary: Yeah, you're used to working on your bag at home, her names Emma [Lee doesn't really respond] (Field notes, 23/7/10).

Here, issues of alcoholism and marital abuse are discussed in a carefree and flippant manner. Such observations helped to enrich my understanding of the research setting and those that inhabited it. In some of these moments, areas of people's lives that I felt uncomfortable asking about in the context of an interview were discussed. Although I was aware that the men I was meeting at the gym might well engage with violence, drink, drugs and other illicit activities outside the gym, I found it difficult to broach these subjects. I did attempt to ask about violence outside the ring in the context of pub fights and self defence, but I felt that asking directly about the other areas would have transgressed my position as a 'trusted' friend, training partner and researcher. My adoption of, and unwillingness to break, the 'code of silence' about such taboo subjects is perhaps a function of my involved position within the research setting, and is an example of the constraining effects such 'closeness' can have on the production of knowledge.

The informal schedule of questions that was used during interviews developed over time. Initially, simplistic questions, that were designed to elicit answers about themes that had been highlighted in the literature review, were employed. However, the majority of interviewees found it difficult to discuss certain areas with the openness that had been hoped for, conversations in which violence was discussed, proved to be particularly problematic. As previously discussed, the term 'violence' is an emotive one. During interviews, its use tended to be a hindrance to gaining information from participants. Firstly, the use of the term to discuss acts occurring in the ring generally resulted in confusion and disagreement from interviewees. As a result, different terms or examples tended to be employed in an effort to start conversations about violent acts. Secondly, when I attempted to find out if people

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<sup>11</sup> Gary was 35, works as a builder for a well-known local 'face'. He is a central figure in the gym and generally leads much of the gym banter. He had some amateur rights and fought in unlicensed fights from time-to-time. He is six foot four inches and is often used as a sparing partner for local fighters who are up against a taller opponent.

<sup>12</sup> Carl was 36 and a roofer by trade, he and Gary grew up in the same neighbourhood. Although he does not take boxing as seriously as Gary he has boxed at a higher level in the amateurs.

actually enjoyed the violence that was observed in the ring some interviewees tended to become rather coy in their responses. Most respondents seemed wary of discussing violence in such positive terms. As my interview technique progressed, I tended to engage the interviewee in conversation about sparring and training without directly asking them about their enjoyment of the more violent aspects of each. I would ask 'what does it feel like to land a good shot?' or 'what is a good sparring session?' These subtler questions tended to elicit discussions about their experiences of violence. Another technique I had success with was to draw on my own experiences of sparring; this seemed to encourage the interviewee to discuss their own experiences more freely. Observations from previous times in the gym were also used to help anchor interviews in real life events. This worked well when Patrick<sup>13</sup> was interviewed:

Chris: When we were doing body sparring, you landed a good shot and you seem to enjoy it, do you?

Patrick: Err, yeah it's not very often I do though.

Chris: What is it you enjoy about it?

Patrick: I dunno really. [pauses] It's good to land one of the shot you're trying to land.

Chris: What about the feeling, like of knocking the wind out of someone?

Patrick: Yeah that's cool, especially when you catch 'em just right.

Chris: How do you know when you've done that?

Patrick: You can just tell from the way they take the shot, people try and hide it when you hurt 'em but I think you can pretty much always tell if you land a big shot (Patrick interview).

During interviews and chats, participants also seem to have difficulty discussing the emotions and sensuous feelings that accompanied their experiences in the gym. The time spent observing and training in the gym had reinforced the points of departure that were outlined in the introduction and literature review, but drawing out explicit discussions of these experiences proved to be difficult. It is not inconsequential that there was some difficulty in obtaining information from participants about certain subjects. Indeed, one aspect of certain forms of hegemonic masculinity that were on display in the gym, is an apparent irreverence towards emotional expression and physical contact, especially between men (Connell, 1995). The significance of the methodological difficulties will be drawn out further in Chapter Four. For now, it must suffice to say that certain information, although eventually obtained through observations and interviews, proved to be very challenging to gain due, in part, to that nature of the themes being explored and, in part, due to participants' notions of what are legitimate topics of discussion.

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick was 19, he lived near the gym in a part of town which is generally considered to be rough. He plays Ice Hockey for the local team and initially started boxing to increase his fitness. He is currently studying at college.

In the above, the practicalities of the research process have been mapped out to provide a sense of the manner in which the observations and interviews upon which this study is based have been collected. The research process was shaped by the position that I adopted within the gym, the subject matter that was being explored and participants' ability/willingness to discuss their experiences. To conclude this chapter, a personal account of the experience of conducting this research, the trials and tribulations of a violent ethnography, will be explored.

### **3.17 Being Nosy**

Being nosy is a useful ethnographic skill that can be employed to observe the richness of a social environment. However, during the fieldwork for this study, my nose played a far less metaphorical roll in my attempts to understand Freedom Gym. In an ethnography of a violent subculture, ones nose (and other body parts) can become the target of violent acts. In what follows, my engagement in violence, and experiences of pain and injury, are explored. While attending the gym, I regularly found myself involved in phenomena that have received much critical attention from sociologists of sport. Enduring links between sports participation and risk to athletes' health and disablement have formed a central theme within the sociology of sports literature (Messner, 1990; Nixon, 1994; Smith, 1983; Young, 2001; Young, McTeer & White, 1994). Nixon (1994; 79) states:

It has been argued that athletic participation occurs in a cultural context that glorifies risk and normalises pain, injuries, and playing hurt and in a social structural context in which the forces of social control, power, and institutional rationalization conspire to constrain or induce athletes to accept the risk and pain of sports injuries.

At times, it seemed that my research environment represented an exemplary illustration of the cultural contexts Nixon describes. I repeatedly found myself the willing participant in the normalisation of violence, pain and injury. Not only was I a willing participant, I enjoyed it, immensely. As did the majority of others with whom I shared the environment. Regardless of my academic understanding of the alienation, debilitation and risk factors that athletes' may experience, I kept coming back for more. Indeed, by the end of first year in the field I had become a member of the established group of boxers for whom Nixon's cultural context was a home from home. During this period, I watched and studied others attempting to make sense of their gym experiences while attempting to do the same myself. I repeatedly tried to balance

the tensions that were produced by my sociological education and these experiences of pain, injury and violence.

Initially, my body was not accustomed to the battering that I would force upon it during my training sessions. As time wore on, I gradually desensitised it to some of this pain and became more resistant to such punishment. Such 'body callusing' (Crossley, 2009), was an essential component of effective participation in sparring. Accompanying this body conditioning was a long period of acclimatising my body to the training involved; not only did I need to learn to push myself harder than I have ever pushed before, but I also needed to become accustomed to round-after-round of sparring, day-after-day. This process is mapped out in what follows.

### **3.18 Pain and Injury in Research**

One of the first areas of my body that was the target of punishment was my nose. With hindsight, it seems quite obvious now, that the nose, protruding from the face, would be the target of punches. Being punched on the nose is a quite unique pain; sharp, but throbbing almost instantaneously. Sometimes, the disorienting nature of this pain was severe enough to force me to stop sparring; this experience is captured in the following field note extract:

My first few goes at sparring made me realise that there is a bloody good reason why I've heard some people say to hit dogs on the nose when they're misbehaving. It's because it hurts, a lot! When you first get hit square on the nose, especially from a stiff jab or right cross (as Lewis<sup>14</sup> is fond of doing to me), it's a dizzying and extremely uncomfortable experience. I could feel my face being squashed, like those slow motion replays of impacts during fights.

When I first started sparring, a hit on the nose (even a slap, as Lewis would call it when he throws fast punches without much force behind them) could cause me to have to stop. Not only was the pain intense, it also knocks your senses, everything goes out of focus for a second. However, once hit, the nose loses some degree of sensation, so after the initial punch, while the adrenaline is still going, it is possible to grin and bear the pain.

Over the last few months, my nose has gradually been getting used to the shots, it doesn't seem to hurt as much and I'm able to carry on when I did take a punch, but tonight I took a big right hand flush on the nose and I heard it click. The next thing I could taste blood in my mouth, my nose was gushing blood, I was almost used to the pain so I carried on. At the end of the round I looked down at my grey t-shirt, it was now a dirty brown colour from all the blood. I pulled my t-shirt up and blow my nose on it. It cleared it out but it started bleeding again (Field notes, 3/12/09).

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<sup>14</sup> Lewis was 26, he has trained in a variety of martial arts. He grew up in Reading but moved to the area to attend a local university. He now works as a lecturer at a different University. Throughout my time in the field we spend much time training and socialising together.

I remember the odd feeling of touching my swelled, numbed nose when I woke up the next day. I had to suffer the consequences of my injury, "today, my nose is squashed flat on my face! It swelled up and I sound like I have a cold. I woke up with a sore throat because I had been breathing through my mouth all night. I do look a bit silly" (Field notes, 4/12/09). Recovering from this injury took a week or so, eventually, I was able to resume sparring. It seemed that somehow the experience had toughened my nose, and made it more robust:

It's a week or so after my nose got busted. The pain and swelling has gone now. I used to have a click in my nose, that has also gone, I assume the cartilage that was clicking has been squashed down in some way. I also notice that I've lost some sensation in my nose. It simply doesn't hurt at all when I get hit on it. I can basically hit my nose as hard as I like with my hand and it doesn't hurt one bit. This is brilliant for boxing. But it did make me stop and wonder about what I was doing to myself (Field notes, 11/12/09).

The extra resilience that this injury gave my nose meant that I did not experience the same level of disorientation to my senses when I took a punch in the face. From this point on, I knew that if I were to spar with someone who has not gone through this experience, there would be a good chance I would be more comfortable taking punches than they were. It felt like I had broken through a fundamental stage in becoming a boxer, I now knew I could at least take a shot to the face without my eyes watering. During this injury, I had been covered in blood. Although my bloody face and t-shirt did not really elicit many direct comments, it certainly served to cement my place as one of the few gym-goers who was willing to do fairly tough sparring.

Along with my flattened nose, I repeatedly got black eyes. These ranged from big purple and yellow marks with cuts in the middle, to subtler bruising that was difficult to see. Mostly, these bruises were ignored in the gym but in other areas of my life they tended to draw unwanted attention:

Last night I met a few mates for a drink, they were all making a right fuss out of my black eyes. I had forgotten that I even had them and I'm sure most of them have seen me with one over the last few months. Perhaps it was 'cus they were all together and pissed up or something. I had lads jokingly telling me they 'will sort out who ever did it to me' and girls trying to make sure I was ok. I felt really awkward; all of a sudden, something that I had accepted as a normal part of life had made me stand out. I've grown so used to black eyes that I just didn't understand what the fuss was about. I guess to people who have nothing to do with fighting they are a much more powerful symbol. I do sometimes wonder what people might think when they see me with clipped hair, a black eye and scratches all over my face (Field notes, 2/3/10).

I tended to wear these markers of violence as 'badges of courage' when I first started sparring. Outside the gym, they were a point of conversation that allowed me to discuss my

research with people, while inside the gym they placed me within the minority of gym users who were willing to put their body on the line in the ring. I was generally un-reflexive about these facial injuries until an event was observed that forced me to think about my time in the ring. During a sparring session with Lewis, Ally<sup>15</sup> asked if he could join in:

As I leave the ring I say to Ally, 'I get a break then aye?' he laughs a little. As the buzzer sounds they move around each other using the odd jab. They each land light shots. These early moments are about feeling out your opponent and finding a level that you're both happy working at. Then Lewis catches Ally with a flush right hand, which although it was on the button and sounded nice, didn't have that much behind it. They carry on sizing each other up, moving in and out of range, changing stances and faking shots. Lewis moves into range to throw a shot just as Ally comes in with a jab and loopy right. Lewis' chin is up in the air without any guard. Ally lands his shot and Lewis crumbles back into the ropes and to the floor. At first I thought he had stumbled, Gary who was watching from the other side of the ring shouted out 'Good fucking shot.' As the echo from his words slowly died out, we both realised Lewis was out cold. We clambered through the ropes into the ring, Lewis was lying half on his back, half on his side, eyes open, arms and upper body tensed. Gary went in for his gum shield I listened to see if he was breathing, he was, thank fuck. More help arrived and we moved him into the recovery position, he slowly started to come round.

I heard him mumble something that sounded like 'what happened?' After this he tried to get up and stumbled into the middle of the ring and dropped to the floor again. At this, we told him to stay down, someone asked how many fingers they were holding up? He replied four, he was conscious enough not to count the thumb so he looked like he was ok. Gary said 'head guards, that's why ya need fucking head guards' (Field notes, 20/1/10).

Eventually, the session continued, Lewis recovered outside the ring and eventually his wits returned. During the next few days, I thought a lot about what had happened. I had been contemplating trying to get a competitive fight later in the year, now I began to reconsider. If something like this could happen in sparring what could happen when someone was really trying to hurt you? I even questioned my own involvement in sparring. As time passed and the image of Lewis slumped on the floor faded, I started to see what had happened as a rare accident rather than the norm. Before long, I was itching for tough sparring again, and I had once more started to think about having a fight. It seemed that I enjoyed sparring and fighting too much to be able to give it up. However, I was now keenly aware of the risks involved, they had been brutally brought to my attention; I had to understand, attempt to negate, but ultimately, live with them.

To date, I have not been knocked out. Such injuries are perhaps the most striking and powerful of all the images of injury that come out of the boxing world. Indeed, witnessing a

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<sup>15</sup> Ally was 19, he was recognised as the only regular attendee who had any chance as 'making it' as a pro boxer. He is from one of the local notorious estates and had been in trouble at school and with the police before being encouraged to take up boxing by his father

knockout is shocking but the physical mechanics of the brain being violently bashed around in the skull provides an extra layer of meaning to these experiences. Such events are relatively uncommon in sparring, however, I have experienced less-dramatic head injuries with perhaps alarming regularity, as the following field note extract records:

After sparring tonight I must have stared at the floor for like 10 minutes. My head was spinning but empty. My jaw already aches, my temple is sore to the touch. I won't even start on about how physically drained and tired my body feels. As I sit at my desk 4 hours after leaving the gym, I have a headache and I feel slow. Earlier I couldn't get my words right; I took three attempts to tell Jennie to put jacket potatoes in the oven. Everything just feels a bit mixed up after a hard session of sparring. I like the feeling sometimes, I've got used to it, it's kinda nice 'cus you phase out most stuff and can just sit there in a bit of a daze without thinking about anything (Field notes, 9/8/10).

From time to time, I would worry about the long-term damage that these tough sparring sessions could be doing to my health. But, during the session, such thoughts could not be further from my mind. Instead, I am consumed by the duel, by the competition, and the drive to push through the pain barrier to take my fitness and skill to the next level. However, there were times when I withdrew from sparring because I had pushed so hard that I lost the ability to defend myself. Take the following example:

When I started sparring tonight I tried to work at a higher intensity than usual, I wanted to step things up with Gary after he had encouraged me to really start attacking him. It was good, a definite improvement but I was knackered after three rounds. Luckily, while we started, Arthur<sup>16</sup> had arrived and was able to step in. After a couple of rounds break I was keen to step back in with Gary, but it wasn't long till I was running out of steam again. Now the problem was that I had stepped things up with Gary this meant that he was putting more mustard into his shots. By the end of the second round I was done, I had nothing left, so much so that at the time it felt easier to take a punch to the head than to keep my arms up for protection. It's at this point that I get a bit of space and put my hand up to call time. I just wasn't protecting myself anymore. I was so drained that I simply couldn't do the basics to defend.

At first Gary seemed worried that he had been going too hard, and that I had stopped 'cus he had done me some damage. But, when I said that it was because I was so tired that I couldn't defend myself he started bollocking me about quitting. I felt a bit hard done by considering I had just put so much effort in. But I wasn't about to start arguing with Gary, I told him I had pushed hard, and that I wasn't getting anything out of it anymore and neither was he. Well, he was getting target practice out of it (Field notes, 8/6/10).

Gradually, I became comfortable pulling myself out of sparring when things were getting a little too heated. Engaging in such sessions allowed me to collect rich observations about the boxer's physical and emotional experiences of sparring. The timely recording of these experiences was sometimes hindered by the slightly disorganised way my head was left after such sessions. I did find it difficult to return home after a session of sparring and attempt to

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<sup>16</sup> Arthur was 49, he is Ally's father and only took up boxing since coming to Freedom Gym despite being around the sport for ten years because of Ally. He works in the building trade and is renowned for his willingness to push tempo of training.

write detailed field notes. Usually, brief notes would be made that could be used as prompts the next day.

There were times during the research process when I had to remind myself that I was in the gym to conduct research. The 'extreme sensuousness' of my gym experiences made less exciting areas of my life harder to focus on. Take the following example:

At times, I feel totally focused on boxing, either recovering from my last hard session and suffering the dizzying after-effects, or thinking about the next session and how I will improve. It's so much fun, other stuff just feels a bit like someone has come along and turned the volume down on it. I have to force myself sometimes to copy up these field notes, to engage with people I don't know at the gym to get interviews and talk fragments. Most of the time, all I want to do when I'm down the gym is either work on my own technique or get in the ring and move around with someone. I remember last week someone sitting near me and starting a conversation about something or other and I was annoyed that this person was potentially going to stop me resuming my training when the buzzer rang. This was a potential opportunity for research missed because I was so focused on completing my own session (Field notes, 4/5/10).

There is an element of 'going native' here. Without doubt, there were times where I lost sight of my research and, instead, focused explicitly on the activity at hand. Although this lack of detachment might have resulted in some missed opportunities to collect observations and form relationships, periods of reflection allowed me to go back and draw out the significance of my experiences. This drifting towards an increasingly involved position enabled me to paint a detailed 'insider' account of the world of boxing at Freedom Gym. This temporary lack of focus on my position as a researcher also enabled me to exist in the gym as more than simply 'that lad who is always trying to interview people'. I was clearly wrapped up in my training experiences and, as such, I was not only a regular feature of the gym, but I was also adopting the same focus that other gym attendees displayed. If I were to have always adopted the role of researcher in the gym, I would have 'stuck out like a sore thumb' and, as such, may have found it harder to gain access to the established group and the exciting significance of boxing.

As I became increasingly proficient at boxing, opportunities to engage with more established members of the gym presented themselves. This position was supported by my regular sparring sessions in which I would train with the most experienced boxers in the gym. This may sound counterintuitive, but as my ability increased, and I gained a more established position in the ring, there was an increased level of risk involved in sparring. Although my defensive abilities were always improving, I was stepping in the ring and beginning to push

people with much more experience than I had. The harder I fought, the more pressure I put on them and this pressure resulted in a reciprocal increase in the intensity with which they fought. As I started to get more comfortable with attacking and 'throwing shots', I also began to leave myself open to counter punches. My membership within the established group did not rely on my ability to put my body on the line, but it was certainly aided by it. I was accepted into this group when I became able to compete in open sparring with boxers with varying degrees of ability. My willingness to work hard and listen to advice helped me to maintain an involved position from which I have been able to observe behaviour and conduct interviews within Freedom Gym. This time in the field was characterised by a gradual increase in my ability to take, and deal out, mimetic violence. With my developing physical abilities so came a development in my place in the gym and new opportunities for observations and interviews. There is another side to this story that is worthy of being told. Not only has my body been the target of violence, it has also been an instrument of violence. Within the following section I reflect on the tensions such experiences have produced.

### **3.19 Personal Ethics of Involvement in Violence**

The physical punishment that was inflicted on my own, and others', bodies caused me to reflect upon my involvement in boxing. This reflection also encouraged me to consider my place within the research environment as a violence-committing agent. In what follows, the process of learning violence, enjoying violence and some of my thoughts about engaging in hard sparring are explored.

Punching someone in the face was a rather alien experience to me before this research project was conducted. I had done a small amount of boxing before entering the gym, but this had never involved sparring. The process of learning violence was a slow one. I never had any problem with hitting punching bags, but when it came to hitting a person, I found it difficult to throw certain punches. Take the following field notes extract as an example:

Lewis was telling me that I need to start throwing my right hand more, especially when I am sparring with him and Ben<sup>17</sup>. I always hold it back, I guess I just think I am going to hurt them or get hurt myself from a counter punch. It's stupid, they are both significantly better than me, consistently hit me with hard shots, and I still can't seem to let my right hand go properly. While I'm not throwing the right hand properly my opponents will be

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<sup>17</sup> Ben was 26, he grew up in a town outside the city and was involved in MMA for a few years. He met Lewis at University and trains with him from time-to-time. He works in sales.

able to step into my range knowing that they only need to watch out for my jab (Field notes, 11/12/09).

With time, I became more accustomed to hitting my partners. Accompanying this process, I began to develop a taste for these experiences of hard sparring. I had always enjoyed the competition, the fitness, and the mastery of sparring, but eventually I found myself enjoying the feeling of 'catching' my opponent, and the sensation of 'landing a good shot'. Eventually, I found lighter-sparring sessions, where punches would not be thrown with full force, would leave me unsatisfied. I began to think more and more about taking part in a competitive bout. Here, I would not have to worry about holding back. I had gone from not being able to physically throw punches at people, to wanting to have a fight with a total stranger, in which my goal would be to try and knock him out (and *vice versa*). The following field notes extract is indicative of my thoughts at this time:

The more I think about it, the more I want to have a fight. I want to be able to go in the ring and not worry about holding back. I want to land a big right hand and not have to worry about throwing a second and third and fourth shot. I want my opponent to be really trying to hurt me, so that I know it's all right to hurt him back. I want to be able to say I have had a fight and I want to start planning the next one (Field notes; 4/5/10).

Accompanying this newfound motivation for engaging in violence was a change in the way I experienced the world around me. In the ring, I had developed the ability to 'see' and 'feel' gaps and angles from which I could attack an opponent. This new lens, that now tinted the way I looked at people, extended away from the gym, into my everyday life. I would find myself looking at people and sizing them up, wondering about slipping a punch from them and returning with a combination. Such daydreams were not a result of an urge to start a fight; rather, they represent the manner in which I had become used to thinking about using my newly-developed physical skills. I would be talking to someone, or standing in a queue, and I would see gaps that I could land punches through. I would catch myself, at times, looking at a complete stranger thinking "lead jab, step across, body shot, then finish with an uppercut, right cross". I would laugh to myself and carry on with my shopping, or whatever it was I happened to be doing, but these moments were significant in that they highlight the ways in which my subjective view of the world has changed during my time in the field. Through my time learning the pugilistic habitus, I had developed a new way of looking at bodies, which is accompanied by a feeling, a sense, of how I could interact with them. Such a view of the world must not be conflated into an urge to be violent. It is simply a manner of

looking at people and situations that has developed as I have travelled down the pugilistic pathway.

Throughout this process of learning violence, I had many periods of reflection upon my involvement in boxing in general and sparring sessions in particular. Through my adoption of the involved position, previously outlined, I had become a complicit element within a patriarchal system, “thus lending support and legitimation to patriarchy” (Messner, 1990; 66). This was problematic. After some deliberation, I realised that by maintaining an element of detachment through such reflections, I was able to switch between my research setting, in which a traditional hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity dominated, and my usual place in life as a student of sociology. By moving into a boxing world, I was not necessarily adopting the values that Messner (1990) and others (Howe, 2001; Nixon, 1992; Sheard, 1997; Young 1993) explore. Rather, I was developing a position from which I could witness, feel and hopefully better understand the significance of the experiences of men who inhabit such settings.

As my pugilistic adventure continued and I began to see a competitive bout as a real possibility, I had to reflect again on my proposed involvement. This next step seemed to be a logical progression to my involvement thus far. However, upon reflection, the different meanings and significances that were attached to sparring and fighting became visible. This requires some unpacking. When engaging in sparring, I had always found that the cooperative way in which these sessions were constructed provided a perfect justification for the violence that I was engaged in. Regardless of how boxing violence might be defined as problematic in an academic sense, during sparring sessions, the framing discourse was that my opponent and I were not being ‘violent’ towards each other, we were learning to box by working with each other. The last thing on our minds, in theory, was trying to seriously hurt each other (such experience will be further explored as this thesis progresses). When it came to accepting a competitive bout, this veil of cooperation could no longer be cast over the action in the ring. Although the fight would be at the bottom end of the scale of competitive boxing participation, the extensive purpose of the fight would be the same as any boxing match; win the fight by knocking your opponent out or score more points than them by landing more

power punches on key areas of the body. I would no longer be in the ring to learn; now I would be in the ring to beat (literately) my opponent. I needed to address the tension caused by my position as a sociologist, who would tend to adopt a critical stance on acts of violence in society, with the stark realities of stepping into the ring in a competitive sense. I had grown used to the risks involved in sparring, which to a large extent come from accidental movements or punches that land on a 'sweet' spot. But now the risk would be coming from my opponent's purposeful attempts to hurt me, not only would I be the target of punches aimed at knocking me out but, if one of these punches was to stun me, my opponent would be looking to capitalise. After a particularly hard session the following was noted:

Sparring was really hard tonight, I am pushing harder and harder every session and I am fit enough to keep going and going. The problem with that is that I am starting to push Gary, and the others, harder, which means they start throwing bigger shots, I got rocked a couple of times in today's session. *I was all over the place after we finished, fuzzy head, aching body, a hole in my gum where my wisdom tooth had been forced up by a punch.* After one of the punches, I couldn't see for a little while.

I was at Jennie's [my girlfriend] and I started wondering what it would be like when I was fighting someone for real. When anyone lands a big shot in sparring they usually back off to let you recover, or at least they don't throw another big shot, but when I'm fighting if I get rocked I'm not gonna get any time to set myself, they're gonna come in looking to finish me. I also have to return the favour, I can't sit back if I land a shot, I'm gonna have to go in hard. I'm still not sure how I will get on doing that, I think it will be ok, but it's only recently that I have really been able to throw my shots properly at people, and I still pull them a lot of the time. What makes me think I will be able to try and knock someone out? And, more importantly, should I really be trying to do that? I think to myself, 'that's what I am supposed to do', but so what if that's what I am supposed to do, I am still trying to give someone bloody brain damage! I think about this quite a bit, but I still want to have a fight. *I know the risks, I know what I might be doing to my opponent, but I can't wait* [to have a fight] (Field notes, 19/8/10 - emphasis added).

This tension has remained unresolved to a certain degree. However, my reflections on the matter have revolved around the temporary separation of my roles as sociologist and 'wannabe' boxer. There would certainly be an ethical dilemma if I were to engage in a competitive boxing match with some methodological reason as justification for doing so. Here, de Garis' (2010) work is again relevant. For de Garis, Wacquant (2004) engages in a competitive fight in an attempt to prove the authority and legitimacy of his work. My motivation to have a fight was less driven by a methodological need to experience this action first hand than my own personal desire to become a 'boxer' and to be in a 'real' fight. I would have been fighting for my own personal fulfilment rather than specifically as a means of recording observations for this study. Lyng (1998; 232) has described a similar experience, "what had started as an intellectual quest to understand the edgework phenomenon became a sensual

attraction to the experience itself". This partial resolution of the tension is perhaps open to critique, but it was sufficient for me.

In the end, the opportunity to actually take part in a competitive bout never fully materialised. However, the spectre of this event happening was an important part of the self-reflection that has been presented in this chapter. In the preceding section, the process of learning violence and a changing subjectivity has been outlined. Periods of reflection that have come about through my involvement with boxing have been explored. In subsequent chapters, these experiences will again be called up as partial evidence to support my findings.

### **3.20 Summary**

Within this chapter, the foundations of a qualitative methodology have been outlined and Elias' writings on the subject have been described. It has been argued that fundamental Eliasian principles can be used to provide a sophisticated reframing for critical examinations of 'insider' knowledge. Mansfield's (2007) extensions of Elias' work can help us to appreciate the necessary involvement that is required of a methodology such as that presented here. Elias' work is also used as a means of framing the interplay between theory and evidence. Informed by these discussions, the research process has been mapped out in detail. Alongside this, my biography and my place within the research environment has been explored. Employing Mansfield's (2007) notion of involved-detachment, I have sought to move beyond recent critiques levelled at the construction of 'insider' knowledge as more adequate than that produced from an 'outsider' position. Linked to this, my changing position within the research environment has been discussed and the ways this has affected the observation and interview process have been described. The practicalities of entering the field, forming relationships, recording observations and conducting interviews have been detailed. To conclude the chapter, my personal experiences of conducting a violent ethnography and my reflections upon engaging in violence were explored.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Freedom Gym – a Fighting Figuration**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

The experiences that form the focus of this research project take place within a complex of interdependent relationships. This figuration shapes and frames these phenomena making certain acts of violence expressive and enjoyable experiences, which in other situations may be defined as abhorrent and barbaric. As such, we cannot begin to understand the significance of boxer's time inside the gym without first examining the social processes that give them meaning. This chapter and Chapter Five, should be read together as a detailed, yet partial, account of the framing of social life at Freedom Gym. Although I will repeatedly touch on aspects of masculinity throughout this chapter, I have endeavoured to separate discussions of gender from other framing processes to aid analytical clarity. Throughout this chapter, I will move from the general to the particular beginning with an outline of the ways in which the SVMC acts as an overarching framework for the Freedom Gym figuration. In this regard, the gym's demographics, myths and images are examined, followed by local dynamics, including local estates and the gym's neighbourhood. A picture of life at Freedom Gym will then be painted by describing the gym, typical training sessions and key aspects of the social hierarchy. My aim here is to make explicit the links between the gym environment and the layers of meaning that colour experiences of violence. I hope the use of rich ethnographic data will provide the reader with a feel for the gym and the social processes that frame and shape it.

#### **4.1 What is Freedom Gym? – A Broad Sketch**

Freedom Gym means many things to many different people, there are, however, some key components which must be appreciated in order to build up a picture of the gym. In this regard I will outline the gym's geography (both in terms of its location and internal layout) and the practices, people, norms and values that are associated with it. Following this, the way in which that gym is framed and interpreted will be discussed. This initial outline will be expanded and detailed throughout the course of this chapter.

It is difficult to classify Freedom Gym, with any degree of accuracy. It exists somewhere between the polar stereotypes of the contemporary model of fitness centre, as typified by the consumer focused chains such as David Lloyd, LA Fitness and Virgin Active, and the traditional 'spit and sawdust', boxing and bodybuilding gyms made infamous by films such as Rocky (1976) and Stay Hungry (1976). The gym is known throughout the city as a place in which traditionally working class, male activities, such as boxing and bodybuilding, predominate. While this main focus is clear, there is also space for phenomena that might more readily be associated with a mainstream gym: such as spin classes, sun tan beds and a women's only area. Based on this ambiguity we could tentatively expect a degree of variety in terms of the gym's demographics. However, this was not the case, the gym was overwhelmingly populated by men, aged between sixteen and thirty-five, who could either be described as having a working class background or as having strong links to working class communities. The gym's location, in a rundown, 'rough' area on the verge Woodford city centre further adds to the sense that it is a place for men from the working classes. Here, the activities, demographics and location mutually reinforce, resonate with and support this popular conception of Freedom Gym. As such, the dominant subjective positions within the gym share much in common with values and norms traditionally associated with working class males. Powerful, large and aggressive male bodies are prized; hard work, effort, discipline and determination are repeatedly valorised; less dominant forms of masculinity are equated with femininity, homosexuality, weakness and softness; women are objectified and placed on a sexualised pedestal; right wing views dominate politically-minded discussions about crime and punishment, immigration, race and war.

Training at Freedom Gym was generally perceived as following a traditional, stripped-back approach, in which hard work, rather than the latest 'fad', was the key to success. In this way, Freedom Gym is believed to be a 'real' gym for 'real' men. Time and time again, this notion of 'realness', as opposed to the 'unrealness' of other gyms and other forms of masculinity, was a source of pride for gym users and staff alike. The untidiness, and worn-out appearance of the gym, only added to the sense that it was a place where superfluous activities and practices, which are layered over the 'essence' of training within mainstream, contemporary gyms, are removed in favour of a more *authentic* method of training. This, in turn, provided symbolic

proof of the authenticity of masculine and class identities that are dominant within the gym. This brief outline of Freedom Gym is then, one in which a traditional, working class, masculine notion of a 'gym' more or less prevails, notwithstanding some ambiguous, even subversive, phenomena.

How then, does a place such as Freedom Gym come into being and in what ways are the dominant subjectivities generated and maintained? What signposts direct certain sections of the local communities toward and away from the gym? How is a majority consensus reached as to what is sanctioned, encouraged and rewarded inside the gym? How do people make sense of this environment? A useful concept in attempting to address these questions is the SVMC.

#### **4.2 An Overarching Framework**

As previously outlined in Chapter Two, experiences of boxing do not take place in a social vacuum. They are informed by a set of values, norms and assumptions that are shaped by, amongst other things, ideas about gender and class. In this regard, I have suggested that the SVMC is a useful conceptual tool for interpreting these intertwining processes. Aspects of this over-arching framework are a means by which people make sense of Freedom Gym. Without such a frame of reference, to guide assumptions of, and experience inside, the gym, we might expect an affordable gym, easily accessible to various sections of the community, with a variety of activities on offer, to draw its customers more equally from different social stratifications. We might also expect narratives and mythologies about the gym to take various forms, and that images inside the gym would be interpreted in significantly different ways. Instead, the gym is generally interpreted and experienced by its users and non-users alike as a place for certain types of classed, masculine habitus to be generated, expressed and maintained. Images within the gym were interpreted as more or less reinforcing this position. As such, the SVMC offers gym users a set of knowledges that enable them to think and behave in the ways expected of them. In what follows, I will set out the ways that ligatures of this over-arching framework can be shown to be connected to, and shape the nature of, gym life.

### 4.3 Freedom Gym's Demographic – 'this is a working class place'

It was hoped that quantitative data about the membership base could be located relatively easily by accessing the gym's computerised records. However, only estimations of this data were available. An interview with a member of staff explains the reason behind this lack of clarity:

Chris: So can you tell me about the membership base, how many members do you have?

Carlos<sup>18</sup>: Its always changing but around 200 or so.

Chris: Why is it always changing?

Carlos: Well ya get people who pay for the year but a lot of guys pay month by month, or even per session. It used to worry me, 'cus it's the first place I've been involved in that relies on people paying on a short-term basis. *There's a load of 'em that come down regularly that just can't afford to pay for the year, they're not members but they use the place all the time.*

Chris: Ok, so how many people do you think regularly use the place?

Carlos: Around 300-400 I would say.

Chris: How many of them are female?

Carlos: Two. [Laughs] Err, I think there are about 20-30 women who use the place.

Chris: Do you have information about people's ethnic background or where they live?

Carlos: Not really, we don't ask for stuff like that, we have addresses for some of them but not many. *We tend to not ask to many questions down here, I think it's best to just let people come in and get on with it. I don't give a shit what someone's ethnic background is* [Carlos interview – emphasis added].

Carlos' 'ask no questions, be told no lies' policy was not only linked to his *laissez faire* and egalitarian approach to users of the gym. During some interviews with members and staff, it was clear that some aspects of their lives, and practices within the gym, were not topics for open discussion. At various times I was privy to partial data about the illegal and socially nefarious activities of some gym members. Drug use and dealing, street violence, hooliganism, marital abuse and dodgy business dealings were all discussed in private and at times openly. Indeed, the need for privacy concerning certain matters was an implicit condition of people agreeing to the interview. Clearly, some members of the gym are involved in activities that lead them to place a premium on protecting information about themselves. The gym's policy of not collecting membership data makes more sense when considered alongside these issues.

Although a comprehensive quantitative record of the membership base is not held at the gym, it was possible to draw together a broad picture of the users of the gym through conversations with staff and during the interviews and observations. The gym is overwhelmingly used by

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<sup>18</sup> Carlos was 37, he managed Freedom Gym during my time in the field. He also took MMA classes and did one-to-ones with a few gym members. He fought a number of professional MMA fights and was very well respected within the gym.

men (300-400), between the ages of 16 and 35, who live within the city centre or in one of the nearby areas. Although some women (20-30) did use the gym, they occupied an almost invisible position. It is hard to discuss the ethnic background of gym users with any sense of certainty, but there is a general sense from the staff that the majority are white British with a significant proportion of black British. It is also possible to identify small groups of men from Poland, Iran and Turkey. The majority of these men are believed by the staff at the gym to have working class backgrounds:

Chris: Where are most of the members from?

Carlos: The local area really.

Chris: Would you say the more affluent or rougher parts of town?

Carlos: Perhaps, well, other people who call them rough parts of town.

Chris: And what types of jobs do they do?

Carlos: How would I know?

Chris: Well, you know of lot of them pretty well so I guess I assumed you would have a feel for what types of work the majority of them do.

Carlos: They do all sorts, there's builders, shop owners, engineers, taxi men, fucking I don't know.

Chris: Ok, let me come at this another way, I need to try and find out if the majority of members share class back-grounds, and I would use the...

Carlos: Hold on, why didn't you just say that? *I'd say that most of the guys down here are working class, even the ones who've done alright for themselves are working class, this is a working class place. You don't need to know what jobs they do to know that.*

Chris: Why is that do you think?

Carlos: People know what this place is all about, and it's the type of stuff that real guys who work for a living are into, we don't cater for people who don't wanna work hard, so that's the type of people we get in (Carlos interview – emphasis added)

Carlos' assertions about the class backgrounds of gym users resonates with the observations at the gym. The majority of members interviewed were either employed in jobs associated with the working classes, had a family background that could also be said to be working class or held strong links with working communities. Despite the lack of quantitative data, these indications of the overall class profile of gym users are a useful resource. As Thompson (1991 [1963]; 8) has noted "the finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more that it can give us one of deference or love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context." In this way, I am not looking for 'proof' in the form of a definitive test for class, rather, my aim is to find indications that can point in a general direction towards a set of relationships and shared experiences that can be considered to mark out a class background.

As described, the activities chiefly associated with Freedom Gym can be said to resonate with a traditional notion of masculinity, framed by working class sensibilities, it is perhaps unsurprising that working class men dominate the gym. The SVMC can help us to understand the narrow demographic dispersion of the gym's regular users. The challenge now is to find how, and in what ways, this complex is employed by those inside and outside the gym as a frame of reference. As previously outlined, the complex does not exist in any tangible sense outside of the interactions of those whom engage with it. To avoid reifying the concept, it is essential that we attempt to locate it within the lived interdependencies of those inside and outside the gym. As such, the ways in which stories and images connected to the gym shape the preconceived ideas, habituses and lived experiences of regular users will be examined.

#### **4.4 Mythologies of Freedom Gym**

In what follows, the myths and narratives that dominate the ways in which the gym and its members are talked about will be discussed. Although I cannot claim to describe all the ways people know of the gym, what is presented are dominant narratives that I repeatedly encountered. There is some evidence to suggest that these gym fables are constrained and enabled, and in turn constrain and enable, values and assumptions based on notions informed by the SVMC. In this way, gym mythologies are structured by, and in turn structure, gender- and class-based ideologies.

Although it has been open for a relatively short period of time, in comparison to other 'infamous' gyms in Woodford, Freedom Gym has gained a level of notoriety. During discussions with friends, family and acquaintances, I was able to build a partial picture of how the gym was seen through the eyes of those who had never attended it. There were consistent themes that emerged during these informal chats. These centred on the 'meat-heads' or steroid users that were perceived to make up the majority of the membership, that people practised MMA and other combat sports, that there was a cage and boxing ring, that a famous boxer and UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) fighters trained there and that the gym is located in a rough part of town. The stories that rested on these themes were exaggerated at times, but they rest on kernels of 'truth'. Such local urban myths frame an understanding of the gym. In this regard, they conjure up images of hyper-masculine bodies,

overt aggressiveness and violence and dilapidation in a ghettoised part of town. Stereotypical notions of heavy contact sports, hegemonic masculinities and the working classes converge to overlay the 'idea' of Freedom Gym with meaning. These layers of meaning resonate or clash with people's habituated subjectivities. In this way, a judgement is made about Freedom Gym's suitability as a place to be condoned and visited or admonished and avoided. The vast majority of people who had heard of the gym tended to adopt one of these opposing viewpoints. A brief chat with an old friend was typical of the negative framing of the gym:

As I walked out the gym tonight, I saw Rob who is an old friend from the squash club I used to work at. I guess Shelton [the gym's neighbourhood] isn't a place we would ever really associate each other with, he seemed surprised to see me.

Rob: What you doing down here then?

Chris: I've started boxing as part of my Ph.D. and this is the gym I'm going to.

Rob: *What, in there, with all those psychos?*

Chris: It's alright mate, no different to the squash club really.

Rob: Come on, you'll be one of them in no time.

Chris: You should come down and check it out, honestly.

Rob: I'll give it a miss. (Field notes, 10/3/2010 - emphasis)

Rob's dismissive attitude, and assumption that I would become 'one of them', highlights the disdain in which he held the practices and people that he assumed to be associated with the gym. The following chat, although good natured, centred on Hannah's critique of the assumptions she made about the gym:

While I was out with Jennie I met one of her friends who was asking what I do, part of the conversation went like this:

Hannah: Where do you box then?

Chris: Down at Freedom Gym it's just outside of the town centre.

Hannah: I walk past there on the way to work; it's always steamed up.

Chris: It gets a bit hot in the evening.

Hannah: All those muscle men pumping iron or whatever you call it [Laughs].

Chris: Yeah, it's a bit like that.

Hannah: So do they put steroid in your water or something?

Chris: Yeah it's compulsory.

Hannah: *And I bet they're all mean bastards, angry and shouting at each other. But then, I bet you all get in the showers together after.*

Chris: Its like you've been and done a session there [Both laugh].

Hannah: I don't think I would dare step foot in there; I don't even like walking past it.

Chris: Seriously, it's alright in there, it just looks a bit intimidating from the outside.

Hannah: Yeah, well I ain't coming down and learning to how to beat people up or whatever you all do in there.

Chris: Probably a good thing, 'cus I love hitting girls [Both laugh] (Field notes, 1/12/2009 – emphasis added).

Here I tried to deal with Hannah's use of stereotypes and hyperbole by playing up to the assumptions she was making. Such a negative construction of the gym was not shared by

everyone. Although the following example took place 'online', it is synonymous of various chats with people who defined the assumed activities in the gym in a positive light:

Today I noticed a friend's *facebook* status mentioned one of the well-known fighters who trains at the gym. This is the conversation that we struck up:

Dave: Come on Shaun, do it for Woodford. [status update]

Chris: I've seen him training the last few weeks, he looks in good shape.

Dave: Is it? Nice one. So you go down Freedom?

Chris: Yes mate, I do a bit of boxing, nothing proper mind.

Dave: I fancy coming down sometime, I've heard loads about it, it's a bit rough though ain't it?

Chris: Na man, its cool, it's just got a bit of a rep.

Dave: Well I to get in shape and I ain't bothered about paying through the nose to go to Virgin, I wanna go somewhere I can do some proper train, not just mincing along on a treadmill.

Chris: Freedom's ya one then.

Dave: Safe. (Field notes, 14/10/2010)

The myths and stories that surround Freedom Gym are divisive and polarising. The vast majority of people spoken to had either 'always wanted to go down there' or 'couldn't think of anything worse'. An interesting extension to this study would be to examine the ways in which the backgrounds of gym 'outsiders' affect the ways in which they interpret the gym. For the purposes of this project, these anecdotal examples offer some insight into the ways the gym may be perceived by sections of the wider population of Woodford.

Implicitly, and in Hannah's case explicitly, these myths were framed by aspects of the SVMC. Assumptions about Freedom Gym generally contained a classed or gendered dimension. Whether they are about the people that attended the gym, illicit drug taking activities, aggressive and violent displays, the bodies and personalities that dominated the space, or even the gym's location, notions of the 'correct' way to do class and gender were powerful frames. In this way, dramatised and caricatured hyper-classed and hyper-gendered images can become representative of gym life and to an extent habituated in the bodies and behaviours of regular users. To paraphrase Elias & Scotson (1994 [1965]; xix), in a negative interpretation, the 'bad' characteristics or the gym's 'worse' sections are taken to be attributes of the whole group. Meanwhile, in a positive interpretation, the 'good' behaviours of the 'best' sections are taken as evidence 'proving' the exemplary nature of both the gym and its users. Knowledge from the SVMC is one of the means by which such assessments are made about Freedom Gym. This is one of the mechanisms that can act as a demographic filter, distilling

and concentrating those who find significance in the dominant values that are attached to the gym.

These myths and narratives do not stop at the doorway to the gym. They extend inward, and are employed by staff and regular users to structure their experiences of gym life. The secrecy that surrounds certain illegal practices, the sometimes cold and unapproachable manner of gym 'faces' and the near legendary status of some regulars, means that users of the gym gossip and chat about those aspects of the gym which remain opaque to them. Whether it be about a bodybuilder's latest 'supplement', a famous fighter's sparring session or a local 'badass' that uses the gym, fact and fiction intermingle with notions informed by the SVMC. The dominant values associated with class and gender colour these stories; taking a grain of reality and propagating it, turning it into a gym fable, a moral lesson of right and wrong. In this way, stories and myths can be used to prove legitimacy:

Paul<sup>19</sup>: Ya seen Wayne<sup>20</sup> sparrin' this week?

Chris: No mate, what's the criac?

Paul: He looks mental, I've not seen him like that before, proper mean. Someone said he broke the guys hand who was holding pads for him, or like sprained it or something.

Patrick: Yeah, I saw him hitting pads and I though he was gonna knock me out when he came out the ring, he looked mental. They were sayin' he gets like this when he has a fight, it's weird 'cus normally he's proper chilled. *He turns into some kind of killing machine.*

Paul: *He's the real deal though innit, he don't fuck about like us lot. That's the type of focus you need if you're gonna do it proper.* (Field notes, 8/12/2009 – emphasis added)

Although very few gym users have actually witnessed Wayne training and fighting, his abilities are legendary. A crucial dimension to this legend is his uncompromising, brutal aggressiveness. By discussing Wayne's preparation for a kick-boxing tournament in dramatic and positive terms, Paul and Patrick were able to show they find significance in such aggressive and violent action. These myths, stories and legends are generated and maintained using knowledge from the SVMC, and are crucial tools employed in the ongoing battle to establish a general consensus over the correct ways to engage in activities at the gym.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul was 18, he and Patrick started spending time in the boxing area at the same time. They attended college together and generally trained with each other. He was also from the local area.

<sup>20</sup> Wayne, was 29, he worked at the gym as an instructor. He competed in Thai Boxing and spared with the boxers on a few occasions.

Some staff and regular users were aware of the embellished nature of these stories and the significant part they played in people's interpretations of the gym. These myths were, at different times, embraced, played with, laughed at and rejected. Carlos, took a very pragmatic view about the mythic reputation the gym holds within the city:

Chris: When I speak to people about the gym, a lot of them hold very stereotypical views about the place, like it's full of meat heads or whatever, what do you think about that?

Carlos: Well, it true though ain't it, [laughs] we always try and expand our membership and try to get into stuff that isn't our main crowd, but I always try and tell'em [the owners] that if you go too far from your main crowd you end up pissing people off.

Chris: So you don't mind people saying stuff, I mean, exaggerating about what goes on in the gym?

Carlos: I don't mind it, it's one of those things, it's alright, you can't do anything about it, you just work with it.

Chris: What do you mean?

Carlos: *Well, we try and advertise so people know there is more to the place than that, but really, rumours and that are good 'cus you know people are talking about ya. And if they're talking about us people will come down and check it out and see for themselves.*

Chris: Do those rumours attract a certain type of person to the gym?

Carlo: Yeah, probably people who'll love it when they get down here [Laughs]. (Carlos interview – emphasis added)

Carlos was keenly aware of the important part these gym myths played in framing the gym as a space for working class men. He seemed unworried about any negative connotations as long as the gym's key demographic still positively identified with stories emerging from the gym. During an interview Dave noted how he liked to play with people's perceptions of the gym:

Dave: My mates all think this place is full of people injecting 'roids in their eyes n'shit.

Chris: Classic, I've heard so many stories about this place since I've been coming down. What do you think when you hear shit like that?

Dave: I think it means we get to come down and have the place to our'sens, if everyone thought the place was alright they'd all be down getting in the way and that.

Chris: So ya think it puts people off from come down? [*sic*]

Dave: Most people are scared of the place, serious, they might not say they are but they daren't come down. Serious man, all my mates talk about it and then pussy out, they fucking think they gonna get smash in or somefing. They all like the idea of it but when it comes down to it, they get scared.

Chris: Don't you tell'em it's alright?

Dom: *Na, I make it worse, I tell'em all sorts, fucking crazy shit so they never know when I'm being proper or not. Once right, this lad I work wiv' was asking about where I train and that an' I was tellin' him that when there's a disagreement people just get locked in the cage till its settled, like only one man leave the cage, he didn't believe me at first but he don't know shit so by the end we was all over it. Like, 'fucking no way man, that's fucking mental'. (Dave interview – emphasis added)*

Dave embraced myths that provided support for aspects of gym life in which he found significance. He played with the notion that the gym was a place exclusively for hard men and that various deviant activities were commonplace. Adding to the gym's mystique, even in this

playful manner, compounds the kudos that he gains from attending the gym and being involved in boxing. Similar to Dave, Patrick enjoyed the gym's reputation:

Chris: Whenever I mention that I train here I always get the same responses from people about the place being full of meat heads and cage fighters, do you get that?

Patrick: Yeah, my mates always say stuff like that to me, they all think I'm a legend for coming down here.

Chris: Why is that?

Patrick: *Well, 'cus [well-known fighters] train down here, and there's always massive fucking guys strutting about.*

Chris: Is that one of the reason you like come down, 'cus of the rep?

Patrick: It wasn't at first 'cus I didn't really know about it but I do now. People respect you when you tell them you train down here.

Chris: Why is that?

Patrick: It's the rep, 'cus these lads all think they're hard but compared to the guys down [pause] *when people know you train at Freedom they know you can handle yourself.* (Field notes, 3/3/2010 – emphasis added)

Mythologies and narratives, whether firmly based on lived realities or not, act as powerful frames for notions of Freedom Gym. The myths extend outward into the local community and act as a signpost, guiding some people toward, and others away from, the gym. Such myths can act as symbolic proof of the gym's credentials as a safe place for the expression of a tough, working class, masculine style. While in the hands of those who cannot abide the presumed values and ideologies of Freedom Gym, these myths provide further evidence supporting and justifying their position. Within the gym, they are tools used by members and staff to legitimate their own - and subordinate opposing - subjective positions. In this way, a partial consensus as to the 'correct' ways of being at Freedom Gym is generated, maintained and sometimes challenged. This is one means by which regular users are able to understand what is possible, permissible and pleasurable within the gym. There is some evidence to suggest that such stories are partially framed by notions linked to the SVMC, indeed, prevailing gender and class norms within the gym tend to be writ large within these myths. As a consequence, these gym mythologies also play a part in framing notions of the SVMC. At one and the same time, these myths are both structured and structuring, confirming and/or subverting dominant ways of interpreting sport, violence and violence within sports. This overarching frame is a crucial part of the language people use to read gym myths, stories, fables and legends. It is also a component of the lens through which images and pictures at the gym are cast. Such images will now be described and how, and in what ways, they frame gym life is discussed.

#### 4.5 Images in Freedom Gym – ‘pictures of ripped bodybuilders, mainly male’

The pictures, videos, brands, adverts and products that are scattered throughout Freedom Gym are also shaped by ideas informed by the SVMC. These artefacts do not find their way into the gym by accident. They hold significance for the users of the space, they are designed to frame gym life, and they are linked to products and companies that use notions from the SVMC as a platform to attract their target audience. In the following field notes extract, attempts are made to capture the myriad images that members see when entering the gym:

Behind the glass frontage to the gym there is a larger than life image of the Champ taken at his successful world championship fight. What does this images say to folks as they walk past the gym? I stopped for a moment and tried to take in all the other pictures, posters and signs that adorn the front of the gym. There are posters about fight events, with pictures of mean looking men in fighting poses and brightly coloured adverts for the latest nutrition supplement, complete with the obligatory, steroid enhanced bodybuilder and ‘scientific’ claims about it’s effectiveness. Alongside these professional looking images are the gym’s own posters advertising spinning, cage fighting, and boxing classes, sun beds and personal training. Perhaps the most important image is the gym logo that consists of the outline of a hyper-masculine bodybuilder’s physique balancing a pair of scales. This bold white on dark blue of this logo commands people’s attention, and is a clear sign of intent, graphically showing the type of body, male and muscular, which is of value at Freedom Gym. *This image, and others that can be seen from outside of the building, convey a message to people who walk past. A message about what type of person uses Freedom Gym and by default, what type of person should not use Freedom Gym.* (Field notes, 19/9/2009 – emphasis added)

The symbols at the front of Freedom Gym act as sign-posts, beacons that mark the gym out as a site where the expression of certain, class- and gender-based, identities will be welcomed. This display goes some way to ensuring the ‘right’ people attend the gym, but perhaps more importantly, that the ‘wrong’ people do not. Such images also frame what is to be sanctioned, encouraged and rewarded. They act as a constant reminder to regular users of the bodies, qualities and personalities they should have, or should be aspiring to have, and thus the means by which they can become ‘real’ men. Inside the gym, images and the meanings attached to them become more stark, perhaps aimed at catching the eye of gym ‘insiders’ who, by definition, might be expected to find some degree of significance in their messages:

The reception area is a clutter of fighting and weightlifting equipment, drinks, powders, bars and tablets. On the opposite side, there’s an array of clothing, mostly branded with images and logos of companies linked to MMA such as Badboy, Affliction, Rough gear, Sprawl and Cage Fighters. All over the walls of the gym are pictures of ripped bodybuilders, mainly male but some female. The further back towards the cage and boxing ring, more pictures of famous fighters start to appear. Classic photos from boxing’s hall of fame, such as Muhammad Ali standing over Joe Frazier, are intermingled with posters and flyers from past fight events. TV screens run MMA fights and bodybuilding training videos. A huge advert for a tattoo parlour overlooks the free weights area where tattooed bodies flex and work out. The whole space is a shrine to tanned, adorned, powerful, muscular and violent male bodies. (Field notes, 19/9/2009)

If one were not aware of the gym's reputation then the meanings attached to these images would surely be powerful enough in their own right to indicate the values that dominate Freedom Gym. They act as a reference point, signposts that help to usher members towards a shared understanding of the correct ways to act, train and spar in Freedom Gym. Although noting the hyper-reality of these images, Gary still found them to be motivating:

Chris: What do you think to all the pictures around the gym?

Gary: I like 'em mate.

Chris: What do you like about them?

Gary: Well, [pause] they're like a bit motivational, not all the joke physiques, but just all those pictures give you something to aim for. (Gary interview)

Through such images Gary had visual cues prompting him to train towards certain goals in certain ways. Different images contained different levels of significance depending on areas of gym life with which the person in question identified with more readily. Liam appreciated that images of bodybuilders were important for some gym users, but for him, posters of boxers with traditional, perhaps clichéd, slogans on them, could be a source of inspiration:

Chris: What do you think to all the pictures around the gym?

Liam: I don't really notice them anymore.

Chris: But you used to?

Liam: I think when I first started down here they were a bit over the top, but I suppose they're [management] showing people [pictures of bodybuilders] that all these guys [gym users] look up to.

Chris: But you don't?

Liam: Well around here [the boxing area] they're a bit different, they've got real people up here not bodybuilders. And them slogans or what ever, are good to read.

Chris: You mean the ones of Ali?

Liam: Yeah, yeah.

Chris: Why do you like to read them?

Liam: I dunno, it just helps pump you up a bit. (Liam interview)

Liam's assertion about the 'un-real' nature of the bodybuilding images, in relation to the 'real' pictures of Mohammed Ali (ironically, perhaps the greatest boxing *legend* of all time), highlights the significance he finds in the values which he sees as underpinning each image. The meanings that are attached to such images are not inherent, members and staff interpret these images using, amongst other things, knowledge based on an understanding of the SVMC. Without an over-arching frame, we might expect such pictures to be interpreted in wildly different ways. For example, the almost naked pictures of bodybuilders, although potentially containing a homoerotic dimension, were never openly interpreted in this way. Pictures of famous boxers standing over a defeated foe were never seen as a depicting a bully or a cheat. The lens of the SVMC tinted these images, bringing with it a degree of

consensus as to the appropriate ways in which they should be interpreted and discussed. Of course, there will be variations in the meanings that people attach to such images, however, inside the gym, for the most part, they are understood in positive terms as showing forms of traditional, working class, powerful and violent masculinity.

These images did not find their way into the space by accident. Their framing power was not missed by the staff and owners of the gym:

Chris: Why do you have the pictures up around the gym?

Carlos: It's a bit of decoration int'it.

Chris: Do you think the types of images fit with the gym as a whole?

Carlos: *Yeah, well its back to that thing of looking after your core clientele again, most of them are about liftin' and that's the main thing down here. I put more boxers up around the ring 'cus that's what people wanna see int'it. Boxers don't wanna look at a picture of a girl in a leotard while they, hold on, [pause] well they might wanna look at that, but they shouldn't be doing. You got to pick stuff that people look up to, I know what you mean though, they wouldn't work in the ladies area, or in a normal gym, but here we have loads of lads who love bodybuilding even if they ain't doing it properly that's what they look up to. (Carlos interview – emphasis added)*

Decorating the gym in this way is a means by which Carlos, other staff and the gym's owners have been able to publicly communicate with the gym's 'core clientele'. In this way, they are able to mark out what is possible, permissible and pleasurable within the gym. By endorsing and encouraging certain identities and behaviours they are also signalling to people who do not find significance in these images that Freedom Gym is probably not the place that they would enjoy. In essence, if you are offended by images of steroid enhanced bodies, or violent physical contact you might be better off in a different gym.

Images, pictures, logos and brands, associated with and found around Freedom Gym are more than simply decorations. They are signposts, beacons and markers, which carry a set of messages for those who care to read them. Interpreting these signs allows a prediction to be made as to what one might expect to find in Freedom Gym. These images are an ever-present reminder of core values and assumptions. They are a relatively subtle way of showing what, and who, is improper, appropriate and valorised within the gym. Once again, these images, as with the mythologies and narratives presented previously, require a frame. Without assumptions informed by notions about the SVMC, the desired meaning of them might be lost within a myriad of interpretations. Although there is clearly some degree of discontinuity, the meanings, or at least the intended meanings, can readily be deciphered.

The SVMC partially enables the power that these images carry. Without the knowledge and assumptions that the complex provides, such images would be relatively free to be interpreted in various ways. As such, their use as markers and as a frame for gym life would be greatly diminished.

In the above, a broad picture of Freedom Gym is sketched out. In focusing on demographic information, mythologies and images, the aim is to provide a feel for the space and also the ways in which the gym is experienced both by regular users and non-users alike. Key in this regard was the over-arching frame provided by the SVMC. This complex provides a point of reference from which people can make sense of the gym. Perceptions, based on knowledge born out of assumptions about class and gender stereotypes, can be shown to pervade the ways people think about and engage in life at the gym. There is a local dimension to this framing of the gym. As outlined in Chapter Two, the concept of the figuration, upon which this SVMC is based, maintains conceptual space for these local dynamics to be considered alongside wider social processes. I will now explore these local pressures.

#### **4.6 Local Frame**

A necessary step in attempted to frame gym life is to account for the unique local processes that impinge on the environment. In this regard, the gym's locality near, but on the outskirts of, the city centre can be shown to shape gym life. This section will outline the role local areas play in supplying the majority of the gym's membership base followed by a discussion of the gym's surrounds as a frame for Freedom Gym as a whole. The chapter concludes by painting a picture of life at the gym including the gym's layout, typical experiences of training and the gym's social hierarchy.

#### **4.7 Local Estates – 'They wanna come and learn to fight'**

The lack of demographic information held by Freedom Gym means that it is difficult to provide quantitative data showing the locations in the city from which the regular users are drawn. However, there are indications that local estates play a central role in shaping the identities of the men that attend the gym. Through conversations and interviews, it became apparent that the users of Freedom Gym are mainly drawn from local areas around the city. The estates of

Farnham and Parkhall appeared to be significant; they were traditionally considered the most dangerous places in the city. Although there is no one estate from which the gym mainly draws its membership, there is a clear connection with areas traditionally associated with the working classes. Throughout the fieldwork, there was a strong sense that the 'rougher' parts of town were sites of significance for regular gym users. Dunning *et al* (1988) have previously explored the role such local estates play in shaping violent behaviours. During chats with staff, this relationship was probed:

Chris: So, where do you think most of the gym's members are from?

Wayne: Around here, mainly people live nearby or in one o'the estates.

Chris: Do you think you get many people from the more affluent parts of town?

Wayne: Na, we get all the kids off the estates innit.

Chris: Why do you think that is?

Wayne: *They wanna come and learn to fight.* (Field notes, 12/10/2010 – emphasis added)

Although Wayne did seem to miss that the gym was attended by older men, as well as 'all the kids off the estates', the point he makes is worth examining. The overwhelming majority of young men I spoke to lived in, or had strong links to, one of the local 'notorious' estates of Farnham and Parkhall. Indeed, a motivation to learn fighting, self-defence techniques and to 'bulk up', was generally the driving force behind their repeated attendance at the gym. Carlos agreed with Wayne, although he explained this by referring to the low cost of attending the gym:

Chris: So where do you think you draw the majority of members from?

Carlos: All over the place.

Chris: Do you think you get many from the more affluent parts of town?

Carlos: A few.

Chris: But not loads?

Carlos: Mainly we get lads from the local estates.

Chris: Why is that?

Carlos: Its affordable down here ain't it. (Carlos interview)

There was clearly a feeling amongst staff that the regular gym users were mainly drawn from local housing estates. Although there is some evidence to support this contention, especially when referring to the younger users of the gym, the relationship seemed to be complex. Of the members interviewed or chatted with, the majority did have some form of link to one of the 'rougher' housing estates either through growing up, schooling or friendship groups. However, they appeared to be living in various areas in and around the city, some more affluent than others. This link was generally assumed by users of the gym to be one of the reasons for taking up weight training, boxing and/or other combat training. Spending time in, or with

friends who were from, these areas, meant that a premium was placed on being able to 'look after' ones self. Time and time again, the cities 'mean' streets were described as a catalyst that pushed these men towards training:

Chris: So do you have to use the stuff you learn in the gym outside of here?

Sam<sup>21</sup>: Now and den. D'ya know da Hankin road?

Chris: A bit, I used to have a girlfriend who lived up at the top.

Sam: It's got a rep right, and it ain't dat bad really as long as you know what you is doing, but if you can't look after ya sen then you're gonna get jacked. And if someone's lookin' to rip you off you got to get in there first, all dem boys be running with blades and that man, so if someone gonna get in ya face it's safest to bang 'em out. When I was growin' up my dad always told me to get in first, not like going looking for it but he always said dat if someone gives you the eye then not to fuck about. (Sam interview)

Despite an age difference of thirty six years, Sam and Dan<sup>22</sup>, shared very similar ideas about living in the more deprived areas of Woodford:

Chris: What is the intended use then? I mean, it sounds like some of the stuff you do isn't necessarily for the ring.

Dan: You know you got to be able to look afta' ya' sen, when I grow up you 'ad to even look owt f'cops. So sometime yeah, it might get used owter t'ring.

Chris: Does that happen much?

Dan: Not so much now-a-days, but when I was young, you know if someone started I could usually finish it. You don't live in Woodford all these years and not run into a spot of bova' from time to time. (Dan interview)

The need to protect oneself while spending time in the city's 'rougher' areas was a recurring theme amongst the boxers and gym goers. This resonates with Dunning *et al.* (1988; 208) who asserted that working class communities "will tend to generate norms and standards which, relative to those groups higher in the social scale, [will be] conducive to and tolerate a high level of open aggressiveness in social relations". Although many of the interviewees did not still reside in such communities, and seldom, if ever, had to use violence outside of the ring, they still found significance in the ability to stand up for themselves on the 'streets'. Their appreciation of a tough masculine style seems, in part, to have its social roots in their connection to one of the city's more deprived, working class areas.

Through boxing, and other combat sports, members not only learnt the physical hardness needed to be able to deal with acts of violence, and the skills to use violence; they also gained respect and credibility amongst their peers. Through their ability to box, these men reported managing to avoid engaging in violence. Although he never employed boxing

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<sup>21</sup> Sam was 17, he lived a fifteen minute bike ride away from the gym. He was a college student and had been an apprentice at a local professional football team.

<sup>22</sup> Dan was 53, we worked mainly as a painter and decorator but he also did some security work on the side for extra cash. He trained with a variety of people through my time in the field. He tended to focus on a variety of training method of which boxing was one.

techniques outside the gym, Larry<sup>23</sup> discussed gaining respect from his school friends when he started boxing:

Chris: Have you ever used boxing as any self-defence, or outside the ring?

Larry: Err, I haven't really need to be honest, the word got around when I was at school that I was doing boxing, but no one ever wanted to challenge me.

Chris: Do you reckon that's because people know you could box, or 'cus you stay away from trouble?

Larry: I think its 'cus they thought I boxed [laughed]. (Larry interview)

This resonated with many fragments of conversation that I heard around the gym. Boxing was seen to help them avoid trouble in these rough parts of town. While hanging around after a training session, I was part of a telling conversation with Dave and Patrick:

Tonight I was chatting with Patrick and Dave about fighting outside the ring; I was trying to find out how much they use boxing on the street. They have both grown up in rough areas where I guess they have opportunities to fight if they want to, or indeed had to.

Chris: Do you get much chance to use any boxing outside the ring?

Dave: Not anymore, *I used to go looking for fights all the time when I first started [boxing], I always used to get in scraps when I was young, but then ya realise when ya start sparring that one lucky punch and it's lights out, besides, no fucker will fight me na, they know I've had some fights.*

Patrick: I think you've got a rep now though innit, like people know you're hard. When I first started my mates were all giving me shit, until a squared one of them up and slapped him.

Dave: Ha, what you do that for?

Patrick: They were all taking the piss, calling me Rocky and that.

Dave: Just ignore 'em you dickhead.

Patrick: Well they don't do it no more do they? (Field notes, 8/3/2010 - emphasis added)

It seems that the reputation of Dave, and perhaps the skills of boxers in general, can be enough to stop acts of street violence occurring. Boxing was also constructed as a vent, or a release, for 'natural' urges to be violent.<sup>24</sup> For many, the gym acted as a safe zone that allowed them to escape 'real' street violence but still release what was believed to be their biological 'need' to experience it. Action in the gym is discussed as a socially accepted replacement for illegal action outside it:

Chris: Were you getting into fights on the street?

Sam: My folks would never have let me, I think they could see some of my mates getting into bother and thought they better get me some way of staying out of it.

Chris: What do you think?

Sam: Well, yeah, I never really got into fights 'cus you don't when you're a boxer, you don't need to. Ya knackered all the time, and you don't need to prove yourself to anyone, after you have trained for fights and done 'em in a ring watched by a load of people you realise that fightin' down the pub or whatever is just for chumps.

Chris: So, 'cus of boxing you didn't feel the need to get involved in stuff on the street?

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<sup>23</sup> Larry was 20 years old, he was studying at a local university. He grew up in Grimsby and lived in university halls a short bus journey from the gym. During the field work he left his course to return home to get a job.

<sup>24</sup> This aspects of the social construction of these experiences is briefly explored here before being returned to in greater detail in following chapters

Sam: Na, I *get it all out of my system in the ring, I don't have it all pent up inside like the rest of 'em*. Anyway, what's the point, they couldn't hang with me for a minute in the ring, this is what its all about, not running around on streets acting the big man. (Sam interview – emphasis added)

The relatively 'safe' violence of the gym still allows these men to prove they are 'real' men, who can look after themselves, and use physical force if needed. The relatively close-knit nature of the communities with which these men identified meant that their attendance at the gym was well known. Such attendance, combined with the previously discussed mythologies, was symbolic proof within their communities of their level of physical competence.

In some cases, engaging in this ritual boxing violence was described as being more challenging, and therefore more 'manly', than the cowardly acts of violence that occur outside of the ring. This sentiment was captured in an interview with Burt<sup>25</sup>:

Chris: You said you grew up in Jackswood what kind of area was it?

Burt: Err, its alright, it's a bit rough in places, its Woodford ain't it.

Chris: Was there much trouble around where you lived?

Burt: Not really, I stayed out of any of that kinda stuff anyway.

Chris: Why's that?

Burt: I was a good lad, just 'cus I was doing boxing don't mean that I was a bad 'un. I usually just kept away from anything dodgy, if I ever got near it, my dad would smack me so hard [laughs].

Chris: So you never had to use your boxing on the street?

Burt: Not really, it's not really the place for it though is it, not these days. You get people walking around with knives who wouldn't be able to hit a bag for longer than a minute. There's no point in getting involved with all that, better go down to a club and prove you can handle yourself properly.

Chris: What is it about doing it in the ring that makes it proper?

Burt: *Any punk can carry a knife around, it doesn't mean they know about the discipline and heart that you need to step in the ring, or just to even do the training. It's a cheat's way out, I know they think they have to look after themselves on the streets, but a knife's for someone who's weak.* (Burt interview – emphasis added)

The ethics of gym life were seen as a corrective to the worst aspects of the communities with which these men had associations. By channelling their 'natural' urges to engaging in violence towards a positive and healthy end, these men believed they were rising above the minority who give working class estates a bad name. When users of Freedom Gym talked about their links to local communities there was a general acceptance that violence was a regular part of social life. The gym served as a means of preparing for, protecting them from, and proving the ability to handle, such violence. Training at Freedom Gym was an accepted, rewarded and encouraged means shaping up to the violent masculine norms that dominate such environments.

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<sup>25</sup> Burt was 37, he lived near the gym but has grown up in one of the cities satellite estates. He previously worked as a fireman before leaving to start his own business hiring entertainment equipment.

Although the majority of people I interviewed, and got to know, shared some link to a working class area in the city, there were some exceptions. These men still shared an appreciation for what might be described as working class sensibilities and attitudes. However, their motivations for attending the gym were more focused towards fitness and health. They appreciated the ability to be able to 'look after' themselves, but this was not due to the 'dangers' they faced when growing up. Rather, they seemed to be captivated by the popular mythologies of boxing and boxing clubs, they reported 'always wanting to do something like this' when they were younger. These men were not centrally involved in the gym's established groups. They existed on the periphery of gym life, generally ignored by those who made up the core of the gym's regular users. This link between local communities and the established/outside groups will be further explored in a subsequent part of this chapter.

Freedom Gym is thus not the sole preserve of working class men, although, links to 'rough' areas within the city did seem to produce an appreciation for core aspects of gym life. As such, the forms of physically powerful and potentially violent masculinities that would traditionally be associated with such local areas, linked with overarching notions from the SVMC, frame much of gym life. Men from less deprived areas, who might be expected to bring a different set of masculine norms into the gym, seem to exist on the periphery of the environment. As such, the tough masculine styles described by Dunning *et al.* (1988) and others (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004; De Garis, 2007; Woodward, 2006) that are evident within Freedom Gym were seldom challenged. The predominance of men with links to working class communities within the gym reinforces the previously set out social frame of Freedom Gym. An extension to this analysis of the local dynamics requires a description and discussion of the gym's neighbourhood. Here we find a set of centrifugal and centripetal forces drawing some people toward and some away from the gym.

#### **4.8 Freedom Gym's Surroundings – 'there's a brothel, and near that, a tattoo parlour'**

The local area in which Freedom Gym can be found plays a role in shaping the way that people perceive the gym. During conversations with friends and acquaintances who did not use the gym, or spend time in the area, I found that they made assumptions about both, based on stereotypical views of the surroundings. Some of the key features of the gym's neighbourhood are described in my field notes:

Sometimes, when I walk to the gym I notice just how run-down parts of the area are. But it's not just the closed shops, dilapidated or derelict buildings, its also the types of places; just behind the gym is a half-way house, 150 metres away there's a brothel and near that a tattoo parlour. This location is not only on the outskirts of the city centre; it is also on the outskirts of mainstream (perhaps middle-class) society. There's an invisible barrier that must be crossed to pass into this area, a barrier made up of stereotypes, myths and assumptions. (Field notes, 13/12/2009)

The gym's local environment certainly provides fuel for assumptions about the 'dodgy' or 'rough' nature of those who inhabited the neighbourhood and, by extension, the gym. During conversations with friends, who had little experience of the area, their assumptions were found to shape the way in which they thought about the gym and those who used it. This was evident in a chat with a friend who was partially acquainted with the area:

Glyn: So you're boxing down near Bubbles [brothel]? You pop in there on ya way home?

Chris: Yeah mate, I get a sports massage after I finish.

Glyn: Then a kebab from that place across the road?

Chris: How come you know so much about the area then, late night visits? [Both laugh]

Glyn: Yeah mate, [pause] I tell ya, no way you'll catch me down that way after dark, I just drive through sometimes and I lock me doors. You must get some right sorts in that gym, are all the lads just coming in to learn how to street fight?

Chris: It's alright down there mate, just 'cus it's a bit rough dun't mean it's a bad place. Everyone I've met down there is sound.

Glyn: Well whatever, I'm not in a rush to come and find out. (Field notes, 3/7/2010)

Such assumptions, based on the local area, combine with notions informed by the SVMC to produce a sense that the gym is a place for certain 'types' of people. The general point here was that the gym's neighbourhood was 'dodgy', therefore the characters in the gym must have similar traits. People who made such assumptions felt that they had more than enough evidence to support their decision to avoid the neighbourhood and the gym. In this way, the location plays a role in filtering those who attend the gym, and subsequently influences the shaping of norms and values that dominate the space.

People who attended the gym shared similar stories and assumptions about the local environment. James, a student at a local university (considered to be the less academically

prestigious of the two in the city), had to negotiate official advice and rumours in order to attend the gym:

Chris: So what did you think about this place when you first started coming down?

James: Well, it took me a while to come down because when you first start at Uni they give you a talk about [the city], and about the areas you should avoid and you hear all these rumours about how rough it is so I thought I shouldn't come down here. But with a bit of time I realised it's fine, so I guess when I first started I was still unsure about the place.

Chris: What were you unsure about?

James: Coming down here for starters, it's a bit of a walk, and a couple of times I ended up in some right dodgy places. Its ironic 'cus I'm walking to a boxing club, but I'm worried about getting mugged on the way.

Chris: But you still came?

James: Yeah, 'cus its stupid to think like that, so I just got on with it, its all exaggerated anyway, [the city] ain't that bad. (James interview)

James' knowledge of the area is framed by his understanding of the university's attempts to keep students away from certain parts of the city, which have a reputation for relatively high levels of criminal activity. Dan, a lifelong city resident, lives nearby the gym and described his frustrations at certain aspects of the neighbourhood:

Chris: How do you find the area?

Dan: It's alright you know, there's a few too many immigrants for my liking, but they're not that bad when you get to know 'em. There's a few lads running around in gangs but they're all mouth.

Chris: Do you think the half-way house<sup>26</sup> has an effect on the area?

Dan: Well it's not good is it? They're always pissed up, hanging around. Sometime I just wanna go and kick 'em when they're laying around on the floor like a bunch of dickheads.

Chris: Do things like that have an effect on who come to the gym do you think, I mean, do some people avoid the place?

Dan: Err, yeah, I think it will do, people don't wanna see it, do they? I don't mind, I just gerr'on wiv it. (Dan interview)

Both James and Dan, and the others interviewed, used the gym despite acknowledging that the local area may serve to put some people off attending. Carlos defended the reputation of the area but pragmatically linked it to other notions about the gym:

Chris: Why do you think they might not come down?

Carlos: I dunno, they wouldn't like the place I don't think. If you go into them gyms<sup>27</sup>, they're all sterilised and you feel bad if you go in and get sweaty.

Chris: Do you think they might not like the area?

Carlos: Yeah maybe, but that's only 'cus people just think stuff about places in Woodford, people think [the gym's neighbourhood] is a rough place but it's nothing of the sort, I've been parking my car here for two years now and it's never been touched. People shouldn't be worried about coming down here, they get a bit twitchy when they walk out of the city centre, when they walk past the sex shop they start to think they are gonna get mugged or something [laughs].

Chris: The area does look a bit run down though.

Carlos: Yeah, I can see why people think like that but just 'cus a couple of shops are shut don't mean the place is full of thugs and rapists.

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<sup>26</sup> Behind the gym is a centre for the homeless, at varying times throughout the day and night I witnessed various acts of antisocial behaviour from people who I believed to be staying the halfway house.

<sup>27</sup> Here Carlos is talking about modern commercial fitness centers.

Chris: Do you think people make assumptions about the place based on what they think about the area?

Carlos: Yeah probably, it's the same thing again though, we don't really want people down here who make up their mind before they even check it out. If they're gonna be like that they probably won't enjoy coming down here even if they tried it out. This place works well 'cus the members know what type of place it is, they don't mind that the changing room ain't that big, or that there ain't loads of personal trainers hanging around or loads of staff cleaning up after them, they just want a nice friendly gym that's cheap where they can come and do what they want to do. (Carlos interview)

Carlos' appreciates the ways that the 'rough' reputation of the local area might impact on thoughts and feelings about the gym. However, he also finds resonance between those who make stereotypical assumptions and the 'types' of people he does not want attending the gym. It appears that the location is a social filter. Not only does it act as a barrier, repelling some people from the gym, it may also attract others who feel comfortable in such surroundings and with the activities they expect to find in a gym in such an area.

There is a degree of resonance between the neighbourhood, and the forms of training that are found at Freedom Gym. Boxing, Cage Fighting, and the hyper-masculinity of bodybuilding and weightlifting fits within this 'rough', working class part of town. In this way, there is evidence to support assumptions about the gym, which are made based on knowledge from the SVMC. Indeed, myths and stories about the gym may reinforce the ways people think about the area as a place to be avoided. Freedom Gym, and the lived experiences there in, appears to 'make sense' existing in a part of town that is considered by certain people to have a 'rough' reputation. A further dimension of this process of framing experiences of violence is the gym itself. A description and discussion of some aspects of gym life follows below.

#### **4.9 Freedom Gym**

Throughout this chapter an attempt has been made to describe some of the phenomena that shape experiences at Freedom Gym. Crucial within this framing, is the gym itself. The ways in which the gym's demographics, images, mythologies and locality combine with the SVMC to frame gym life have already been described. Adding to this, a detailed description of aspects of the day-to-day events at Freedom Gym follows. Such a description, further contextualises the experiential data that will be presented in subsequent chapters. The aim here is not

simply to describe the physical space of the gym, but to convey the ways in which the gym is experienced by its inhabitants, and may be framed by, and in turn frame, their subjectivities.

#### 4.10 A 'Real' Gym

As might be expected, the environment inside Freedom Gym resonates, to a certain extent, with the previous findings about the framing of the gym by its location and the SVMC. The gym's position in a run-down part of town is reflected in the state of the building and equipment. Broken windows and mirrors, out-of-order toilets and equipment, damaged flooring, sweat-stained boxing gear left out for anyone to use, a general unclean and untidy feel; Freedom Gym is clearly not a post-modern, high-end, fitness centre. The following passage paraphrases notes from my first few trips to the gym and captures a snap shot of life:

One of the condensation-covered glass panels near the entrance of the gym is smashed, it's been like that for a while I guess. I walk in and I'm hit by a wave of warm sweaty heat. It's quite nice in comparison to the cold outside, but from outside the gym, all this humidity streams down the windows and make the place look more like a steam room than a gym. The surly staff, who man the reception, often carry a look of disdain on their faces; when asking for a bottle of water I feel like I've just asked them for a kidney. The reception counter has a collection of bars, drinks, and sun tan lotions, all brightly packaged with words such as 'power', 'energy', 'recover' and pictures of hyper-masculine men and hyper-feminine women.

In an evening, the gym is full of big burly blokes lifting weights, tonight is a perfect example, I have to struggle my way through all these guys who don't see me because they're fixated on their working muscles in the mirror. Some high-tempo music pumps out around the gym, over this the clinks and clunk of weights combine with gym 'banter' to create a wall of sound. When there is a class on, the sound from the trainer barking orders usually rings out across the gym.

There is a kinda shabby feeling about the gym, perhaps 'worn' is a more polite way of putting it. Machines, flooring, posters, equipment, the ring, they all show the signs of wear and tear. The changing room are sometimes messy; the bathrooms are always a bit dirty. (Field notes, 4/8/2009 – 27/8/2009)

From this description, Freedom Gym may sound like a less than pleasant place to exercise. In comparison to other gyms that I have used, it is cramped, sweaty and a bit dirty, the staff seem uninterested in interacting with members, especially new ones, and members often walk around with serious, almost scowling, looks on their faces. However, in conversation, the members of the gym either did not notice any of these issues or seemed to be unbothered by them:

Gary: Someone's been leaking all over the ring again. [Points at some bloodstains on the ring canvas.]

Dave: I bet its those MMA guys, they love the sight of their own blood, dirty fuckers.

Gary: They'd never think to clean it up though would they?

Dave: Would you?

Gary: Good point. (Field notes, 9/9/2010)

Gary and Dave proceeded to step into the ring without mentioning the blood again after this brief and casual chat. When interviewed, Lewis described his willingness to accept certain aspects of the gym due to the low cost of attending:

Chris: Do you think there is a bit of attitude down here?

Lewis: That goes with the territory though, don't it?

Chris: How do you mean?

Lewis: You don't pay £66 for half a year and expect the staff to be falling all over you.

Chris: [Laughs] Yeah, very true, what about the equipment and that, do you think it's a bit tatty?

Lewis: Yeah, but it's the same thing man, and I don't come down 'ere for the latest, newest equipment, that's not what this place is all about. All people need is a bag and some weights, all this extra stuff is just a waste of time anyway, it don't matter if the bags go a rip in it, or the paint on the weights a bit chipped. (Lewis interview)

What had been described in quite negative terms in the field notes was clearly not a problem for the men who regularly used Freedom Gym. During interviews I found that users of the gym identified positively with the 'spit and sawdust' appearance of the gym. Indeed, this was used as evidence to show the *superiority* of Freedom Gym in comparison to mainstream fitness centres. In this way, a 'proper' gym does not need to be perfectly clean with the latest equipment, all it needs is some 'lumps of metal', boxing gloves and 'real' men to use them.

This no-frills approach was not only accepted as a part of attending an inexpensive gym, it was also constructed as a more *authentic* way of training. The sense that the gym is a place stripped back to the bare essentials was a regularly occurring theme. Once again, there is a resonance here with the dominant values and norms that frame gym life. By removing some of the sanitation, activities, equipment and personnel that were deemed to be superfluous to the gym experience, there was a belief that Freedom Gym represented a 'truer' version of what 'real' training was all about. In effect, Freedom Gym was a 'real' place for 'real' men. The men who attend Freedom Gym value the notion that they train harder, and therefore better, than people who go to other gyms:

Chris: Can you try and sum the gym up in one sentence?

Carlos: Erm, it's a proper gym, not one of these places where people go to be seen, this is a place people come to work hard.

Chris: Is that something that you guys aimed for when you set the place up?

Carlos: Yeah, there's no point trying to compete with all those poncy gyms, we were aiming at people that want to come down and do it properly whether it was boxing, MMA or [weight]lifting.

Chris: Which are the poncy gyms?

Carlos: Holmes Place and those bloody David Lloyds.

Chris: But don't places like that have spin classes and sun tan beds?

Carlos: Yeah, but you've got to have stuff like that now-a-days to make money, and you'd be surprised how many of the lads have ended up using them beds. Not just the body builders ya know, loads on 'em do it. (Carlos interview)

Regular users and staff alike found significance in the dominant notion of the 'type' of gym that Freedom was perceived to be. Despite Carlos' assertions to the contrary, they did like to be seen in, and associated with, the gym. The scruffy, 'lived in' appearance; it's inner city, 'rough' location; it's no-nonsense staff and training methods, were all symbolic proof of the gym's status as a 'real' man's gym. However, as pointed out in Carlos interview, Freedom Gym actually has some of the hallmarks of a more up-market fitness centre. Alongside the clear emphasis on hyper-masculinised forms of exercise can be found sun beds, a ladies-only section, a small seating area, personal training, branded clothing and a female fitness instructor. On one hand, the gym was believed to be a place where 'real', working class, men could come and 'really work out', without the distractions and unnecessary add-ons that are the trademark of inferior, less 'real', less masculine and non-working class gyms. On the other hand, there were clear attempts by the gym's staff and management to follow the contemporary model used in mainstream gyms, and a clear acceptance and adoption of some of the practices and characteristics of this model by regular users of Freedom Gym. As can be seen in the above interview with Carlos, this tension was rarely recognised by those inside the gym. Indeed, the aspects of Freedom Gym that seemed not easily to chime with the dominant construction of the gym as a 'real place for real men', were generally subsumed within this subjectivity, or accepted as a small and inconsequential effect of the current trends in the fitness industry and society more generally. In an interview with Steve<sup>28</sup>, it was clear that he saw no obvious discrepancy between the way he perceived the gym and the presence of sun tan beds:

Chris: So, if like you said earlier, this a place where people come to train properly, where do the sun tan beds fit in?

Steve: They're for the body builders really.

Chris: But I've heard of loads of members using them who don't do body building.

Steve: Well [pause] just 'cus people are using 'em doesn't mean they're not training properly, in fact it's probably a good way of relaxing after training, I'm not bothered about that stuff, but some of the lads down here are a bit image conscious, so ya just let them get on with it.

Chris: Why do you think that is?

Steve: Its not OK to be just a guy anymore, you've got to look after yourself and like, do all this preening and stuff. (Steve interview)

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<sup>28</sup> Steve was 33 and was a plumber by trade. He tended to come to Freedom Gym irregularly but through his work connection he knew Gary and a few of the other boxers. He had also lived in Woodford all his life.

Steve integrated the presence of sun tan beds into his understanding of the gym as a place for men who like to train hard in a back to basics environment. The women-only area could also provide a challenge to the dominant assumptions about the gym's place as a male preserve. This space could provide a zone within which women can claim a dominant position. In practice, the space served to further remove women from the rest of the gym. By 'allowing' women their own space, the staff and owners of Freedom Gym provided symbolic proof that the rest of the gym was no fit place for a woman to be.

The idea that Freedom Gym was more 'real' than other gyms, was a theme that emerged repeatedly. Users of the gym found evidence to support this notion in the untidy, at times dirty, appearance of the gym. There was a resonance here with interpretations of the gym's location and ideas based in the SVMC. These 'matches' mutually reinforced the understanding of the gym as a place for 'real' men 'to really train'. Aspects of gym life that could be used to subvert hegemonic norms and values are then viewed through a monochrome lens that colours them to match the dominant, working class, and masculine subjectivities. Instead, the notion that Freedom Gym was, in important ways, more 'real', and subsequently more masculine and therefore 'better', was almost universally accepted within the established membership of the gym. The perceived stripped back and basic activities and equipment at the gym were symbolic proof of this 'realness', despite phenomena that could be perceived as challenging this position.

#### **4.11 Training at Freedom Gym**

Certain exercise practices held a dominant position within the gym. Broadly speaking, gym users either took part in training geared towards some form of fighting, weight training for strength and/or size, or a combination of both. The following excerpt from my field notes describes a typical scene from an evening at Freedom Gym:

In-between rounds of sparring I looked across the gym, there must be 100-150 men all pushing weights in some way or other. Small groups of lads are working together, encouraging, laughing, advising, spotting. A lot of them, especially the younger ones, are working on 'beach weights'; exercises aimed at producing size and shape rather than functional strength. When watching the younger guys, I sometimes think the mirrors around the gym get more of a workout than their bodies do. Not only do they check their form during training, from time to time I see them pulling poses or checking out each other's abdominal muscles. Some guys are a lot more focused on the job at hand; heads down, training, no chatting. When the gym is as busy as this there seems

to be a tension in the air, a cloud of testosterone perhaps? This tension is broken when occasionally an episode of banter breaks out for some reason, laughs rain out across the gym. Over in the dojo, an MMA class are doing grappling drills. They struggle for position before attempting to take their partner down to the ground. Mark watches over them and barks out technical orders. A couple of guys are sparring in the cage; they seem to be doing kick-boxing. Shirts off, dripping in sweat, they move in and out of range throwing combinations of kicks and punches. From time to time, someone lands and they take a breather. The buzzer goes and five guys start working the bags and doing shadow boxing. The sound of leather on leather is accompanied by a sharp 'sssstttt' sound as the boxers forcefully exhale. The bags' chains rattle and feet skip and slip around on the plastic floor. The whole gym seems alive with a hectic buzz, except for the cardio-area, and the women-only area, which are deserted in comparison. (Field notes, 19/10/2009)

It is very apparent during these busy times just how much fighting and weight training are the core activities within Freedom Gym. The actions and outcomes of these different phenomena produce very different experiences and bodies. Despite these differences, the underlying assumptions that draw men within Freedom Gym to enjoy these practices are built upon very similar notions of the 'right' way for men to engage in physical activity. The tensions and harmonies that these different expressions of physically powerful and sometimes violent masculinities bring forth will be detailed in the following chapter. However, the contextualisation of the day-to-day life of Freedom Gym will continue by focusing specifically on the boxing area.

#### **4.12 Boxing at Freedom Gym**

It is important to note that the majority of people who use Freedom Gym do so for its weight training equipment. As such, boxing is just one component of the activities that are on offer to users of Freedom Gym. This combination is believed by staff to be necessary within the current economic climate in which fitness centres must draw in members by appealing to multiple demographics. On the whole, regular users that I spoke to enjoyed being able to take part in weight training and boxing in the same space. However, there was a sense that the boxing at Freedom Gym was limited in certain ways due to the club's split focus. At times, members discussed the lack of a full-time coaching presence and any real direction for people who wanted to competitively box. In this regard, the gym was felt to be lacking in comparison to 'traditional' boxing clubs:

Gary: You know what this place needs? A proper coach, Simon's a good guy and that, but he's not gonna turn this place into a proper [boxing] club is he?

David<sup>29</sup>: *That's not what this place is about though is it? Yo don't come down 'cus it's a proper club, you come down cus you like doing a bit [of boxing], and doing some weights without having to do it [boxing] properly. As if you would really want to have a coach barking at ya making ya train hard and not letting ya spar if you don't.*

Gary: If I was [competitively] fighting I would.

David: Mate, most of the guys down here aren't bothered about all that, they just wanna come down and hit some bags without the pressure of having to do it the way a coach would make them.

Gary: I know what ya sayin', but that's what makes this place the way it is sometimes, there's no-one teachin' all them kids and stopping them fucking around. I wouldn't mind getting told what to do a bit, at least I wouldn't be stuck like I am now, not going anywhere.

David: If you really wanted a fight you would go down Stringers [boxing club]<sup>30</sup>, this place is just what most of us want, you wanna be able to keep doing a bit [of boxing] without the pressure of all the training, and I wanna do some weights and that an'all. (Field notes, 5/10/2010 – emphasis added)

A minority of the members who regularly used the boxing area at Freedom Gym seemed, at times, to long for a more traditional model of a boxing club. However, these same men would, in other chats and interviews, describe their appreciation at being able to take part in boxing without the pressure of attending a 'proper' boxing club. This perception of Freedom Gym as not a traditional boxing club is reflected in the lack of competing professional & amateur boxers who use the gym as a training base on a regular basis. However, the management had managed to associate the gym with the city's currently most high profile boxer. By sponsoring the local 'champ', they bought the right to use his picture on the front of the gym and in advertisements around the city. Therefore, despite the less-than-traditional set up, they sought to establish the gym as a place for boxers and boxing in the city. This policy had some success:

Chris: So, Freedom isn't really like a traditional boxing club environment, and I know you've said already that that isn't what Neil and Tim [Freedom Gym's owners] were after, but its obviously a key part of what you do or you wouldn't have got [local champ] on board.

Carlos: That's all about the gym's profile, they [the owners] knew him, so they bunged him some cash to come and do some sessions down here. Job done, everyone associates him with this place.

Chris: Does that bring many [competing] boxers in?

Carlos: Not really, because we ain't geared up to be a proper club, but it brings people in for definite, anyone who has a passing interest in boxing, who has ever thought about taking it up will be aware of him and then perhaps come down here.

Chris: I guess its good for the gym profile away from boxing as well?

Carlos: Yeah, its our target audience innit, lads and men in the city know [the champ] and they wanna train where he trains. (Carlos interview)

Boxing at Freedom Gym is generally understood, by those that regularly use the boxing area, to be inferior to more traditional gyms in terms of the authenticity of the boxing experience.

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<sup>29</sup> David was 41, he had lived in Woodford all his life and now managed a local garage. He had fought in the amateurs in his teens and early twenties. During my time in the field he and his wife had a baby boy.

<sup>30</sup> A boxing club which is renowned for its adherence to a 'traditional' approach

However, in linking the gym to the local 'champ', the management have attempted to purchase some level of credibility. Indeed, within the gym membership, especially those centrally involved with boxing, this association is the source of some pride. Outside the gym, this association forms a part of the mythologies that have been previously outlined. Boxing at Freedom Gym does not follow the traditional model of a boxing club that has previously been investigated by Sugden (1996), Wacquant (2004) and Woodward (2007). As such, there are a unique set of influences and effects that impinge on behaviours and experiences at the gym. One crucial aspect of this dynamic is the location of the boxing area within the gym.

#### **4.13 The Boxing Area – 'the buzzer tells me when to work and when to relax'**

Freedom Gym is basically a warehouse space partially separated, using equipment, walkways and some small barriers, into five different areas. The boxing area is partially segregated from the rest of these areas, due to its location at the far end of the gym. Only rarely do people come into the boxing area that are not going to be using the boxing equipment. In this respect, it feels like a space within a space, set aside for boxers and other fighters:

Head down, I stride through the hectic gym to reach the tranquillity of the boxing area. Gloves and pads are strewn across the floor, bags swing from side to side, it's like an assault course. I find my usual spot on the ring apron and exchange a few nods and 'ay'ups' with the regulars. I get my boots and wraps out and started getting ready. Once I'm warmed up, I settle into a pattern of three minute round, one minute rest. Except for concentrating on technique, I can switch off; the buzzer tells me when to work and when to relax. Everyone around me does the same. (Field notes, 22/6/2010)

This entry in my field notes was made after a year spent attending the gym, by which time the boxing area at Freedom Gym had become a home from home. These feelings were shared by others who regularly used the boxing area. However, as might be expected, newcomers had an entirely different set of experiences. Initially, the boxing area was a place in which few people felt immediately comfortable. Those that had not been involved in boxing before attending the gym told me of their insecurities and anxieties when first entering the boxing area. The activities, environment and even the equipment, seemed to be intimidating:

Patrick: I fancied doing some boxing for ages but I was always a bit nervous about coming round here [into the boxing area], I didn't have the first clue what I was doing and like, their ain't no-one to tell ya what to do so, I didn't wanna come and do it wrong. I thought I'd end up hitting a bag wrong or something.  
Chris: What changed?

Patrick: I was training with Paul and he made me come in here to do some cardio after we finished doing weights. I was hooked after that. (Patrick interview)

There is then, an invisible social barrier that the majority of Freedom Gym users do not pass. A crucial component of this barrier was the physical presence and symbolic meaning attached to the ring and the cage. Together they tower over the rest of the gym, as such, they dominate the space. Symbolically, the framing of these spaces as places for physical combat, results in an almost mythical reverence. Romantic notions about the years of training required to prove one's ability to step into the ring were common. Through this exalted position, these spaces were typically off-limits to the general gym population. These were spaces elevated, physically and symbolically, above that of the rest of the gym, spaces in which one did not step unless one had earned the right. Except during coaching sessions, where novices are accompanied by a coach, there is an un-written rule that the ring and cage are reserved for people who are at an ability level that means they know how to conduct themselves safely. I felt the romance of the boxing ring when attending a class at Freedom Gym. The 'ring', that symbol of 'gentlemanly' combat, where good battles evil, and Rocky over comes his foes, was now a place that I could say I had been:

Although I had seen boxing rings on TV loads, indeed, I had seen this ring when I came to check the gym out, I was not prepared for the nerves I felt when I stepped through the ropes. I instantly felt like a fraud, like I shouldn't really be in there. Around the ring, men toiled away on the bags, meanwhile on the other side, they lifted weights and strutted around. The slightly-sprung canvas floor, the red and blue ring ropes, the padded turnbuckles, the buzzer, it all felt very authentic, I couldn't help feeling that I now shared something in common with all those men who had dared to step into the square circle. (Field notes, 18/8/2009)

It would be some six months after this session that I would begin to feel like I had earned my place in the ring. As time went by, I felt more and more at home in the boxing area. I became accustomed to the ebbs and flows of life surrounded by boxers and boxing equipment. As a means of demonstrating an important diminution of gym life there follows a description of what can be considered to be two typical boxing sessions at the Freedom Gym.

#### **4.14 A Boxing Session – 'Who's up for a bit of move around then?'**

There are many ways that people engage in boxing at Freedom Gym. There is not the space here to describe them all in detail, instead, the focus will be on two separate sessions as recorded in my field notes, which will be useful in framing the types of training session that were popular within the boxing area of the gym. During the first few months, that I attended

Freedom Gym I either attended a boxing class or did my own drills based on the techniques demonstrated in these classes. These sessions tended to follow a very similar course, as the following extract from the field notes for a typical session shows:

I arrived early for boxing tonight, Simon [the coach] was working with the kids who he coaches before our class. I notice a few guys who I have seen at a session before, I nod and say hello. It's a bit busy so there isn't really any room to do any skipping so I get my wraps on and do some shadow boxing. Dancing around in the mirror feels odd, but it does help to get to know where your hands and head are. Simon shouts us over, I'm relieved to get some direction, I feel like a fish out of water when I have to do my own thing. He pairs us up and we get on the bags, the drills start off simple and, gradually, Simon adds in some punch variations and bits of footwork. Everyone seems to be on it tonight, pushing each other to work harder. After twenty-five minutes or so, Simon gets all eight of us in the ring. None of us is very experienced so there is always a slight sense of trepidation when we step through the ropes. Simon lays out what we're gonna be doing, "right then lads, lets work on some footwork and then we can do a bit o'light sparrin' after that." After showing us the basic footwork drills we spread out around the ring, over and over we repeat the same drill. *Simon comes round and gives us some pointers and eventually moves us onto a new drill. Approaching the end of the session, Simon calls out "who's up for a bit of move around then?" Under strict instructions we pair up, "right, now, we ain't doing this so you can fuck each other up, lets see if we can work on some of that footwork we were just doing". With Simon's instructions ringing in our ears, Matt<sup>31</sup> and I proceed to forget everything we have spent the last hour working on. For the next two exhausting minutes, we try, mostly unsuccessfully, to hit each other. The shock of landing a punch results in apologies, much to Simon's derision, 'you ain't got time to say sorry every time you bloody punch each other!' After a couple of hectic rounds Simon calls an end to our fun, tired and a bit exhilarated we finish off by doing some abbs. After ten minutes of gruelling exercises, we are finished. A few of us hang around and chat about the session for a few minutes before heading off. (Field notes, 22/10/2009 – emphasis added)*

Within these sessions, Simon focuses on teaching the fundamentals of boxing technique and ensuring that the participants get a good workout. During one of many informal chats, Simon was asked about these classes:

Simon: Most of these lads come down to learn a bit and just for the crack, there's only a few who actually wanna try and do anything with it, so we're always a bit limited as to how far we can take the sessions.

Chris: So you generally just try and teach people the basics?

Simon: Yeah, there's no point to try and to do too much with them, if people want to take it further they will, like you did. *As soon as I start doing any complicated stuff with people, they just end up losing everything and going a bit mental.* (Field notes, 14/1/2010 – emphasis added)

Boxers who did not attend one of Simon's sessions tended to do drills on the bags, and then sometimes take part in some form of sparring with acquaintances. There is a discernable group that uses the boxing area more than most. This established group meets on a regular basis for training sessions. As my time in the field progressed, I begin training with this group. These sessions are guided by a set of unwritten assumptions, framed by the SVMC, about

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<sup>31</sup> Matt was 27, he worked as an assistant manager in a local pub/restaurant. He started training at Freedom Gym at roughly the same time as me. Initially he started using the gym on his breaks from work, but eventually he started attending the boxing sessions on his nights off, we were a similar level of (in)ability until he stopped coming so regularly.

the correct way to engage in training and sparring. The following is an account of a typical session:

I training with Gary and everyone tonight, I started by doing some rounds on the bags and then he nodded over to see if I wanted to join in. I think we did around fifteen rounds or so in total, taking turns to rest and spar. Between the seven of us training, there was usually four sparring at any one time, sometimes six, sometimes two. Everyone figured out the level that they wanted to work at, so, although I was the least experienced, I didn't get knocked about too much. Meanwhile, Gary and Dave went at it, smacking each other about. Towards the end of the session, a few of the guys did body sparring as a way of doing some more training when they were getting too tired to full spar. After we finished, we sat around for a bit and chatted, a couple of the guys did some weights. (Field notes, 15/4/2010)

With the absence of a club coach, this established group did much to frame the ways that people trained in the boxing area. They enforcing norms either by telling newcomers to train and spar in certain ways or by simply being the most readily available example to follow. This group forms the focus of the following section of this chapter.

#### **4.15 Established/Outsiders – ‘They wouldn’t know a jab if it hit them in the face’**

Having mapped some of the ways in which boxing is experienced at Freedom Gym I will now describe in broad terms the social hierarchy of the gym, and in finer detail, that of the boxing area. In this regard, Elias and Scotson's (1994 [1965]) work, as outlined in Chapter Two, provides the conceptual frame. This will enable social differentials of group cohesion and integration, which I have found to be of particular relevance at Freedom Gym, to come to the fore. Such differences can often be lost amidst other, perhaps more visible, social fault lines (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]).

There was a network of people who use Freedom Gym on a regular basis that formed a relatively stable group. Over my time in the field I repeatedly saw the same faces time and time again. I asked Carlos about the turn-over of the gym's regular users:

Chris: Is the gym mainly used by the same people?

Carlos: Yeah, we've got our regulars, but we're always adding to them, you can't make a profit if you just sit back on the guys you've got 'cus some of 'em will stop coming eventually.

Chris: Do many of the new members turn into regulars or do they tend to stop coming after a while?

Carlos: I'd say that we can rely on our regulars [to keep coming] much more than the new guys, sometimes you get a group of new lads who start coming and it'll seem like they've been here for years, other times, you see a face for a couple of weeks, then you won't see him again. That happens a bit 'cus people don't pay up front, you know they're a bit more serious when they pay for the year. (Carlos interview)

The option to pay per session seems to encourage a degree of transience at Freedom Gym. However, Carlos went on to describe the way some people 'fit' in with the gym and other simply did not. This message was repeated during interviews with other regulars at the gym. Newcomers to the gym that did not continue coming were seen to be lacking in some sense, as such, their lack of attendance was seen as no great loss. Those that 'can't hack it' or 'who need their hands holding' were dismissed in favour of men who 'were happy to get on with it' and 'understood what the gym is all about'. In this way, the transience brought about by pay per session usage was resisted and those that did become regulars tended to conform to norms and values that dominate the gym.

There is a set of individuals who occupy an established position within the gym. These regular users are the center of gym life, they are the most vocal, they are more likely to be involved in gym 'banter' and they are crucially involved in setting the tone for gym life. This group display a high degree of cohesiveness in relation to those who can be considered to exist on the periphery of the gyms social hierarchy. Their familiarity allows them to come together far more readily than outsiders. This greater integration ensures the established group has greater influence on what is considered 'normal' within Freedom Gym. During training sessions, chats in the changing room, walks to and from the gym, and many other occasions, these men are able to consider, confirm, consolidate and from time-to-time challenge assumptions about the correct ways for people to 'be' in Freedom Gym.

Crucial to understanding the parameters by which members gain such a position are the previously-outlined frames of gym life. Those centrally involved in gym life can be shown, to a greater or lesser degree, to have adopted the dominant subjectivities that frame gym life. Proof of ones credibility to be in this established group can be gained through displaying markers of the 'right' form of identity, behaviours and attitudes as framed by the SVMC. Associations from outside the gym whether through work, or links to estates can also act as validation; a link to someone, or someplace, which holds positive significance within the gym. Staff members and owners of the gym, who would perhaps be expected to hold an established position by default, also seem to have gained personal legitimacy through one, or more, of these avenues. Conversely, those who occupied a relatively outside position within

the gym can be shown to be lacking in the above means of gaining access to the established groups, or have not had sufficient time to prove their legitimacy.

A boxing subgroup exists within this hierarchical social profile. This group's more established members gain their position based on similar criteria as the rest of the gym. However, as might be expected, there is an increased emphasis based on boxing ability and the adoption of the norms and habitual behaviours traditionally associated with boxing. This group could be identified by their familiarity with each other and their attendance at Freedom Gym on Tuesday and Thursday nights. On these evenings, between five and seven o'clock, there was an informal sparring session, which the core of the established boxers attend. Over my time in the field, this session developed from being an infrequent and accidental meeting of acquaintances, to become regular and informally-organised with a set of rules, norms and values. Once a few established boxers made a firm commitment to try to attend every Tuesday and Thursday, these occasions became the basis upon which the established group could develop its cohesion and subsequently its group charisma. Through regularly meeting and sharing training experiences this group gradually formed a majority consensus as to what were considered possible, permissible and pleasurable behaviours within this environment. These norms and values were displayed during sparring sessions and though gym 'banter'. I will further discuss aspects of this group's subjectivity in Chapter Five when I describe the masculine framing of gym life.

As described in the previous chapter I was able to interview most of these men, as such, more precise claims about their socio-economic status can be made. The majority of this group can be described as having either a working class job or background and they tended to share links to one or more of the local estates. What was apparent within this group was the prevalence of what has been termed 'a respectable working class background'. Such a class based differentiation has repeatedly been made in other academic literature on boxing subcultures. As Wacquant (1989; 11) noted:

Youngsters from the most disadvantaged families are eliminated for lack of the habits and inculcations demanded by pugilism; to become a boxer *de facto* requires a regularity of life, a sense of discipline, a physical and mental asceticism that cannot take root in social and economic conditions marked by chronic instability and temporal disorganisation.

The family backgrounds, employment status and values system of this established group resonated with that described by Wacquant and latterly by Sugden (1996; 183):

Continued membership of the boxing subculture necessitates the acceptance of a value system which emphasises respect for oneself and for others, not just physical respect, but equally respect for one's own and an opponent's character. It also requires the acceptance of a work ethic along with the principles of self-sacrifice and deferred gratification: qualities not usually associated with the ghetto experience. Boxing requires a certain deference of authority and appreciation of fairness and, despite what goes on in the ring, it demands controlled aggression and a renunciation of vicious violence.

This dominance of a respectable working class subjectivity results in a high degree of consensus about the correct way of engaging in training and sparring. Members of this group would actively encourage such values in other group members and outsiders. Drilling basic techniques was favoured over performing flashy or novel moves. 'Heart', determination, hard work and cardio vascular fitness were encouraged and rewarded. The cooperative and controlled nature of sparring was almost always emphasised. Newcomers to the group would be inducted into these values by one or more of the established group. These lessons could be taught verbally and/or physically:

Alex, a new guy joined in sparring tonight. Gary and David made sure he knew what was expected from him by telling him before he went in the ring that 'we take it steady at first, get to know the level everyone's happy with'. As he was a pretty big guy, Gary went in with him first. *He seems to do this with newcomers to make sure they don't come in swinging, if they do, he will give them a slapping and slow them down.* Tonight it seemed like this chap got the idea, after a couple of rounds it was like he had been sparring with us for weeks. (Field notes, 4/5/2010 – emphasis added)

The established group had developed a very effective means of maintaining a status quo within the boxing area (I will focus again on the established groups control of sparring practises in the following chapter). During, and after training rewards, encouragement and admonishments were readily handed out based on individual's performances in the ring. Frequently, members of the group were valorised for refusing to give up when they had taken good punches from someone with more experience. After an impromptu sparring session David told me, "You're a tough fucker, I though you were gonna have to take a knee after the body shot" (Field notes, 15/1/2011). Conversely, anyone who was perceived to have not given their all was castigated. Dave, who lacked focus at times, repeatedly received 'bollockings' of from the older, more experienced boxers:

Gary: For fucks sake kid, what's fucking up wiv ya na, you been smoking that shit again?

David: Yo ain't gonna get anyway just letting him hit ya, you'll get fucking hurt like that.

Gary: Don't bother coming if ya gonna be like again.  
[Dave sat in silence with his head down] (Field notes, 11/4/2010)

In this way, norms associated with the respectable working classes were sedimented as dominant in the boxing area of Freedom Gym.

As previously described, the boxing area is partially segregated from the rest of the gym, this combines with the small number who regularly use the space, to create a relatively tightly-knit established group. The limited space around the ring gives ample opportunity for this group to develop its cohesion. The familiarity that this close proximity creates almost forces regulars to begin developing relationships based initially on the exchange of polite greeting gestures. The regular physicality of sparring sessions also aids the development of this group's bond with each other. Boxing, in comparison to the body-building and weight lifting activities at the gym, provides plenty of opportunities for the sharing of emotionally and physically significant experiences. It seems then, that the space around, and the action inside, the ring are well suited to encourage the development of the cohesion, integration and subsequent group charisma the Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]) have previously described.

Due to its confined location, the boxing area also provides a closed space within which outsiders can display their credentials (or lack thereof) for entry into this established group. The limited number of regular boxers who take part in the established group's sparring sessions meant that anyone who displayed basic boxing skills, and the right mentality, was encouraged to attend these sessions and given the opportunity to gain entry into the established group:

Dave: Who's your mate then?

Chris: Burt?

Dave: Yeah, he seems like a sound lad, ain't he up for joinin' in, you've done a bit [of sparring] wi' him ain't ya?

Chris: He's a good lad, I think he's a bit nervous about gerrin' in with us though.

Dave: He'd be alreet, he looks [like he uses] proper [technique], *look at him snappin' that jab out. Fucking get him down* [to our sparring sessions] *mate, we need lads like him to be involved.* (Field notes, 14/5/2010 – emphasis added)

For Dave, Burt's technically-sound jab was sufficient evidence to suggest he is 'sound' and that he should be taking part in the regular sparring sessions. The established group also reaffirm consensus about norms and values by discussing outsiders who ventured into the boxing area:

Gary: Did you see that lot in here when we arrived, no gloves [they had punching bag gloves on with only minimal padding], no gum shields, just going at each other.

Ernest: Bunch o'thugs, I've seen 'em about a few times, its just a matter of time till one of 'em loses a tooth or something.

Chris: Who are they?

Gary: All them local lads that come and fuck around.

Ernest: *They wouldn't know a jab if it hit them in the face* [all laugh]. (Field notes 11/11/2010 – emphasis added)

This group of teenagers were repeatedly discussed as a prime example of 'rough' sections of the working classes that did not 'get' the underlying ethical, moral and physical lessons of boxing. Such groups and individuals were strictly excluded from the established group. In this way, the 'respectable' values and norms, of the established group were maintained and seldom, if ever, challenged.

Through their adoption of norms framed by the SVMC, and/or backgrounds, occupations, and links to local estates, the established group have a perceived set of commonalities. These links form the basis of bonds that were forged through their continued participation in regular sparring sessions. This integration and cohesion enables them to shape the social landscape of Freedom Gym's boxing area far more readily than individuals who occupy relatively outsider position in the social hierarchy. In this way, the significance that they find in values associated with respectable working class subjectivity can be seen to largely frame the tone of boxing at Freedom Gym.

#### **4.16 Summary**

Within this chapter, a broad but partial picture of Freedom Gym has been sketched out. I have described the ways that an overarching frame shapes mythologies, narratives and images connected to Freedom Gym. This was followed by a discussion of certain local dynamics. By moving from the general to the particular, the aim was to provide an understanding of wide and local frames of gym life. There is evidence to suggest that notions, informed by the SVMC, shape experiences at Freedom Gym in numerous ways. This over-arching frame allows users, and non-users, of the gym to make predictions and judgements about the 'types' of people and activities they might find at Freedom Gym. Based on this knowledge, decisions were made as to whether the gym was viewed in a positive or negative light. In this way, the gym's narrow demographic was generated and maintained; here, those who

positively identify with perceptions of gym life were more likely to find themselves attending. Regular users were then more likely to find significance in the activities that were stereotypically associated with Freedom Gym. This mutually reinforcing relationship was one means by which a general consensus about the 'correct' way to exercise and train was produced. In this way, subjectivities associated with traditional working class male identities dominate. Such positions resonate to a certain degree with the gym's location and appearance. Mythologies, narratives and images were viewed through this lens and were taken as further evidence supporting the notion of Freedom Gym as 'real' gym for 'real' men. This consensus was maintained despite the presence of phenomena that could be used to subvert this dominant position.

In this chapter, I have also tried to describe, in some detail, the day-to-day world of Freedom Gym. By including ethnographic data about the boxing area and training sessions my aim was to provide a small window into some of the activities that were a regular part of gym life. Here, the goal was not simply to present a description. Rather, I have attempted wherever possible, to draw out the significance of this data in shaping gym experiences. Finally, the social hierarchy within the gym and boxing area was mapped out. The established group of boxers were crucial in shaping the dominant ways of thinking and behaving within the boxing area. Here, values and norms associated with the respectable working classes can be shown to hold a dominant position. As such, this subjectivity holds a key role in understanding the experiential observations and articulations that will be presented in this thesis. Although there is no claim to have accounted for all the aspects that may frame experiences at Freedom Gym, those elements that seemed to be the most significant have been discussed. Although masculinity has been a recurring theme through this chapter I have refrained from providing a detailed account in the interests of analytical clarity. In the following chapter, I will deal explicitly with the masculine framing of gym life.

## Chapter Five

### Masculinity and Freedom Gym – ‘It’s testosterone and that, int’it’

#### 5.0 Introduction

The preceding chapter referred to aspects of masculinity which frame life in Freedom Gym. Masculinity appears to be strongly associated with boxing generally, and with Freedom Gym in particular, therefore this chapter focuses on this connection in detail. Here, then, I examine the gym as a site for the production and reproduction of masculine habitus'. The aim is to further frame the experiences of violence that form the focus of this thesis, by exploring the masculinity component of the SVMC. In this regard, an outline will be drawn of the ways in which masculinity is constructed and experienced. It will be argued that the gym is a heterosexual male preserve in which female, lesbian, gay and transsexual identities are almost completely absent. Following this, an examination of images and notions of 'real' men will be conducted as a means of further understanding the masculine beliefs and aspirations that dominate the environment. To conclude, this chapter will examine some of the intricacies of the established (Elias & Scotson, 1965) boxers' masculine habitus.

#### 5.1 Masculine Frame

As discussed in Chapter five, knowledge informed by aspects of the SVMC acted as a frame for gym life. Within this male preserve, a set of core assumptions about the correct way to engage in gym action can be shown to have been accepted to a greater or lesser degree by the vast majority of gym users. Notions about masculinity were a key component of this frame. As Brod (1987; 195) argues, "men both form and are formed by their conditions, or as Marx put it, men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing." This is certainly the case in Freedom Gym, hence the following section will discuss, in detail, the typical ways that masculinity was discussed, thought about and experienced. The starting point is an understanding of the masculine values that have been found to be linked to other boxing environments, in Woodward's (2006; 2) words:

Boxing masculinities carry many of the features of traditional, hegemonic masculinity. It is a sport characterized by corporeal contact, courage, danger and in some cases violence, which might seem out of place in the contemporary world of change and fragmentation and the emergence of more ambiguous, less traditional gender

identities. One might also expect to find resistance to the challenge of new masculinities and strong ties to more traditional gendered identities.

Despite the previously described 'untraditional' status of Freedom Gym as existing somewhere between traditional and contemporary images of a gym, Woodward's description resonates with the environment encountered in this work. In what follows, this masculine space will be outlined and some of the ways in which gender is embodied in the actions and behaviours of regular users of the gym is described.

## **5.2 (Heterosexual) Male Preserve – 'Look, hit me you big faggot'**

The majority of sports have traditionally been male preserves (Connell, 1995; Dunning, 1986; Messner, 1992; Messner & Sabo, 1990). However, over the last 50 years there has been an observable equality shift resulting in increased participation by women in various sports (Hargreaves, 1994; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). This process of equalisation is far from complete; certain sports, teams, clubs and sub-cultures still maintain zones of clear male dominance. Freedom Gym is one such place. As briefly discussed in Chapter Four, women make up around 6% (n20) of the gym's regular users. This minority occupies an almost invisible position within the gym. On the rare occasions that I saw women in the gym, they tended to be observed in either the small, segregated, 'women only' space or using one of the machines in the cardio area. These two spaces are situated at opposite ends of the gym away from the central area that acted as a hub for (male dominated) gym life. During busy times, walking between these two spaces requires women to navigate past groups of loud, muscular, sweaty men:

I saw two girls scurrying like frightened mice from the cardio area into the women's only area tonight. They marched, single file, heads down, arms crossed, picking a path of least resistance around the groups of lads weight training. Lads that were resting tracked them with lecherous eyes, and winked and nodded to each other as they passed. They were like a pack of hungry wolves watching as its prey wanders away into the distance (Field notes, 22/7/2010).

My note taking, although rather dramatic, does attempt to catch the stark nature of the male/female divide at the gym. While men train, chat, laugh, stretch, and generally dominate the centre of the gym, women and girls that do dare to enter this space subtly pick their way around them before disappearing into the 'women only' area.

Of the regular female users, only two can be said to hold a position of any visibility within the gym's social hierarchy. Katie, a 25-year-old mother of two, who sports a shaved head and competes as an MMA fighter, works at the gym part-time as a fitness instructor. During interviews Katie was described as 'one of the lads' on numerous occasions. Wendy, a 35-year-old mother, regularly trains in the gym and has been in a relationship with Carlos (gym manager) for a year or so. As Carlos' girlfriend, Wendy is partially removed from the objectification that is forced upon other women. The respect and deference that is shown towards Carlos extends to some degree towards Wendy. The acceptance of Katie and Wendy within the gym is the 'exception that proves the rule'. Katie's link to fighting, shaved head and position as a staff member, and Wendy's link to Carlos, enables them to exist in the gym in their own right. Katie bats away sexualised 'banter' from gym regulars, while Wendy is never the target of such comments.

Although women (except Katie and Wendy) were conspicuous by their absence within the gym, discussions about women and girls were plentiful. Such conversations tended to fall into one of two broad categories: women were either objectified as sex objects or placed on a pedestal of virtue. The same men who described in warm terms spending time with their daughters, sisters and mothers would also describe, in graphic detail, sexual and abusive experiences with women. There was an unspoken separation that more or less placed women into these two mutually exclusive groups. During my time in the field, this line was seldom crossed, as the men in the gym knew not to even approach it. On one side of the line is the idea of women as objects of sexual desire and domination, the physical, emotional and sometimes intellectual (which tells a story in itself as most of these men do not consider themselves to be intelligent) inferiors to men. On the other side are daughters, sisters, mothers, grandmothers, girlfriends and sometimes wives, who are discussed in respectful, reverential, and at times romantic, language. The boundaries between these groups are clear, the main differential being the presence or absence of a caring relationship between the female(s) in questions and one, or more, of the men involved in the conversation. During a brief chat, Paul described how he used the reverential position reserved for mothers to play a joke on Patrick:

Paul: I sketched Patrick out the other day right, fucking funneh man.

Chris: What you been doin' to him na?

Paul: We was talking about sumink' and somehow he mention me mum right, I was all like, 'You fucking talking about me mum ya dick head?' And ya should o'seen him, he shit him'sen. He was squirming like he'd just been caught nicking shit. I kept it goin' for a bit, but then I cracked up.

Chris: That's mean man.

Paul: Na, I was just fucking with him. He'd never say nowt about me mum, he knows her, she's made him sandwiches in the past when we was going to college together. He don't need no more sandwiches though [Pats his stomach to show he thought that Patrick is a bit overweight] (Field notes, 17/11/2010).

Paul's assumption that Patrick would never consider talking about his mother in anything but respectful terms, is a function of the unwritten rule that the discussion of certain significant females was off limits. In addition to women and girls that share an emotional link to one of the gym users, young girls and elderly women were generally absent from conversations. Young girls; physically immature, presumed to be pre-sixteen and sexually inactive, were shielded from objectification and sexualisation by assumptions about the need of men to be protective of such 'helpless' females. However, the line between 'too young' and 'just old enough' was blurred. There was some confusion as to whether this boundary was defined by age or physical maturity:

Eddy<sup>32</sup>: What yo lot looking at? [Eddy shouts over to Darren<sup>33</sup> and Ben who are looking into the women's only area.]

Ben: Sumink you're too old for.

Eddy: So are you, *ya fucking paedos*.

[After a few minutes, Ben comes over.]

Ben: What you shoutin' for?

Eddy: You fucking pervin' on them girls.

Ben: They're alright, look at 'em.

Eddy: *They might look alright to yo, but when you've got a daughter you might start looking different at underage girls.*

Ben: They ain't under age, if they in 'ere dressed like that [they had tight exercise clothes on] n'looking like that, then are fair game I say.

Eddy: You need to sort yourself out, have a bit of respect for women (Field notes 18/8/2010, emphasis added).

This was one of the very rare occasions when there was a dispute about where the line between women as objects and women as virtuous was contested. This was partially down to the different subjective positions of Eddy (a father and husband) and Dave (a single man in his early twenties who likes to 'play the field') and partially the haziness of the boundaries between which young girls are, and which young girls are not, legitimate targets for sexualised objectification.

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<sup>32</sup> Eddy was 37, he worked as a freelance striking (kick boxing, boxing, Thai boxing) coach in various gyms in the midlands. Depending on who he was coaching at the time we would either be in the gym regularly or no often at all. When we was around he tended to upset some of the more regular members through his often outspoken comments.

<sup>33</sup> Darren was 33, he worked as a bouncer in the city. He had his doorman license revoked during my time in the field and had to work cash-in-hard where he could. We had some amazingly vivid chats about some of the incidents he had to deal with in his line of work. I hope such accounts can form the bases of a piece of work examining the exciting significance of such a physical job.

Generally, there was a high degree of consensus over which women were to be objectified.

The following chat is typical of the language used to discuss such females:

Gary: You know why I'm no good, [in training today] it's 'cus I was fucking this morning, always ruins me I tell ya. Birds man, they're no fucking good for ya trainin'. [It is not clear whether Gary was having sex with his wife or another woman.]

Dave: Tell me about it, *I've always got slag's doin' me head in*. If ya fucking 'em they're knackerin ya out, if ya not, ya spend all ya time try to [have sex with them].

Gary: *And then you get bits like that wondering around* [he motions over to the ladies only area where two young, attractive women are chatting] here and watching them instead of thinking about the next round.

Chris: Good job were not in a gym where there's loads of birds then aye? You'd have no chance.

Gary: Fucking hell *imagine that, if we had fit slags wondering around all the while, you'd get a fucking hard on while ya fightin'*. [All laugh.]

Dave: Trust you to get a hard on while you're fighting you *big puff*. [sic]

Gary: Fuck off; you know what I'm on about (Field notes, 8/4/2010 - emphasis added).

Here we find the almost absent female body discussed as little more than a sexualised, annoyance. The interchange is concluded by Dave questioning Gary's sexual persuasion. This assumed heterosexuality is a further dimension of this male preserve. It is difficult to say with any certainty what proportion of the gym were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual (LGBT). However, heterosexuality was the *only* accepted form of sexuality within Freedom Gym. LGBT sexualities were completely absent in any overt sense. The terms 'poof', 'gay', 'fudge packer', 'homo', 'queer' and 'lezza' were commonly employed in a variety of ways, all negative:

I was watching Darren do a session with John, a novice bouncer, he was teaching him a few 'techniques for disabling threats', a brilliant euphemism for causing maximum damage with as little effort as possible. I lost track of how many times he called him gay. Part of the conversation went something like this:

Darren: Don't be such a sack o'shit, how do you think ya gonna get on if someone's hitting you for real? Ya can't be hiding away like that, ya need to start getting used to getting hit, so you can hit 'em back. *Look, hit me you big faggot*. [Pause] Come on.

John: Jesus Daz, giz us a break.

Darren: Come on.

[John hit Darren, he takes it in the face and moved to the side ready to return a punch.]

Darren: See, it don't hurt and when ya used to it you can just smack 'em back harder, you got to keep your eyes open. Look at the fucking size on ya, and ya fucking acting like some soft lad out o'da Red Rooms [a local gay bar] (Field notes, 11/7/2010 - emphasis added).

The assumption here is that gay men are physically weak and lack the ability to defend themselves physically. Although it is hard to give any quantitative evidence to suggest that lesbians, gays and transsexuals are excluded from Freedom Gym, there is clearly a strong

resistance to such sexualities. We might expect such overt negativity, and often times hatred, in an environment in which violence is an everyday occurrence, to result in a suppression of any behaviour that might be stereotypically linked to homosexuality and/or bisexuality (Hekma 1998; Kimmell, 1994; Messner, 1992). Within the established-outsider figuration discussed in Chapter Five, such identities were firmly considered to be part of the 'outside'. Indeed, opposition to behaviours associated with either female or gay identities were a means by which the established group defined its own norms and values. In this way, "exclusion and stigmatisation of the outsiders by the established group were thus powerful weapons used by the latter to maintain their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping others firmly in their place" (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]; xviii).

It has been argued that Freedom Gym is a heterosexual male preserve. Women are hypersexualised and turned into objects or placed on a pedestal of virtue and regarded as requiring male protection. LGBT identities are absent from the gym except in the casual and abusive use of homophobic language as a means of highlighting behaviours that are deemed to transgress the accepted norms and values that dominate gym life. What then does this mean in terms of the framing of experiences that make up gym life? The exclusion of feminine and non-heterosexual identities results in a social landscape in which only a few subjective positions can be considered legitimate. Combined with the discussion in Chapter Four concerning the prevalence of people from the lower classes at Freedom Gym, we can start to build up a picture of an established-outsider figuration within which working-class, heterosexual, male identities more or less dominate. This is not to say that there is no contestation in this process, but that there is a clear dominance of such subjective positions. Notwithstanding the relatively high degree of homogeneity that is present at Freedom Gym, on occasion I observed struggles for dominance and subversion of the hegemonic. Such a dynamic process is to be expected and resonates with Elias' (Elias, 1978; Elias & Scotson, 1965) conception of power, which characterises *all* social processes. This contested nature will be further considered as this chapter progresses, after a further exploration of the manner in which the heterosexual male preserve shapes life at Freedom Gym.

### 5.3 A Place for a 'Real' Man

In Chapter Four, the ways in which Freedom Gym was believed to be 'more real' than other gyms were outlined. There was a sense within the gym, that such a gritty, urban and uncompromising place could only be occupied by 'real' men. Indeed, the lack of female and 'other', presumably 'less real', habitus' and identities supports this notion. This hierarchical understanding of different forms of gendered identity was one of the means by which the established group "look[ed] upon themselves as the 'better' people, as endowed with a kind of group charisma, with a specific virtue shared by all its members and lacked by the others." (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]; xvi). In this way, ideas about the 'realness' of masculine identities were intimately tied to the established-outsider figuration that was discussed in Chapter Four. What then, in this instance, are believed to be the attributes that mark out a 'real' man? By exploring this question, further light will be shed on the norms and values that dominated Freedom Gym.

The idealised images of 'men' that dominated Freedom Gym were shaped by notions linked to the SVMC. In this setting, with its strong connections to working class communities, as one would expect, were a set of masculine identities that resonate with the core values associated with such groups. Here we find the image of a 'real' man to be: heterosexual, hard working, determined, physically capable of protecting his family and friends, relatively emotionless except in private with female family members, almost always in control of his tendencies to be violent and aggressive and fundamentally fair and reasonable. This is inline with other gendered landscapes that have previously been described in boxing environments (De Garis, 2000; Early, 1994; Oates, 1987; Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2001; Woodward, 2006) The gym, as a heterosexual male preserve, is a place where such notions of masculinity can exist relatively unchallenged. Indeed, such notions are components of the established members group cohesion and charisma (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]). Images that could be interpreted as displaying 'real' men are on the television screens, posters and adverts that litter the gym. The framing of such images by the SVMC ensures that a partial consensus is reached as to their meaning (as outlined in Chapter Four). Muscle-bound men walk around the gym, others sport flattened noses and 'war' wounds, these bodies and images combine to

form symbolic proof that these men are indeed 'real' in the sense previously described. Conversations and chats were rife with references that resonate with this picture of what constitutes a 'real' man. After ensuring that I was aware of his 'moral' side, Burt described his willingness to physically impose himself: "Listen, I'm a fucking good guy right, I'm not a dick to no-one who dun't deserve it, but you got to be able to use it [violence and aggression] sometimes, I'm not about to get mugged off by some chump, I'm gonna get in first and then that's that." In an interview, Dan told me about being able to protect his family:

Chris: Is it [being able to street fight] ever about, you know, looking after your family and stuff?

Dan: In my dad's day it was, not so much now, you can't do nothing now [to someone who threatens your family] 'cus you'll get dun [by the police] as well, even if people are robbin' ya, fuck that, if someone comes inta me 'ause 'am gonna 'ave 'em.

Chris: Is that important to you, to be able to protect your family?

Dan: Course it is (Dan interview).

Although the threat to his family was deemed to be minimal, it was a given that Dan would put his body on the line by tackling anyone that threatened them, this also included potentially sacrificing his freedom if the police were to get involved. Here, then, an essential part of being a 'real man' at Freedom Gym was a physical prowess, the ability to act on ones environment and to impose ones will (Connell, 1985). In this way, Dave equated an inability to effectively use the body with a weak female identity:

Ya got to do somefink, too many of my mates think they're bad but they don't train or know anything about fighting. How do they think they'll be able to look after themselves if they don't get down a gym and learn some shit. *They're deluded man, thinking they can be the boss man when they punch like little girls.* I couldn't walk about not knowing I can get stuck in if I 'ave to, fucking bang some lads out if they're getting to big for their boots (Dave, Field notes, 27/1/2011 - emphasis added)

Phil also equated the notion of being a 'real man' with this physicality:

Chris: I get a sense that people think Freedom is a place for real men, what do you think about that?

Phil<sup>34</sup>: I think most, if not all, of the guys that come down here can look after themselves. Or at least they think they can, or they wanna learn how to, and like get big or something so they look like they can (Phil interview).

Despite his initial assertions about members of the gym it was apparent that Phil believed the majority of men at Freedom Gym to be frauds. For him, the 'bulky, slow, meat-heads' were displaying a form of hyper-physicality which did not actually equate to the hard work, dedication and skill level that was essential to be involved in a fighting sport. As such, they could not be considered 'real' men. These contested notions of masculinity will be returned to

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<sup>34</sup> Phil was 28, he was head doorman at two different bars in the city during my time in the field. Originally he was from Leeds, after starting door work while in the city for university he carried on in that career after he graduated. He took up boxing and MMA as a means staying in shape and increasing his ability to look after himself while at work.

in a later section of this chapter. For now, it suffices to say that, despite some contestations as to the best ways to be a 'real' man, there is a majority consensus as to *what* generally defined a 'real' man. The ability to protect oneself, family and friends was a key component of this. This consensus was built upon various evidence, not least of which is the belief that there is a naturalness to such gendered identities.

#### **5.4 Naturalness of Masculinity – 'Every man's born wiv 'em kid'**

Freedom Gym's status as a heterosexual male preserve continually reinforced notions of what it meant to be a man within the gym. Without a sustained challenge to such hegemonic assumptions, the status quo was repeatedly reinforced during my time in the field. Regular users of the gym found further support for this knowledge in the belief that being a 'real' man was an inherently natural trait. Connell (1995; 45) has argued a similar point; "true masculinity is always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body". Manliness was believed to be found residing somewhere inside 'real' men. In this way, the habituated nature of behaviours that were framed by aspects of the SVMC was hidden from view. As such, this socially learned habitus, in the guise of 'natural' behaviours, formed evidence from which hierarchical social relationships could be generated and maintained. As Mennell (1994; 177) reminds us:

The very taken-for-granted quality of habitus in this sense makes it particularly potent in conflicts between groups, for the component of the habitus of one's own group seem to be inherent, innate, 'natural', and their absence if difference in the habitus of other groups seems correspondingly 'unnatural' and reprehensible.

Within the established group, assumptions about the naturalness of 'real men' formed a part of the means by which these men confirmed their own identities in relation to others. This was a "recourse of power which enabled them to assert their superiority and to cast a slur on" outsider groups and individuals (Elias & Scotson, 1994 [1965]; xix). A post-training chat with Ernest revealed his thoughts about the limited potential for the gym to produce the traits of a 'real' man:

Chris: Do you think boys can learn how to be men down here?

Ernest: It's not that simple, 'cus it's got to be in them, this place will help it come out, but if it's not in there in the first place it don't matter what they get taught in here.

Chris: What's got to be in there?

Ernest: [Pause] You can't polish a shit right, same with kids, there's got to be a good man inside waiting to come out (Field notes, 25/22/2010).

Gary had a similar understanding:

Chris: Do you think you learn those traits or are you born with them?

Gary: *It's testosterone and that int'it, every man's born wiv 'em kid. Who don't wanna look after their wife and kids?*

Chris: So it's a part of being a man?

Gary: *That's our job ain't it, we weren't put on this earth to bake cakes and do washin' was we? You g'back to when we was huntin' and gatherin', it's the men what do all the fightin' ain't it. It's in ya genes youth.*

Chris: So, you can't learn it?

Gary: You got to learn it, otherwise why would we be in the mirror shadowin' [shadow boxing] all the while. What I'm sayin' is, it's in there already, but you have to work hard to get it out. Every man's got it in 'em it's just that some're lazy and get carried away with train spottin' or something and never do the training ya need to be any good (Gary interview - emphasis added).

The logical inconsistency of a natural explanation for behaviours that require training, hard work and determination was not missed by Karl and Ernest. Thinking on their feet, they were able to maintain a biological basis for masculinity, despite their acknowledgements of the need to learn certain of its features. For Larry, there was a naturalness to the qualities that helped him succeed in boxing:

Chris: So, why do you think you have ended up boxing?

Larry: Err, I don't know really, I always wanted to do it.

Chris: Where do you think that came from?

Larry: I guess it's just something I've always had in me, I mean, I guess I'm just suited to it. 'Cus like, I've always been dead determined to do stuff and 'cus I work hard at things like.

Chris: Is that something you learned or something you were born with?

Larry: Erm, I'd say you're either like that or not, I've got mates that are happy doin' nothing, I've always wanted to make something of myself and I like working hard (Larry interview).

Here, he believed that determination and hard work elevated him above his friends who did not have such qualities. The power of these natural explanations comes forth when their legitimising effect is considered. If by 'natural' people assume a biologically determined set of behaviours, such traits can then be considered uncontrollable, unchangeable, unchallengeable and thus legitimate in some form. This notion of naturalness is a powerful resource that is repeatedly used within Freedom Gym to 'prove' the validity of dominant norms and values. In this way, it can explain and justify a variety of men's actions. 'Real' men are then 'naturally' real. Notwithstanding the necessity of working hard to fully realise these 'natural' capabilities, the men in Freedom Gym believed they had a set of qualities that were innate and even God-given. Indeed, the determination and dedication needed to fulfil this natural fate was at times considered to be an innate power possessed by these men. These narratives of superiority were a means by which inter- and intra-gender hierarchies were gained, maintained and, at times, challenged. In this way, powerful, heterosexual,

masculinities dominated the established-outsider figuration that was discovered at Freedom Gym.

Notions about 'real' man formed a central theme in the habitus the men. Such knowledge was not only used as an intellectual device to understand and legitimise action in the gym, it also framed the lived experiences of mimetic violence that are the focus of this thesis. The very sensations that were attached to the action inside and around the ring were in part a reification of these naturalistic narratives. Embodied evidence supporting such notions was immediate, powerful and enjoyable. I will further explore the intertwining of this habitual framing of behaviours and violent experiences in Chapter Six. For now, it suffices to say that this natural understanding of behaviours was intimately tied to the emotional and sensuous lives of these men.

To summarise thus far, it has been argued that Freedom Gym is a more or less working class, heterosexual male preserve. As such, a narrow definition of what are considered legitimate masculine behaviours frames gym life. Within these tight notions of legitimacy, images of 'real' men are produced. These idealised versions of masculinity were believed by the established group of boxers to be embodied, to various degrees, by men who train at Freedom Gym. Traits associated with being a 'real' man were constructed as being natural and thus innate. There was a mutual reinforcement between this naturalness and the gym's position as a heterosexual male preserve. In effect, Freedom Gym was believed by the men who attended it to be a 'real' gym for 'real' men, a place to express 'natural' masculine tendencies. Symbolic proof of this was constructed in the absence of women, lesbians, gays and transsexuals. Within this established-outsider figuration stigmatisation of 'alternative' identities was a means of defining the norm and maintaining exclusion of the 'other'. Habitual behaviours were contoured and shaped by these established norms. So far, this study has presented an almost homogenous conception of the masculine frame of gym life. Indeed, the social landscape at Freedom Gym is one in which traditional hegemonic masculinities do dominate and social change was resisted. In what follows, this general picture will provide the basis for an exploration of some of the finer aspects of the masculine identities discovered at the gym. Here, we will find the contestation, plurality, fluidity and complexity that, it has been

argued, characterise embodied gendered identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and social interdependencies more generally.

### **5.5 Boxer's Versions of Masculinity**

It has been argued above that a set of overarching masculine norms formed a key component of the dominant subjective position within Freedom Gym. At first sight, behaviours, ways of thinking and conversations, seemed to be more or less shaped by these traditional hegemonic masculine values. With time, as my position within the research environment became more established and involved, insights that added a layer of depth to this picture became gradually more apparent. As relationships with the men at Freedom Gym, especially those who frequented the boxing area, developed, a softening of the hard-line, masculine, discourses, images and ideals, that had previously been encountered, began to be seen. Before discussing the nuanced, lived realities that exist within this traditional frame, some of the characteristics associated with the masculinities found in the boxing area at Freedom Gym will be outlined.

### **5.6 Established Boxers' Notions of Masculinity**

The values and norms of masculinity that frame Freedom Gym are manifest in quite specific ways by those that regularly use the boxing area. These men tend to find significance in a subjectivity that has been associated with the respectable working classes (Dunning *et al.*, 1988). Other authors have argued that such a position resonates with boxing subcultures (Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2006). As such, it was no surprise to find these respectable working class values shaping life in the boxing area at Freedom Gym. The established group of boxers had generated and maintained a consensus as to what were legitimate ways for men to think and behave. This masculine boxing habitus varied in small but crucial ways from the embodied identities displayed throughout the rest of the gym. The activities that these men engage in combined with traditional boxing narratives to generate unique experiences. As a means of outlining this subjectivity, the established boxers' notions about sparring and the body will be explored.

### **5.7 Boxing Bodies – ‘you’ve got to be lean, lean so you can be fast’**

As previously discussed, the ability to look after ones self, family and friends was a key component of the masculine values that dominate gym life. One resource for 'proving' such capabilities was the body. As Winlow (2001; 98) rhetorically asks, "What better way to depict masculinity than by encapsulating it in the body?" For the men who inhabit the boxing area, the large and muscular bodies that the majority of gym users either had or aspired to have, were a poor symbolic substitute for the fast and lean boxing body. Bodybuilders' bodies were believed to possess power, but were not capable of functionally employing this power in an effective manner. These big, heavy bodies were described either as being a social display of power, which did not necessarily equate to any real physical or masculine ability, or as a cumbersome hindrance that reduced the owners' chances of effective attack or defence in violent encounters. This, then, was a body built for symbolic violence and aggression. The boxer's body displays less, if any, overt signs of the violent skill of which it is capable, especially in comparison to the steroid-enhanced size of bodybuilders upon which a symbolically violent hegemonic masculinity is writ large. Such notion were not missed by the established boxers, who enjoyed reminding their muscle-bound friends about their violent skills:

Eddy: You lot make me laugh, [nods at Neil] pumpin' all ya fucking weight, and for what? You couldn't even get near me and I'm half ya size.

Neil<sup>35</sup>: You wanna come closer and say that then?

[Eddy, with a wry smile on his face, walked over to Neil, but stayed just out of range.]

Eddy: I bet you couldn't even hit me while I'm this close.

Neil: Ah, whatever, you wanna tek them little guns o'yours and get back ova there [motions towards the back corner of the boxing area] I'll bloody flatten you if I 'ad to.

Eddy: Yeah, yeah, they all say that, then they get popped with a one, two, three before they've even swung a punch (Field notes, 4/3/2010).

When building the boxer's body speed and skill are favoured over size and strength. Throughout my time in the field, I was involved in many conversations in which regular users of the boxing area would disparage the "fat slow 'roid heads" (Dean, field notes, 18/5/2010) for being physically inferior. The established boxers bodily aspirations were clear:

Chris: So, boxing keeps you in shape then?

David: Yeah, nothing like it for that youth.

Gary: Course it does, keeps ya healthy an'all, when was the last time you seen a boxer all fat like that lot? [Gary nods at the rest of the gym.]

Chris: What's the best body for boxing?

David: Ya get all different sorts, and you just fit ya style [of boxing] around ya body shape, but *you've got to be lean, lean so you can be fast.*

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<sup>35</sup> Neil was 40, he was one of the owners of the gym, he lived in a relatively affluent part of the city but he had grown up near the gym. Although he never boxed, favouring bodybuilding, he would often come over to the boxing area to engaging in banter and catch up with some of the gym he knew well.

Gary: That's the key, you can't be fast and heavy, you know what its like doing round after round, you can't do that and carry loads of extra weight, well ya can, but you're at a disadvantage straight away (Field notes, 15/8/2010 - emphasis added).

I'm big enough already, the last fink I want is to get bigger. I fink boxing helps me stay lean and quick. I'm strong enough 'cus o'doin' weight when I was younger, I just need to be healthy n'stuff. I don't wanna be one of these big lumps that can't move around, look at 'em all, they fink they're healthy, but really all that shit they put in demselves will just kill 'em eventually. (Dion interview)

These lean, fast and skilful bodies were not simply a by-product of boxing; they were also a reason for engaging in boxing. Patrick (Field notes, 3/4/2010) told me; "I need to get in shape, and boxing is the best way to do it." His friend and training partner, Paul, enjoyed his boxing body:

Paul: I've always been skinny, but since I've been boxing I've got proper abbs and I'm getting bigger as well.

Chris: What like muscley?

Paul: Yeah a bit, not like dead big or owt, just filling out I guess.

Chris: You think that's down to the boxing then?

Paul: Yeah man, it makes you fiiiit [Paul pulls a bodybuilders pose and we both laugh.] (Paul interview).

Some of the older boxers held boxing responsible for their ability to maintain a physic considered to be healthy. David, told me about his changing body:

I ain't worried about my weight like some bird, but ya notice when ya get a bit chubby over Christmas and that, or if you cant train for a bit. But all I do it get my ass back in here, couple of months of proper training again and I'll be in shape, I don't have to think about it, it just happens (David interview)

In the boxing area, the lean body is king, excess muscle was regarded in almost the same negative way as excess fat; a hindrance to performance, a hindrance to masculinity. This is not to suggest that everyone who boxed was lean and/or fast, far from it. Rather, the ability to protect oneself, family and friends was thought to be encapsulated in a functional body as opposed to a symbolically violent body. The size and shape of bodybuilders' bodies was repeatedly discussed in negative terms. This tension, between idealised images of bodies, was the source of much gym 'banter' and a means by which the established boxers legitimated their version of embodied masculinity. A similarly contested process occurred around the legitimate means of sparring in Freedom Gym.

## **5.8 Masculinity and Sparring – 'Real men can control their shit'**

The established group of boxers at Freedom Gym built their relationships with one and other around a belief in a similar set of respectable working class, masculine values, links to local

estates and areas, and through regular sparring sessions. Through the physical and psychological challenges and liminal experiences (Turner, 1969) that sparring engenders, this group develop an embodied knowledge of each other's willingness and abilities to engage in violence. For Wacquant (1992; 242), such sparring illustrates the "codified and collective nature of pugilistic violence". Within Freedom Gym these experiences were tightly regulated by knowledge of the 'right' way to spar:

Chris: Right, so, 'cus there's no coach about, I sometimes wonder how everyone knows the right way to spar, and why it never seems to get out of hand?

David: Well, there's a few of us who know what the crack is, we've done a bit at other clubs, and most people know what it's about.

Chris: What's the right way then?

David: *It's about working together, not trying to beat each other up, you learn together. That's why we touch gloves before and after, it's a mark of respect.*

Chris: How do you know when someone isn't sparring properly, and what do you do about it?

David: Ya see it in 'em, ya see the red mist come over 'em, they're not thinking about technique or movement, their thinking about hittin' ya.

Chris: How do you get them to go about it in the right way?

David: Ah, well there's two ways, the best way, is what I would do if I was with you and stuff started getting a bit rough, I'd just tell ya, usually its just 'cus someone's getting a bit excited, so if you have a word it tends to settle stuff down. But if you didn't listen then the other way is to throw a bit of a dig in. Ya'know, if you catch me a bit, then I'll pop ya back, but you got to watch that, 'cus it can get out'a hand, I mean, it's best if it's someone who knows a bit, doing it with a novice, 'cus then if lessons have got to be learned its done in a *controlled* way (David interview - emphasis added).

For David, and the other established boxers, sparring was about control, safety, learning and enjoyment. The ability to control violence was a valued masculine trait. Such behaviour was constructed in opposition to the reckless use of violence that was thought to be the *raison d'être* of the 'thugs', 'skallys', 'psychos', or 'roid heads' that used the gym. These men and boys were perceived by the established boxers to be from the rougher sections of the working class, it was thought that they did not have the work ethic or moral values to succeed in boxing:

Chris: How come none of those lot (young lads from a local rough estate) ever train with us?

Dave: They don't know how to, all they do is come down and fuck about, you put them in the ring and they'll either try and knock your head off, or give up, no fucking middle ground with skallys (Field notes, 8/12/2011)

Chris: Those lads look like they need to learn how to spar!

Ben: Tell you what, I'd love to get one of them in here, learn 'em a thing or two. Not they'd even be able to understand the lesson, they'd just think I was tryin' to knock 'em out something, that's the problem with these rough lads, some of 'em can fight, but if they ain't been brought up right then there's no way they're gonna listen when someone tries to tell 'em the right way to go about stuff (Field notes, 15/12/2011).

Immediate gratification has at times been described as a feature of working class life (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1964). Within Freedom Gym, this trait was used as a means to differentiate between sections of the working classes. In effect, people who were deemed to have a rough, working class, masculine habitus were excluded from the established group due to their inability to defer their violent tendencies in favour of the controlled cooperation required in sparring.

In a masculine subculture where violence occupies a central position, we might expect to find the rejection of certain violences to be experienced as feminising. This was far from the case. Indeed, a 'real' man could use violence, but also had a tight control over this ability. This is similar to De Garis' (2000) discussion of gentlemanly sparring, in which cooperative sparring was experienced as the hallmark of a 'better' type of masculinity. These values of gentlemanly sparring were threatened from time-to-time. As described by David, these challenges were generally ironed out by a member of the established group 'avin' a word'. However, on one occasion a more dramatic course of action was deemed necessary. Adam, a Polish MMA fighter who had recently started training at the gym, had been particularly rough in a sparring session with Dave. The resulting black eye and the manner in which it had come about were the talk of the boxing area for a few days. Gary, a particularly vocal believer in the 'correct' way to spar (although this was not always apparent in his sparring, this will be discussed in a later section of the chapter), decided to engineer a physical lesson for Adam. During a regular sparring session, he sent Allie, a young professional boxer, in the ring with Adam:

Allie knocked a new Polish guy out in sparring tonight. It was brutal; I think this is the guy that Dave had said had given him a black eye. I was on the bags and I noticed the tone of the session change, Allie and the Polish guy were the only two in the ring and a small crowd had gathered. It was apparent from the first couple of exchanges that Allie could read the Polish guy's moves and counter whenever he liked. In the second round, Allie landed a big right hand and followed up like it was a proper fight. There was no sense that this was normal sparring. The Polish guy went down to the ground, he got up and insisted he was OK to carry on. The glazed look on his face and his wobbly legs told a different story. Allie piled back in and had him out on his feet against the ropes. Gary, who seemed to be the instigator in the whole thing, jumped inside the ring and had to drag Allie off him. I couldn't really believe my eyes, this was the first time I had seen any real malice during a training session at the gym (Field notes, 20/7/2010).

Over the next week, I did my best to investigate what had happened in this session and asked Gary for his take on things:

Gary: Them Polish lads don't know how to spar, it's like they just don't give a shit, every [sparring] session is a world championship [fight]. So if that's the only language they know you got to talk to 'em like that. That's why I sent him [Allie] in there with him. That calmed him down a bit.

Chris: So you were teaching him a lesson?

Gary: 'Spose so, he can't come down here hittin' people like he was doin' so we 'ad to do somethin'. *Remember you was asking me about real men? Well, real men can control their shit*, he was just bullyin' in the ring.

Chris: What happened at the end then, when Allie went after him?

Gary: That wasn't the best was it, he ain't been sparring much and he just got a bit carried away (Field notes, 27/7/2010 - emphasis added).

It seems then, that Gary had taken exception to Adam's relatively physical version of sparring. It was not clear whether there was a further motive for his actions, perhaps a dislike for Adam's Eastern European heritage, but what was certain was that there was a broad agreement from within the established group that this physical lesson was one that Adam needed to learn. What was seemingly ignored from this episode was Allie's lack of control in the session; he had to be dragged off Adam. In defending the established groups norms, Allie had been given temporary permission to transgress them. Ironically, Gary's intervention, on the grounds of maintaining the balance of sparring, lead to one of the most brutal rounds of boxing I had witness in the gym. At this time, Gary constructed himself as the preserver of the established moral order within Freedom Gym. However, his own ability to spar correctly was called into question some months later. After the birth of his first son, Gary attended the regular sparring sessions less and less. When he did come, he seemed to lack the focus and dedication that previously made him a central organising figure within the established group. His size and boxing ability combined with this change in attitude resulted in some particularly painful sparring sessions. After a particularly cooperative and enjoyable session in which Gary was not around, I had the following chat with Dave:

Dave: That were a good'un tonight, it's [sparring] good with David n' Danny, 'cus they know so much, you learn just by being in there with 'em, like, its good with Gary, but he ain't boxing no more, so it just a bit of a fuck about, he ain't in there to learn, and if ya smack him, he'll spend the rest of the time tryin' to take ya head off. [Pause] I don't mind that like, its good sometimes, you know me, I like a good scrap, but I'm still fightin' so I wanna get better not such throw down all the while.

Chris: I feel ya mate, it's hard sometimes when he starts messing around.

Dave: When he's not taking it seriously he starts slacking off, and then you catch him and it's like [pause] it's like a macho thing then, he thinks he's got to prove he's top dog so he starts swinging. Ya end up coming out a o'sparrin' with bells in ya 'ed.

(Dave interview).

Through such conversations and physical lessons, the established group maintain their understanding of the correct way of sparring and, by extension, of being a 'real' man. Excluding, and berating those who could not 'control their shit' helped to crystallise the

dominant notion of masculinity in the boxing area. Here, then, the established-outsider figuration intertwines with notions of respectable working class masculinities and traditional narratives of boxing to contour behaviours, bodies, and the experiences of men at Freedom Gym.

### **5.9 Other Masculinities in the Boxing Area**

As previously highlighted, there is a majority consensus as to the correct ways of behaving within the boxing area at Freedom Gym. This subjectivity is framed by knowledge that has its roots in the SVMC. Crucial in this regard are values associated with respectable working class masculinities. As has been highlighted, the established group of boxers define what is possible, permissible and pleasurable, to some degree, in opposition to the stereotypical characteristics of 'lesser' masculinities. There were, however, 'other' embodied masculine identities that do not resonate with certain aspects of the dominant subjectivity. These positions were not denigrated to the same way as homosexual or rough working class masculinities. In this respect, we might consider them to be marginalised, but somewhat complicit, masculine identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These men may not fully accept all the ways in which values and norms of the established group were performed but their habitus did not clash, to the same degree, as did other identities within the gym. The social fault lines of age and boxing ability, along which some of these differences were constructed, will briefly be described followed by an examination of the established group's dominant narrative about the cooperative nature of sparring. It will be suggested that the norms and values of the established group do not necessarily match the lived experiences of sparring at Freedom Gym. Rather than control and cooperation, aspects of physical and masculine domination, as previously highlighted by de Garis (2000), could be considered to be central parts of such experiences. In this way, action in the ring could be seen to challenging what I have described as the dominant masculine values in Freedom Gym.

### **5.10 Age – 'Fuck it! Why am I botherin' with this still?'**

Willingness to engage in challenging sparring sessions, where participants would push their physical and mental abilities, was valued by the established group. Excuses of tiredness, minor injury, or lateness arriving to sessions were generally met with jibes questioning the

person's determination, commitment, masculinity and sexuality. However, such comments were generally withheld when an older member of the group decided against sparring or wanted to finish the session early. With age and experience came a different set of notions about what it meant to be a man engaging in boxing. David and Ernest were the most senior members of the established group who regularly took part in sparring. They both had similar understandings about what their age meant in terms of their masculine identities and training at Freedom Gym:

Ernest: I love it right, I bloody love it, I just wish I'd taken it up a few years ago, I would'a loved to 'ave 'ad a fight, but you can only do some much as you get older. Ya see, I'm not like you going in there to knock seven shades of shit off each other, I just wanna keep fit and have a laugh, get away from the wife an'all [Laughs] (Field notes, 7/10/2010).

David: I've paid my dues [pause] sometimes I just wanna do a bit o'body, 'cus I come out of a [full sparring] session with ringing in me ears and I think "fuck it, why am I botherin' with this still?" I'm only here for the craic, I've got kids waiting for me at home. It all changes when you're married and there's kids involved. You have to start looking after ya'sen 'cus people rely on ya (David interview).

Due to commitments and responsibilities away from the gym, these two men, and others of similar age and experience, removed themselves from some of the rougher (e.g. hard punches and displays of aggression) aspects of sparring. The established group were respectful and supportive of their decisions not to put their bodies 'on the line'. A key aspect of these older men's versions of masculinity was a recognition of their physical vulnerabilities. Where younger members of the group generally seemed happier to sacrifice their body in pursuit of enjoyment and mastery, these older men tended to refrain from such risky action. As such, their masculine subjectivities were shaped to maintain a logical understanding of themselves as 'real' men who chose to avoid the physicality of harder sparring. Here, then, knowing and respecting one's physical weaknesses, and the needs of dependents, was a sign of masculine strength for these men. As de Garis (2000, 102) has noted: "One possible reason why older boxers are likely to be less aggressive is an appreciation for pain and injuries. Veteran boxers often have experienced injuries during their boxing careers and may subsequently develop sympathy for others". These men certainly had a greater respect for the damage that sparring can do to the body. For myself and other members of the established group, adopting a similar position was not so easy.

Gary: What's up with you today you fanny?  
Chris: I dunno, I can't be arsed with it.

Gary: Don't fucking start with that shit, you can't expect to get fitter if you don't push hard. You got to ignore what your body says and just keep working, its all mind over matter (Field notes, 10/7/2010).

During training today, Rupert got a bollocking from Dave, it was pretty funny and he deserved it really as he was being a right lazy fucker:

How fucking old are you? Ya, sound like a fucking 50 year old, you should be in your fucking prime and look at ya, flaking out when it gets a bit 'ard. Come on lad, get stuck in, we at least need you to make up the numbers (Field notes, 11/3/2011)

As Patrick and I found out, you had to turn the right to take it easy in sparring. In both cases it was experienced members of the established group that enforced these norms. Questions were regularly asked of the younger boxers if they dropped out of a session sighting self-preservation as a reason. In this way, Freedom Gym had much in common with other sporting environments in which "pain, risk of injury and injury itself have come to be accepted as normal components of participation" (Young, McTeer & White, 1994; 175). Not only were such experiences accepted, some aspects of them became valorised and even appealing. Within this 'pain community' (Atkinson, 2008) certain 'suffering' practises were socially, psychologically and physically significant. Here, "the ability to withstand and relish in athletic suffering [was] embraced as a form of group distinction" (Atkinson, 2008; 166). This performed a bonding function for the established group, here, they were able to coalesce around a set of often enjoyable pain experiences that they considered set them apart from 'others' inside and outside Freedom Gym. As Atkinson (2008; 166) discovered in his study of triathletes, participants were able to use "the emotional and physical stress produced in training and competition as a tool for emotional stimulation." These experiences make up an important part of the sensuous landscape that will be explored in Chapter Six, as such, I will refrain from further detailing them here.

Although the 'pain community' at Freedom gym did share many of the characteristics that have been described in the literature on sports, pain and injury (Curry & Strauss, 1994; Nixon, 1992; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Theberge, 2008; Young, 1993) there were clear fault lines that shaped these experiences. In certain instances the previously discussed social pressures to disavow, ignore, trivialise and enjoy pain was set aside. Such exceptions were made when injuries involved blood, full or partial loss of consciousness or low blows. These injuries were viewed as being substantively different from the usual pain that accompanies sparring and

training. These thresholds of pain were framed by the rules of boxing, norms of bodily risk, masculine notions of the body and the cooperative norms of sparring. Within the established group there was a continual process of negotiation that tended to maintain a more or less stable set of parameters defining what was considered to be normal in this regard. The most influential members of the group, those who had to a greater degree adopted the boxer's habitus (with it they embodied an understanding of pain as something to be, at times, ignored and, at times, enjoyed) were chiefly involved in setting the tone for these norms. Although a set of assumptions framed what was generally considered 'normal' there was some degree of room available for each participant to find a pain threshold that they were happy with. In this way, some norms were immutable and generally went unchallenged; lows blows and concussive punches (although infrequent) were followed by breaks in training to ensure safety. As David described:

Chris: So, what happens if someone gets caught hard in sparring, like if they're a bit knocked out?

David: What supposed to happen is they should stop, it's not very often that happens but if it does no way should people be even thinking about carrying on, what's the point? (David interview)

While other norms were far more flexible; some would box on with bleeding noses, while others would stop at the first sight of blood. Gary described the social framing of individual choice:

Chris: How do you decide what is the right amount of pain in training?

Gary: Well, really, they shouldn't be any, except from pushing ya'sen hard, 'cus trainin's not supposed to be about pain, but I know what ya mean, 'cus that's the reality of it, there's always gonna be a bit. So I dunno, I guess ya just know what ya happy doin', but like if someone's being lazy people are gonna jump on 'em. Know what I mean? (Gary interview)

Elements of these pain narratives were negotiated far more easily than others. Biographical factors and ones place within established-outsider figuration were important components of ones ability to shape the acceptability of pain thresholds. Indeed, for older men, the dominant masculine norms of bodily sacrifice and taken-for-granted invincibility were challenged. In de Garis' (2000; 104) words, these boxers were "man enough to be gentle (as in *gentleman*)". Notwithstanding the age dimension, this attitude of bodily benevolence might normally be considered inconsistent with the established boxers' respectable working class masculine habitus. However, these men displayed their knowledge of their physical limitations as a marker of experience, a sign of their ability to rise above 'macho' and potentially harmful

behaviours. As such, this mature masculinity was not viewed by the established boxers as oppositional to the dominant subjectivities at Freedom Gym. Rather, it was a position that could be adopted once they had paid their masculine dues in the ring through boxing experience, by reaching middle age or by having had children.

### **5.11 Boxing ability – ‘I’m man enough to realise it’d be stupid goin’ in there’**

There was a similar process of negotiation by men who had less experience of boxing. The established group were continuously looking for men to join in the regular sparring sessions. In Gary’s (Field notes, 25/11/2010) words, “we need some fresh meat to spice it up a bit, it’s rubbish when their ain’t enough of us down”. Men who demonstrated signs of the correct habitus, or signs that they could develop such a habitus, were encouraged to make the step from ‘hitting bags’ to sparring. This step was symbolically significant to these beginner boxers. By venturing through the ropes, they moved from the ‘safe’ world of bag work, into the potentially ‘unsafe’ world of mimetic violence. This ‘shift to risk’ was a highly significant emotional and physical experience (Maguire *et al*, 2000). As novices (with a poor understanding of the ins and outs of sparring), they could not be sure of the level of violence which they would encounter or whether their limited abilities would not be taken advantage of by the more experienced boxers. After several reassurances about the ‘friendly’ and ‘cooperative’ nature of the session, a proportion of these men decided to take part. However, their involvement tended to be bracketed by caveats about their unwillingness to engage in the rougher aspects of sparring. Probing these statements revealed that the established norms of sparring violence were constructed as being ‘too macho’ or ‘an attempt to prove something’. In Andrew’s<sup>36</sup> words, “I just thought you lot were mental, just trying to prove something when you was in there” (Andrew interview). Dean<sup>37</sup> (Field notes, 13/5/2010) agreed, “I’m not into getting all busted up, what’s the point in that? I wanna look pretty for the ladies”. Although the ability to engage in sparring was a valued masculine behaviour within the established group, Andrew, Dean and others initially rejected these norms as signs of an inferior embodied identity that required some level of proving through violence. For Harry, the

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew was 29, he worked in IT. He moved to the city for work and took up boxing to keep fit and because he had always been intrigued by it.

<sup>37</sup> Dean was in his early 20s, he worked in a shop in the city. He used the boxing area infrequently, usually towards the end of weights sessions.

established group's norms of cooperation and learning in sparring hid a more deviant motivation:

Harry<sup>38</sup>: You don't need to get in the ring to prove you can handle yourself, I don't see the point in all that, I understand that you can learn stuff in there, but I don't think its always about that with them [the established group].

Chris: What do you think it's about?

Harry: Well, I know they have fun and that, but I can't help feeling the bigger lads are just in their as an outlet for some thing. A way of making themselves feel better about themselves or something. Maybe they were bullied as kids or something? [laughs]  
(Harry interview)

From 'outside' of the established group, the mimetic violence of sparring was often described in such negative ways. Harry's remarks were typical of the way in which tough sparring was described as a means of masking a perceived psychological or physical inadequacy. Even Dion's<sup>39</sup> more positive interpretation questioned the intelligence of the established group:

Chris: What do you think about the roughness of the sparring?

Dion: I tell ya what, you got to have some balls to step in there, and especially when it's getting a bit fierce. Sometimes I think their balls are bigger than their brains though (Dion interview).

It was not the case that these men disagreed with the basic tenants of the established group's version of masculinity; rather, they viewed the action in the ring (through their novice/outsider eyes) as a sign of an overly violent embodiment of these norms. In effect, attempting to prove one's masculinity by putting one's body on the line, was believed to be a symbol of the delicate hold the established group had on their masculine identity.

As outlined in Chapter four, there was a high degree of transience in men who did not become linked to, or part of, the established group. As such, I found it challenging to organise interviews with the men who chose never to partake in sparring sessions. It was also difficult to broach the subject of their masculine identity without causing offence:

Burt: I know I ain't that good and I don't need my ass handing to me on a plate to prove it.

Chris: Do you think that has any reflection on you as a man?

Burt: What you on about? Does it fuck, it just means I ain't stupid. I'm man enough to realise it'd be stupid going in there with that lot when I ain't been doing it for long (Field notes, 20/1/2011).

Clearly my interview technique here was a little 'clumsy', this combined with my gradual acceptance into the established group sometimes resulted in interviewees, who held a

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<sup>38</sup> Harry was 30, he worked a stationers near the gym. He had lived in the city all his life. He tended to use the boxing equipment as a means of getting fit.

<sup>39</sup> Dion was 32, he had been involved in a variety of martial arts and begin to train with the established boxers during my time in the field. He lived on the edge of one of the cities notorious estates.

relatively 'outside' position, taking a rather defensive stance when discussions of masculinity took place. It seems then, that the limited ability of some newcomers was linked to them defining the sparring of the established group as overly violent. These assertions were then connected to notions about the dominant masculine norms of this group. Thus, the opposition seems to be levelled at the degree of violence, rather than violence *per se*. As such, this partially oppositional masculinity constitutes a rejection of the perceived norms of violence adopted by the established group. The novice boxers questioning and denigration of the established group's masculinity could be regarded as a means of subverting the clear disparity between these groups' abilities to engage in violence. As such, by labelling overt violence as a characteristic of an inferior masculinity, behaviours associated with a less violent masculine habitus could be defined as superior. This is partially conjecture, what seems more certain, is the experiences and changing opinions of the men who eventually became a part of the established group, let me spell this out.

After engaging in the established group's sparring sessions, negative notions about this group's collective masculine habitus' and engagement with overt violence tended to be softened. As Barry<sup>40</sup> remarked:

I know it's only sparring and stuff, but I just didn't really feel the need to get in the ring. I was only doing it [boxing] for a bit of fitness, I didn't feel the need to prove how good or bad I was, I still think the same, but now I know that's not what it's all about. No one is in there to prove a point, especially not with someone like me [a beginner] (Barry interview).

It seemed that these men began to appreciate the cooperative nature of the mimetic violence that generally characterised these sparring sessions; their previous assumptions were replaced with a newfound respect for the established group's norms and values. Indeed, these men began to find significance in the emotional and physical experiences produced through the previously critiqued physicality of sparring. Here, we find an example of the social framing of exciting significance that Maguire (1992) has discussed. Their partially oppositional notions of masculinity seemed to have been co-opted by, and merged with, the established group's subjective position:

Chris: What did you think the first time you started sparring with the lads?  
James: Well, I thought, [pause] well, I know you lot are all good guys, so I didn't think I was gonna get ended or anything, but you'd be a fool to step in the ring after a

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<sup>40</sup> Barry was 24, he ran an electricians company with his brother. He had lived near the city all his life.

couple of months of hitting bags and not be a bit nervous. I wasn't that sure that sparring was for me, it just seemed a bit hardcore.

Chris: But it was all right though?

James: Yeah, course, I took a couple of shots, but that's how you learn ain't it, all part o'the game.

Chris: And what do you think about the sessions now?

James: It's fun ain't it, you find your own level with guys, I was looking at guys like Gary and Dave and I just thought they was so aggressive but they just help you out, tell you where to put your gloves and stuff like that, I see it totally different now I'm a regular (James interview).

As the beliefs and behaviours of gym 'newcomers' became increasingly shaped by the norms that dominated the boxing area they were gradually accepted into the established group. This increased involvement went hand-in-hand with an acceptance and appreciation for, and embodiment of, the established group's norms of masculinity. In this way, instead of being a violent and potentially destructive means of proving masculinity, sparring now began to be experienced as a cooperative and controlled way of learning boxing skills. Discussions about masculinity now tended to centre on the relative absence of any attempts to prove something in the ring (as discussed in Chapter Four). It seems, from the 'inside' position at least, that the established group is believed to leave any 'machoness' outside the ring. This change in assumption about the established group's norms tended to accompany the process of moving from relative outsider to relatively established. To conclude this chapter, the lived realities of sparring will be briefly explored in the light of the previously highlighted assertions about the cooperative nature of these experiences.

### **5.12 Domination in Sparring – 'He just wants to bang you out'**

As described on numerous occasions throughout this chapter, and by other researchers (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004), the dominant narrative that accompanied sparring sessions was one of a cooperative and controlled learning experience. This seemed to be the default setting for the established boxers and for boxing narratives more generally. However, these codes, which are linked to a rejection of 'macho' attitudes to violence, do not necessarily play out in the lived experiences of sparring. de Garis (2000; 101) found a similar disparity between sparring discourses and sparring practices:

Denzel, a recently retired 31-year old African-American professional, argued that an experienced boxer could frustrate another boxer by tapping the other at will. He demonstrated on me by tapping me in the stomach, and in the head and back to the stomach, all at will. He said, "You know, after a while he gets frustrated and starts swinging wildly." I could easily imagine because I was humiliated by my inability to deflect or block any of his blows and wanted to grab him myself.

During the fieldwork for this study, I was involved in many sparring sessions that, with hindsight, are now felt to be not wholly cooperative or controlled. Indeed, sessions were also witnessed that could be interpreted as being characterised by attempts at domination rather than mutual learning. However, the boxers involved, including myself, still tended to talk of these experiences using the language of cooperation. To not do so, was to call into question not only one's sparring partners' friendly intentions, but also one of the key principles upon which the established group constructs their time in the boxing area. Only rarely was it possible to collect data in which terms associated with domination were used, despite what could be called clear signs of antagonism and aggression. After a hard session, I chatted with Dave:

Chris: Why do you think Gary is like that sometimes mate?

Dave: I dunno, he's always on about looking after each other but then the *red mist comes down an' he just wants t'bang ya out.*

Chris: I don't need sessions like that, I know he don't get much out o'sparring me, but he must get less out of just whaling on me like that.

Dave: It's when you catch him, he don't like it, he don't like it if you get in his face 'cus he thinks he's top dog (Field notes, 9/12/2010 - emphasis added).

A loss of physical and emotional control which stimulated this conversation did not resonate with the established groups' sparring norms. Challenging the social hierarchy that dominated the boxing area by 'getting in someone's face' could result in a decrease in the cooperative component of sparring. However, there seemed to be an unwritten rule, that such experiences were not generally discussed as domination. In effect, by using the code of cooperation, these sessions, regardless of attempts at domination or the mimetic and 'real' violence on show, could still be constructed in positive terms as resonating with the respectable working-class masculine norms of the established group. This perception of sparring sessions only became apparent as the reflection required for writing up this thesis limited the amount of time that could be spent in the gym. My relatively involved position within the established group and the adoption of their habitual behaviours and beliefs resulted in me interpreting sparring using the dominant narrative of this group. The discourse of cooperation was so pervasive that it had previously hidden from view certain aspects of domination that littered the established group's training sessions:

Tonight I tried to dispel my knowledge of the codes of cooperation in sparring, I tried to look at the session without my usual assumptions about what the behaviours meant to those involved. Clearly, some of the guys were working together, finding a pace and physicality level with which they were both comfortable. However, as the session went on, this level would be pushed and tested. This extra competition seemed to be enjoyed by all involved, there was an extra edge to the session that

increased the excitement on offer. I would suggest that these guys, although looking to land the better shots and 'get one over' on their 'opponent', were still engaged in a cooperative contest. However, on occasion, especially when an experienced fighter was 'tagged' by a relative novice or when two equally matched boxers wanted to 'go at it', there were attempts to prove their position as superior by physically dominating their partner. There were exceptions, for example, Lewis (who has the most professional experience) would never respond to being caught by a punch. He would constantly outclass the other boxers, but there was always a sense that he was teaching, not taunting (Field notes, 9/11/2010).

Experiences in these sparring sessions were clearly not limited to a simple cooperative give and take. Indeed, as the session progressed, behaviours that could be considered as attempts to physically dominate increased. I asked Lewis about this escalation of domination:

Listen, I've been doin' this for years right, its part o'the game, you get hit, if you try and fire back straight away you can leave yourself open. Ya stay calm, keep a cool head, *don't let all that pride get the best of ya*. If you hit me I think 'good on ya lad'. Sometimes the other lads don't think like that, *they're still not in control of that pride ya'see*, they think if you hit'em you're proving something (Field notes, 9/11/2010 - emphasis added).

For Lewis, and others from the established group, pride impinged on ones ability to control the action in the ring. It was believed that effective sparring required the cessation of emotional responses that could override boxing technique. However, just as boxing techniques need to be learned, so did this emotional control. The underlying assumption was that this uncontrolled emotions was connected to a person's masculine identity; that, in some way, taking a punch needed a similar, if not better, punch in response to maintain one's manliness. Here, then, a lack of adoption of the norms of emotional control was believed to lead to actions that did not fit the established groups sparring norms.

There was then, a tension between the established group's professed norms and values and certain experiences in the ring. When this tension was probed, the men at Freedom Gym tended to explain it in one of two ways. Firstly, that established members who were involved in sparring sessions, that included attempts to dominate were comfortable taking their training to a higher, more competitive, but still cooperative, level. Here, this 'mimetic' domination was considered to be substantively different to, and less serious, than 'real' domination. This was certainly believed to be the case with Gary and Dave who shared some brutal sparring sessions that could be defined as containing attempts to dominate, were still constructed as cooperative as they both wished to take their boxing to the next level. Such competitive, hard sparring was seen as an essential means of progressing an experienced boxer's fitness and

skills. Secondly, these experiences were also constructed as brief, naturally-occurring aberrations within the landscape of otherwise cooperative sparring. In this way, an 'instinctive' override of their usual violence controls - the 'red mist' descending perhaps – was believed to temporarily cause the sparring session to contravene the usual norms. Such brief losses of control were a sign that the person(s) involved need to improve his ability to restrain his emotions.

Although discourses of cooperation framed thoughts about, and exchanged in, sparring, some experiences of mainly mimetic, but also 'real', domination were also evidenced in the established group's training. Seldom were these signs of domination discussed, perhaps due to the tensions to which highlighting them would lead, perhaps, as in my case, the narrative of cooperation hid them. Rather, they were ignored, interpreted as highly competitive cooperation, or written off as a natural aberration within an otherwise controlled environment. As such, the established groups framing of sparring, although not necessarily played out through all lived experiences, were maintained in a relatively uncontested manner. In Chapter Six I will further discuss these experiences of domination in sparring and describe how, and in what ways, they contribute to the emotional and physical significance of training at Freedom Gym.

### **5.13 Summary**

Throughout, this chapter has explored the masculine world of Freedom Gym and argued that the gendered space can be viewed as a heterosexual male preserve in which a narrow definition of what is possible, permissible and pleasurable male behaviour dominates. Female and LGBT identities were mainly absent from the gym or, when discussed, were referred to using disparaging language. Exceptions were made for women who had significant relationships with established members of the gym, and young girls who were both deemed to transcend the usual objectification and sexualisation that was reserved for females. Such identities were employed in a binary fashion to define what was considered the right form of masculinity. The notion of a 'real' man was explored as a means of conceptualising the masculine ideals and aspirations that dominate Freedom Gym. Evidence to reinforce assumptions about the realness of men who trained in the gym was supported by the lack of

other embodied identities and notions of 'naturalness'. Time and time again, genetic, innate, and even God-given, reasons were used to explain behaviours in the gym. Such natural determinism justified and legitimated the dominant masculine habitus. Some of the intricate and nuanced aspects of the established boxer's masculine habitus were then discussed. The boxer's body and sparring experiences were used to draw attention to the partially contested nature of embodied identities found in Freedom Gym. This chapter was concluded with a discussing of the tension that existed between the dominant masculine narratives and lived experiences. No attempt has been made to describe every aspect of the masculine framing of gym life. Rather, the goal has been to build upon the partial picture set out in the previous chapter by drawing the reader's attention to some of the notions of masculinity that feature prominently in Freedom Gym. Moving forward, this partial picture of the social landscape will be used to frame the experiences of violence that will be detailed in the following chapter.

## Chapter Six

### Experiences of violence – The Thrill of the Fight

#### 6.0 Introduction

This chapter explores observations that can help to address the questions and issues outlined in Chapter One. A detailed picture of experiences of mimetic violence at Freedom Gym will be painted. As a conceptual frame, Maguire's (1992) extension of Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) *Quest for Excitement* will be used to conceptually frame these phenomena. In what follows, attention will be drawn to some of the physiological and psychological aspects of these experiences. The most significant social processes that shape the action at Freedom Gym have been highlighted within Chapters Four and Five. Understanding the contours of these social fault lines, enables us to begin to appreciate what sensuous experiences of violence can mean to the men who attended the gym. The ways in which dominant subjectivities were played out in the ring and through gym life will be outlined. Within Chapters Four and Five much data to this effect has been discussed while the social structuring of these experiences has been explored. Although, there are many aspects of attending Freedom Gym that produce significant experiences, not least, being a part of a 'rough', at times 'dodgy', subculture and the camaraderie of being a part of the established group, the explicit focus within this chapter will be on the emotions and sensations produced during the act of mimetic violence. It has been argued that the emotional and sensuous dimensions of these experiences remain relatively under-researched within works examining sports violence. This chapter represents a partial corrective to this relative lack of experiential data.

Initially, life in the boxing area at Freedom Gym will be further contextualised through a discussion of the popular means by which experiences of exciting significance were understood. Here, the men at Freedom Gym tended to rely on a biological narrative, similar to that described by Lorenz (1963) and his followers, to explain and express the physical and psychological pleasures of training. Tied to this understanding were established norms of mimesis that framed the overwhelming majority of the action in and around the ring. In this way, the men at Freedom Gym believed their experiences on the punch bag, or in the ring, differed in crucial ways to other forms of violence. The significance of these frames will be explored. Following this, the intertwined emotional and somatic pleasures of bag work and

sparring will be detailed. Here, the release of emotion and the generation of physically significant sensations will be discussed.

### **6.1 The Framing of Exciting Significance**

Freedom Gym, and the boxing area in particular, was a site in which particular and powerful emotions and sensations could be experienced. In comparison to the routine and emotionally boring lives that were reported by regular users of the gym, the boxing area enabled colourful, expressive, challenging, rewarding and visceral experiences to be produced. Through acts of mimetic violence, participants were able to generate psychological and physical tensions that were given significance by the social structuring of such events. As Shott (1979, cited in Maguire, 1992; 111) reminds us:

Within the limits set by social norms and internal stimuli, individuals construct their emotions: and their definitions and interpretations are critical to this often emergent process. Internal states and cues, necessary as they are for affective experiences, do not in themselves establish feelings, for it is the actor's definitions and interpretations that give physiological states their emotional significance or non-significance.

In this way, an appreciation of knowledge informed by the SVMC, that has been shown to frame life at Freedom Gym, is a necessary aspect of any attempt to understand the significance of physical and psychological experiences. As such, a tough masculine style, linked to traditional boxing norms and working class values, resonates with the ways these men experience emotion and physical sensations. This subjectivity, although never completely pervasive, framed much of gym life. Before exploring these sensuous experiences in detail, the ways that the men at Freedom Gym made sense of them will be examined. Specifically, the focus will be on their use of a biological frame to explain behaviours and the importance they placed on the mimetic nature of these experiences. These two intertwined aspects of their understanding of gym life do much to justify and legitimise their expression and enjoyment of emotional and physical experiences. As such, they are key components in the lived experiences that are the focus of this study. Firstly, the biological interpretation of these men's motivations to take part in violence at Freedom Gym will be described.

### **6.2 Bodily Needs and Desires - 'It's adrenaline that gives you that buzz'**

The men at Freedom Gym believed a biological interpretation provides the most adequate explanation of their exciting experiences in the ring. This understanding was linked to the

assumed aggressive nature of men that attended Freedom Gym (see Chapter Four and Five), and the concurrent need to somehow control and/or channel sex-determined drives. This interpretation provided these men with a logical, 'science-based' reasoning for their needs to engage in training and sparring at Freedom Gym. This is not to suggest that these experiences are in some simple way a false consciousness produced by the reification of biological discourse, rather, as Shott (1979) and Maguire (1992) argue, they are the function of the intertwining of emotion and sensation with the social framing of such phenomena. In this way, biological narratives justify and legitimise the behaviours and sensations that are produced inside the boxing area at Freedom Gym.

When discussing their involvement in boxing, the majority of men at Freedom Gym mentioned physical and psychological needs. Their time in the gym helped them to fulfil what was believed to be biologically and sex-determined drives to experience some form of physicality, exciting emotion, competition and violence. These 'real' men (see Chapter Five) described urges and needs to release their 'natural' tendencies to physically express themselves:

I 'ad to get in here today, I'ad the shittest night at work last night right. Dickheads everywhere, and the cops 'ave been clampin' down on us crackin' skulls so I've 'ad to keep it in check. As soon as I got up I felt like getting in 'ere and smacking the shit owta bag, *if I don't do it 'ere I'm gonna do it at work later* (Phil, field notes, 13/3/2010 - emphasis added).

Phil's bad night in the office, working as a head bouncer at a bar in town, was described as generating a feeling of almost uncontrolled aggression. Training at Freedom Gym allowed Phil to vent this emotional and physical tension in a far more socially acceptable manner than would be the case had he done so at work. Dave also described similar feelings when he was forced to stay away from the gym due to a hand injury:

Dave: It don't matter how much weed ya smoke, I still wanna fucking do somefink. I wa' sat at home fuckin' bored to fuck, figitin' all't while and when anyone said owt I'd be on edge, like jumpy and angry an' that.

Chris: What even after smoking?

Dave: In the end it made no difference, it wa' good to begin with, no pressure t'train like, but after a couple of weeks I just felt shit, like I wa' wastin' away or somefing. I started doin' some running an' that 'elped a bit. But I wa' all'us finkin' 'bout gerrin' back in 'ere to let some o'this aggression out (Field notes ,7/10/2010).

Even the sedative effects of marijuana use were not sufficient to temper his need to get back in the gym. Upon returning to training after a break, regular users tended to describe the way

that they had *physically* missed training. 'Hitting the bag' or 'moving around' (sparring) were discussed as essential components of their day-to-day life:

Trainin's horrible right, especially if you've been away for a bit but I've missed that feeling, you know when you're dead but you keep going 'cus you know it's doing you good. There's nothin' like that [feeling you get] after you finished training (Ben, field notes, 2/8/2010).

Chris: What do you think would happen if you could never train again?

Shaun: I'd go mad, I'd be like a dog that never gets walked. It wouldn't happen anyways, I can't go two days without doing a bit, I need it, and I feel different if I've been down [to the gym].

Chris: In what way?

Shaun: Dunno really, but I know when I've not been in, my body tells me (Shaun interview).

The gym then, provides a space for these men to satisfy what was believed to be a 'natural' need. Prolonged absence from the gym, and the ability to satisfy these needs, was discussed in terms of a physical and psychological withdrawal. Such needs were linked to their perceptions of the positive outcomes of participation in boxing (see Chapter Four). By expressing these needs in the ring, and on the punch bag, these men believed they were not only averting the potential negative effects of such emotions, they were also proving and improving their discipline, health and ability to protect themselves, their family and friends. In this way, they believed that the assumed violent and aggressive nature of men was transformed inside Freedom Gym into a positive social force. After a sparring session with the established group, Dave, Gary and myself had the following conversation:

Chris: Do you think it's a good thing that we come in here and beat up on each other?

Gary: Better than doing it out there!

Chris: Do you think you would?

Gary: You don't know about this one do ya? [Gary nods at Dave] Fucking hell, if it want for sparring he'd be out there fightin' somefink.

Dave: Yeah.

Chris: Why?

Dave: I wa' always fightin'.

Gary: *It* was in 'im want *it*, he's got the same fire as the rest on us, he just didn't 'ave anywhere to let *it* owt. You got to let *it* come out somewhere, if you don't take *it* out on the bag *it's* gonna come out somehow (Field notes, 24/6/2010 - emphasis added).

For Gary, the 'it' that he describes, was the animalistic urges that he believed were a product of human male biology. Stories of the transformation of physical and emotional needs to experience violence frame socially inappropriate to socially appropriate, were common-place within the gym. Here, Freedom Gym and boxing more generally, occupied an at times exhaled position as the medium for these changes. Such narratives were used as evidence to support the place these men reserved for boxing as a positive social force. This reasoning

could then be used as a shield to deflect critical observations aimed at the learning of violence through engagement in boxing and the health risks of this involvement. In this way, boxing at Freedom Gym could be defined as more than simply an anachronistic pastime 'for the boys', instead it was an essential social tool that these men believe enabled them to control their biological needs.

A number of intertwined physiological explanations were employed by gym users to make sense of these needs and desires to engage in training at Freedom Gym. The hormone testosterone was considered to be a productive force that caused the motivations to engage in mimetic violence. The pleasure from these experiences was interpreted as resulting from the satisfaction of these testosterone-fuelled drives and the consequent production of adrenaline and endorphins. As Eddy and Nathaniel claimed:

It's adrenaline that gives you that buzz when ya training, and then after its all them endorphins that make you feel good after ya finished. I tell ya, that's what it's all about, but you got to train hard, and the more you train the harder you have to train, you get hooked on 'em (Eddy, field notes - 1/7/2010).

Ya come in [the gym] and ger'all that testosterone out ya system in here. Then you can chill and do ova shit wivout worryin' about flipin' out on someone, like you can concentrate betta (Nathaniel, field notes - 8/4/2010).

Satisfying these biological needs was believed to be an inherently enjoyable experience. The 'buzz' from training was commonly discussed as one of the main benefits of engaging in boxing. These explanations of behaviour carry an inherent inevitability about them. In effect, if these needs and urges are determined by a biological constant then the men enjoying them, are compelled to experience them in some form. Such an understanding carries with it a powerful justification and legitimisation. For these men, boxing represents the most effective means of channelling and controlling such drives. This narrative underpins the previous discussion of the positive social outcomes of boxing. The assumption is, by turning these potentially destructive biological drives into a social 'good', the values attached to boxing participation can performing a doubly-positive social function. These biological interpretations are not only a frame for the day-to-day experiences within Freedom Gym, giving a logical basis to support the established group's norms and values, they also provide a powerful means of maintaining and justifying the presence of aggression, mimetic violence and

traditional forms of masculinity. In this way, wide gender orientated power dynamics shape and frame lived experiences of physical and emotional pleasure.

Within Freedom Gym, especially amongst the established group of boxers, a biological and sex determinism is employed to explain and legitimise experience of physical and emotional expression and enjoyment. This 'scientific' knowledge was then employed to justify behaviours that elicit such phenomena. The use of biological terminology provides an inevitable dimension to the explanation of violent behaviours, thus allowing these experiences to be constructed as essential and immutable. As such, by engaging in the 'positive' social outcomes of mimetic violence in boxing, these men had a means of resisting challenges and critiques that could be levelled at their enjoyment of the emotional and physical side of such experiences. This positive 'spin' on the notion of potentially negative biological forces centres on the differentiation between 'real' and 'mimetic' experiences of violence. Without the ability to draw a line between the types of violence that occur inside and outside of the gym, the basis for the narrative of positive social outcomes would be absent. In what follows, the focus will be on the mimetic aspect of these experiences.

### **6.3 Mimetic Violence**

An essential component in the framing of violence at Freedom Gym is the interpretation of these experiences as being a mimesis of the 'real' violence that occurs beyond the gym doors. Such a construction allows a separation to be made between street fighting, other traditionally deviant acts of violence and the sparring and training that occurs in and around the boxing area. This framing is also matched by an experiential differentiation; the violence at Freedom Gym tends to conform to cooperative and friendly norms and values. In this way, the mimetic component of the violence at Freedom Gym was an essential aspect of these men's experiences. For them, the violence in the ring and on the bag was not 'real',<sup>41</sup> however, it did enable them to experience sensations that were elicited in 'real' situations. The established group of boxers placed great significance on this difference and strived to maintain it (see Chapters Four and Five) but the blurred threshold between 'real' and mimetic was a place where enjoyable emotions and sensations were generated. Indeed, the biological

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<sup>41</sup> As described in Chapter Three, the term violence tendered to be problematic for these men

'needs' previously described were believed to be more readily satisfied by experiences that were close to this threshold. The following conversation was overheard after a sparring session:

Gary: It's alright workin' the bags and that, but it's not the same is it? It don't do the same job as a session like that where everyone's pushin'.

Eddy: Na, 'cause it ain't, that just makes you want it [the contact of sparring or fighting] more. That's why people taper their sparring leading into big fights, you want ya man to be hungry. You want him to be on the verge of exploding.

Gary: And it's the same with body [sparring] or if, no offence kid (looks at me), if I'm in with some of these [less experienced] lot, 'cus you don't get the same buzz as when ya in there doin' it right, *after a session like that I'll come home and proper chill when I've got it all out me system* (Field notes, 8/4/2010 - emphasis added).

The tension balance between the mimetic and the 'real' is a crucial component in the satisfaction that is gained from training at Freedom Gym. Regular users of the boxing area sought out these sensations by engaging in actions that flirted with the physical and social danger of approaching and even transgressing this boundary. This process of finding, negotiating and experiencing this threshold will be explored in what follows.

Despite Pringle's (2009; 225) assertions that rugby violence "does not appear well tempered or mimetic", it is argued (see Chapter Two) that the vast majority of sports violence experiences should be defined as mimetic. Indeed, the world of sports violence that I encountered at Freedom Gym was one in which the mimetic nature of training was essential and embodied in varying degrees by *all* those who regularly took part in training and sparring. The dominant discourse was one of mimesis; even experiences that appeared to have more in common with 'real' violence were discussed using the language of the mimetic (see Chapters Four and Five). Despite regular pain and minor injuries, the training and competition at Freedom Gym seldom transgressed this informal, flexible yet pervasive boundary. Whether bag work, shadow boxing, body sparring or hard full sparring, the actions in the gym were substantively different in important ways to the 'real' acts of which they were the mimesis. It is this relative dimension that is missing within Pringle's (2009) analysis.

As previously outlined, the established group of boxers do much to control the amount and type of violence that occurs at Freedom Gym. Within training and sparring, an emphasis was placed on the participants' ability to control their emotions and to remain level-headed under

pressure. Here, we find a *controlled* decontrolling of emotional *and* physical controls (Elias & Dunning (2008 [1986]). In Maguire's (1992;105, emphasis added) words:

'Mimetic' activities vary considerably both in terms of their intensity and style but have basic structural characteristics in common; that is, they provide a 'make-believe' setting which allows *emotions to flow more easily and which elicit excitement of some kind imitating that produced by real life situations, yet without it's dangers and risks.*

This relative comparison between 'real' and 'make-believe' does not mean, as Pringle (2009) insists, that dangers and risks do not occur in a mimetic definition of sports violence. Rather, this is a means of clarifying the substantive difference between the majority of violent sporting experiences and those surrounding similar non-mimetic experiences, such a street fighting. It would be a mistake to assume that a dichotomy exists here, as aspects of training for, and competing in, boxing can clearly move away from the mimetic towards the 'real' and *vice versa* (Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Maguire, 1992). However, an understanding of this conceptual difference, this shift in gear, is *essential* if one is to appreciate the types of pleasure, risks and significances that mimetic experiences in boxing, and sport more generally, can produce.

The line between mimetic and 'real' violence is a blurred one. The physical similarities between boxing and 'real' fighting increases the difficulties that people, especially 'outsiders' to the sport, have in drawing this line. This similarity was of much significance for the men at Freedom Gym. As described in Chapter Four, these men tended to believe that boxing represented a purer form of sport. There was a sense within the gym that all sport was a manifestation of men's 'natural' tendency to be physically competitive, as such, boxing's close resemblance to fighting was in many ways more 'real' than other sports. Although, the mimetic nature of boxing was a dominant narrative, regular users of Freedom Gym still believed it represented a more authentic means of engaging in sport and physical activity.

As discussed in Chapter Five, acts defined by the established group as mimetic were regularly viewed as brutal and 'real' violence by newcomers to the gym. Within the established group, this blurred line was frequently negotiated in the ring. During sparring, this process was believed to affect the level of emotional excitement and physical challenge that was on offer. Take the following example:

Chris: So what's it like when sparring isn't as tough as you are used too?

Patrick: What, like against a beginner or something?

Chris: Yeah.

Patrick: It's ok, you can work on stuff, and maybe even teach 'em a few bits, like what you do for me.

Chris: Ok, but is it as much fun?

Patrick: It can be all right but it's not like when you get a really close sparring session. 'Cus then you can go at it a bit more, like when I'm sparring you I know I can try and really hit you, and that if I do something stupid I'll get punished. It's better like that.

Chris: Can it go too far though, I mean, you know I'm not really gonna try and hurt you, right, but what if someone was?

Patrick: Yeah, well if someone was just beatin' on ya, that's no good is it, *but that's not what it's about* (Patrick interview - emphasis added).

Patrick, and others who engaged in sparring, continually worked to find the optimum balance between excitement and risk. During some sessions, the intensity of the sparring could reach uncomfortable levels. Although participants might report enjoying these tough sessions at the time, even getting carried away by them, they tended to describe their unwillingness to regularly take part in such sparring:

Arthur: That was too much tonight, I tell ya, I love it, I love it too much sometimes, ya end up pushin' n'pushin' an' at the time it's all good, but ya look back and think 'Jesus man I don't need this shit'.

Chris: I started thinking like that after a had a few days having a fuzzy head.

Arthur: Yeah man, it's hard though, it's hard when ya having fun and pushing each other, it's natural just to keep taking it on [a level]. It's not like it's getting out o'and or anyfink, it's just one of dem fings, someone's gonna get hurt eventually (Field notes, 13/5/2010).

Such boundary experiences show the complex nature of emotional and physical pleasure, in which, at one and the same time, these men could experience both pleasure and discomfort. All the boxers who used the gym tried to find a level of mimetic violence that they were happy to engage in. For some, this constituted little more than very light punches aimed only at the body, for others, throwing brutal and full-blooded headshots was acceptable. To use the Goldilocks analogy; the sparring could not be too 'hot', or too 'cold', it had to be just right. In sparring sessions where this balance was achieved, participants reported far more enjoyment, excitement and the satisfaction of their 'needs' to engage in violence. As Maguire (1992; 105) has argued:

Mimetic activities thus allow, within certain limits, for socially permitted self-centredness. Excitement is elicited by the creation of tensions: this can involve imaginary or controlled 'real' danger, mimetic fear and/or pleasure, sadness and/or joy...The different moods evoked in this make-believe setting are the 'siblings' of those aroused in real-life situations ... They involve the experience of pleasurable excitement which is at the core of most play needs ... in sport ... especially 'achievement sport', struggles between human beings play a central part. Indeed, some sport forms resemble real battles between hostile groups.

The men who engage in sparring at Freedom Gym, were attempting to find a balance between their motivations to create more challenging and exciting experiences and their willingness to put their body 'on the line' (Messner, 1990). Playing with this mimetic feature was a crucial component of gym life, as such, I would argue that, although there is much to be commended in Pringle's (2009) focus of pleasure in rugby, his dismissal of this mimetic balance leaves his account of violent sporting experiences seriously lacking.<sup>42</sup>

To summarise thus far, two of the key framing features of experiences within the boxing area at Freedom Gym have been further explored as an advancement to Chapters Four and Five. It has been argued that the majority of men who box there interpret their 'need' to engage in the physical and emotional experiences of boxing as being biologically determined. There was an assumption that such potentially negative internal drives were channelled into positive social outcomes by the adoption of discipline and control through learning boxing techniques and mentalities. As such, for these men, experiences in the gym represented a means of tackling the tension between their 'hard-wired', testosterone-fuelled drives to engage in violence and the social norms that generally classify such actions as repugnant. These urges were described as being satisfied by the mimetic violence experienced during training and sparring in the boxing area. During sparring sessions, boxers would find a level of mimetic violence with which they were comfortable. Negotiating this balance was a key dimension of the day-to-day experiences of exciting significance in the gym and was framed by understandings of the 'correct' way to engage in boxing. The belief that this mimetic violence was in important ways different to the 'real' violence that took place outside Freedom Gym was a key theme in the justification and legitimisation of their experiences. As such, Pringle's (2009) dismissal of the QES and the mimetic component of sports violence has been refuted. So far, the data presented has broadly supported Maguire's (1992) discussions of the emotional significance of sport. In what follows, the experiential dimension of this significance will be explored.

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<sup>42</sup> This critique will be returned to in the concluding chapter

#### **6.4 Physical and Psychological Significance**

Freedom Gym is a place in which psychological and physical experiences, usually considered taboo in other areas of social life, can be enjoyed. Within the boxing area, sparring and training on punch bags was the main means by which these sensuous and emotionally charged phenomena tended to be produced. The remainder of this chapter will explore the experiential landscape of Freedom Gym by paying particular attention to the mimetic violence that dominates boxing training, firstly, by examining the practices of 'bag work'. Here, participants were able to enjoy a set of socially-framed emotions and physical sensations that were believed to bear many similarities to those experienced in 'real' violent encounters. Secondly, the pleasure and physical challenges that are generated through sparring sessions will be discussed. Although these phenomena were repeatedly discussed as autotelic, that is, that they were believed to be inherently pleasurable, they cannot be considered in any sense to exist in separation from the social world in which they have been generated. As such, an attempt will be made to continually refer to the previously outlined social frames of life at Freedom Gym. In this way, the aim is to provide a phenomenologically-sensitive account of experiences of mimetic violence while maintaining the sociological emphasis of similar work undertaken in this substantive area.

#### **6.5 Working the Bag – 'you can really hammer it if you want'**

Amongst the established boxers, doing 'rounds' on the bag was considered to be a necessary part of training. 'Bag work' tended to be discussed as a means to improving technique, fitness and prepare for, and cool down after, sparring. Opinions and attitudes varied considerably as to the meanings and importance that was attached to these experiences. On occasion, bag work was described as little more than a necessary chore:

Shaun: Let me just do some rounds [on the bags]. I need to warm up. I'll do like three or something.

Ben: What ya bothering for, just get in 'ere and we can go light for a bit.

Shaun: Na, you know what'll 'appen, we'll end up going at it and I'll pull something.

Ben: I can't be arsed with hitting the bag if we're gonna spar, especially when I've 'ad a shit week at work (Field notes, 9/10/2009).

Those that discussed bag work in this fashion tended to engage in sparring on a regular basis. Within the established group, bag work was usually described as offering less opportunity to develop emotionally-exciting experiences when compared to sparring.

Notwithstanding this relative hierarchy of training, 'working the bag' enabled opportunities to generate emotional and sensuous experiences that were not acceptable during sparring. Due to the restraint that was demanded in cooperative sparring sessions, certain emotional releases and physical experiences were thought to be limited, as such, 'working the bag' offered an opportunity to 'let loose'. Among relative outsiders, who tended not to engage in sparring, 'bag work' tended to occupy a far more central role in training. For beginners, such training was described as a significant end in its own right:

Harry: It's good to come down and let it all out, you don't have to hold anything back on the bag.

Chris: 'Cus it doesn't punch back? [Both laugh].

Harry: Well that helps, but I mean *you can really hammer it if you want*, you can't do that in the ring.

Chris: You enjoy that?

Harry: Love it! [Laughs] (Harry interview - emphasis added).

Although participants discussed working on the bag in different ways, they tended to find significance in similar emotional and sensuous experiences. In amongst this variation, three themes continually reappeared: the release of emotions associated with a traditional hegemonic masculinity, timing powerful and/or speedy punches and combinations and the physical drain of hard training. The significance of these experiences will be explored in turn.

## **6.6 Releasing Emotions - 'Let some fucking aggression out'**

The punch bags at Freedom Gym were viewed by the men who use them as offering the *only* socially legitimate opportunity to release anger and aggression regularly and overtly. Within the established group of boxers, outward displays of emotion were commonplace while 'working the bag'. Take the following example:

There were a lot of us on the bags tonight, all-marching to the rhythm of the buzzer. Although some guys were working technique, the majority were wailing into the bag, waging an un-winnable battle against the padded leather. Some worked at range, driving straight punches home, others got in close for some dirty boxing. *Faces contorted with aggression, as punches were dug in with real spite. The unmistakable growls, hisses and barks of full effort accompanied the resonating sound of right hands slamming into the bags. To the outsider it might have looked like the place was going to erupt at any second, such displays must surely represent the participants' loss of control over their emotions.* But when the buzzer went, the snarls were replaced by smiles, the grunts by friendly 'ayups', punches by sips from water bottles. Then the buzzer sounded again, and the social niceties were once more replaced by displays of aggression, anger and the release of tension and frustration (Field notes, 2/3/2010 - emphasis added).

Working the bags allowed punches to be thrown with full power, punches that would be considered to transgress the mimetic norms of sparring were commonplace. The physical act of 'working the bag', although carried out on an inanimate object, was arguably more 'real' than sparring in crucial ways. Such acts enabled participants to experience a greater relaxation of emotional controls. These men reported the de-stressing, relaxing and cathartic<sup>43</sup> function of being able to generate, release and experience this level of emotion.

Take the following example:

Chris: What about if you're pissed off with someone, would you use the bag as a way of releasing anger?

Dean: Maybe, sometimes when I've been dealing with well shit customers all day, I might. It's a good way to get anger out though defo, 'cus like you can get everything out here and then you're less likely to do anything stupid, you know what I mean?

Chris: What like get in a fight or something?

Dean: Well whatever man, 'cus when shit's winding you up you got to let it out somehow innit, and the bags don't hit back innit. Everyone gets mad from time to time. And after doing some trainin' down here you're too tired to be all mad and that, you just wanna go home and chill innit (Dean interview).

The bag offered a relatively stationary, socially acceptable means of producing these experiences. A field note extract describes an occasion when Larry felt the need to work that bag after a sparring session:

After training with Larry I was a little surprised to see him get stuck into the bags. I asked him about it after:

Chris: Sparring wont enough for ya?

Larry: Ya know, sometimes it's just a bit frustrating innit, you move out the way, so I can't do the stuff I wanna do, I don't wanna leave the gym without landing a few shots.

Chris: Why?

Larry: I wanna let some tension out innit, and I can't do that on you (Field notes, 13/4/2010).

Larry, and others with minimal experience, often reported sparring to be the source of mounting frustration rather than a means of releasing emotional and physical tension. As such, the bag represented for them, a means of ensuring that the 'need' to experience this release was satisfied. The cathartic function of these experiences was a central aspect of the significance this training held for these men, as Dan and Dean told me:

I needed that, I love a hard session on the bag, lets you forget everything and have a good old work out. Nothing like it for having a smash about and letting the beast out, you know what I mean? (Dan, Field notes - 2/3/2010).

I've been sparring with mates all week and I've not 'ad any time to do my own thing, I don't really wanna do any sparring tonight, I just wanna get my head into da bag and work on some shit. *I wanna unload a few bombs innit. Let some fucking aggression*

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<sup>43</sup> Such popular understandings bear much in common with the work on Lorenz (1963) and his followers

*out*, I'm gonna think about all them times I could have knocked them jokers [his friends] out [in sparring, but held back] (Dean, field notes, 23/7/2010 - emphasis added).

I have also experienced such feeling of catharsis while working the bag. Although I never felt the *need* to vent or release stress through training, I did enjoy the opportunities to produce and express emotions. As my time in the field advanced, I began to notice that I became more comfortable generating and vocalising this aggression when working the bag. It seemed that the more ingrained my boxing habitus became, the more confident I had become in my own ability to produce these potentially socially risky emotions, without contravening the norms that dominated the boxing area. The manner in which this dynamic framing of emotions structured the interpretations and experiences at Freedom Gym will briefly be discussed.

Displays of emotion in Freedom Gym follow tight boundaries of legitimacy and acceptability as framed by the SVMC. As such, traditionally-defined 'manly' emotions tended to be released through the powerful bodily actions of such training. Although, in comparison to sparring, there was a greater scope for emotional release when working the bag, these experiences were still tightly regulated. This *controlled* de-controlling of emotional control helps to maintain the substantive gap between these experiences and those of which they are a mimesis (Maguire, 1992). Although it rarely happened, transgressing this mimetic boundary was highly problematic. Such occurrences would then be defined by the established group as temporary aberrations in their control of natural tendencies, behaviours associated with the 'rough' working classes and/or those who had not fully appreciated the nuances of boxing etiquette. During a conversation between Gary and Dave about damage done to some of the gym's equipment, these uncontrolled behaviours were discussed:

Chris: Another bag's down again.

Gary: It's people hanging off 'em and shit, ya seen them lads who do knees on 'em and shit, like hanging with their weight on it and jumping up, course the fuckers gonna come down. They don't give a shit though do they?

Dave: *It's not just that, it's dem kids that come in n'go psycho on 'em, I seen some lads down here last week going mental, serious, I thought they was gonna flip out.*

Chris: What were they doing?

Gary: I've seen 'em an'll throwin' everything they got at it, like it's done something to 'em, they don't get it.

Dave: *They ain't trainin', they just come down and do what they do on the street* (Field notes, 9/9/2010 - emphasis added).

Although the release of emotions was key to working the bag, respectable working class masculine values tended to maintain a channelling effect on these experiences. There was a sense of relative decorum attached to such acts; aggression and violence must remain within certain parameters. Technique was also an essential component of the legitimate means of releasing emotions on the bag. Individuals who did not possess basic boxing skills tended to be ridiculed if they began to 'let loose' on the bags:

Steve: Look at this pair behind me, all ova-t'place. What do they think they're achieving by doing that?

[David and me look over.]

David: They're just fucking about aren't they, stupid kids. Thing is, they'll get bored eventually, they wanna be gerrin' directed on where they're going wrong. They look feral don't they?

Steve: Thing is, they go mental like that for 30 seconds, they can't carry on, so they never get enough time on the bag to learn owt (Field notes, 4/12/2010).

For Steve and David, the lack of technique displayed by these two novice boxers resulted in their aggressive training being dismissed as 'uncivilised', wasteful, and ultimately ineffective, displays of 'real' violence. Members of this group did acknowledge that such experiences could be enjoyable, however, such fun was belittled as lacking any real substance:

What's the point in training like that? They ain't gerrin anyfink out of it. All they're learnin' there is how to go mental on a bag that don't hit back. I'd like to see 'em do that in the ring. I suppose he's having fun, but what a waste. I'd hate trainin' if it was about doing that (David, field notes - 3/8/2010).

Chris: Would you get any enjoyment out of training like that?

Ben: Probably for about five minutes, but then I'd just get bored (Ben, field notes - 3/8/2010).

Acknowledging the enjoyment of relatively uncontrolled actions was perhaps linked to the emotional significance that members of the established groups experienced. It was believed that, without the 'refinement' of proper boxing technique, these young men were simply displaying uncontrolled violence and emotion. For the established group of boxers, such displays were far removed from their practices of mimetic violence and controlled forms of emotional display. In the following field note extract, the restriction and encouragement of emotions at Freedom Gym are described:

During Simon's session, I noticed him encouraging some of the improving members of his group to get mad. He was trying to get them to put a bit of intensity into their bag work. I heard him say, 'come on, get angry and hit it.' In the same session, he also encouraged a newcomer to calm his training down in order to learn the correct technique. This beginner was throwing wild punches into the bag without any real thought for the basics that Chris was trying to teach him. There's a great deal of emphasis placed on channelling the emotions in boxing, with a greater adoption of the correct techniques and attitudes to training and sparring comes a greater freedom

to express and use emotion. Watching Chris' session reminded me of something Gary once told me:

"It's not about staying completely calm and not getting mad, it about having done enough training and work in the gym to be able to use all that emotion."

What Gary had realised was that by adopting the discipline and control that is a key part of learning boxing, participants had a much better understanding of the legitimate ways in which such emotion could be expressed (Field notes, 2/11/2010).

In effect, the greater acceptance and embodiment of norms and values that dominated the boxing area, the more opportunities were made available for the legitimate expression of emotional experiences. Within this habituation, participants found increased significance in the dominant frame of emotional expression, as such, this frame tended to be reproduced. However, as the vocabulary of the habitus becomes more layered the ability to express emotion in original and innovative ways, without breaking the informal codes of the boxing area, increases. Those that more-or-less optimised the correct way to be in the boxing area were able to express themselves in ways which could be considered to counter the very norms and values that they embodied. As such, there were sometimes small variations in the ways those emotions were expressed by the established group, but, the majority consensus largely remained unchallenged throughout my time at Freedom Gym. Emotional releases were then shaped by a respectable working class masculine framework, with basic boxing techniques acting as a conduit for the correct expression of these experiences. The channelling of these emotions via the habitual adoption of controlled technique was accompanied by physiological significance that the established boxers reported as rewarding. It is these sensations that will now be examined.

### **6.7 Timing Punches – 'it's nice to just hit something'**

The physical sensations produced by 'working the bag' were very much part of the emotional experiences previously described. However, we should not consider them to simply be a biological means by which these socially and psychologically significant experiences came into being. These experiences were also described as significant in their own right. Dean described these feelings when interviewed:

Chris: What about landing well-timed shots?

Dean: Of course, who don't like that?

Chris: What do you think about doing that is enjoyable?

Dean: Hitting the bag, man. You know it's cool.

Chris: How do you know when you've landed a good punch?

Dean: [Pause] It's all about relaxing, when you throw punches and you're relaxed that's when the good ones come. 'Cus when you're tense all ya muscles don't work together 'cus they're too busy tightening up, so like, you got to try and stay loose and then let the punches flow. Ya faster like that as well; fast and there's more power. You can just let stuff go and when you do that the punches start landing (Dean interview).

The bodily practice of 'staying loose' was one of the ways that men at Freedom Gym increased the speed at which they could throw punches. Dean, and others, found that this relaxation was easier to achieve while doing bag work. The absence of a 'live' opponent removed some of the anxiety that sparring could produce. The norms of control and cooperation, which dominate sparring practices, were also removed. As such, boxers were liberated to 'let their punches go' when working the bag. The speed and rhythm involved in throwing fast 'punches in bunches' (combinations) was significant for these men. It was a marker of technical mastery and physical prowess accompanied by physically significant sensations. Take the following example:

Chris: Why do you think you enjoy throwing combinations?

Andrew: I like getting them right, you know changing them so they're really tight and snappy.

Chris: Do you enjoy the feeling?

Andrew: Yeah, getting a combination spot on is brilliant, especially if it's taken a while [to learn].

Chris: Can you describe what it feels like?

Andrew: After a while it goes from feeling forced to being natural and easy, things just flow out.

Chris: How can you tell when you get it right?

Andrew: *It clicks and the punches get faster and land with more power. If there's [foot] movement then you feel balanced and you can spring back out of range.*

Chris: You enjoy those feelings?

Andrew: Yeah, nothing like it, landing a really hard punch and then getting out, I think it's the man in me coming out [Laughs].

Chris: Can you describe the feeling of landing a hard punch?

Andrew: *It not so much about how hard it is, its about the timing, that's when you know you've done something right, that's when it feels the best, everything's in line or something and you feel the power* (Andrew interview - emphasis added).

Speed, power transfer, balance and coordination of the body, were all discussed in positive terms, not only because of the social rewards associated with the process of habituating actions, but also as a rewarding sensuous experience. Once again, it is not suggested that these feelings stand alone as some essential component of the experience. Rather, they must be understood to be intertwined with the social and physiological significance of boxing. As such, these experiences are contoured by notions informed by the SVMC. These sensations were an embodiment of the dominant narrative of masculinity and class, as Andrew remarked, 'I think it's the man in me coming out'. The physically powerful, fast and coordinated experiences of bag work represented an effective adoption of the overarching

notions of what a 'man' should be. Such feelings were sensuous evidence of the participant's ability to protect himself, his family and friends using only his fists. Here we find the intertwining of the social and physical significances of these experiences.

Within the established group, the reporting of such physically enjoyable experiences was accompanied by the embodiment of the correct techniques and ways of using the body. Patrick described the process of changing significance that accompanied his adoption of the boxer's habitus and the norms and values of the established group:

Chris: I want to ask you about bag work for a bit now, what do you enjoy about hitting the bag?

Patrick: Well I used to enjoy it just 'cus it was a way of finishing off a [weight] training session but now it's the best way to practise stuff.

Chris: So what was it you enjoyed at first then, being able to let loose on the bag, or working up a sweat, or hitting something?

Patrick: Everything really, when I first started I loved coming over [to the boxing area] and having a bit of a mess around really, just whacking the bag. It's not like [weight and cardiovascular] training is, it's more like you're having fun rather than working out.

Chris: What about when you connect with a really solid punch?

Patrick: Yeah that pretty cool.

Chris: What is it that's cool about it?

Patrick: Err, well I suppose it's nice to just hit something, like you can't normally do that can ya? I mean that was at first, 'cus like now I'm used to it but when I first started it was a new thing, so like hitting something was a bit different.

Chris: Do you still enjoy hitting the bag in the same way?

Patrick: Yeah, well, it's not like a new thing anymore so I am used to it now, but I still like it, but *now it's more about what I'm doing, I mean, like learning what I'm doing when I'm doing it, so I'm thinking much more* (Patrick interview - emphasis added).

As Patrick engaged more and more with the established group, the means by which he enjoyed the physical pleasures of bag work became both constrained and enabled by the norms that dominated the boxing area. The enjoyment he once gained from simply 'whacking' the bag in a uncontrolled manner was gradually replaced by an appreciation of a more refined production of these sensations. This controlling and channelling was experienced by Patrick as a challenging but fulfilling experience. Through learning the 'right' way to work the bag, Patrick developed his body's ability to produce physically and socially rewarding experiences in the ring. This conditioning of the body was accompanied by a set of physical markers that these men strived to achieve. These markers were framed by what was believed to be a traditional approach to boxing technique. An extract from the field notes describes this link:

I noticed today that when people talk about enjoying the physical side of training it's always framed by their boxing skills. They never discuss landing a really big punch with bad technique, it's always linked to the biomechanics of sound boxing. So balance will be key as this lets you transfer your body weight without falling over. When guys are talking about technique, they invariably start by discussing the 'base'. Having a 'solid

base' is essential if power is to be generated. Then the 'twist' or 'wind' of the body will be used to generate more force. This is followed by aligning the upper body so that the force that has been produced can be transferred into the bag or opponent. *All of these descriptions are accompanied by a feeling for a set of bodily positions and movements that are significant for these guys.* You see them drilling these movements in the mirror, refining the pattern, ingraining it. When hitting the bag they're rewarded for their hard work by the sensuous experience of matching these actions up, combining them in a bodily continuum of power production and transference. Training on the bag is a means of fine-tuning these actions. Feedback is instantaneous; if it feels powerful, then it's probably good technique and it probably feels good at the same time (Field notes, 13/3/2010 - emphasis added).

As my time in the field passed and I started to develop the boxer's habitus, I also found increased significance in the finer details of boxing technique. Not only was it enjoyable to 'time' a punch, combining it with advanced movements provided an extra level of bodily significance. Slips, rolls, blocks of imaginary punches, snappy movements in and out of range, all added to the sense of physical capability. These actions were all accompanied by sensuous markers that I hoped confirmed the 'correctness' of the techniques I was developing. These markers were an essential component of the process of habituation that came with increased involvement within the established boxing group.

The transfer of power seemed significant for *all* the men at Freedom Gym. For the established group of boxers, such sensations were also accompanied by an increased appreciation for control, speed and returning to a defensive guard. Markers of these sensuous experiences were employed as tools to pass on knowledge about good technique. During various training sessions, casual advice, including reference to these physical markers, was offered to me:

You've got to feel it [power] moving through your body (Gary, field notes - 18/8/2010).

If you're off balance you're gonna get knocked out, keep your weight in-between your feet (David, field notes - 4/5/2010).

It's this twist right [moves his torso round], that's where you get speed and power from, don't try and do it with your arms (Simon, field notes - 10/9/2009).

Such comments were particularly effective at encouraging the adoption of the established group's norms regarding boxing technique. Advice delivered from one of the more experienced users of the gym was generally accepted without question by those who used the boxing area. As such, the dominant understanding of the correct physical markers and the sensuous significance of good technique were passed on.

Encouraging participants to discuss these physical experiences proved to be challenging at times. Some possible reasons for this have previously been explored in Chapter Three. To briefly recap, the difficulty tended to be connected to issues of the appropriateness of discussing the enjoyment of violence, the miss-match between these sensuous, emotional experiences and the descriptive terminology available to these men and/or their belief that I, as a fellow participant, already knew the answer to questions that I was asking. As such, they would happily discuss their enjoyment of mastering techniques, but finding out what was pleasurable about the sensuous side of this mastery was challenging. Exploring the enjoyment of the physical act of violence was difficult for these men. However, with some probing it was possible to discover insights that pointed to the sensuous significance of training at Freedom Gym. The most readily reported aspect of these experiences on the punch bag was the transfer of power through well-timed or full-power punches. As previously described by Andrew, the feeling of physical power, the movement of force from the body into the bag was enjoyable. Phil told me how this feeling also helped generate emotional release:

Sometimes you got to just come down and smash the bag in, there's no better way to let it all out. Proper hammering it with big bombs, right, left, right, left, really loading up. Nothing like it, no better way to de-stress then landing some KO punches (Phil interview).

'Loading up' one's body weight and bodily power enabled boxers to generate more force. This greater power was felt travelling through the body, into the fists and then into the bag. In Wacquant's (2004; 68 - emphasis added) words, "training becomes its own reward when it leads one to master a difficult gesture that offers *the sensation of decoupling one's power*". After watching Gary doing a particularly intensive round on the bag, I questioned him about our mutual enjoyment of landing such punches:

Chris: Easy there big guy, you enjoyin' ya sen?

Gary: [Laughs] Yeah, winding up a bit.

Chris: What is it that we like so much about landing big shots?

Gary: It's getting all that weight from ya toes into ya body and then out in small point on someone's chin.

Chris: Ya on a bag though?

Gary: Imagin' it though don't ya, every shot you got to think about it landing on someone's chin. Putting all your weight through with one shot is the one (Field notes, 27/10/2010).

Such weight transference using correct technique was enjoyable for all the members of the established group. In this example, Gary attempted to increase the 'realness' of these experiences by projecting an imagined opponent onto the bag. He had described in previous

chats the importance of imagining that the bag was a live opponent, others in the gym also used this technique. For Dave, imagining the bag was a person was a key aspect of training:

If you just think about hitting a big bag o'leather stuff with shit then ya ain't gonna care about hittin' that. But if ya imagin' it's someone, then ya can work on stuff better and it's more of a buzz. It's better for ya accuracy if you imagin' someone's chin on the bag as well. That gets the adrenaline going more than just thinkin' it's a bag (Dave, field notes, 15/5/2010).

For Dave, Gary and other established members, imagery increased the significance of these experiences. This enabled them to treat their bag work more like their sparring sessions, as such, they would pay more attention to defensive slips, blocks and movements while working on their attacking punches and combinations. Here we find the constraining and enabling effect of the dominant norms and values that shape training in Freedom Gym. Bodily techniques were refined and channelled while, at the same time, new significances were developed and experienced.

As highlighted in Chapter Four, during chats and interviews these men tended to express themselves not only with words but also actions and noises. When discussing the physical significance of boxing this somatic language was employed more fully. This perhaps stands to reason; what better way to explain the significance of a physical act than by communicating in a physical language? During Faisal's interview, he repeatedly used the actions of punching as a means of describing the enjoyment he gained from working the bag. Informed by an assumed mutual understanding of these experiences, Faisal used his body to convey meaning:

Chris: What about hitting the bag, do you enjoy that and if so, what is it that you enjoy?  
Faisal: Well that's what most boxing sessions are based around really, it can get a bit boring if you don't do it properly, it's one of those 'you get out what you put in' type of things. If you are prepared to push hard and stay focused, bag work is really good, but if you let tiredness get the better of you it quickly turns boring and it can ingrain bad habits.

Chris: What about punching the bag, do you like connecting with it?

Faisal: *Yeah sure, sometimes it's nice to let some big bangers go* [he leans in with his body like he has just thrown a big punch] *you know and really feel the power* [puts his left hand over his right fist and bangs them together with force], *but also, it's cool to get some nice crisp combinations off, not really that hard but nice and tight and fast. Bam bam bam bam bam* [he throws punches in time with these noises] (Faisal interview - emphasis added).

Faisal assumed through our shared experiences at Freedom Gym that I could understand the message of physical significance that he was transmitting by re-creating boxing techniques. Indeed, through my time in the gym, I had come to understand this physical language. As

such, I tend to believe that I could more or less decipher the meanings that were attached to these boxing actions. This section of the chapter concludes with an exploration of the significance of the fatigue that accompanied the physical and emotional experiences that have been described.

### **6.8 The Physical Drain of Hard Training**

Along with the emotional release and sensuous rewards from timing punches, there was a tendency for the men at Freedom Gym to find the muscular and cardiovascular fatigue of hard training enjoyable. Indeed, in comparison to the difficulty of accessing other data about the enjoyment of boxing, these feelings were readily expressed. It seemed the elicitation of enjoyable sensations of tiredness was not as problematical as discussing emotion and enjoying the physical act of violence. A similar picture in a school environment was painted by Gard and Meyenn (2000). The significant experiences, generated by pushing the body through pain barriers, resonate with the dominant working-class masculine subjectivities that framed gym life. The level of discipline and commitment, that such training suggested, was valorised amongst the established group of boxers. As such, these experiences were described with a relative degree of freedom, in comparison to the previously described significances. The following field note extract describes one of many situations in which such sensations were positively discussed:

I trained with Gary and Dave tonight. We did some sparring then a fitness session on the bags. Gary was talking about doing it after most sessions to help push our fitness levels. We hammered it, three hard rounds, then a break, then three more hard rounds. I could hardly walk after we finished. While I caught my breath, Gary had the following to say:

“That was a proper little session, you can push yourself harder on the bag, you got to be in the right frame of mind ‘cus you don’t have the same adrenaline, but once you get going you can keep at it ‘cus there ain’t that danger like there is in sparrin’. Wow, I’m fucked, I love it, I’m just gonna pass out as soon as I get home, nothing like a hard session to get those endorphins going” (Field notes, 22/4/2010).

Both Dave and I agreed with Gary’s assessment of the session. The physical challenge we had been through was gruelling and pleasurable. At one and the same time we hated it and loved it. This complex intertwining of physical and emotional pain and pleasure was a key dynamic within such sessions. During interviews, these experiences were repeatedly described using biological explanations. Gary described this enjoyment as being linked to the release of endorphins, others talk about adrenaline, or a physical 'buzz'. These 'natural drugs'

were described as being addictive and as generally unobtainable in other aspects of life. Ben told me; "It's a rush, the whole thing's like a drug, once you're used to the pain of working hard you get hooked on it. Once that happens you just push harder and harder" (Ben interview). Liam described something similar:

If you wanna be fit you got to work hard, so I like working hard. I think in boxing most people who're involved are willing to push themselves properly, you don't start boxing unless you enjoy training hard. Everyone knows boxers are a bit mental when it comes to training, and that probably shows. It gets like a drug to 'em, but it's a healthy drug, not like booze, that'll kill ya. We get hooked on training hard, it's something ya born wiv (Liam interview).

This positive identification with such sensations seems to be linked to the embodiment of the established group's boxing habitus. With the adoption of the norms associated with this group came an increased enjoyment of these experiences of fatigue. Indeed, the older members of this group who tended to partake in less intense sparring sessions still found significance in pushing their bodies toward exhaustion. Eddy, one of the most experienced users of the gym, described his enjoyment of hard training; "Too many of 'em don't wanna put the work in. I've always found it easy. Coming down and hurting is what I do best, if you like doing that to yourself then getting in shape is easy, just come down and hammer yourself for an hour" (Field notes, 3/11/2010). Frequently, Eddy and other established members would praise less experienced participants for their ability to push through pain barriers. With a premium being placed on hard work and effort, the bodily sensations elicited by tough training tended to be valorised. Take the following discussion:

David: I don't know how you still do it. I'm totally knackered.

Arthur: Simple I like to keep going when my body's telling me to stop.

Chris: Do you still enjoy it though?

Arthur: I enjoy it more, that's when you know you're doing some good, that burning in ya lungs, when you wanna stop 'cus you can't even lift your arms up anymore, that's when I wanna keep going (Field notes, 20/1/2011).

Arthur was renowned for his tenacity and the 'heart' he displayed when training. He had taken to boxing late in his life, as such, he made up for his lack of skill by working tirelessly on the bag and in sparring. I asked him to describe what he enjoyed about working the bag:

Arthur: When I'm sparring I like to out-work people, but sometimes I struggle 'cus I'm not as confident with my basics, so it don't matter sometimes 'cus I'll get whacked and there's not that much you can do, but when I'm on the bag I know I can just keep going and going till I can't stand up anymore.

Chris: What do you enjoy about that?

Arthur: I just like pushing myself I think.

Chris: Do you like the feeling of it?

Arthur: Yes and no, sometimes it's hard work if I've had a long day but I do like that pain.

Chris: What about after you've finished, is it a nice feeling after?

Arthur: Yeah, it relaxes me (Arthur interview).

It was thought that the physical and emotional release that was possible through bag work was a more effective means by which boxers were able to train their bodies. Generating the same level of physical strain was described as being much harder in relatively 'boring' exercises such as jogging. It was thought that the 'endorphins' and 'adrenaline' produced through the generation and release of tension, and the physical act of mimetic violence was a means by which these men were able to push their fitness levels further. Without these emotionally and physically rewarding aspects of boxing training, the men at Freedom Gym felt they could not develop the physically draining experiences that marked out a good training session. Lewis described training on the bag as the superior means of generating enjoyable post-training sensations:

Lewis: When I do a session on the bags I am knackered. But not in a bad way, it's more like you know you've done something good.

Chris: So do you think that is 'cus of the cardio or because of the letting loose you were just describing.

Lewis: It's probably both. The feeling I get when I'm home after training is like, I'm tired but feel good and kinda switched off but like, I've still got energy though. That sounds weird don't it? (Lewis interview).

Although Lewis found it difficult to describe the physical sensations of post training, it was clear that he interpreted them positively. Bag work allowed these men to focus primarily on their own desire to experience the significant effects of hard training. Although a well-balanced sparring session would also produce such sensations, bag work was a means by which these men could more or less guarantee a challenging workout. The increased ability to generate and experience powerful emotional and physical sensations was also linked to this pleasurable fatigue. For the established group and many of the less experienced members, other forms of training simply did not enable them to push themselves to the same level. This was further evidence that supported their understanding of training for boxing as being the most challenging, and therefore 'best', form of exercise.

### **6.9 Bag Work Summery**

For the men who used the boxing area at Freedom Gym, bag work enabled a variety of significant experiences. The character of such training allowed them to generate and express emotions that were generally considered to transgress the norms and values attached to

sparring and other training. These emotional displays were tightly contoured by assumptions of legitimacy based on notions informed by the SVMC. As such, traditionally 'manly' emotions such as aggression and anger could be released during such training as long as they were channelled into the bag using sound fundamentals of boxing technique. Release of these emotions in a manner not conforming to the established group's norms resulted in the participant being portrayed as a member of the rough working classes and/or uneducated in the 'correct' way to engage in such mimetic violence. Accompanying the release of such emotions was the physically significant act of throwing well-timed and powerful punches. 'Working the bag' enabled these men to throw full-power punches without the risks that were associated with doing this in sparring. The transfer of force from the boxer's body into the punch bag was of key significance. However, the legitimate means by which these experiences could be enjoyed were shaped by established notions of correct boxing technique. Participants reported finding significance in a set of sensations that were associated with these techniques. In this way, participants' experiences of bag work were constrained and enabled by the social frames that dominated Freedom Gym. This generation of physically and emotionally significant experiences was linked with the enjoyment these men gained from the fatigue of hard training. It was believed that such training enabled the boxers to push their bodies harder and longer.

In combination with the generation of emotions, physically significant experiences of bag work shared important similarities with the 'real' violence that occurs outside the gym. This added 'realness' was in part used to explain the enjoyment that these men gained from their participation. For the majority of these men, it was believed that the satisfaction of testosterone-fuelled urges and the elicitation of adrenaline and endorphins explained such behaviours. Within the established group, these bag work sensations tended to be described as less significant than similar experiences in sparring. In many ways, the 'realness' of the emotional and physical sensations was thought to explain this relative hierarchy. In what follows these experiences of sparring are explored.

## 6.10 Sparring

As previously described (Chapter Four), one of the key ways that the established group of boxers generated and maintained their relationship was by attending informally-organised sparring sessions on Tuesday and Thursday nights. These sessions were fundamental to many of the members of the established group's motivations to attend Freedom Gym. Outside of this group, sparring was engaged in far less regularly. During my time observing and chatting with men from different positions in this social hierarchy, I came across a degree of variety in the meanings that were attached to experiences of sparring. Indeed, the previously-discussed emotional and physical significance of bag work had its counterpart within sparring. However, the different structuring of these activities, as previously described in Chapters Four and Five, created variations in the physical and psychological significances that were possible, permissible and rewarded at Freedom Gym. Burt explained this difference:

Burt: Well, you know what punching a bag's like. It's nice to hit something sometimes. I suppose it depends on what mood I'm in. If I've been dealing with knob heads all day then it's good to come down and release some tension. Sometimes when I'm at work and I'm 'avin a bad day I'll think about hitting the bag later in the evening.

Chris: Is that the same with sparring?

Burt: *Oh no. I don't think about sparring like that, well, I suppose when we go at it we get some aggression out but I wouldn't ever hit one of my mates in that way. Sparring ain't about going mental* [pause]. Although sometimes when I hit a bag I am thinking about smashing someone's face in. I shouldn't really say that should I? (Burt Interview - emphasis added).

Experiences of sparring tended to be framed by a narrative of control and cooperation, emotional and physical significances largely followed this pattern. The inclusion of a sparring partner as a target for this mimetic violence was the key aspect of this changed meaning. In an interview, Lee and I discussed the trust and risk involved in sparring sessions:

Chris: I know what you mean though, 'cus sparring isn't just like having a game of tennis together, there's a strong element of trust involved.

Lee: Yeah, *yeah that's it. I think you have to know someone pretty well to be happy sparring with them, especially when you're learning.* Ya see when I've done a bit of full sparring I've struggled a bit, you have to learn to get used to getting hit. It's not natural to stand there and get smacked in the face. It's like all of a sudden you 'ave to do all this stuff but with the added difficulty of an opponent that moves around and is trying to hit you. That's why I need to be sparring, it's not like other sports where you can pretty much practise exactly what you will be doing when you are in a match. The training and the actual fighting are totally different.

Chris: Why do you think that is?

Lee: *Well, you cant really do loads of fighting can ya 'cus it's dangerous. I mean, it's not like having a full fight but you can still get hurt and you're taking shots to the head. You hear about boxers getting brain damage and stuff so they ain't gonna be taking excess punishment if they can avoid it* (Lee interview - emphasis added).

For the men at Freedom Gym, sparring required the formation of trusting relationships. This trust was based on the assumption that implicit or explicit agreements about the threshold of mimetic violence would not be transgressed. This assumption was a fundamental theme upon which experiences of sparring were constructed. As such, emotional and physical significances were contoured by these narratives, such experiences will be explored in what follows.

### 6.11 Emotions in Sparring

Experiences in the ring were framed to a large extent by the established group's norms of cooperation in sparring. This dominant narrative meant that the relatively aggressive emotional displays that characterised 'bag work' tended to be absent in the ring. Displays of such emotion lay in opposition to the dominant norm, as such, they had to be negotiated, explained and justified. The production and release of aggression and anger were only acceptable in certain situations. Instead, happiness, pleasure, closeness, excitement, frustration and anxiety dominated the emotional landscape inside the ring. A field note extract describes a typical sparring session:

The buzzer goes and the lads pick a partner. Some exchange a few words to ascertain what level they will spar at, others with more experience get straight to it; Karl winds up a hay maker and swings at Dave's head! Everyone settles into a groove, and begin to work together. The level of intensity, force of punches and emotional displays vary but the underlying atmosphere is one of camaraderie and fun. At various times, jokes and laughs are shared but are quickly followed by a return to this *friendly violence*. The buzzer sounds again, embraces and respectful glove touching follow. Technical advice and encouragement is offered while those outside the ring step in ready for the next round (Field notes, 17/9/2010 - emphasis added).

The vast majority of sparring sessions were similar to this description. Although there was a degree of variety in the level of intensity, the fundamental theme of friendly competition and cooperation remained. The emotional experiences attached to these sessions were tightly framed by these notions of the correct way to engage in sparring. Arthur, David and Dion all told me about the pleasure they gained from sparring in a cooperative and friendly manner:

Arthur: None of us are in there for the wrong reasons, we step in to learn something and have a bit of fun, it's just a good way to stay in shape.

Chris: What's the wrong reasons?

Arthur: If you're one of these lads that come down to prove a point, or if you just wanna come and try and bang people (Field notes, 19/5/2010).

David: I love working with someone, pushing each other so that we both get the most enjoyment out of it (Field notes, 7/1/2010).

Dion: It's just so much fun, 'cus I come from a different art form I thought boxing would be a bit restrictive at first, but it's like chess, but you're not trying to beat each other you're trying to bring out the best in each other (Dion interview).

The dominant narratives of cooperation and mimetic violence framed much of the established group's sparring experiences. The emotional landscape attached to these experiences tended to be dominated by excitement and happiness. However, outside of this established group, newcomers' experiences of sparring were initially characterised by anxiety and frustration.

Take the following examples:

I was shittin' bricks the first time, I remember trying to hide it but it ain't that easy, I was gassed after the first round 'cus I was running on nervous energy, you know bouncing around all tense and that (Burt, field notes, 7/8/2010).

I had a go at sparring a bit back and it just pissed me off. I thought I knew what I was doing but then when I started I couldn't do any of the stuff I do on the bag. It was like I was learning a new sport all of a sudden, I think you need a proper coach if you're gonna spar (Liam, field notes, 24/5/2010).

Chris: What was it like the first time you sparred?

Dwight: I don't mind admitting I was nervous as hell. There'd been loads of build up to it, and the lads were all being dicks, I was just glad to get it out the way, once you've done the first one, when you've tasted a bit of pain and you know it's nothing to worry about, you can start getting used to it, you've got to be relaxed in there and the only way to get that is by doing the hours (Dwight interview).

Although anxiety and frustration were themes within these early sparring sessions, these men also discussed the excitement and enjoyment of such experiences. Indeed, those that were not put off by these initial encounters, reported a gradual process of anxiety being replaced by excitement, frustration by expression, fear by pleasure and an increased level of control over physical and emotional experiences. The follow field note extract described my experience of this process:

After tonight's sparring, I thought back to how my time in the ring has progressed. I remember the nervous excitement I had before my first session of sparring. Technically I was crap, but it was so much fun once the initial fears had passed. Now, a year or so on, I am a far better boxer, far more comfortable in the ring, but the excitement and fun of sparring is still the same. I have to engage in harder sessions to reach the same levels, but it's still exhilarating (Field notes, 7/10/2010).

Although the experiences of beginners were sometimes described using negative language, it was clear from observations, interviews and personal experiences that the vast majority of sparring sessions contained positive emotional experiences. The established group of boxers reported looking forward to 'moving around' in the ring. These emotional experiences were a crucial part of this enjoyment. Frequently, a biological interpretation was employed to express this enjoyment:

David: I miss it, I see you lot in there and I wanna jump in, everyone misses it when they ain't been doing it for a while.

Chris: What do you miss?

David: I dunno, all the training I do just doesn't really cut it after you've boxed proper, it's cool 'cus I'm getting too old for it, but I still want that adrenaline from time-to-time. (David interview)

Although the experiences varied in important ways from those of working the bag, the men at Freedom Gym tended to make similar biologically-based assumptions about their reasons for engaging in sparring. Indeed, it seemed that these men found it easier to use terms associated with biological concepts as a means of explaining their behaviours, and the pleasure elicited from them, rather than employing emotional language. In Gary's words:

It's the competition, getting in and workin' with someone. Ya push each other out of ya comfort zone and that's where the fun is. It's ok working on [technical] stuff but I really wanna just throw down with someone who knows what they're doing. That's when it's best, that's when you get a buzz (Gary interview).

This 'buzz' was a reoccurring theme for the men in Freedom Gym. It was one of the means by which they could describe their understanding of the biological foundations of their emotional sensations. No doubt the term contained variations in meaning, however, there was clearly an enjoyable physical and emotional component attached to the concept. This simple terminology enabled these men to describe the expressive psychological and sensational experiences of sparring, without employing overly emotive language, which was either not available to them, or did not resonate with their traditional masculine norms of emotional detachment and stoicism. These significant feelings were believed to be linked to the risks involved in sparring. This partially-controlled risk enabled these men to experience emotional and physical sensations that were generally removed from other areas of their lives. This 'buzz' was described as being unobtainable in the less emotionally charged, 'boring', day-to-day experiences of these men. As Dan told me:

Chris: People talk about the buzz they get from sparring, do you get that?

Dan: Course, that's what you do it for, that's what lets you know you're alive.

Chris: What do you mean?

Dan: It might seem daft, but it's not until you're hanging out of your arse, with some guy trying to hit you in the face, till you really start to feel shit. Work, home, pub, whatever, it's all the same, but in the ring you actually feel stuff, pain, fear, whatever (Dan interview).

Faisal said something similar:

Chris: Buzz?

Faisal: The buzz people get from sparring, that feeling, I wouldn't know 'cus I've never done any, but like it's a drug. I think it can get like that for people, 'cus *sparring is so different to other stuff in people's lives they end up kinda getting hooked on that buzz a bit. The adrenalin of it.*

Chris: How do you mean different to other stuff?

Faisal: Other stuff in their lives, I mean if people are used to playing sports like football or cricket or whatever then when they come boxing they end up realising it's just so much, well, better, just it, basically beats those other sports. I don't think other sports can compare to it really, it's just so much more of a challenge to overcome, it means more. Does that make sense? I just mean that anyone can play other sports but because boxing takes courage and a lot of discipline, it just means more I think (Faisal interview - emphasis added).

This relative contrast between the emotionally vibrant experiences that occur inside the ring and those of the work-a-day lives of these men was a defining characteristic of the significance that was attached to sparring. Similar accounts can be found within the criminological writing of Jack Katz (1988). As O'Mally and Mugford (1994, 190) argue, Katz "makes the claim that much crime is to be understood as an array of reactions against mundane, secular rationality and against the (especially modern) forms of social settings in which they are inextricably implicated." Risk was a key component in generating these emotionally charged sensations. Although serious injuries were extremely rare, pain and minor injuries were a persistent aspect within these sessions. Despite the mimetic norms that dominated sparring, pain was still an essential part of the exciting significances of these experience. The ever-present physical threat of such pain added a certain 'spice' to the action that was believed to be absent in other areas of these men's lives. This risk of pain and injury was believed by some to be the most adequate means of generating the 'buzz'. In Philip and Faisal's words:

Chris: What's the buzz?

Philip: It's that feelin' you get when ya doing tough sparring, like, from the danger (Philip Interview).

Chris: Do you think the risk of pain from sparring increases that buzz?

Faisal: It certainly makes you concentrate, yeah I think you might be right, 'cus when you first get into sparring, that side of it is always at the forefront of your mind 'cus no-one likes getting hit, and that will make you really on it. That's the adrenalin, 'cus you're standing with someone who's trying to hit you and your body just goes into auto-pilot and you get that fight or flight thing. Obviously, we choose to fight though (Faisal interview).

By putting themselves in situations of, albeit controlled, bodily risk, these men believed they were satisfying their 'natural' propensity to enjoy such physical and psychological experiences. They tended to discount the social significance of these experiences favouring instead to focus on a biological interpretation of the 'buzz'. In this way, they believed that boxing allowed them to access the risks needed to satisfy testosterone-fuelled drives and the

production of adrenaline and endorphins that were synonymous with emotional and physical enjoyment.

A key dimension of an enjoyable sparring session was finding the right balance between risk and emotional reward. Key within this negotiated process was the threshold between mimetic and 'real' violence. As the intensity of sparring increased so did the expression of emotions that might normally be characterised as suggesting 'real' violence. Such 'tough' or 'hard' sparring sessions were mainly the preserve of the established group of boxers. These men had formed a relatively high level of trust between each other, as such, they tended to be more comfortable pushing the boundary of mimetic violence, safe in the knowledge that their partner was willing and able to take this step in a controlled manner. They were keenly aware of the norms and standards of sparring; this enabled them to 'play' with the flexible boundaries of these sessions while avoiding being labelled as deviant. Although the cooperative and mimetic character of these sessions was seldom questioned by those involved, sparring between some of the more experienced boxers sometimes appeared to transgress the expected norms of such training:

If a stranger walked into the gym and watched a normal session between the lads, generally they would be able to see the underlying camaraderie. However, when guys are closely matched and have experience of sparring together they sometimes pushed the normal boundary of aggression. Gary and Dave do this most regularly, but also Patrick and Paul, Ben and Shaun. All these guys know each other well, this closeness allows them to move past the usually accepted norms of sparring. When these guys go toe-to-toe it sometimes looks like an all out war. Not only do they throw what look like full-blooded shots, especially to the body, they also look very aggressive at the time. Gritting their teeth and releasing uncontrolled grunts with each big swing (Field notes, 18/1/2011).

Despite such displays of physicality and emotion, these men insisted that their sparring sessions were not aggressive or indeed violent. Clearly such action was on or near what they defined as the mimetic boundary, however, they constantly maintained that these sessions were different in important ways to 'real' violence, as such, they were able to legitimise their behaviours. They insisted that aggressive emotional displays did not contain any 'real' malice. Indeed, when hard punches were landed, there would generally be a pause to ensure the partner was happy to continue. Each round started and finished with a friendly touch of the gloves. A warm embrace usually followed particularly hard sparring. Post-training discussions tended to be full of acclaim for the partner's abilities and courage. There was clearly a degree

of emotional warmth during and after these sessions. When the members of the established group were pushed to discuss the construction of their experiences they were adamant that, despite the potential for gym outsiders to make assumptions about the 'violent' nature of their sparring, until someone had been involved in one of these hard session they could not understand this mimetic component. Take the following example:

Chris: What would you say to people who say our sparring sessions are just like a fight?

David: If they said that they wouldn't understand it, so I wouldn't say anything to them, just let 'em get on with it.

Chris: What don't they understand?

David: People look and think it looks tough and it is in some ways, but not like they think, we work hard, but we're pretty much safe in there, massive gloves, head guards, gum shield and we all know what we're doing, we're good enough to pull out of shots that're gonna land straight down the pipe, and you learn to move with them anyways.

Gary: And with these big gloves on it's only those unlucky shots you have to watch out for.

David: That's not very often though is it, 'cus none on us hard spar with anyone who ain't ready (Field notes, 14/9/2010).

For David and Gary, to engage in sparring was to begin to understand the controlled nature of these sessions. Phil describe something similar:

People think our sessions are hard, but they don't realise the control people have and the difference between a hard shot and a KO [punch]. Unless you know a bit and go in with someone else who does, you can't understand how safe it is, it don't matter how hard it looks from outside, it's only in the ring that you really know (Phil, Field notes, 30/9/2010).

By privileging their own knowledge above that of outsiders, the established group were able to devalue and disregard other interpretations of their emotional experiences and acts in the ring. This process served to legitimise their interpretation of events and helped to add more significance to the established norms and values within Freedom Gym. As such, this group was able to maintain a degree of control over the level of risk and emotional expression that was seen to be appropriate in sparring sessions.

Managing risk while maintaining the emotional significance of these experiences was then a key aspect of the established group's boxing habitus. Indeed, their habitual embodiment of the values and norms attached to sparring enabled them to skilfully negotiate these experiences. An understanding of the mimetic nature of sparring was believed to accompany the process of learning boxing techniques and mentalities. Not only did these men learn the 'correct' way to punch, but they also had to learn to temper these punches at crucial times

during the heat of sparring. Such fine control was mirrored in the generation of an acceptable degree of aggression and anger required to ensure mimetic norms could be maintained. This emotional control followed assumptions informed by the SVMC. Indeed, men with the most experience of boxing and the values of the SVMC had the greatest ability to produce innovative emotional displays. These men, whose vocabulary of habitus had become sufficiently layered by fully embracing the emotional values and norms that dominated the boxing area, could push the boundary of what was considered possible, permissible and pleasurable. In this way, their sparring and emotional displays enabled them to generate more of the emotions and sensations that were of significance to them. I asked Ben about taking part in hard sparring:

Chris: Some of your sparring sessions get a bit heavy, do you enjoy them more?

Ben: It's good to take it up a notch from time-to-time.

Chris: It looks like you are being really aggressive, but I didn't think that's what sparring was about?

Ben: It might look like that, but it's all good man. We know where to stop, it's never got any spite in it, we just push it a bit is all. It comes with having done it for years, you 'ave to push it to make it fun.

Chris: Does it make it more fun being able to make it a bit more real?

Ben: More of a buzz for defo.

Chris: What about it gives you that buzz?

Ben: I think it's like, that extra level of competition, 'cus if someone's not really trying to hit you properly, the training gets a bit stale sometimes (Ben interview).

Shaun, Ben's main training partner, agreed with Ben's explanation of their sessions. According to Ben, not only did the length of their association with the sport enable them to push the mimetic threshold, it *required* them to. This 'shift to risk' was an essential part of the exciting significance that they reported. For these men, and others at Freedom Gym, as their experience of sparring increased so did their need to engage in harder, more intense, sessions. The risk involved in these hard sessions, produced more of the emotional experiences that 'made it fun'. Through their adoption of established behavioural norms, Ben and Shaun were confidently able to train on, near, and even past, the mimetic threshold without being negatively constructed as losing control or misunderstanding the finer points of sparring etiquette (see Chapter Four). Indeed, fully adopting the established group's habitual norms enabled a certain degree of leniency as to the appropriate level of emotional release. Gary told me about the enjoyment he got from pushing the intensity of sparring and with it the mimetic threshold:

Chris: You and Dave really dig them [punches] in sometimes, why do you spar so hard?

Gary: We're big boys, we've done this long enough to know how to protect ourselves, so it's not like it's super dangerous or anything. It's all about levels, for us this is normal. If we go soft all the time, it's not really what we need to keep sharp.

Chris: Cool, is it more enjoyable sparring like that?

Gary: When it's done right it is, course it is, no-one wants to do dry sparring [boring and uncompetitive], that's not what we're in here for is it? We all like a bit of a ruck.

Chris: So it's not just about technique and staying sharp?

Gary: Course it's not kidda, we're down here to get stuck in.

Chris: Do you think you can let more out in those sessions, 'cus it looks a bit aggressive at times?

Gary: *That's half the enjoyment, you can't get like that unless you're with someone who can look after themselves. We can push it 'cus we know what we're doing and 'cus it'll never get out of hand, we know the game too well for that* (Gary interview - emphasis added).

For the majority of the established group, sparring produced more emotionally-significant experiences when it took place near the mimetic/real violence threshold. These hard sparring sessions produced more of the 'buzz' that these men craved. Through their strict adherence to the narratives of mimesis, cooperation and camaraderie, these men were able to legitimise the production of aggression and acts that might be considered to transgress mimetic norms.

Within this section, the emotional landscape of sparring at Freedom Gym has been explored and the exciting, pleasurable and, at times, anxiety-producing and frustrating aspects of these experiences have been described. The men at Freedom Gym tended to favour a biological interpretation of their desire to engage in such mimetic violence. The term 'buzz', was used as a means of describing the emotional and physical significance of these experiences. This term enabled these men to discuss psychological sensations without transgressing their masculine code of emotional detachment and stoicism. This vibrant emotional landscape existed in contrast to that of the relatively-boring everyday lives of these men. A key component in these experiences was the risk involved. Although this risk was managed to a greater or lesser degree due to the mimetic norms that framed these experiences, the ever-present potential for pain and injury provided elements of exciting significance within these activities. To a point, a decrease in the mimetic component of these sessions tended to be accompanied by a heightening of emotional significance. The established group of boxers were more likely to engage in such hard sparring sessions. Through their habitual embodiment of the norms and values that frame the boxing area, this established group were able to spar on, near, and at times over, the mimetic threshold. Their adherence to the narratives of cooperation and friendly competition allowed them a degree of leniency where

judgements on the appropriateness of emotional expression were concerned. From time-to-time, aggressive emotional displays were generated and justified by this group. The established group described relative outsiders who engaged in similar 'hard' sparring in negative terms linked to assumptions about the 'rough' working classes. In this way, the established group not only illegitimised 'other' ways of expressing emotion, they also confirmed the 'correctness' of their own experiences. This group did much to define the acceptable ways in which the 'buzz' of sparring could be produced and experienced. The physical side of these experiences of sparring will now be explored.

### **6.12 Physical Significance of Sparring**

Sparring at Freedom Gym carried with it a set of physically significant experiences. Once again, these experiences were framed by the values and norms that dominated the boxing area. The process of embodying and habituating these norms was accompanied by significant physical markers. During the observations and interviews, three main themes within this significance reoccurred. Here, these men tended to describe their enjoyment of the physical side of sparring sessions by referring to fatiguing and painful experiences, learning the dominant boxing habitus and the sensations attached to landing punches and other techniques. There is some degree of overlap with the experiences of bag work. However, differences in the structuring of these activities created important variations and tensions. In what follows, this physical world of sparring will be explored and attempts are made to unpack the tensions that arouse from the social framing of these experiences.

### **6.13 Pain and Fatigue in Training**

Hard work, physical effort and bodily sacrifice were key components of the SVMC that shaped life at Freedom Gym. As such, the fatigue and pain involved in the established group's sparring was described as being central to these sessions. Take the following example:

After a few months of regular sparring, when my nose had toughened up and I had learned to move with punches, I started to really enjoy the pain involved in tough sessions. Up to a point, I use the pain to help me focus and work harder. There's nothing like a sharp whack in the face to wake you up. It's easier to push through the pain of training as well, you just don't have a choice in sparring; on the bag I might slow down or take a breather but that isn't an option. With someone trying to punch you in the face and body you find a way to keep working. Sometimes, at the end of sparring, I just collapse 'cus I can't stand anymore, it's ridiculous how hard we push our bodies sometimes. You finish training in a delirium, head spinning from punches,

body useless, but the feeling is ace. You know you've achieved something when you're in that state (Field notes, 8/8/2010).

These sensations marked out one's ability to take punishment and the discipline necessary to push the body beyond what might normally be considered comfortable. Generally, attempts were made to conceal such painful experiences until sparring had finished. Here, an essential part of the boxer's habitus was the ability to hide any outward signs of pain to avoid giving an advantage to the opponent. However, after the session finished, these experiences were revelled in. Gary, Dave and David shared the following conversation:

Gary: I'm fucked.

Dave: Yeah, good'un was that. Remember when you had me on the ropes, I nearly took a knee then, you got me round the back of me elbow and I felt like dieing. I ain't took a knee yet so I thought fuck it, I'll just swing instead, at least then you'd put me down or I'd get some time [to recover if I landed a punch on you].

Gary: You're a mad one. 'Ere David, you heard this lad, I don't know anyone who can take as much [punishment] as him. He fucking loves it.

Dave: I don't love it, but you get used to it don't ya? [Pause] Maybe I do love it a bit [everyone laughs] (Field notes, 27/5/2010).

The power and accuracy of Gary's body punches was almost too much for Dave to take. His ability to disregard and even enjoy this pain was a key element of his sparring experiences.

Shaun described a similar interpretation of the painful fatigue of hard sparring:

Chris: Do you enjoy the feeling of doing a hard session?

Shaun: [Laughs] Yeah, I'm a bit weird like that.

Chris: How do you mean?

Shaun: That's why I like fightin, it's the pain. I like gettin' it, and eatin' it up and proving I can keep going. It's nothin' when you think about it, ya not getting injured, your body is just trying to make you stop. So you start enjoyin' it and then fuck it, just keep on workin' harder when it comes (Shaun interview).

Ernest also found great significance in his ability to produce and endure pain:

If the pace is high then I love it, I'm not even that bothered about who's winning, I just want to throw a load of punches. That's when you get the burn going, when you really push your body (Ernest, field notes 17/12/2009).

These enjoyably painful experiences carried a tension with them. Dave's initial dismissal of Gary's description of his love for pain and Shaun describing himself as 'a bit weird' marked out the inconsistencies between the framing of these experiences. On one hand, pain was a marker of the boxer's adoption of a code of bodily sacrifice and the ability to push himself. On the other, repeated pain from heavy punches could signify a total disregard for one's body. This jibbed with the controlled learning ethos of sparring. In this regard, the body should be pushed but not broken; a degree of respect for one's bodily health was an important part of

sparring. Where pain was equated to bodily damage, the tolerance and enjoyment of these acts diminished. Take the following example:

Right, I'm a bit of a stickler for this 'cus some of the lads don't know what sparring's all about. You 'ave to work hard and you've got to take some knocks to learn, but it's not about getting hurt, good boxers don't want to get hurt. No one should be taking big shots to the head in sparring. *It's all well and good working hard and enjoying it, even gritting your teeth and working through body shots, but if you keep getting stung to the head it's gonna affect you eventually* (David, field notes, 17/6/2010 - emphasis added).

The enjoyment of these masochistic experiences was then constrained and enabled by the norms and values that frame sparring. The boxers at Freedom Gym were relatively free to gain enjoyment and pleasure from pushing and punishing their bodies in certain ways. Positively interpreting these potentially uncomfortable sensations enabled these men to revel in the physical evidence of their adoption of the boxer's habitus. Such markers of the habitualisation of norms and values that dominated the boxing area tended to be experienced as significant.

#### **6.14 Adopting the Boxers Habitus**

A key theme within this sensuous world of sparring was bodily evidence of the learning of boxing technique. Steve made the following comments:

It's a good crack working in with the guys [the established group]; you learn so much from just moving around with them. It's only through sparring you get that. What's the point in doing all that stuff on the bag if you're never gonna try and put it into practice? (Steve, field notes, 23/1/2010).

Such descriptions represent the acceptable side of the physical enjoyment of sparring. The men at Freedom Gym were relatively free to talk about sparring sessions in terms that resonated with the norms of cooperation, learning, control and hard work. In the early stages of this research, such narratives dominated my attempts to explore the pleasure that I observed in these sessions.

These men learnt the fundamental aspects of boxing technique from various places, people and resources. The SVMC was clearly a crucial frame in this regard. An important component of this learning process was the development of an appreciation for physical evidence that could highlight the adoption of these techniques. Such sensuous information provided these

men with an enjoyable confirmation of their abilities to embody the norms that dominated the boxing area. The following field note extract describes this learning process:

Whenever I need to make a technical correction, I go back to the mirror. Watching the reflection allows me to make sure my technique matches whatever I am copying, whether it be a punch I saw on TV or a defensive move one of the lads is trying to teach me. Once it looks right, I go about drilling it in, making it permanent. Repetition after repetition, ensuring each one looks right in the mirror. As I get used to the pattern, I start to get a sense for the feeling, it might start off as a conscious awareness but eventually it slips away into the back of my mind. It might take weeks, but it happens if I keep working. When I first started sparring I was very open to a left hook to the head, this was because I didn't keep my right glove high enough, especially when I threw a jab. I spent months doing mirror work to sort that out. Now I notice the absence of my right glove from the right side of my head. Indeed, my right hand (usually) moves upwards to cover my temple when I step into range to punch (Field notes, 25/11/2010).

My bodily awareness was an essential component of the effective adoption of this technique. Indeed, the successful use of this technique to partially or fully block punches was very enjoyable. It was a feeling that signified my technical improvement, and eventually became a trigger for a countering right hand punch. However, I also experienced this physical sensation as satisfying in its own regard. The following examples describe the similar experiences of other gym users:

I like it when you get a nice bit of competition between attacking and defending, when you have to really think about what you're doing, so you keep your hands up and you're doing things properly. Stupid stuff like catchin', parryin' and blockin' punches, using their momentum against them [he performs the moves as he says them]. It's all pretty simple but it's cool when you've someone standing in the pocket [up close] slinging [punches] at you and they can't actually make contact [with scoring targets], they're just punching your gloves, that's when you know your defences are working (Dan interview).

For Dan, sparring ensured that he would concentrate on his defensive technique. It also enabled him to practise defensive moves that he found pleasurable. Gary also told me of his enjoyment of catching and parrying punches:

Chris: Do you think there's a sweet spot with defensive stuff like there is with punches?

Gary: When you get in a rhythm there is, there is with everything. You get the timing right and that's when the sweet spot comes.

Chris: Is it a good feeling, you know, parrying punches away?

Gary: Yeah, 'cus you're basically stopping your opponent from doing anything.

Chris: But does it feel good like landing a big punch, I mean like in your body?

Gary: Patting someone's punches away does, or a good block, yeah. 'Cus, you're timing their punch, so like, if you throw a right [he beckons me to do so] all I need is the slightest tap with my front hand and you can be off target and off balance, how wouldn't that feel good? (Gary interview).

For both Dan and Gary, the ability to neutralise their opponent's offensive was enjoyable. These techniques of domination clearly had a social significance in the light of the masculine

norms that framed life at Freedom Gym. The physical markers of effective adoption of these movements provided instant somatic feedback. During my training with Burt, we had a number of discussions about such bodily feedback. Instances where such sensations were thought to match the ideals of good technique were enjoyable for both of us. Take the following field note extract that came after I had been encouraging Burt to try and develop his movement around the ring:

Chris: That movement's coming on, how's it feeling?

Burt: Yeah, ya think? I wasn't sure if it was getting a bit risky 'cus I felt my hands coming down at times, but making you miss was brilliant, and it set you up didn't it, I had you on that body shot, I knew as soon as I'd slipped that you were open. When you get that timin' right it's amazing, 'cus I could use your movement against you. It just clicks, it felt weird at first, but once I got it right, I knew what to aim for. It's getting more and more natural na (Field notes, 20/5/2010).

Holding my weight over my legs is loads better, I'm loads more balanced and in control of what I'm doing. I used to hate it when I over-reached and left myself open, I just didn't know what I was doing. I know what to look out for now, just keep my weight here [sits down a bit]. More power and faster, wicked! [he darts in and out] (Burt, field notes, 20/5/2010).

These small alterations to Burt's technique increased his ability to avoid punches and counter attack. He felt an increase in his balance, speed and power. This was experienced as a positive progression, as such, the somatic information that was produced was highly significant. These enjoyable sensuous experiences were markers of his further adoption of the habitual behaviours that dominate the boxing area at Freedom Gym.

Sparring offered these men the chance to prove to themselves and to others that they had developed aspects of the boxing habitus. They were able to put moves and skills that had been drilled in the mirror or on the bag, into practise during these sessions. They placed a high degree of emphasis on the 'realness' of their sporting experiences. As such, the relatively 'real' actions in the ring provided the chance to develop their skills in what was believed to be a more functional sense. Learning this component of boxing technique was physically enjoyable for these men. Take the following example:

Dave: Sparring is all about putting your bag work into practice. So, when you've drilled a combo or slip and counter you wanna land it for real. Getting it right on a bag is alright but getting your movement right against a live opponent is more harder [*sic*].

Chris: Does it feel good when you land something you've been working on?

Dave: Yeah, especially when you line it up just right and it's like you did on the bag (Dave interview).

The bodily sensations that were learnt by drilling moves in the mirror and on the bag had to be refined for use in the ring. The enjoyable physical markers that were described previously, such as the transfer of power, provided these men with feedback as to their abilities in the ring. Sparring also produced quite unique learning experiences that were almost impossible to recreate outside the ring. Patrick described his enjoyment of learning such techniques and how he began to recognise the physical markers of good sparring skills:

When I first started sparring I had no defence, I mean, I knew to hold my hands up and all that but when you get in the ring that's when you learn man. Learning to see punches coming and block or parry them was brilliant. Catching punches is my favourite; when someone throws a jab and you meet it with your glove, take all the power off it and then you can counter. It's like catching a ball. You go from getting hit all the time, to being happy defending and taking shots on the arms and gloves, I even started liking it when someone was landing punches on me, but you just tuck up and it hits but doesn't hurt, it's ace when you do that (Patrick interview).

Patrick and the other men who regularly spar at Freedom Gym believed their time in the ring honed their boxing techniques. Adding this 'real' dimension to their skills brought an awareness of a new set of physically significant experiences. For Patrick, taking punches on the arms and gloves was enjoyable as it was evidence that his defence was improving. Take this example of my own experience of implementing a skill during sparring:

I've been working on countering of slips, after a few round on the bag I tried to implement what I had been doing in some light sparring with David. Every time he threw something, I tried to move round the punch and throw my own in return. *Although I missed on a fair number of occasions the ones that worked were brilliant, especially when I timed him coming in.* It's one thing doing it on a bag, it's another landing on someone who is trying to avoid getting hit. When you can get that timing, you know you are starting to make progress with the technique (Field notes, 8/7/2010 - emphasis added).

This timing was a key component of the bodily significance of sparring. The ability to time a punch, defensive move or combination was learnt and rewarded through the body. The more experienced boxers would encourage others to 'feel' the timing when sparring. Gary told me, "you'll know when you get the timing right 'cus it'll feel good" (Field notes, 30/9/2010). David also described the learning of the feel for timing:

David: It's alright drilling on the bag, you got to do it, but there comes a time when if you don't start sparring you will never get the timing right. There's no point being able to throw the best punches if you don't know when to throw them. That's what you learn in sparrin' 'cus you got a man in there trying to avoid 'em [the punches].

Chris: How do you know when you're getting that timing right?

David: You got to practise right, time in the ring, but eventually shit starts slowing down, ya know when ya first started sparring and everything was like a blur? Well, when you get the timing right things slow down, you see things and move better. You can't think about it, you just have to feel the timing, read what your man's doing and work off it. If he jabs, parry and counter. If he hooks, roll and go to the body. *In the end it gets automatic, you just feel the move* (David interview - emphasis added).

Developing this feel for the ‘timing’ of sparring was a positive physical experience for these men. Not only did it provide somatic evidence of their embodiment of the norms and values that are associated with boxing at Freedom Gym, it also produced physically enjoyable experiences. The act of learning the ‘timing’ for a punch or defensive move produced significant physical markers. However, there was a tension that accompanied these pleasurable sensuous experiences. In timing punches, the risk of damage to ones sparring partner was greatly increased. As such, the controlled and cooperative norms of sparring could be challenged by the action in the ring. This chapter concludes with an examination of this negotiated process and the way in which it affected the physical experiences in the ring.

### **6.15 Landing Punches and Dominating in Sparring – “I love whacking him”**

As previously described, bag work offered these men the ability to generate physically significant experiences from throwing and landing punches that were described as inappropriate in sparring. However, throughout my time attending Freedom Gym I have repeatedly witnessed, and at times engaged in, what I thought were physical acts that did not confirm to the typical ways in which sparring was framed. The following is a field note extract in which my initial thoughts on the physical significance of sparring were recorded:

Although sparring is supposed to be all about learning, some people still land big shots from time-to-time. When they do, there’s a tension between their enjoyment from landing and their seeming unwillingness not to do any serious harm to their partner. Once it’s clear that their partner is ok to carry on, friendly banter, advice and laughs about the heavy shot generally follow. The more experienced boxers who know each other’s willingness to engage in the tougher aspects of sparring were able to push the boundaries of this mimetic violence. In so doing, they seem to increase their enjoyment of these sessions (Field notes, 3/12/2009).

Initially, when I attempted to explore these contentious experiences, the men at Freedom Gym tended to disagree with any suggestions that they enjoyed landing powerful and hurtful punches. However, as time progressed and my position within the gym changed, I was able to gain access to information that shed light on the pleasure that such experiences could produce. Pushing the previously discussed mimetic boundaries of violence not only produced enjoyable emotional experiences, the physical side of this action was also enjoyable. As narratives of learning, control and cooperation dominated discussions of sparring, physical and emotional experiences that could be interpreted as challenging to these narratives had to be justified, explained and negotiated. Take the following examples:

Chris: What's your favourite part of sparring?

Gary: *Landing a nice shot, nothing stupid, just a well timed one.* Something to make someone stop in their tracks. Like when you step back when someone is coming in and then use their weight against them (Gary interview -emphasis added).

Dave: One of the best things in sparring is getting a slip or block right, and then counter attacking. Working out your partner's move, avoiding it and then using their movement against them.

Chris: Does it feel good to land a punch like that, like it does on the bag?

Dave: Better, 'cus it's so much harder to get right, and if you land on someone well, you know 'cus they react to it. *So you feel it, then you see it. I don't wanna knock anyone out, but you like seeing them wobble a bit* [Laughs] (Dave interview - emphasis added).

Chris: When you're sparring with these guys and get a nice counter does it still feel good even though you know they aren't as good as you?

Orlando: Err, well, if they're rushin' me it does, I don't like it hitting them when they're tired and defensive 'cus then it sometimes don't feel fair, but if they're swinging then yeah man, they're fair game I say, *if they come at me then I'm gonna use their momentum and time 'em one on the jaw, pop* [he does the action and smiles] (Orlando interview - emphasis added).

All three of these quotes offers an insight into the enjoyment these men found in landing well-timed punches. Each also contains a caveat designed to justify this physicality in the face of the mimetic norms that framed sparring. Gary's 'nothing stupid' was a reference to his enjoyment coming from a punch being well timed rather than containing full power, Dave's 'I don't wanna knock anyone out', was a clarification that he meant no serious harm and Orlando justified his actions by referring to his sparring partner's attempts to 'rush' him. In this way, these men were able to negotiate the physical pleasure they gained from sparring experiences that existed on, near or over, the mimetic/'real' boundary.

A dominant narrative that framed sparring was that such sessions were a means to learn the practical skills of boxing. In this way, learning to 'time' an opponent was a crucial aspect of the significance. However, the very premise of this type of action was that it had the potential to do severe damage to one's sparring partner. At one and the same time, participants were attempting to land punches, while also trying to avoid seriously hurting their partner. As such, by achieving one goal of sparring, and producing physically rewarding experiences, these men may also break the rules of engagement in sparring. My thoughts on such experiences were recorded after a hard session:

I know that sparring isn't supposed to be about hurting your opponent, but it is really, it's just about not hurting them seriously. No-one will say it's about causing pain, but that's the point, you're in there learning how to hurt people and not get hurt yourself. It's fun to whack someone to the body and wind them, it's fun to sting them with a stiff jab to the nose and make them bleed, it feels good to land those shots, it's a nice feeling as your fist connects and you feel the power move them back. But, I don't

wanna hurt anyone properly; neither do the guys I fight with. Luckily for us, the better you get the more dexterous control you have of your ability to cause pain. I now know when and where to throw the bigger punches, and when to hold them back. As I've got better, and I've wanted to hit harder my ability to control the means by which I do this has increased (Field notes, 9/12/2010).

I believed that through my experiences of sparring and development as a boxer I had also developed the ability to push the mimetic boundary of sparring while still sticking to the core principle of avoiding serious pain or damage to my partner. In this way, I was able to experience the physically significant acts of hard sparring while still maintaining my commitment to the norms that frame the action in the ring. Others were asked about their experiences of negotiating this tension:

Chris: So would you say you enjoy landing a well-timed punch when you're body sparring?

John: Oh yeah, it's brilliant.

Chris: Can you describe what it's like for me?

John: What like getting the timing right?

Chris: Yeah.

John: I think the most important thing about a really good punch is to have your opponent moving in towards you, if you can land a punch when their weight is moving forward it's game over. Timing one of those is the greatest feeling in the world. You know when you see K.O. highlights on YouTube all the biggest ones are when someone walks onto a punch. So, the key is back to understanding that rhythm again, getting to know when your opponent will be coming forward. That's why I practise on a swinging bag, 'cus it mimics that movement (John interview).

John went on to discuss in detail this process of timing a body shot and the damage it can do to a sparring partner. Crucially, body sparring was considered to be a relatively safe form of training. As such, targeting the body with full power punches was generally an acceptable part of sparring. Landing such body punches produced an enjoyable set of physical experiences. As John told me, the extra momentum produced by 'timing' one's partner increased the significance of these sensations. I regularly witnessed examples of people 'working the body hard', I asked Gary and Dave about such a session:

Chris: You guys really hammer it to the body.

Gary: Best way to land some big shots innit, safe down there as long as you keep 'em up [avoid low blows].

Chris: I guess you can really wind up.

Gary: Yeah, especially with 16's [16 ounce gloves] on, and everyone loves landing a big power punch (Field notes, 3/12/2010).

Body punching then offered an easily negotiated means of landing physically enjoyable punches. Other somatic pleasures from sparring were far less legitimate. As such, engaging these men in conversation about them was difficult. However, it did become easier after I had been involved in hard sparring sessions. In going through such sessions, I was able to form

closer relationships with the established group of boxers. An assumption of these friendships was that having been through the trials of tough sparring I could now appreciate the finer points of these experiences, and would be less likely to make negative judgements about them.

I asked Shaun, who repeatedly engaged in furious sparring sessions with his good friend Ben, about his enjoyment of landing hard punches:

Chris: Right, tell me about your hard sessions do they ever get out of hand?  
Shaun: It depends what you mean, you know what it's like in there, it gets tough but it's still not out of control, but I would understand if someone else thought it was.  
Chris: It does look like you're both enjoying hurting each other.  
Shaun: 'Cus we do, it's fun innit, that's what we are both in there for, we wanna try and land our best shots.  
Chris: Does it feel good to land those punches?  
Shaun: *I love whacking him* [Laughs] (Shaun interview).

Ben and Shaun had been friends for a number of years, as such, they had trained together long enough to feel comfortable holding little back in sparring sessions. Others in the established group would comment on their training going too far, however, Shaun and Ben's justification was based on their mutual enjoyment of these sessions and their perceived ability to avoid seriously hurting each other. Patrick also told me about his physical enjoyment of such hard sessions:

Chris: Tell me about hard sparring, I mean, it's supposed to be cooperative but do you enjoy the feeling of landing big shots?  
Patrick: Yeah, I like a tough session where both guys are able to let their hands go a bit.  
Chris: And what does it feel like to land a good punch on someone?  
Patrick: It just feels right, you can feel them on the end of your glove 'cus like usually you don't land proper so when you do, you know instantly 'cus *you can really feel yourself hurting 'em* (Rupert interview – emphasis added).

Patrick was one of the least experienced of the regular boxers. His lack of ability meant that the others tended to encourage him to throw punches with full power in order to make sparring with him more challenging. This may account in some way for his disregard for the usual narratives that frame sparring. For Dave, landing punches in sparring was akin to any other sporting skill:

Chris: I get the sense that some of the guys think you and Gary go a bit hard sometimes, do you still enjoy those sessions?  
Dave: They're the best ones, you're right though, we do go too far sometimes, but we know what we're doing, and in the end, if one of us get lucky [with a big punch] it's not the end of the world.  
Chris: What's it feel like to land one of those big shots on someone?  
Dave: Erm [pauses].

Chris: Can you describe how it feels?

Dave: It's like landing any big punch, ya just do it don't ya, throw ya weight at 'em.

Chris: And it feels good, to land them?

Dave: Yeah course, it's the same as any sport, hitting a six, getting a one hundred n' eighty or whatever (Dave interview).

Dave agreed that, at times, his sparring sessions with Gary did go too far. They both tended to justify such intense exchanges using a naturalistic explanation or by insisting that their experience and skill learned in sparring meant that their training looked more violent than it actually was. Dave, and others at Freedom Gym, negotiated the dominant interpretation of narratives of cooperation, learning and control in sparring, which tended to limit the chances to experience the physical significance of landing powerful punches. In this way, the physical significance of bag work and sparring were quiet similar at times. For other men, the mimetic norms of sparring were adhered to far more closely, as such; this produced a different set of significant somatic sensations. David and Lewis, who were two of the most experienced boxers, described their enjoyment of a lighter more technical form of sparring and punching:

David: Sparring ain't about landing punches that hurt, you've got to learn to time a shot without putting power in it. There's no need to load up, you 'ave to get used to landing pitter-patter punches. Just touching someone, then doing it again, and again.

Chris: That feels better to you than landing a big shot?

David: 'Course it does, anyone can throw bombs, *it's much harder to land right on the button without putting power in it. It's the same timing, it feels the same, but you just don't give your opponent brain damage* (David interview - emphasis added).

Chris: When you're sparring me you never hit me hard, does that get a bit boring?

Lewis: Na 'course not, I wouldn't get anything out of hitting you, it would just make you less likely to come at me hard.

Chris: What do you enjoy about it then, presuming you enjoy it?

Lewis: [Laughs] Yeah, 'course I do, I just like working on stuff, don't get me wrong I'm not in there to tickle ya, I still give people a whack from time to time, I'll pop a combo off or something or get you to walk onto a shot.

Chris: And even without sitting down on them, you enjoy landing those punches?

Lewis: *Timing and technique feels better than power to me, like I said, anyone can throw bombs, but I wanna get my technique right, hit that sweet spot* (Lewis interview - emphasis added).

Here, the timing and control of power was described as producing a physically enjoyable experience similar to that of landing powerful punches. As the physical enjoyment of such action in the ring matched the dominant narratives of sparring, such experiences needed no extra justification. de Garis (2000, 101) has discussed similar aspects of sparring, referring to them as forms of 'non-violent aggression':

The avoidance of violence and injury [in sparring] does not preclude aggressive attempts at domination. It is possible to assert masculine domination without transgressing sparring codes and causing injury. Higher-skilled boxers who spar with novices sometimes taunt the novices' inability to connect with solid punches, although the higher-skilled boxers hold back from inflicting physical punishment.

However, I would argue that classifying such acts as ‘attempts at domination’ misses a potentially crucial component from such experiences. During my observations of, and engagement in, sparring where one partner was experienced enough to dominate another, the lived experiences were seldom described using de Garis’ language. Granted, a hierarchical relationship existed, in which physical domination provided a foundation. When this hierarchy was challenged, the more experienced partner may employ techniques to prove his physical dominance. However, the vast majority of sessions contained no such intent to dominate in any such manner. Indeed, a more accurate means of describing the majority of such experiences at Freedom Gym would be ‘mimetic domination’ (see Chapter Five). Here, physical actions similar to those of ‘real’ life domination are used in a cooperative, controlled and learning setting without any of the intent to cause the physical, psychological and social discomfort that such situations might generate. An extract from the field notes captures my thoughts after an experience of such mimetic domination:

I sparred with Shaun and my housemate today. Shaun has a lot more experience than I do, and I have a lot more experience than my housemate. Although these sessions are characterised by attempts to physically dominate each other, the underlying nature was one of supportive learning and fun. At times, there was frustration, but it’s a part of the learning process. At times, there was mickey-taking, but it was always underwritten by a camaraderie and friendship. Lewis had me on the ropes at one point, punching and moving, even spinning me round to get a better angle to land on my belly. Clearly, this position can be read as one of domination. However, I know from my experiences of training with Shaun, that he is working on his own technique while giving me the chance to experience high-level sparring. In this way, we are working with one another rather than against each other. The same is true when I spar with my housemate, if he drops his right hand, I hit him with a left hook, next time he doesn’t drop his right hand. I beckon him onto me while I cover up and catch, block and parry his punches. Here, I am helping him get comfortable being in the pocket and throwing punches, while working on my defence (Field notes, 8/10/2010).

In this way, these experiences are fundamentally different from those that might traditionally be linked to a physical ‘masculine domination’. However, they can still produce the enjoyable physical experiences that might be connected to ‘real’ situations. Although I was helping and encouraging my housemate, I was also enjoying landing punches on him and making his attacks ineffective. Lewis told me something similar:

Chris: What would you say if someone watched a session where you were messing around with someone, and they said you were a bully?

Lewis: Ha, they wouldn’t really understand would they then. I guess I would just say they need to get in the ring and try it for themselves. I had it done to me when I was young, that’s when you learn. You’re under pressure and you ‘ave to learn to deal with it. Anyone who’s willing to go in the ring and do that isn’t a bully, they’re doing someone a favour!

Chris: It’s still fun though right?

Lewis: Yeah man, course it is, everyone enjoys that challenge, it makes it fun for me and whoever is getting worked (Lewis interview).

Clearly, there are means by which non-violent aggression can be expressed during sparring and in other areas of gym life. I am not suggesting that such experiences exist in dichotomy to the mimetic domination that I have described. A continuum would perhaps be a better means of conceptualising this relationship. However, from my observations at Freedom Gym, failing to provide conceptual space for mimetic domination would result in an inadequate understanding of sparring experiences.

### **6.16 Summary**

This chapter has explored aspects of the physiological and psychological significance of life in the boxing area at Freedom Gym. The QES has provided a conceptual basis from which a phenomenologically sensitive account has been presented alongside the social framing of these experiences. Initially, the focus was on the biological interpretation that was regularly used to explain and justify the enjoyment of such action. In combining the inevitability inherent within biological explanations of behaviour with the perceived positive social outcomes of mimetic violence, the men at Freedom Gym were able to resist negative interpretations of their behaviours. As such, they had a justification for enjoyable experiences that in other areas of life would be considered deviant. The emotional and sensuous landscape of 'bag work' was then explored. These experiences were framed, to a large extent, by knowledge informed by the previously described SVMC. In this way, the men at Freedom Gym were constrained and enabled in their abilities to generate and experience emotional displays. The sensuous significance of these experiences was contoured by what was believed to be a traditional approach to boxing technique. Enjoyable sensations of fatigue were thought to be regularly obtainable while 'working the bag' due to the emotional and physical experiences that were the norm during such practises. The psychological and physiological landscape of sparring was then explored. Here, differences in the structuring of norms and values created a tension between experiences and dominant narratives. Many of the established group of boxers displayed behaviours that seemed to be in opposition to the meanings that they attached to sparring. As such, sparring that was conducted on, near or over the mimetic/real threshold had to be negotiated and justified. A number of methods were employed to achieve

this, the result being the production of enjoyable physical and psychological experiences and the maintenance of hegemonic norms and values.

This chapter represents a partial corrective to a lack of explicit experiential accounts within literature that examines player violence. The SVMC, as suggested Chapter Two and outlined in Chapters Four and Five, has been an important frame of gym life. Theoretically informed by Eliasian sociology, this concept represents a flexible means of understanding the partial but overarching structuring of QES experiences within sports violence. Here, long-term gendered and classed based identifications can be placed within local frames to uncover influences on the shaping of sensuous and emotionally significant experiences. A detailed picture of the emotional and sensuous significance of these acts was presented. The QES (Maguire, 1992) has been shown to be useful as a conceptual frame of the social structuring of these experiences. Indeed, the research presented here has confirmed previous counter-critical observations made in the literature review regarding relatively resent critiques of Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and latterly Maguire's (1992) work. The research presented here highlights the ability of the QES to frame, not only experiences of mimetic violence, but also the function of sports more generally. The importance of the mimetic nature of the vast majority of the experiences of violence at Freedom Gym has been repeatedly highlighted. Such is the relevance of this mimetic feature to the day-to-day understanding of these experiences, that further work in the area which is not sensitive to this dimension must remain necessarily incomplete. The social framing of these experiences (presented mainly in Chapter Four and Five) have been a constant theme within this phenomenologically sensitive account. Here, the figuration and habitus have been theoretical frames that have enabled a sensitivity to the embodiment of social processes. Connell's conception of gendered identities has been an important element of this account. As such, this chapter contributes empirically to the study of masculinity and gender, specifically the theoretical debate surrounding the embodiment of gendered bodies and pleasures. These contributions will be further discussed in the following conclusion to this thesis.

## Chapter Seven

### Concluding Remarks

#### 7.0 Introduction

Within the preceding chapters, experiences of mimetic violence within a gym environment have been explored. Through the inclusion of extensive field notes and interview extracts an attempt has been made to convey a detailed picture of the research setting, those that inhabit it and the exciting significance of training in, and around, the boxing ring. The aim of this conclusion is to briefly summarise and then advance the arguments developed throughout. The principle theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues that have been explored are discussed. Following this, the significance of the findings, in relation to our existing knowledge about sports violence, masculinity and emotional experiences in sport, is commented on. Here, theoretical and methodological contributions are described. To conclude, suggestions for further research are made.

#### 7.1 Thesis Summary

In the introduction, it was suggested that experiential accounts are relatively lacking within the literature examining sports violence. Researchers have presented rich and critical explorations of the development and maintenance of violent sporting environments (Curry, 1993; Dunning, 1986, 1990, 2008 [1983]; Dunning *et al.*, 1988; Elias & Dunning, 2008 [1986]; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner 1990; Nixon, 1992; Smith, 1983; Young, 2000). However, accounts of the emotional and physical significances experienced in these settings are often left implicit within such works. A point of departure for the need to make such phenomena explicit is Wacquant's (2004) account of boxing. At various times Wacquant (2004; 70) describes in detail the "carnal pleasures... [and] extreme sensuousness" of attending a traditional boxing gym. A crucial part of these experiences is the mimetic violence of training and sparring; "the irrepressible desire to 'get it on' in the ring" (Wacquant, 2004; 70). It is such moments that are explicitly lacking within the literature that examines player violence. Notwithstanding Wacquant's all too brief discussions of his enjoyment of mimetic violence, these experiences are generally absent or implicit within works examining boxing (see Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1996; Woodward, 2006). While such experiential narratives are undeveloped, our understanding of such mimetic violence remains necessarily incomplete. It

is within this context that the present thesis took form. The aim was to produce an account that explicitly focused on the viewpoints of those who regularly took part in such action.

During the review of literature, debates surrounding the definition of the concept of violence were explored. These introductory issues provided a platform from which typologies of sports violence were critically examined. Dunning's (2008 [1983]) sophisticated handling of this complex subject formed the basis upon which sports violence was defined. In particular, Dunning's description of the *relatively* ritual/mimetic nature of the vast majority of sports violence has been an important theme. Building upon this foundation, research that examines sports violence was reviewed. Key in this regard was Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) exploration of the sociogenesis of modern sport. This account traced the development of contemporary western sports worlds alongside other long-term social processes. Based on this work, Maguire (1992) suggested the QES as a means of framing the role played by leisure, sports and sports violence in participant's lives. Maguire (1992) discussed the emotional and physical significance of such action. The QES presented a useful means of interpreting the experiences that are the focus of this thesis. Although Maguire's (1992) work conceptually positions the sensuous and emotional significance of sport, there have been insufficient attempts to locate the phenomenology of these exciting experiences. As such, a second aim of this thesis, was then, to empirically evaluate the ability of the QES to adequately frame such phenomena.

Sports violence has traditionally been a well-researched and central topic within the sociological study of sport. As such, much work examining the social processes that frame violent sporting environments has been produced (Young, 2000). Gender relations and notions linked to masculine identity reoccur frequently within such research and represent an important organising theme for the experiences of training at Freedom Gym. Literature examining the link between masculinity and sports violence was explored. A further aim of this thesis was to theoretically and conceptually map the embodiment of masculine identities. Crucial in this regard was the interplay between figuration and habitus. Elias' writings on the dynamic processual nature of social interdependencies informed a theoretically sophisticated appreciation of the shaping of experiences, bodies, norms, values and behaviours at

Freedom Gym. The SVMC was suggested as a means of combining figurational theory with the extant literature in the field of sports violence to frame the social significances that were attached to mimetic violence. In this way, the embodiment of social processes can be theorised and an overly phenomenological, asociological account is avoided.

These three interrelated aims presented above guide the methodological approach that afforded a relative degree of 'closeness' to day-to-day experiences of boxing training. This relatively 'involved' position was described in Chapter Three. Here, the development of qualitative research was examined to provide a context for the current study. Following this, Elias' works discussing method were discussed. In particular, the production of insider/outsider knowledge was more adequately conceptualised using the terms 'involvement' and 'detachment'. The research process was discussed in the light of this Eliasian reframing. Attempts were made to locate my changing position within the research environment. Here, elements of my biography, that may have drawn me towards this study and which present a possible bias, were also considered. Critiques of the primacy of an 'insider' account were further engaged with and related to the experience of adopting such a position. Following this, the practicalities of conducting the research were outlined. To conclude this methodological discussion, some of my experiences of pain, injury and violence were discussed in relation to ethical and moral issues, involved in conducting an ethnography in a violent environment.

Within Chapter Four, a detailed picture of the research environment was painted. Attempts were made to depict a 'warts and all' portrait of Freedom Gym and its surrounding area. Some of the ways in which the SVMC articulates with local processes to frame gym life, were described. This was achieved through discussions of the gyms demographic, mythologies and images. In particular, observations were presented which suggested that notions connected to the SVMC inform experiences at Freedom Gym in various ways. Here, subjectivities associated with traditional working-class male identities tended to dominate. There was a general consensus maintained within the gym's relatively narrow demographic that the space was a 'real' gym for 'real' men. Following this, attention was focused on the boxing area and the behaviours, experiences, norms and values that were commonplace

within this space. The social hierarchy was then discussed in terms of established/outsider relations. The established group of boxers were crucial in the shaping of dominant notions of what was considered accepted, legitimate and rewarded around the boxing area. This chapter provides a partial, but rich, outline of life at Freedom Gym, which acts as the foundation upon which an understanding of experiences in the ring can be constructed. Without such knowledge, the embodied social significances of engaging in mimetic violence might be lost within an overly romanticised and essentialist description of the powerful and vivid phenomenology of such experiences.

Chapter Five was a continuation of this framing of life at Freedom Gym. The explicit focus on masculinity comes not only as a response to critiques that gender relations have often been absent or implicit within work examining boxing, but also because the sport is so intimately linked to certain forms of masculine identity (de Garis, 2000; Woodward, 2006). The gym was discussed as a heterosexual male preserve, which can serve as evidence to support regular attendees beliefs that it is a space mainly reserved for 'real' men. There is a perceived 'naturalness' accompanying these notions of 'realness', which provides a justification and legitimation for certain violent practices within the gym. A resonance existed between the forms of working-class masculine identity and the gym's location and practices, images and mythologies that dominate within the space. Dominant notions about masculine identity, that pervade gym life, were further described via an exploration of the established boxers' bodily ideals and sparring practices. Hegemonic notions of what it is to be a 'real' man within Freedom Gym were then contrasted against 'other' versions of masculinity, that did not resonate so closely with the dominant perspective previously presented. Here, age, boxing ability and domination in sparring were found to be some of the issues around which the dominant masculine codes were negotiated, challenged and, to a degree, subverted. Together, Chapters Four and Five map out important components of the Freedom Gym figuration, in so doing; central aspects of the social framing of sensuous and emotionally significant experiences were highlighted. It is suggested that norms and values that dominate the gym in general, and the boxing area in particular, were associated with a tough masculine style that symbolically 'matched' traditional working-class values. As Wacquant (1995; 502) described within the professional ranks:

That boxing is a working class occupation is reflected not only in the physical nature of the activity but also in the social recruitment of its practitioners and in their continuing dependence on blue collar or unskilled service jobs to support their career in the ring.

Although the vast majority of the participants I observed and interviewed made no income from boxing, the significance in physicality and recruitment to the established group of boxers followed the pattern described by Wacquant. As such, the ability to physically protect oneself, friends and family and effectively use, and be the target of, violence, were significant for the men who regularly attend Freedom Gym. In this way, social processes connected to gender and class shaped and framed what was considered possible, permissible and pleasurable.

The findings chapters were concluded by an intimate examination of significant experiences of mimetic violence. The experiences presented resonated with Maguire's (1992) discussions of the emotional and physical significance of sport. Previously discussed frames of gym life were located within the day-to-day experiences of training in, and around, the boxing area. Here, the QES was used in conjunction with the concepts of figuration and habitus to frame an understanding of the social shaping of meanings, bodies and behaviours. The means by which these men define, interpret and talk about acts of boxing violence were explored. Crucial in understanding the significance these men attach to such experiences was their belief that there was a biological/natural explanation for their enjoyment of boxing violence. As such, the mimetic nature of their training was believed to turn a potentially socially negative, biological need to engage in some form of aggressive physicality, into a controlled, socially acceptable action, which served a positive function in the community. Following this, a phenomenologically sensitive account of the physical and psychological significance of such experiences was presented. This was achieved via a detailed exploration of 'working the bag' and sparring. Although there were many similarities between the significances attached to these phenomena, there were also important differences based on variation in the meanings attached to each. Here, the controlled de-controlling of emotional controls, the physical markers associated with 'timing' punches and other boxing techniques and the physical drain of hard training, were all experienced as emotionally and sensuously significant aspects of the training. Wherever possible, links were drawn to the previously described gym figuration and SVMC to maintain a presence for the social frame that informs such experiences. In this way,

the intertwined social, psychological and physical significance of mimetic violence was explored. In what follows, the contributions to our existing fund of knowledge are detailed.

### **7.3 Contributions to Knowledge**

This thesis represents a contribution to the sociological study of sports violence in particular and violence more generally. In what follows, the ways in which a small but significant step has been taken toward addressing a gap in the literature examining sports violence is discussed. Alongside this empirical dimension, there are also conceptual, theoretical and methodological contributions that can inform future sociological study in the area. Specifically, critical observations about the mimetic dimension of heavy contact sport are explored, figurational sociology as a frame of interpreting the social shaping of action in the gym is evaluated and notions of 'insider'/'outsider' knowledge are reconceptualised using Elias' discussions of involvement/detachment. These issues are explored in turn. By focusing explicitly on the physical and emotional significance of mimetic violence, a relative lack of an experiential dimension within academic accounts of player violence is partly corrected. It has been argued that important aspects of the exciting significance of sport participation are produced by engaging in such acts. This thesis has mapped out a detailed, phenomenologically sensitive, picture of such experiences, within a sociological frame. In this regard, observations and interview extracts were presented which focused explicitly on the lived experiences of mimetic violence at Freedom Gym. It was suggested that the boxing area in the gym was a site in which particular and powerful emotions and physical sensations were legitimised and rewarded. In comparison to the relative emotional staleness of their lives away from the gym, regular users described training for boxing as enabling colourful, expressive, challenging, visceral and enjoyable experiences to be produced. These men tended to believe a biological interpretation was the most adequate explanation of their enjoyment of, and 'need' to experience, excitement in the ring. It was thought that, in satisfying these 'manly' needs, biological rewards in the form of a 'buzz' from adrenaline and endorphins were elicited. This biological interpretation was used to explain, legitimise and describe the exciting significance of action in, and around, the ring.

Both 'bag work' and sparring enabled opportunities to generate significant emotional and sensuous experiences. Although there were some important differences between these phenomena, both represented an opportunity to loosen habitual controls over psychological and physical expression. This *controlled* de-controlling was tightly regulated by the embodiment of dominant notions of acceptability. As such, these constrained and enabled actions were accompanied by a specific set of physical sensations. Here, markers of correct technique, sensations of speed and power and the fatigue of pushing the body all resonated with the established boxers' habitus. These physical and emotional experiences were intertwined with social significances. Within the established group there was *always* a negotiated 'match' between these experiences and the dominant frames of gym life as informed by the SVMC. Here, the pleasure, enjoyment, meaning and significance of these phenomena was structured by pervasive notions connected to masculinity, class and boxing traditions.

The punching bag enabled the men at Freedom Gym to generate and express aggression. This loosening of control over the production of usually unacceptable emotions was thought to be a key component of their enjoyment of training on the bag. Grunts, grimaces and other bodily displays of emotion were regular occurrences around the gym. Such expressions tended to be described as an enjoyable opportunity to release frustration and experience the 'buzz' that was thought to accompany this 'cathartic' release. Such emotional displays were produced in conjunction with physically enjoyable experiences. Here, acts of learning a technique, 'letting loose' on the bag and 'timing' a punch were physically rewarding. Feelings of power transferring from one's body to the bag and sensations of speed and timing elicited physical markers that were enjoyable for the men who attended the gym. In Wacquant's (2003; 68, emphasis added) words, "training becomes its own reward when it leads one to *master a difficult gesture that offers the sensation of decoupling one's power*". For these men, training was understood as its own reward. In this respect, their interpretation of these experiences resonated with what Schinkel (2004) has termed 'autotelic violence'. However, as was shown throughout this thesis, Shrinkel's search for the 'intrinsic character' of violence,

is another form of determinism<sup>44</sup> which negates the socially framed nature of such action. Accounts such as Shrinkel's that attempt to locate an inherent quality within experiences of violence, although matching popular understandings of some lived experiences, miss the intertwined social, biological and psychological processes that produce such phenomena.

For the men at Freedom Gym, the meaning and significance of their actions in, and around the ring, was tied to powerful sensations and emotions. Accompanying the emotional release and sensuous reward from working the bag was a tendency for the men to find the muscular and cardiovascular fatigue of hard training enjoyable. These feelings were described as being gruelling and, at the same time, pleasurable. Bag work allowed these men to push themselves physically in ways which could be difficult to produce during sparring. At various times, they described such training as a guaranteed means of producing such sensations. In contrast to 'bag work', experiences of sparring tended to be framed by norms of cooperation and a higher degree of control. As such, emotional and physical significances were shaped by this pattern. Newcomers' experiences of sparring were initially characterised by anxiety and frustration. However, participants that continued to attend the gym reported a gradual process of anxiety reduction with concurrent increases in experiences of positively constructed emotions. It was clear from observations, interviews and personal experiences that the vast majority of sparring sessions took place within a positive emotional landscape. Indeed, happiness, pleasure, closeness, excitement and acceptable levels of aggression tended to dominate. The same biologically-based assumptions used to justify and explain the enjoyment of bag work, were employed to frame their engagement in sparring. For the established group the 'buzz' was most readily experienced within a competitive sparring session. In this way, a balance between sparring partners was negotiated in an attempt to ensure that an enjoyable 'give and take' of mimetic violence was achieved. No doubt the use of the term 'buzz' contained slight variations in meaning for these men, however, the enjoyable physical and emotional component attached to the concept was clear. Here, the ever-present, albeit largely-controlled, threat of pain and injury added 'spice' to the mimetic action in the ring. Indeed, experiences that existed near, on, or slightly over the mimetic/'real'

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<sup>44</sup> He describes the social determinism, which for him pervades sociological and criminological understandings of violence.

boundary were generally thought to elicit more of the significant experiences they sought.

Take the following example:

You have to push it to really get something out of it, I'm not bothered about landing punches on someone who's not trying, or who's not as good as me, and it doesn't get you going in the same way, there's got to be that give and take [between you and your partner] so you have to concentrate or you'll get smacked. Then it gets tense, then you can get into it. Then if I land a good shot I know it means something, and the competition is proper, then it's a buzz (Phil interview).

Engaging in such boundary action was described as being more meaningful in a physical and emotional sense. These experiences produced rewarding sensations that were framed by, and in turn generally reinforced, the norms and values that dominated the boxing area. The physical significances of sparring were mainly experienced through pain and fatigue, the adoption of techniques associated with the boxers' habitus, by landing punches and in the mimetic domination of ones sparring partner. The men at Freedom Gym reported these phenomena as physically satisfying and enjoyable. In summary, whether training on the bag or sparring, men who regularly used the boxing area at Freedom Gym experienced a whole set of, generally mutually reinforcing, intertwined, and enjoyable emotional, physical and social significances. Carlos drew these points together:

Chris: Do you think people come down here and do this 'cus they wanna be able to look after themselves, 'cus they can boast about it, 'cus it keeps us in shape, 'cus its fun, or is it something else?

Carlos: It's probably loads of reasons all combined, but the main thing is people like doing whatever they do down 'ere. If it wasn't fun, they wouldn't do it. This is a place where they can come and train properly with lads who're up for the craic. People like smacking stuff, even their mates [laughs] and they also love letting some stress out, and the bonus is they can get fit and stay in shape at the same time. It's all linked (Carlos interview).

The connected phenomena that Carlos describes have been detailed within this thesis. Through locating these visceral and powerful sensations within a sociological analysis, it is hoped that this thesis has advanced the study of sports violence and violence more generally. In different ways, the works of Elias and Dunning, (2008 [1986]), Maguire (1992), Wacquant (2004) and others (Dunning, *et al.*, 1988; Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Messner, 1990; Pringle, 2009) have directed us to the significance of physical and emotional sensations connected to sports. This study has expanded our knowledge of such phenomena by adding an explicit focus on experiences of participation in mimetic boxing violence. Through adding the colour of lived experiences to the picture already painted by sociologists of sport, this thesis has highlighted the day-to-day richness of participation in sport violence. In this way, some light

has been shed on “the relatively unexplored landscape” of the emotional significance of sport more generally (Maguire, 1992; 118). Elements of the “carnal pleasures... [and] extreme sensuousness” (Wacquant, 2004; 70) of participation in sports violence have been described. These sensuous and emotional significances are central elements in the enjoyment and function of boxing for the men at Freedom Gym. What was brought so emphatically into focus throughout my time in the field was the fundamental place that such action held within the significance of gym life. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that *any* account that did not provide conceptual space for the sensuous expression and feedback produced during engaging in mimetic violence is, at least partially, blind to a world of meaningful and enjoyable experiences. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that if we wish to advance the sociological understanding of sports violence in particular, and violence more generally, accounting for such emotional and physical experiences is a necessity step.

Alongside the substantive contribution outlined above, this thesis has enabled certain theoretical positions and conceptual tools to be evaluated as frames of social life. In what follows, the previously discussed QES will be evaluated in the light of similar work. Following this, figurational sociology as a sophisticated model for interpreting the interdependent nature of social processes and lived experiences, and the ability of habitus to frame the embodiment of said social processes, especially gender, is discussed. A central conceptual theme, has been the discussions by Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) and Maguire (1992) on the function of sport in contemporary societies. In this regard, Maguire’s advancement of Elias and Dunning’s original work has been of great use. This QES has enabled a phenomenologically sensitive sociological picture of the emotional and physical significances of mimetic violence to be painted. Here, the inherent intertwining of these bodily, psychological and social phenomena can be explored together; hence, the over-emphasis upon, or primacy of, any one aspect can be avoided. As such, the “sociologically conditioned psychological [and physiological] need to experience [a] kind of spontaneous, elementary, unreflexive yet pleasurable excitement” was detailed (Maguire, 1992; 106). Maguire’s (1992; 109) work adds an increased sensitivity to various means of “self-realization and the presentation of self” to Elias and Dunning’s research. In highlighting the symbolic nature of sport, and hence the means by which social processes can impinge upon emotional experiences, the QES is

suggested as a flexible concept with which to frame certain lived experiences. What is more, a central theme within a figurational interpretation of sport; that a principle function of participation is the 'arousal of pleasurable forms of excitement' in a relatively controlled environment, was played out within Freedom Gym on a *daily* basis. The ritual, or mimetic, nature of the vast majority of the action, in and around, the ring, was not only readily observable, it formed an *essential* aspect of the meaning and significance attached to boxing action. As outlined earlier, such mimesis was a dimension of the "systems of legitimation" that shape the leisure experiences outlined in this thesis (Rojek, 1985; 178).

Linked directly to Elias' work examining the civilising processes of Western societies, the largely mimetic nature of sport is a cornerstone and point of departure within the very definition of sport for figurational sociologists *and* the boxers at Freedom Gym. Indeed, the experiences outlined within this thesis suggest that accounts of sport violence, and sport and certain forms of violence more generally, that are not sensitive to this dimension are severely lacking. This mimetic theme continually resurfaced within the day-to-day experiences and the norms and values that framed life at Freedom Gym. Here, the essence of sparring for the established group of boxers could be found in the trusting, cooperative and friendly violence that they engaged in on a regular basis. Indeed, the action in the ring on, near or slightly over, the mimetic/'real' boundary was socially, physically and emotionally risky and offered these men the chance to experience significant emotional expression generally not available in other aspects of their lives. Such edgy, threshold action was produced within trusting relationships built up over time, based on a mutually assumed, and often take-for-granted, understanding of this mimetic feature. It is with this understanding in mind that I return to Pringle's (2009) critical comments aimed at such an Eliasian interpretation of sports violence.

Pringle's (2009; 224) interesting but flawed exploration of sporting pleasures contains both substantive and conceptual problems. Specifically, his interpretation of rugby is heavily skewed by his own assumptions about sports violence. His misrepresentation or misinterpretation of an Eliasian understanding of sports violence compounds this. He makes the claim that the "rugby stories [he encountered] did not fully resonate with [Elias and Dunning's] argument". He dismisses the mimetic interpretation of sports violence simply by

listing damage done to the bodies of his interviewees while participating in rugby, concluding; “rugby pleasure, accordingly, does not appear well tempered or mimetic”. To discard an Eliasian framing of pleasures in sport, due to the presence of serious injuries, represents a complete misreading of the mimetic dimension to which Elias and Dunning (2008 [1986]) initially draw our attention. Indeed, Pringle (2009) presented a simplistic caricature of their thesis for his critique. As such, it is worth quoting their work at length to get a sense for the way in which they understood mimesis:

‘Mimesis’ would gain a clearer meaning if it were not used simply as a more learned expression for ‘imitation’. A Madonna by Raphael, a portrait by Rembrandt, or Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* are not simply imitations of the real thing. What one can say is that elements of the experienced object enter the experience of the same object’s representation in a painting. But the experience of the painted object, although in some respects it resembles the experience of the real object, can hardly be called an imitation of the experience of the real-life object. By being painted the object is transposed into a different setting. The experience of the object, and particularly the complex of feelings associated with it, is, as it were, if one passes from contemplation of the real object to that of the same object as part of a painting, transposed into a different gear. The feeling-aspect of the experience particularly, in that case, undergo a highly characteristic transformation, a *metabasis eis allo genos*. The term ‘mimesis’ can serve as a conceptual symbol which takes account of that transformation. (Elias and Dunning, 2008 [1986]; 291-292)

Elias and Dunning are not then interpreting mimesis to be a simplistic imitation or copy, neither are they saying that a such action is devoid of the ‘realness’ of the objects of which it is a mimesis. Rather, they are drawing our attention to ways in which mimetic action contains both important differences *and* similarities with that of the ‘real’. They continue:

Something very similar happens if one compares a real physical contest between human beings with a sports contest. The mimetic character of a sports contest such as a horse race, a boxing match or a football game depends on the fact that aspects of the feeling-experience associated with a real physical struggle enter the feeling-experience of the ‘imitated’ struggle of sport. But in the sports experience, the feeling-experience of a real physical struggle is shifted into a different gear. Sport allows people to experience the full excitement of a struggle without its dangers and risks. The elements of fear in the excitement, although it does not entirely disappear, is greatly diminished and the pleasure of the battle-excitement is thus greatly enhanced. Hence, if one speaks of the ‘mimetic’ aspect of sport, one is referring to the fact that it imitates a real-life struggle selectively. The structure of a sport-game and the skill of the sportsman and sportswomen allows the battle enjoyment to rise without injuries or killings. (Elias and Dunning, 2008 (1986); 292)

Although the final sentence of this quote, taken in isolation, could be interpreted as Elias and Dunning stating that injuries do not occur in mimetic encounters, their general point remains. That is, participation in sports, and other leisure forms, represent a *relatively* controlled risk which can enabled the generation of socially significant sensation and emotions of similar character to that of ‘real’ life situations. Indeed, as described here, the mimetic component is

a crucial aspect of the social framing of experiences of sports violence. However, Pringle (2009) conflates their attempts to account for the substantive difference between the majority of sports violence and that of 'real' violence into an inability to conceptually locate action that results in bodily damage. This most definitely, as is evidenced in the previous quotes, is not the case. Indeed, here Pringle is reproducing the dichotomous thinking that Elias did so much to challenge throughout his career. A central theme of Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) thesis is that although serious and indeed life threatening injuries occur in sport, the vast majority of such experiences represent a relatively, and this relativity is key, controlled risk and are layered with similar, but also different, sets of meaning and significance to that of 'real' violence. This 'shift to risk' was one of boxing's principle functions for the men at Freedom Gym. Here, the mimetic and the 'real' are considered as existing as necessarily intertwined processes rather than as polarities.

What Pringle also fails to spell out is the manner in which these injuries, which he uses to justify his critique, occurred. Without such information, it is impossible for us to appreciate the complexity of the framing of the phenomena that lead to such injuries. Is it not possible, or perhaps *probable*, that such bodily damage could have occurred within physical contact that not only conformed to the rules of the game, but was conducted without the intent to cause serious injury, was followed by a handshake and 'pint down the local', and was constructed by *both* men involved as 'just a part of the game' and 'not real violence anyway'? Regardless, as the mimetic and the 'real' exist along a continuum not as a dichotomy within Elias and Dunning's theorising, such injuries can be placed within a figurational account with ease. Indeed, if these injurious acts did have more in common with 'real' violence this does not equate to all, or even the majority, of violence in rugby. To extrapolate a claim to definitely know rugby pleasures have no mimetic dimension based on such a small sample is clearly problematic. In fixating on such injuries, as evidence that in some way discounts Elias and Dunning's work, without exploring the detail and complexity of such experiences, Pringle highlights his misunderstanding and/or superficial reading of figurational sociology *and* the majority of sports violence experiences. Indeed, not only is his appreciation of the thrust of Elias and Dunning's research lacking, his engagement with the debates surrounding the definition of sports violence seems non-existent.

At no point in Pringle's analysis does he attempt to define the concept of sports violence. This lack of clarity as to what does, and does not, constitute sports violence is an issue. However, of more importance is Pringle's inability to grapple with the foundational issues to which Dunning (2008 [1983]) and Smith (1983) draw our attention in their typologies of sports violence. These works, which should serve as a point of departure for *any* analysis of sports violence, outline key elements in such complexly nuanced action. Clearly, if Pringle had engaged with such works, he might have been more aware of the inconsistencies in his framing of sports violence. Let me unpack this comment. Despite Pringle's dismissal of the mimetic aspect of rugby violence, he continuously quotes his interviewees and his own appreciation of the substantive difference between sporting and 'real' violence. Take the following example:

Participants' *consent* to being tackled or rucked and possibly even being punched, but the line is drawn with pain inflicting techniques such as eye gouging or ear biting. In this manner, rugby involves a perverse mix of institutionalised and unwritten rules concerned with the legitimacy of techniques of violence (Pringle, 2009; 227).

As highlighted in the literature review, this notion of consent is an important component in understanding sporting and other forms of largely mimetic violence, such as S&M practices. As a brief aside, Pringle's attempt to problematise rugby violence by making a comparison to S&M also misses the ways in which such acts are a pleasurable mimesis of 'real' violence (Raj, 2010). What Pringle is actually highlighting in his problematisation is the consenting, pleasurable and legitimate nature of the majority of such experiences, which separates the vast majority of sports violence from the illegitimate 'real' violence that he described above.

Pringle (1992; 223 - emphasis added) again makes a distinction between types of violence when he tells us that "some of the interviewees, however, disapproved of *overt violence* in rugby." Although one could argue that it is not overt, but rather covert, violence that rugby players disapprove of, Pringle uses the term to once again describe illegitimate relatively 'real' violence. He later quotes Morris who clearly described the transgression of what he and other rugby players perceive as being a mimetic/'real' boundary:

I think there was a kind of acceptance, a kind of an unwritten rule that kicking somebody in the head was kind of marked or moved from acceptable violence to non-acceptable violence (Pringle, 2009; 227).

One would expect that Morris' description would be sufficient evidence to suggest that rugby pleasure *could* 'appear well tempered and mimetic'. However, it seems that Pringle's lack of engagement with attempts to provide an academic definition of sports violence have left him with nothing but his own *a priori* assumptions to use as a basis for interpretation. In this way, he maintains a primacy for his own understanding of violence, at times apparently ignoring the importance of the meanings and definitions that his rugby players apply to their actions on the field. Take the following example:

The interviewees suggested the idea that they participated in rugby to liberate innate tendencies for aggression or violence was farcical. In fact, all of the interviewees denied that they were violent even when discussing their participation in actions of *unequivocal violence* (Pringle, 2009; 226 - emphasis added).

Are we to believe that this denial is nothing but a symptom of the ways in which these men are cultural dupes? Surely such notions, and the framing effect they have on boxing pleasures are an important aspect of these experiences? Is it also not the case that such acts rather than being understood as 'unequivocal violence' are inherently equivocal with manifold variations in meaning and subjective definitions? It is this simplistic reduction of the concept of violence that leads Pringle to miss the emotional significance and pleasure that is tied to the mimetic dimension of sports violence. In finding a primacy in his own understanding of violence, Pringle's own biases override his interviewees' definitions of rugby violence. In so doing, his goal of exploring the significance of rugby pleasures is seriously hindered. Indeed, his use of S&M as a means of interpreting and destabilising rugby violence (although intuitively one might expect it to offer much to the understanding of rugby pleasures) seems incapable of framing an exploration of the experiences of his interviewees. Take the following example:

Nearly all of the interviewees rationalized that rugby was simply a game and, as such was not violent. Nevertheless, they all accepted that the context of embodied risk, as associated with the ability to inflict and absorb pain, made participation exciting (Pringle, 2009; 226).

Such accounts resonate with the observations presented within this thesis, but, at no point does, and one might suggest *can*, Pringle detail how, and in what ways, such a rationalization is important in the excitement, meaning and legitimisation that these men experience. Later he makes claims of clarification based on his conceptual framing that seems to lack any depth or examination or explanation:

My strategy for defamiliarizing rugby pleasures by positioning them as akin to S&M can also provide a heuristic framework for comprehending the broader rugby culture. Competitive rugby players, for example, do not typically hate the enemy but respect the opposition for being willing to engage in the pain, fear, and excitement of rugby. This clarifies why rugby players might attempt to batter the opposition into submission but routinely celebrate their bodily endeavours jointly in after-match functions (Pringle, 2009; 228).

No attempt is made to anchor this statement within a theoretical explanation. As such, I find no evidence to suggest Pringle's 'heuristic framework' helps us to understand rugby culture more generally. Instead of actually clarifying why it is that rugby players may at the same time respect and be violent to each other, Pringle's analysis simply points to an issue which has been a central theme within the sociological analysis of sport violence. That is, once again, that the majority of such action is experienced as substantively different in important ways to that of less socially acceptable violence. As Pringle's interviewees' experiences evidently show, rugby is framed by such a notion. It is therefore the case, that his attempt to "examine how rugby players make sense of their broad experiences of pleasure" (Pringle, 2009; 217) is severely lacking. Here, his political intention, which "was not to simply reveal the social construction of rugby pleasures but to problematize them by making the familiar strange" (Pringle, 2009; 225) seems to rest upon an inadequate understanding of rugby players' construction of such pleasures. As such, although some of the broad themes he discusses resonate with other work in the field, his critical comments about the mimetic dimension of rugby violence are rejected. In the light of these comments, and the work previously presented, I argue that the QES represents a well-developed conceptual frame for the pleasures that Pringle has discussed. Indeed, in the light of this critique, Elias' (1971; 165) words, "that everybody stands on the shoulders of others from whom he has learned an already acquired fund of knowledge which he may extend if he can," are drawn into focus. In this way, Pringle would have been wiser to have entered into a dialogue with an Eliasian understanding of sports pleasures rather than dismissing it out-of-hand.

A further theoretical contribution that can be outlined from this thesis is the interconnected way in which Eliasian concepts of figuration, habitus and established/outside have provided a sophisticated means of interpreting the social framing of lived experiences. A crucial theoretical error that was hoped to be avoided within this thesis, with its phenomenological slant and ethnographic involvement, was the production of an unreflexive, romanticised

account of mimetic violence. Essential in this regard, was the ability to place the phenomenology of these experiences within salient sociological frames. At no point throughout this thesis has it been suggested that figurational sociology is the only, or even 'best', means of framing an exploration of the significance attached to experiences of violence. However, due to Elias' willingness to place emotional and physical sensations within his sociological analysis, there is clearly some strength in this approach. Indeed, the previously outlined substantive contribution, although described in connection to the QES, owes much to the theoretical framing of the whole thesis.

In this way, a phenomenologically sensitive account of lived experiences, as framed by social processes, was laid out. This has been achieved via the utilisation of a theoretical tool kit outlined in Elias' writings. Specifically, the figuration, habitus and established/outsider relations have framed the interdependent nature of social processes, individual action and power dynamics. These conceptual tools, working in unison, have provided a means of interpreting the fluid yet pervasive social framing of life at Freedom Gym. Within the findings chapters, whether as an explicit focus or as an implicit frame of my understanding, the figuration, habitus and established/outsider relations has shaped the means by which an understanding of Freedom Gym was pieced together and represented within this thesis. Here, the manner in which images, mythologies and stereotypes connected to the gym shaped the demographic, informed 'common sense' understandings and beliefs about the 'natural' origins of gendered behaviours and contoured bodies, behaviours and experiences was described. Throughout, attempts were made to anchor social processes within lived experiences as felt through the boxer's body. Conversely, the means by which such bodies provided symbolic evidence to support or challenge such frames was also detailed. In this way, the observations presented are significant in wider debates within the sociological study of the body. This outlining of the enabling and constraining effects of the boxer's body, is evidence that can help us understand the structured and structuring nature of bodies. It is hoped that this thesis contributes to the exploration of such phenomena, in a manner that avoids an over reliance on either an agentic or structural interpretation of embodiment.

The habitus concept has been a fruitful theoretical frame for making sense of the embodiment of intertwined social processes. This study has, in part, addressed Atkinson's (1999; 166) concerns that "extended sub-cultural, ethnographic ... studies of habitus formalities and operation processes are rare." The evidence presented here provides support for the notion that the concept can address Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005; 851) call for the embodiment of gendered processes to be "convincingly theorised". Indeed, the conception and application of habitus presented here does much to answer the critical observations on the subject that were outlined in Chapter Two. The thrust of these critiques is that habitus is a sophisticated means of explaining social reproduction, leaving little or no room for agency or social change. Although, some interpretations and operationalisation of habitus can indeed be described as such, it is hoped that such a conceptual slippage has been avoided within this thesis. The social environment that I encountered during my time at Freedom Gym was relatively stable, with apparently little scope for radical social change or individual challenges to the dominant norms and values. However, the understanding of habitus as a 'feel for the game' or a 'social language', with both constraining and enabling elements, framed an appreciation of the means by which habitual behaviours were continuously negotiated and offered the opportunity for novel and innovative action. In this way, a simplistic reproduction of social processes was avoided.

Indeed, it was the established members of the boxing group, those who most epitomised the dominant masculine, working-class code, who regularly displayed actions that could be interpreted as challenging such dominant norms. Through their embodiment and overt expression of habitual behaviours these men were able, during actions in the ring, to bend and partially reform understandings of what was considered acceptable and legitimate behaviours, while seeming to avoid transgressing their own sets of norms and values. This was detailed with regard to the mimetic/'real' violence boundary, which this group, despite enforcing it in others, regularly appeared to transgress in certain ways. As such, the structuring of gym life, which this group did much to influence, was an inherently negotiated and dynamic process. Not only have these figural concepts directed observations and the focus of interviews to phenomena that might be of relevance to telling the story of Freedom Gym, they have also been of much use as a frame with which to think about the

interdependent nature of social life. At one and the same time, I was able to conceptually 'see' the ways in which long, medium and short term, local and global social processes shaped and contoured the norms, values, bodies, behaviours and significances of men at Freedom Gym. Indeed, as has been stated of Bourdieu's work (Jenkins, 2002), I have found that figurational sociology is 'good to think with'.

This thesis has also contributed to the continuing debate about the nature of knowledge production and research methods. As outlined in Chapter Three, there are various methodological debates linked to boxing research and ethnography more generally. Specifically, I focused on the critical observations that have been made of Wacquant's (2004) research. Here, de Garis (2010) claims that Wacquant privileges his account above other research examining boxing, by constructing his participatory role as offering a view which remains hidden within other accounts of boxing. I will refrain from re-addressing the merits of this critique in full, it suffices to say that the debate sensitises us to important issues about the production and representation of knowledge. In particular, this insider/outsider debate was reconceptualised using Eliasian terminology as involving a negotiation of involvement and detachment. This is more than simple semantics. The terms contain a relative dimension rather than the binary notion of being either 'insider' or 'outside'. As such, the development of my position within the research environment, from being relatively detached to becoming relatively involved, was more adequately conceptualised. Within this understanding came an appreciation of the enabling *and* constraining aspects a participatory ethnography. Woodward's (2008: 547) discussions of methodology neatly framed this ontological position:

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.

Although perhaps 'dramatic', the observations presented within relatively involved participatory accounts must be understood as but one viewpoint along a continuum with no absolute involvement or detachment at either polarity. Mansfield's (2007) discussions of involved-detachment informed the operationalisation of this line of thinking. She recognised the necessary requirement of ethnographers to adopt a relatively involved position while also attempting to maximise detachment through critical self-reflection. This process was enabled

by what Elias (1987c) termed a 'detour via detachment'. Through regular periods of self-reflection, I attempted to more adequately appreciate the means by which my changing position within the gym drew certain practices into focus while making others opaque. This continuing process enabled an appreciation of the partial and situated nature of the knowledge that was produced during this study. As such, the methodological critiques aimed at Wacquant's (2004) work have hopefully been avoided. What is more, I would argue that Elias' writings on such issues can do much to reframe this methodological debate. In so doing, dichotomous notions of 'insider' or 'outsider' research are rejected and the primacy of any one subjective position is negated.

#### **7.4 Further research**

It should be clear from the discussions in Chapter Three and the previously presented observations and interviews, that this thesis constitutes a partial view based on a particular boxing subculture. Due to the limited and specific nature of the sample and theoretical and methodological focuses, many aspects of gym life, and boxing more generally, have not been detailed. Indeed, the thesis has been presented with these biases in mind. Rather than interpreting such issues as fundamental weakness within this account, I hope to have drawn attention to them as a way of highlighting the means by which the knowledge produced here has been shaped and framed. Within the concluding section of this chapter I would like to focus once again on these biases and suggest future research, which, in addressing them, might contribute to furthering our sociological understanding of sports violence and sport and violence more generally.

As suggested in Chapter Three, aspects of my background may have predisposed me to find significance in the experiences that I encountered at Freedom Gym. Indeed, I did largely enjoy the time I spent training and socialising during the data collection for this thesis. Added to this, the majority of my observations and interviews were connected to the established group, which consisted of me who, almost by definition, also enjoyed training at Freedom Gym. As such, the vast majority of the experiences of mimetic violence that I witnessed and participated in were constructed as positive. Those who had negative experiences in the gym were less likely to continue attending, as such, accessing their views was challenging. These

stories tend to be absent from the account presented here. Further research that is able to access such viewpoints might add useful substantive and conceptual contributions. A connected issue is the relatively involved positions from which this thesis is presented. Despite attempting to maintain a degree of critical detachment, my position within the research environment undoubtedly made certain practices difficult to observe. As such, a methodology which emphasises a less participatory role might also be a useful means of shedding light on these experiences of exciting significance.

This thesis has focused specifically on the articulation of masculine identities with experiences of sporting violence. Clearly, notions traditionally associated with the working classes have featured prominently with this framing. However, the identities of the men who attended Freedom Gym were not limited to these two dimensions. Indeed, their identities or habitus' were highly nuanced and multi-layered. An aspect of these habitual frames, which has received no attention within this thesis, is that of ethnic and racial identifications. There are two reasons for this absence. Firstly, there is a limit to what one can tackle within a project of this size. As such, certain dimensions of gym life must, by necessity, remain uncovered while others must be moved to the foreground. Secondly, it was felt through my initial observations of gym life and my later interviews that these ethnic and racial identifications seemed to play a relatively marginal role in gym life. Identifications with certain forms of masculine and working-class norms and values were far more significant for the regular uses of the gym. However, this does not mean that race or ethnicity did not play a role in framing experiences in the ring. My position as a white male within a gym demographic of mostly white males may have made accessing such dimensions difficult. Indeed, asking questions about such a potentially controversial subject was challenging and tended to result in short 'politically correct' answers. With this in mind, and in the light of critical comments about Wacquant's (2004) apparent disregard for the ways in which race might impinge upon accounts of boxing (Zuzzman, 2005), it would perhaps be prudent for further research to focus more explicitly upon the construction of race and ethnicity within boxing subcultures. Here, the frame employed within this thesis, in particular established/outsider relations maybe of use. In particular, the ways in which boxer's understand their 'natural' tendencies to enjoy violence, as shaped by notions connected to racial stereotypes, might be insightful.

Other frames of age and boxing ability have been focused on. These dimensions presented interesting oppositions to the dominant ways of understanding participation in training and sparring at the gym. The meanings, significances, norms and values that were associated with the experiences in, and around, the ring were shaped by notions informed by participants' understanding of their bodies' capabilities. Here, the older participants tended to find significance in a different understanding of physical pain, injury and risk. The experience and ability level of these men also modified their understanding of what was pleasurable action. Further research that focuses more explicitly upon the articulation between age, experience, skill level, understandings of bodily pain, injury and risk, and pleasures would be useful. Here, 'other', perhaps marginalised, ways of interpreting, feeling and talking about exciting experiences may be drawn into focus. In this way, we can continue to develop the sociological understanding of the ways in which emotional and physical experiences are shaped and contoured by social processes.

At various times the ways in which a biological interpretation of behaviours, feelings and sensations was used to legitimate and justify certain acts of mimetic violence has been described. These discourses helped to propagate the notion that men and boys had a physical need to experience and express forms of emotion and physicality. The pseudo-scientific knowledge that was used to justify these notions was infused with a traditional understanding of a male identity. It is within such discourses, sensations and experiences that gendered social processes are generated and maintained. Indeed, the actions in, and around, the ring are the basis of events at which unequal balances of power can be reinforced, negotiated, challenged and subverted. The physically and emotionally significant experiences that have been the focus of this study are, as such, crucial aspects of power relations between and within genders. With this in mind, research into such sensuous phenomena from a feminist standpoint, might offer an important empirical contribution to such a theoretical perspective, while, at the same time, providing a different lens from which to critically interpret such action.

A foundational premise within this thesis is that the physical and emotional significance of sports violence has not yet been explored to a sufficient degree. In locating these phenomena within a boxing environment, this thesis has demonstrated the significance of such action and a conceptual framework that might usefully be employed to explore them. If I were to have my time in the field once again, I would focus more time and effort on collecting observations and conducting interviews with gym users who were not so closely associated with the established boxing group. Although evidence from such people might well have made the presentation of this thesis more complicated, insights from these 'other' stories would have added variety to the analysis of experiences of violence. In this regard, I would have liked to have spoken to more non-boxers who watch sparring sessions from time-to-time. These violence voyeurs would no doubt have described an interesting set of emotional and physical experiences which accompanied their spectatorship. Furthermore, the experiences of the MMA fighters, and other martial artists, although closely interconnected with the daily training of their boxing colleagues, would also elicit information about a whole set of different ways of thinking about, and engaging in, violence. These sports are framed by similar but also different social processes, as such, the exciting significance that is experienced during their participation will take the form of similar but also different emotional and physical sensations. Moving beyond the four walls of Freedom Gym, further research that examines exciting experiences within more 'traditional' boxing environments, other martial arts and heavy contact sports would also be an interesting step. Here, the tentative conclusions and conceptual evaluations outlined within this thesis can be compared to observations from other environments. Such research would help describe some of the 'other' stories of sports violence that have not been represented here

Although this thesis' predominant focus was mimetic sporting violence, it is hoped that the framework presented here can be employed to shed light on violence in other figurational settings. Indeed, Elias and Dunning's (2008 [1986]) understanding of violence, in which the mimetic and the 'real' do not exist as anathema, in combination with other tenants of figurational sociology and the QES in particular, could be usefully employed to explore experiences of violence that may be defined as appearing further towards the 'real' end of the 'mimetic/real' spectrum. In particular, I am thinking of the work conducted by the 'Leicester

School' examining football hooliganism (Dunning *et al.*, 1988). At the time of writing, England and the city in which this study took place, has been engulfed in a brief but alarming series of public order offences. The media, politicians and academics alike have rushed to explain the 'London riots' by pointing to ethnic and class tensions, the disillusionment of youth, government cuts, police heavy-handedness and various other salient issues which may have impinged on this complex issue. However, while I watch these events unfold, and with the conclusions of my thesis sharply in focus, I could not help but see what I thought was a remarkable similarity between the action unfolding on the street and the action that I have been witnessing at Freedom Gym. Indeed, Kevin Sampson, writing in the Guardian Newspaper online edition, captures this resonance:

In all the hours and pages of reportage since rioting returned to our cities last weekend, not one commentator seems to have touched upon the sole unifying factor that fuels and drives such unrest – *excitement, fun, teenage kicks*. In [the] 1981 [Liverpool riots] I could have cited unemployment (check), low-income, single-parent family (check), experience of police brutality (check) as factors in my participation, but none of the above even remotely came into my thinking then and I doubt it is stoking today's unrest, either.

I went along in 1981 because I was swept away by the *mind-blowing buzz of mob mayhem*. There's no justifying that – in the crudest terms such behaviour is quite simply wrong – but try telling that to a 15-year-old on a mountain bike. *To him or her, it's like a Wii game come to life – a hyper-real version of GTA*. You taunt the police until they chase you, then you leg it and regroup. Some of the more radical kids will throw rocks and set cars and wheelie bins alight to get them going, but sooner or later the "bizzies" (police) will charge (Sampson, 2011 - emphasis added).

Although I would disagree with his hyperbolic statements about the inherent 'wrongness' of these events, and that excitement is the 'sole unifying factor', the thrust of Sampson's argument is of interesting considering the experiences and framework presented in this thesis. Indeed, the similarities with evidence reported within the 'Leicester School's' work on football hooliganisms is also telling. Sampson is attempting to place the emotional and physical significance of these disorders within the psychological, economical and political accounts that dominated media coverage. In this way, his short piece bears much in common with the thesis presented here. I would suggest that an exploration of the rioters' experiences using the QES as a conceptual frame would be a useful exercise. Indeed, it seems that a figurational approach, and the QES in particular, has much to offer the sociological study of violence and should not therefore be limited to the exploration of sports violence. As Maguire (1992: 118), discussing the emotions in sport, concludes in his paper upon which this research is conceptually based:

Let me conclude by saying that we are dealing here with a relatively unexplored landscape ... Therefore, while the analysis presented here remains attached principally to the figurational perspective, it takes Elias at his word and sees what has been accomplished so far as nothing more than a 'symptom of a beginning'.

As such, this thesis represents a further step within the continuing journey. It is hoped that these recommendations and the observations presented in this thesis will go some way to advancing the sociological study of sports violence and violence more generally.

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## Appendix One

### Interview with Gary

I: Thanks for this quick interview, I'll keep it nice and short. To get us started can you say your name, age and where you live for the tape?

R: Garyl, 32, I live in Garlton.

I: You just moved house, where did you live before?

R: I didn't move far, just to a bigger 'ouse.

I: That was because you've a kid on the way, do you live with your wife?

R: Yeah, that's right.

I: Are you from Woodford originally?

R: Yeah.

I: Where did you grow up?

R: In Carlton.

I: What do you do for a livin'?

R: I work for George Bailey.

I: Who's that then?

R: You don't know who George Bailey is? I thought you was from Woodford?

I: I am but I keep my head down innit.

R: Well, I build 'ouses for him, he's got a load all over the place.

I: Ok, what do ya parents do for a livin'?

R: What's that got to do with owt?

I: It's just so that I can get a sense for your back-ground.

R: Right, me mum don't work, me dads an engineer.

I: So why boxin', why did you get in to it?

R: It was something a few of us did when we were younger, a couple of mates started out down at a club near by and we'd messy about on one of our dads bag. We was just havin' a bit o'fun an' that.

I: When did you start taking it a bit more seriously?

R: I started going to Phoenix an' they make champions in there so ya have to take things a bit more seriously when you go there.

I: I've heard of that place, is that the one in Cedling?

R: Yeah, that's where I met Carl. It's proper daan there, they make people proper fighters, complete boxers. Definitely the best club in the midlands.

I: So you had some amateur fights there?

R: Yeah I did a few.

I: How did you get on?

R: I did alright, I never took it as seriously as some o'the others, so as I got older I want fighting as much, and with amateurs you got to stay busy to make sure you're always moving forward. I had me last amateur fight when I was like seventeen or eighteen and then I kinda dropped out of doing it at that level. You got to commit to it proper or you just end up getting beat by some lad who ain't as good as ya 'cus o'fitness. Eventually, if ya box for long enough everyone you fight has got all the skill and it's fitness that splits 'em, an' then eventually, everyone gets the fitness an' then it's those with all the skill that start winning again. I wasn't unfit but these guys were getting ridiculous, I didn't have the time to be doing all the road work, and there was no way I was gonna start fucking up my record against shit boxers who could just out work me. So I chopped it, well, I kept boxing, I just stopped competing. I ended up just working on technique, keepin' fit and doing sparing with the guys that was still competing.

I: Did you enjoy that as much as fighting?

R: Yeah, ya know, it's just something that I'd been doin' for years, so I won't gonna stop going just 'cus I won't competing properly. It won't like I'd retired or owt, I was always planning on fighting again, but you can't do it half hearted, either 100% or just enjoy it and don't compete.

I: So what happened next, I mean, how did you get back into competing again?

R: I stayed around boxin', a lot of people stop fighting and then drift away and when they realise how much they miss it it's too late to make a come back, but 'cus I was never really away from it I just took a fight when it came up. I was still fit and that, I just needed to get ring ready.

I: Why do you think people leave the sport then realise they miss it?

R: When ya in it, it can be a bit full on, 'cus if ya start fightin' when ya young it's ya life if ya wanna make it as a pro, so when it starts getting tough people just sometimes stop altogether, 'cus imaging if you've not been drinking or meeting girls 'cus of training, and then you take a break and discover it all? Then kids just stop boxing, and they don't miss it 'cus their chasing fanneh and getting' pissed up. And then they get bored o'that and they start to miss boxin', ya see 'em down 'ere sometimes, they hit bags like they're 16 again, they love it, but they're fucked in a couple of rounds. It's a tough road back if you've been away for a while.

I: So what was your involvement, did you stay at phoenix training?

R: I mixed it up a bit really, I still went down to Phoenix, I was mates with Carl and I'd hold pads for him sometimes and do a bit o'sparin' with him. But I also started going to other clubs and gyms that was a bit closer to town. I know a few different guys in different gyms so I just mixed it up a bit. I ended up down here, 'cus a load of us knew the lads opening it up, Carl was brought in to give it some profile and they wanted a few other fighters down here so I just came then.

I: And what do you mean by 'ring ready'?

R: Well you can be fit but it don't mean you are ready for the ring, you got to put some rounds in to be ready for the ring, 'cus it's not just fitness it's being able to take the shots, so ya need to do all the ab work, and you got be able to push through the pain barrier.

I: Ok cool, so when did you have your first fight after the amateurs?

R: I was 24 I think.

I: And what's it like having a pro fight?

R: Well, it's unlicensed stuff I do, not really pro, but it's good, it's a step up from sparin' and amateurs.

I: Can you describe what it's like?

R: What the fight?

I: Well the whole thing really.

R: Being in front of a crowd is pretty mental, no-one really watches amateur fights, unless it's at a national level or something, so I won't really ready for it, it's get ya nervous, I've been in the ring loads, had loads o'fights and I was all over the place before it started. But ya settle down once ya land a few shots.

I: What's it like fighting in front of people? How many were there?

R: I think about 3-400 in my first fight. Well I was fightin' pretty early so it won't full, but I had loads o'mates down, I always sell loads o'tickets. Erm, it's good, if ya win, or if it's close 'cus everyone gets behind ya, you can't concentrate on the crowd 'cus you got to be on the fight, but they definitely help push ya when it gets hard. And it's cool winning man, 'cus you're a fucking God for a night.

I: How do you mean?

R: Mate, when I've won in the past, and especially when I've won big everyone goes fucking mental. Honestly, it's a joke. We've had some ridiculous nights after fights, everyone's on it man, and their all coming up asking about the fight, and telling you what it looked like from the seats.

I: And what about when you lose?

R: As long as ya ain't been hammered it cool, 'cus everyone respects what you've done. There's not many people who dare step in a ring you know mate. So, as far as I'm concerned as long as you do ya'sen justice that it don't matter what the result is. If ya start doing it properly, and ya know money's on the line then it gets different, but I don't do it for that.

I: Why do you do it?

R: There's nothing like it mate, when you've boxed for a bit it's only natural that you wanna 'ave a fight. Ya can't do all this practising and sparin' and working hard and then not want to do the real thing. There's something special about it mate. It changes ya as well, I mean boxing changes ya but after you've had a fight you're in a special club. You can always tell people that you've boxed. And like I said, there ain't many people who can say that.

I: Can you describe to me why there's nothing quiet like it?

R: Ah, I dunno, you've got to do it to understand it, it's an amazing feeling. Ya know when ya get a nice sparin' session going, a nice close one, well is like that but times a hundred. Ya got loads of people cheering ya on, and ya can throw properly and ya know the guy you're

fighting is throwing properly as well. It's too easy to get used to sparing and not throwing properly, once you're in the ring it's time to sort the men from da boys, not holding back man. It's time to throw those bombs. Ya know ya can really go for it, and ya just can't do that in sparing.

I: So being able to throw properly is a big part of it?

R: Well that's what all that sparing's for, it's fun doing it and it gets you fit but you're practising for the real thing arn't ya, that's the point in the end. We do all this sparing so that when the fight comes rounnd you're ready to go at it proper. So like the more ya spar the more ya wanna fight, don't ya find it a bit frustrating sparing all the time?

I: Well, 'cus my sparing's above the level I'm at I am pretty much fighting flat out anyway, I know you have to hold back but for me I am really going for it, so I don't really get that. When I spar people that aren't as good as me I get that feeling sometimes but I just use it as a chance to work on stuff.

R: Yeah yeah, I just get a bit bored of it sometimes.

I: I've not had a fight though so I don't know that feeling, I guess you're reminded every time you spar of what it's like to really go for it in a proper fight?

R: Yeah that's it. Ya always aware when ya spar that ya have to stop if ya hurt someone, but in a fight that's out the window. Ya only stop when the ref tells ya too. If ya land a good shot ya go in again and again. Ya got to have that killer instinct and if you've got it it's hard to switch off. So like in sparing I never get in the same fame of mind as when I'm fighting 'cus if I did I might not be bale to stop so quickly if I hurt someone, so sparin' never really satisfies that instinct to fight.

I: So sparing gets ya more keen to have a fight?

R: It's only natural for ya to want to take the next step, if you're sparing all the while you'll wanna let go of a few punches, ya cant help it, ya must have thought that before? Ya know the feeling where ya land a shot that ya pull out off and you just really want to sit down on it?

I: Yeah, I know what you mean. I have it sometimes when I've been down on the bag and not done any sparing, I just want to get in the ring and hit someone. It's dangerous being like that if you go out after an'all.

R: Yeah, ya get ya'sen in trouble if ya not careful kidda.

I: It's bad is that int'it. You mentioned an instinct to fight is that something that we are born with or is that a result of sparing?

R: We've all got it, it's just that sparing brings it out of us. Basically, if ya start boxing ya end up wanting to spar and when you start sparing ya end up wanting harder sparing and then ya want to have a fight. Ya can't help it, it's just like, it just catches ya.

I: Why is that do you think?

R: Ya always want the next step don't ya, we cant help it, once you've done some bags and ya see guys in the ring going at it, so ya do a bit o'body and then that's not enough and ya wanna start doing open. Mate you know it better than anyone don't ya? You only started a bit back and ya fucking love it and you're having a fight na. You wait till you've had that fight, I bet ya want another, whatever happens, after a couple of months you'll be itching for it again, I tell ya. You've got this on tape as well, look back a few months after your fight and listen to this again.

I: I already want another one! [Both laugh]

R: What 'ave ya told your misses? Have you said you were only gonna do one?

I: Oh, err, not really.

R: What about ya mum? 'Cus most people who do fights when they're a bit older just say they wanna do just one so they can say they've done it, and they promise their girlfriends it'll only be once and then they wanna do it again and again.

I: Ha, right, to be honest I ain't really said anything about what I'm going do. Because I took up boxing as part of me research I can always play that card, that it's so that I can understand what it's like to have a fight.

R: Ah right, I've known a few lads who's misses have flipped when they told them they were doing another fight. They get over it in the end. They ain't got much choice really 'cus once you've decided ya wanna fight again they're not gonna be able to stop ya.

I: It sounds like people get addicted to it?

R: Yeah I think we do.

I: What about the older boys that come down and just do body sparing, why don't they want to take it to the next step?

R: Most o'them 'ave been doing it for years and they're not bothered by it anymore, they're past all that, it's a young mans game ain't it. They come down and do their thing they ain't bothered about putting all that effort in, 'cus they ain't got anything to prove have they.

I: Do you think they miss it?

R: Yeah I think so, you've got to ain't ya, in fact David was telling me the other day he wants to do a bit of open again at some point. He's had loads o'amateur fights ya know, and he's still keen to do it again.

I: Do you think he misses the action?

R: Well he's just had another kid, so I bet he's starting to feel like he needs to get back into it, all those late night man, I've got that to look forward to. I think he just wants to start doing it a bit more seriously again so he has some way of getting away from it all.

I: What's your favourite part of sparring?

R: Landing a nice shot, nothing stupid, just a well timed one. Something to make someone stop in their tracks. Like when you step back when someone is coming in and then use their weight against them

I: Do you get a buzz from sparring and fighting?

R: I do a bit yeah.

I: Can you describe it?

R: If someone's coming at ya trying to hit ya, and you can slip the punches or block them it gives you that buzz ya know, you know it's not a usual thing having someone trying to hit ya, and it gets your blood rushing. Then on top o'that you can fire back! And I tell ya what, ya can only say this to people that box 'cus no one else gets it, but I fucking love hittin' people. Right, don't get me wrong, ya know me I ain't no bad guy, I don't go in there and knock your head off do I?

I: No.

R: But I love to land shot on people, love it. Especially when it's clean, there's nothing like a tight slip and a solid counter. Honestly man, that's what it's all about, simple.

I: I know what ya mean about not really being able to say that to people that don't box, because if you said that to anyone they would think you're a thug, and that's not is. It just feels good when you land a shot, not in a nasty way.

R: Yeah, the things is, if people are honest about it, we wouldn't be doing sparing if we didn't enjoy hitting people would we?

I: True.

R: But without getting involved in it people just think it's the same as fighting down in the market square on a Saturday night if you say you like it. But when you've spared you know it's totally different, it's like comparing enjoy a sport to enjoying ruck down town, no-one would do that, but landing shots in boxing is part of the sport just like a [pause] like scoring a goal or whatever.

I: Except when you score a goal in boxing someone could be knocked out.

R: Well yeah, I suppose it is a bit different. But you know what I mean.

I: Yeah man, I do think it's difficult for people to understand sparing like we do unless they've done it. It's pretty difficult to put it into words as well I find. What do you think it is about landing shots that feels good, do you think it's the connection, or feeling the power, or...[pause]

R: When you land a good shot it's a bit like hittin' a treble twenty in darts, you know when you just slot it in? Unless ya one of these fighters that just throws a million shots and gets luck. If you're picking your shots and ya work a gap and then nail it that's what it's all about. [does a little slip with his head then throws a right cross]

I: Have you got a favourite punch or combo?

R: I like throwing a big right upper cut, a lot of the time people try and get underneath my jabs, if they move back I can usually throw a long right at them, so they'll start trying to move forward and get on the inside and then the uppercut is open. If ya catch 'em on the way down it game over, so sometimes I will just throw the jab to try and get them to go down, ya know, like throw it at the top of the head really quick and maybe double it up, but ya just setting up the upper cut.

I: What does it feel like when you connect with that then?

R: It feels like your taking their fucking head off! Ya know if ya catch them moving down then you've got all that extra weight on it as well, if ya land flush when they're moving forward it's game over.

I: So you can really feel the power from your body landing on them?

R: Yeah, that [throws the right upper cut] duff right through 'em.

I: Does it feel different whether it lands on the chin or the body?

R: Yeah, with the body ya hand kinda gets stuck in there, you know if ya really get one on the belly 'cus ya can lift 'em up a bit and ya hand just stays in there. When you land on the chin it's totally different 'cus their head snaps back, you don't feel the weight like with a big body shot but you see 'em rocking.

I: Rocking?

R: When their legs go.

I: Oh right, so, is the reaction a part of what you enjoy about the shot, I mean when you knock the wind out of them and when their legs go?

R: It can be, but if ya fight someone who's tough and you're looking out for how they take the shot all the time it can be a bit demoralising, so you got to take it with a pinch o'salt 'cus people won't want to let ya know ya hurt 'em.

I: So if someone can hide their reaction how do you know if you've landed a sweet one?

R: Well, even if they don't fall over ya still know when ya hurt someone, you feel it, they can hide all they like, when ya catch someone ya know. If ya sit down on a punch and it hits ya feel the whole thing just like when ya hit a bag, most o'the time when you're fighting ya don't really land that sweet shot much 'cus they're always moving around and rolling with them, it's obvious when ya land the good one.

I: Are ya ever worried that you might hurt someone seriously?

R: [Pauses and looks away for a second] I'm not in there to try and really hurt anyone, but it's part of the game. I don't think ya can give it to much thought, if ya did you'd start pulling out o'shots and that's just not an option. Whoever you're fighting ain't gonna be worrying about it, they'll just be trying to knock ya out. Everyone who goes in there knows the risks so ya just get on with it.

I: Have ya ever hurt anyone really bad?

R: Not really, I thought I had once, some lad got carried out in a stretcher but it was only as a precaution. Bit scary that was man.

I: What happened?

R: He was just a bit out of his depth really, I started off nice and slow, and I knew he won't up to much. Then in the second round I think his corner told him to try and use his weight on me and he just ended up trying to rush me and won't gonna 'ave that. I just landed a big right on

him flush and that was it, he went down hard and they wanted to examine him properly before they let him go. They're tight on stuff like that, it was just precautionary though but I was worried for a bit, ya don't want that shit on your hands do ya?

I: I suppose you can't really enjoy the win as much when something like that happens?

R: Yeah, not really, once he was ok it was cool though we got lashed.

I: Do you think that danger puts people off from taking boxing up?

R: Yeah maybe, it doesn't help the rep does it?

I: I think it kinda elevates boxing in some peoples eyes, because there's that real sense of danger and hurting your opponent is the point.

R: Yeah, for some people, but then others hate it 'cus of that.

I: How do you decide what is the right amount of pain in training?

R: Well, really, there shouldn't be any, except from pushing your body hard, 'cus training init supposed to be about pain, but I know what you mean, 'cus that's the reality of it, there's always gonna be a bit. So I dunno, I guess you just know what your happy doing, but like if someone's bein' lazy people are gonna jump on 'em. Know what I mean?

I: Do you get many people give you bad reactions when you say you box?

R: Not really, sometimes women will get on their high horses about it, but all the lads love it, they love coming and watching me fight. Like now when I haven't had a fight for a while they'll always be asking when I'm fighting again, they love it.

I: Why do you think they love it so much?

R: Ah mate, it's the atmosphere, nothing like it, and who don't like watching a fight?

I: What's the atmosphere like?

R: It's mental, everyone buzzin', they're up on their feet screaming and shooting. Honestly it's crazy, I always get loads of support so when I fight it's mental.

I: And why do you think some women get on their high horse about it?

R: Oh fuck knows mate, they just don't get it do they, they think it make you a bad person 'cus you do a bit of boxing, they don't understand it, they just make assumptions. If they're bothered to get to know it instead of just thinking they know everything they might learn something.

I: Bit of a change in tack now, how long did it take you to get used to getting hit in the face?

R: I don't know if it have, I don't know if you can. You don't wanna get used to it 'cus that's when you know you're getting hit to much. You got to hit and not get hit.

I: Ok, but you have to be able to take some shots, how do you get more comfortable with that?

R: It's just time in the ring man, the more hours ya do the better ya get at avoiding being hit, and taking it when it goes wrong.

I: When you get shuck up by a shot and it make you dizzy or something can you get better at handling that?

R: The main thing is being able to fall back on sound technique, so if ya get tagged ya don't do something stupid and get tagged again, ya got to be able to cover up and pick a good time to come back with some counters. Some people just have rock hard chins and it don't matter how hard ya hit 'em but most of us just have to learn how to have a solid defence for when ya get caught.

I: What do ya think about body sparing?

R: It's good for your fitness and conditioning. Not so good leading up to a fight 'cus ya can end up with some bad habits if ya do to much of it. We do too much of it down here really but all the lads love it. And they don't really like doing open 'cus not many of them are having fights, they just do it for the fitness and a bit o'fun. I try and get them to do a bit of light stuff but they're never bothered.

I: What would you rather do?

R: Open.

I: Why?

R: That's what we're here for ain't it. Ya only supposed to do body to help get you ready for open. [looks at watch]

I: We're out of time aren't we?

R: Yeah I got to go mate, my misses will kill me if I'm late again.

I: Can we do another quick chat some time?

R: Yeah yeah, that's fine. I'll see ya on Sat at training and we can try and do it after that maybe. Could even go for a pint after we finish or something.

I: Perfect mate, see ya then.

R: Sound.

## **Appendix Two**

### **Interview with Andrew**

I: Thanks for agreeing to talk to me today, basically I am going to ask you some simple questions to get us started then I am going to ask you about your involvement in boxing.

R: Cool.

I: Can you tell me your name, age and where you live for the tape?

R: Andrew, 29, Shiptop.

I: How do you live with?

R: My girlfriend Clare.

I: Have you lived in Woodford long?

R: I've lived in the city for about 4 or 5 years now.

I: Where were you before that?

R: I went to Uni in Denerby and before that I grew up in a village called Tinsdale which is near the Motorway.

I: Ok. What do you do for a living?

R: Search engine optimisation at a marketing and advertising company.

I: Is that in Woodford?

R: No, Millcester, I work a lot from home.

I: Is there any reason why you live in Woodford and not Millcester?

R: I started working in Millcester about six months ago and we had just signed a new lease so it's not really been an option. I like Woodford; I have friends here.

I: What do your parents do?

R: Mum's retired now but she was a head mistress and dad works in engineering.

I: Ok, so, how long have you been coming to Simon's boxing session for?

R: Erm, around six months I think.

I: And roughly how often do you go?

R: I try and get about twice a week, I can't do the Thursday session 'cus I play five-a-side with the lads from work, I try and make the Saturday session but obviously I can't if I'm doing something at the weekend.

I: Cool, and did you do any boxing before coming to Simon's sessions?

R: No, nothing.

I: Is there any reason you started coming down here?

R: It was John's idea, I know him from work and he said about coming down, I'm not sure how he found out about it.

I: Why did you want to start boxing?

R: He mentioned it and it sound like a bit of a laugh, something different, and I knew that it was basically the toughest thing you can do fitness wise.

I: Ok, so did it match up to your expectations?

R: Oh yeah, I was a mess after my first few sessions. My body wasn't ready for it, I've never been so sore in my life! All my side were killing for days.

I: Did that put you off?

R: No way, I knew I'd found something I wanted to do, I love that feeling of knowing you've done something to your body. Something it hasn't done before. I remember thinking during the session that I was gonna pay for it the next day, but I didn't know it was gonna hurt the way it did. I suppose I'd never used my upper-body muscles in that way before. I think it was the impact or something 'cus I do weights but this was different, maybe I was pushing myself a bit harder 'cus of the macho thing, like 'I'm a boxer now, I have to hit this bag really hard.'

I: Ha, yeah, I know what you mean, so you were sore from training not sparring, I assume you didn't spar on your first session?

R: Yeah, we just hit the bag and then we did that thing where you hit a different combination each corner of the ring, you were there that night.

I: Oh right, cool, I didn't realise. I know what you mean, it's tough is that 'cus you're being pushed on by everyone watching, so people end up getting draw into it like you said 'cus they want to look like they're hitting the pads hard.

R: I remember that feeling well, I was watching everyone wacking the pads and I though 'fuckin' 'ell I'm gonna look like a complete pussy' so I remember really going for it and trying my hardest to hit the pads hard, but you know what's gonna happen when you do that, I just ended up tensing up and not really hitting them that hard and I bet I looked like some kind of mal-coordinated thug trying to slam my way throw a wall or something.

I: I don't remember but I'm sure you didn't look that bad. So you mentioned that maybe it was a macho thing, can you explain a bit more what you mean?

R: Well, it was my first time down at a new gym and I know I was a beginner but I don't want people to think that I can't punch, you know? It's not like I'm one of these guys that goes around trying to prove his manliness all the time but I suppose male pride takes over a bit when you're in a situation like that.

I: What specifically about the situation do you think might have encouraged that?

R: Err, I was new, I didn't know any of these guys and we are boxing! It's hardly a sport for...well it's just a bit of like, a traditional sport I guess.

I: Sorry to ask what might seem daft questions but what do you mean by traditional?

R: Ha, it's ok, err, yeah like, I think when you see people boxing there ain't any faffing around it's man on man, who's the best, what more simple way is there of finding out who's the better man? If you look at sports now-a-days it's all nutrition and equipment whereas boxing's still the same now as it was then. Well, I know it has changed a bit but not in the important stuff, you're still trying to knock your opponent out.

I: Ok, so, that traditional side of boxing made you want to really hit the pads hard?

R: Well, I mean, I suppose so, you know it's a sport for real men and that kinda goes with it, so it's not like I didn't know when I came to the session that I wasn't going to have to hit stuff, so I was prepared to get stuck in you know? So when I was doing that thing at the end [the five way combination Simon does with the group] I think that I just got a bit carried away with that whole manly thing, I don't want to sound like someone who's bothered about stuff like that 'cus I'm not really but it was fun, it was a chance to let fly that you don't normally get, so I think I just went with it.

I: Ok, we've got off to a flying start with all that, lets just go back to some of the basic questions, is there any history of boxing in your family?

R: I don't think so, Dad definitely isn't the type for it.

I: Ok, so can you put your finger on anything that might have made you want to take up boxing?

R: Err, I've always been a bit interested in it, I mean it's got something about it hasn't it, I think it captures peoples imaginations, well it does mine.

I: What in particular?

R: Well it's just so out of the ordinary now-a-days, you don't see stuff like it, even in other sports you don't get that simple man-on-man physical confrontation. I think if you hear that someone is a boxer you have to give them respect straight away because of the commitment they need to do it.

I: Ok, can you talk me through how your first session went.

R: Well after that first one I 'ad to wait a week 'cus I was so sore but we came again the week after. We'd looked at the foot-work and stuff on the first session and on the second one we spent more time going through different punches and stuff. And then we did ab stuff to finish. Most of the sessions are pretty similar to be honest, we usually do some bag work and then something in the ring and we will sometimes finish with some sparing.

I: Do you ever come down except for Simon's session?

R: I have thought about it 'cus it would be good to work on some stuff but I don't really get time to be honest.

I: So, in Simon's session what is it you enjoy the most?

R: All of it really, all the stuff we do it fun, sometimes you have to stand around and wait when and watch when we are doing stuff at the end of the session, that's a bit annoying but when we're working on the bag and hitting pads with a partner that's wicked, I suppose it's the stuff when we're most active that I like the most.

I: What about hitting the bag do you like?

R: Getting stuff right, practising the movement, 'cus when you're on the bag you can start to feel the timing coming, you'll start off with a combo and it can feel rubbish but after a while something'll click and it'll start to come good.

I: How do you know when it is starting to come good?

R: It depends on the combo, but it'll get faster and more natural and eventually you'll start to feel it on the bag, you know [pause] that snap when you hit it with a good shot?

I: Yeah I know what you mean, and do you enjoy getting that snap?

R: Oh yeah definitely, you know you're getting it right when you start connected with the bag like that. It's all in the sound.

I: When you're on the bag do you imagine that you're hitting an opponent in the ring?

R: Erm, not really.

I: I found that it makes it a bit more realistic if you can start to think about the bag as a person, that way you can try and move off it like in sparring.

R: Oh, ok. I might try that.

I: You've said to me before that you like throwing combinations, why do you think you enjoy that?

R: I like getting them right, you know refining them so they are really tight and snappy.

I: Do you enjoy the feeling?

R: Yeah, getting a combination stop on is brilliant, especially if it's taken a while.

I: Can you describe what it feels like?

R: After a while it goes from feeling forced to being natural and easy, things just flow out.

I: How can you tell when you get it right?

R: It clicks and the punches get faster and land with more power. If there is [foot] movement then you feel balanced and you can spring back out of range.

I: You enjoy those feelings?

R: Yeah, nothing like it, landing a really hard punch and then getting out, I think it's the man in me coming out. [laughs]

I: Can you describe the feeling of landing a hard punch?

R: It not so much about how hard it is, its about the timing, that's when you know you have done something right, that's when it feels the best, everything is in line or something and you feel the power.

I: On to pad work then, what do you like about doing that?

R: I think it's the fact that you're working with someone, and you kinda get better together, so you'll be working on a combination and as long as the person holding pads knows a bit what

they are doing you'll work as a team to get the combo right. And when you've someone working you like that you push loads harder 'cus they'll be encouraging you.

I: Do you think it is more realistic doing pads?

R: Err, maybe because the person's moving with you, Simon sometimes gets us to follow the guy with the pads, that always difficult but I suppose it's what happens in a fight.

I: Do you get the same feeling of timing when you're doing pads?

R: I think maybe more so [pause] cus, you, well it's harder to hit the pads properly 'cus they're smaller than the bag so you need to work closely with the person who's holding them for you to get it right. But eventually when the timing comes it feels even better because they're hitting your glove as well as you hitting the pad.

I: Do you notice the difference when someone is holding pads that hasn't done it much before?

R: Yeah, when Simon holds pads for you it make it easy and pretty much over shot is spot on, I think 'cus he know what he's doing he compensates for me missing stuff and he leads it more.

I: Ok, so you mentioned that you spar sometimes after Simon session, how often do you think you've done that?

R: Err, it's not that often, I think it depends on who's at the session, err, maybe we do it once a month or something.

I: Do you enjoy it?

R: Yeah, but its so frustrating, 'cus like we only do it at the end of the session and you might be knackered and sometimes it's really hard getting anything out of it. And like you do all this good work on the bag and all of a sudden it all goes out of the window when you start sparing.

I: How do you mean?

R: Well, it's just not the same, like Simon'll teach us the combo on the bag and then in sparing it's like you've never even done it before, I've been coming for six months now and I still feel like when I actually box I'm a beginner. There's so much to learn to get used to actually sparing and trying to put stuff that you learn into practise.

I: Yeah, it takes a lot of time to get comfortable sparing, do you find that you get tired quickly when you spar?

R: Oh yeah, I've never done anything like it for that, I think we normally do two minutes with Simon and I'm always totally hammered after that, and it's not like I am unfit, I can play five-a-side of an hour no bother but I step in here and two minutes and I feel like being sick!

I: [laugh] I know that feeling. Do you enjoy that?

R: Not at the time [laughs] but after, yeah I love it.

I: Is there anything you can describe about what you love about it?

R: It's weird 'cus it's so painful, Simon will be telling you to keep punching and counting down the last few seconds and all you wanna do is stop 'cus of the burning and then you might get smacked on the face as well, but you don't stop, you keep going till the end even though it feels like you're going to die.

I: Isn't it strange how we enjoy that?

R: Yeah, we must be psychos or something to do that to our selves. But I think it worth it, 'cus it's got to do you some good.

I: So, what's it like getting hit in sparing?

R: It's a shock. I think that's the best way to describe it. The thing is you can't prepare for it, it don't matter how much you've trained on the bag or on pads the first time you spar and you get hit it throws you completely. I mean when do you normally get hit in the face? Yeah, sometimes in footie you got the odd elbow ride up or something but you know when that happens you stop and usually the ref will blow or maybe the player will say sorry, but not in sparing 'cus that's the point. Although, I think the first time me and John spared we ended up saying sorry a few times [laughs] how stupid's that, we're both trying to hit each other in the face and then when we actually do we say sorry and stop fight! Ridiculous.

I: Why do you think that was?

R: I dunno, I suppose it's not something that you normally do to a mate is it? It just kinda popped out after I had hit him. Simon told us to get on with it, I mean we had a laugh and everything but you can't go around doing that can you? We had to try really hard to get used to hitting people, I stopped saying sorry but it was still pretty hard to actually hit people especially in the face. It's just something that didn't come naturally to me.

I: Do you think it comes naturally to other people?

R: Err, yeah, there are lads that don't seem to give a damn about smacking you as hard as they can. I think some of them don't really know how to not throw that hard and maybe some

of them just enjoy smacking you. For me sparing is about learning to put stuff into practise so I don't really want to hurt anyone, or for that matter get hurt myself I just wanna have a bit of fun with it. It's not that I don't mind taking the odd punch but I'm not that good and if one of these lads who just swings at ya hits me on the chin I might get knocked out.

I: What about black eyes? Have you ever had one from sparing? And is it ok for work?

R: Not proper ones, just little marks but it wouldn't be the best if I had loads of meeting and stuff if I turned up with a black eye, it doesn't really give the right impression does it. I think if I know I have meetings coming up I'll probably stay away from sparing. Its fun and everything and I really want to get better but I'm never gonna be doing this for anything other than fitness really so there's no point me taking it too seriously.

I: Yeah, I think that's fair enough. Ok, so remember you were telling me about when you start timing the pads? Is sparing the same, I mean, when you land a well timed shot do you enjoy it?

R: Err, it's a bit different 'cus like at the start I couldn't even bring myself to hit someone, but I suppose as I've gone on I've started to get used to it [pauses] but do I enjoy hitting someone? I suppose I must or I wouldn't be sparing would I? But I think I enjoy it because if you time a punch it's doing what you've been trying to put into practise. I mean, I've been hitting those bags for six months and the point of it is to try and hit someone, so when I actually do I suppose I enjoy it 'cus I've done what I set out to do. What you got to remember is that for people like me that have never really been in a fight that is all very strange. You know? 'Cus, I havn't been in a fight since primary school and even then it wasn't anything proper. So to start learning all this when I am older is a bit of a challenge to maybe get the right frame of mind. Does that make sense?

I: Yeah, definitely, I'm the same mate. To be honest, I still find myself holding back when people are throwing at me full on, and I know they can take a hit, it's just hard, like you said to get into the mind set, it's coming though. To be fair I love hitting people now.

R: [laughs] It's not that I don't like it, it just takes a bit of getting used to. I think that when I land a punch I feel guilt first and then I have to stop myself feeling guilt and remember that the person is in there willing for that to happen, it's realising that there is that natural give and take in a boxing ring, like I'm fine if someone hits me with a good shot and you've to presume by them standing opposite from you that they're the same.

I: Yeah I think you're right. But what happens when you're clearly better than the other person?

R: Err, you just take it easy don't ya, it's not like I'm better than many people though [laughs].

I: How do you find the level that they're comfortable at?

R: I suppose you just start off slow and see where you end up, I think you can see if you hurt someone, or if they aren't really happy in there and when that happens you just have to ease off.

I: Do you think you'll ever use the techniques you learn in at Simon's sessions outside the ring?

R: What like self-defence?

I: Anything really.

R: Err, well I definitely didn't start for that reason, but I suppose if I got in any trouble I might be a little more prepared for it. I don't know how good boxing is for self defence though, I mean if you take my sparing for example it's not like I'm really good enough to get out of the way of many punches or anything, so I doubt I would really be able to use it in a real situation.

I: Do you think that boxing can teach people to be more violent?

R: Err, not in my case, well I don't think it's violence anyway, but it definitely hasn't made me violent.

I: Why do you say it isn't violence?

R: It isn't is it? We aren't going and fighting in the street or beating people up, I know what you are saying 'cus its kinda the same, in the end we are hitting each other and you could define that as violence but I don't think anyone that comes to Simon's session would say it's violent. It's good clean fun as far as I'm concerned.

I: What about in kids? You often hear about kids learning to box to help control some of their violent urges, what do you think to that?

R: Yeah I know what you mean and I'm not sure to be honest, I think it can teach them discipline so that can only be a good thing. When you hear these stories I always think that it depends on who's teaching them, 'cus it ain't necessarily that boxing is good or bad for them, more that the way in which it's taught. So, for example, if the coach is someone who the kids respect and he demands that they learn all the gentlemanly conducts that go with boxing then I think it could definitely have a positive effect on a kid's life. Especially with rough kids, 'cus

the trainer might be talking their language, well at least more than their school teachers might be. But it also depends on the kid though don't it? 'Cus some of them just, you just can't get through to them.

I: What do you think to girls and women learning to box?

R: That's big nowadays isn't it, I mean, yeah everyone should be able to box, I know it had like a tradition of being a man's sport but I think we have pretty much moved past that now.

I: What about sparing, would you be ok sparing with a women?

R: Yeah I suppose so, as long as she knew what she was doing a bit and she was up for it.

I: Do you think you would have any problem hitting her?

R: Well, yeah I probably would because like I said it's taken me a while to get used to hitting men so I think it would take a bit of getting used to.

I: Why do you think that is?

R: It would be something that is totally alien to me, you know at school we get taught to not hit girls and I suppose it's just one of those rules that you never break. So I guess it would be pretty difficult to get past that, kind of like hitting anyone but even harder.

I: Do you think that women should be allowed to compete or would it be better for them to do those boxercize classes at gyms?

R: Yeah they should be allows to compete, definitely but I bet most of them would be happy with the boxercize classes, I think one of the girls at work goes to one at Roko in Chapelford. I think she likes to think that she's doing boxing but it's not really, it just a fitness class that takes some ideas from boxing.

I: Do you think that people can have a natural talent for boxing?

R: It's the same as anything, you can have abilities that help you pick it up but there's no way you can be good at it without working hard.

I: What do you think those abilities might be?

R: Speed, power, determination, willingness to put the hours in, that was something I was gonna say when we were talking about kids boxing, I think a lot of kids, especially in this generation won't have the sticking power to really take up boxing properly. They get stuff on a plate now-a-days and I think if they don't like something they will just not bother with it.

I: Why would they not like it?

R: It's not like the training is easy, they wouldn't be able to just pop along and mess about like if they were going to an after school sport group or something. I don't think a boxing coach would stand for that, well they shouldn't, 'cus they can't have lads messing around and thinking it's all a load of fun. I suppose this links back to your earlier question.

I: Yeah I think it does, but didn't you say you really enjoyed it from the first time you came, what makes you think that some kids might not be the same?

R: It's funning 'cus I would have hated this as a kid, you change don't you? You start to find different things enjoyable, the thing for me is that I love the fitness side of it, so straight away I really enjoyed the training but kids don't like working hard do they? So I bet a few of them would just fall by the wayside straight away.

I: Ok, last couple of questions, 'cus you have kinda discussed most of the things on my list already. Just thinking back to sparring, what would be a good sparring session?

R: Err, one where we both people are learning something and we are able to put some stuff into practise.

I: Do you think there's any real risk of getting hurt in sparring?

R: If both of you are taking it steady then not really, it depends what you mean by getting hurt, 'cus it might hurt a bit but I don't think there's really much chance of any really damage being done in sparring, well there shouldn't be anyway. I don't mind a bit of pain, 'cus that's one of those things, and it helps you to learn what you're doing wrong but you shouldn't really have to take any real risks I don't think.

I: How does pain help you learn?

R: If you drop your hands, you get hit, simple.

I: [laughs] Yeah, it is pretty simple like that. Last question then, what do you think to liberties as a gym?

R: Yeah it's alright, not to expensive or anything and you have loads of choice over what you wanna do, I only ever come for Simon's session so I don't really use anything other than the boxing area.

I: What do you think to the women's only bit?

R: Err, well if it encourages women who might be a bit embarrassed to train in front of men to do some exercise then it's a good thing I think. It kinda does stand out though, I did notice it when I first came down. I think in most gyms they're past the need for something like that.

I: What would be the difference in other gyms?

R: They're much more equally balanced between men and women so everyone uses all the equipment where as here you have definite areas that are for women and although there isn't a men only area you don't really ever see women using the weights section do you.

I: Why do you think that is?

R: Well they have their own area so I suppose they don't need to, and I would have thought that they wouldn't really want to use the equipment in that area anyway it just big weights and sweaty benches [laughs].

I: Ok, thanks for that. Lets leave it there cus we've been going for a while, I might have a few follow up questions if that ok.

R: Well, you will see me down here so yeah that's fine.

I: Cool.