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Boxing Culture and Serious Leisure among North-American youth: An Embodied Ethnography

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss how I followed in the footsteps of Loïc Wacquant (2004) and took a closer and personal look at boxing as a leisure activity, from the point of view of those who participate in it, using embodied ethnography as the means of research. I was curious as to how and/or if leisure theory relates and applies to boxing, given the latter's peculiar characteristics, which seem to equate it more with "work" than with "leisure." I sought to answer a basic question, "Why do you box?" within these theoretical and methodological frameworks, and discovered that, while Robert Stebbins' casual/serious leisure dichotomy applied to boxing, the reality was far more complex than I had anticipated. The ethos of boxing did not fit neatly into any theoretical classifications, and the participant nature of the research allowed for a more nuanced analysis of boxing culture, with surprising results. Implications for leisure theory and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Boxing, Embodied Ethnography, Culture, Behavior, Casual Leisure, Serious Leisure

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Boxing Culture and Serious Leisure among North-American Youth: An Embodied Ethnography

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In this paper, I discuss how I followed in the footsteps of Loïc Wacquant (2004) and took a closer and personal look at boxing as a leisure activity, from the point of view of those who participate in it, using embodied ethnography as the means of research. I was curious as to how and/or if leisure theory relates and applies to boxing, given the latter's peculiar characteristics, which seem to equate it more with "work" than with "leisure." I sought to answer a basic question, "Why do you box?" within these theoretical and methodological frameworks, and discovered that, while Robert Stebbins' casual/serious leisure dichotomy applied to boxing, the reality was far more complex than I had anticipated. The ethos of boxing did not fit neatly into any theoretical classifications, and the participant nature of the research allowed for a more nuanced analysis of boxing culture, with surprising results. Implications for leisure theory and directions for future research are discussed. Keywords: Boxing, Embodied Ethnography, Culture, Behavior, Casual Leisure, Serious Leisure

In 1983, the editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* argued that "boxing should be banned from civilized countries" (Lundberg, 1983, p. 250), with another author in the same issue (Van Allen, 1983) calling boxing a "deadly degrading sport" (p. 250). Three years later, in Las Vegas, Nevada, Michael Gerard "Mike" Tyson, the "baddest man on the planet," defeated Trevor Berbick by TKO in the second round, conquering the WBC Heavyweight Championship, and becoming the youngest (aged 20 years and 4 months) heavyweight champion in history. By doing so, Mike Tyson also reignited the American public's interest in boxing, lost since the great days of Joe Louis, "Sugar" Ray Robinson, and Muhammad Ali (Oates, 1987). Since then, appeals to ban boxing have continued (Lundberg, 1984, 1986, 2005) and these, combined with the meteoric popularity of other combat sports (Gentry, 2005), such as jiu-jitsu and mixed martial arts (MMA) as well as a host of other factors, have contributed to the decreased popularity of boxing both as a sport and as a leisure activity (Anasi, 2002).

Existing academic research on boxing has concentrated almost exclusively on the (negative) clinical effects of boxing as a physical activity (e.g., Jordan et al., 1997; McCrory, 2007; Mendez, 1995). Although there is a wealth of popular literature on boxing (e.g., Liebling, 1956; Oates, 1987; Toole, 2000) and "how-to" manuals (e.g., Frazier & Dettloff, 2005; Halbert, 2003), sociological and anthropological studies focusing on boxing are less common (e.g., Anasi, 2002; Coates, 1999; Sekules, 2000; Sheard, 1997; Wacquant, 2004; Weinberg & Arond, 1952). The latter invariably fall into one of two categories: those done from an etic¹, or outsider's perspective (e.g., Hargreaves, 1997; Sheard, 1997; Weinberg & Arond, 1952), or those studies which acknowledge that an emic, or insider's perspective is best suited to study boxing (e.g., Anasi, 2002; Wacquant, 2004). The emic approach has been championed in particular by Loïc Wacquant (e.g., 2004), whose boxing (auto)ethnography in the black suburbs

¹ On the distinction between etic and emic see, for example, Headland, Pike, and Harris (1990).

of Chicago, *Body & Soul*, has received much praise² (e.g., Krueger & SaintOnge, 2005; Stoller, 2005).

Regardless of their epistemological stance, boxing scholars have mostly focused on three distinct areas of research: a) the social and economic conditions that are thought to be both the demiurge and the *milieu* of boxing, and the subsequent impact of boxing on the individuals who engage in it and on society as a whole (e.g., Sheard, 1997; Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 1995, 2004); b) issues of gender, masculinities, and feminism and their relation to boxing (e.g., Hargreaves, 1997; McNaughton, 2012; Nash, 2015; Wacquant, 1992; Woodward, 2004); and c) phenomenological accounts of boxing as an extremely demanding physical and mental activity and, as such, worthy of research (e.g., Anasi, 2002; Wacquant, 1995a). Thus far, studies of boxing as a leisure activity, are rare (e.g., Donnelly, 1988; Carter, 2003).

In this paper, I discuss how I followed in the footsteps of Loïc Wacquant (2004) and took a closer and personal look at boxing as a marginalized leisure activity, from the point of view of those who participate in it. I was particularly curious as to how and/or if leisure theory relates and applies to boxing, given the latter's peculiar characteristics, which seem to equate it more with "work" than with "leisure" (Wacquant, 2004). Furthermore, my research takes place in a non-stereotypical boxing gym, that is, situated in a fairly affluent college town in Pennsylvania, where the vast majority of the participants were undergraduate or graduate college students, and seem to regard boxing not as a possibility to escape (literally or metaphorically) undesired socio-economic conditions, but merely as a leisure activity. I was interested in investigating if boxing could be considered leisure or work, especially for those who are "serious" about it. Given the demands and rigors of training (translated, as I mentioned before, in a higher drop-out rate than for other activities), and the fact that, for the majority of the participants, such work will not culminate in a fight, one would expect participants to classify boxing as leisure. It is a freely chosen activity ("no one is forcing me to be here"), it is done in one's "economically free-time" (Kaplan, 1975, cited by Henry, 2001, p. 5), and furthermore, one has to pay to do it. In regard to the latter (pecuniary remuneration in exchange for participation in a leisure activity), and given the respect and admiration that boxers enjoy and naturally appreciate, boxing is not unlike Veblen's (1994 [1899]) notion of "conspicuous leisure" (p. 35). The fun that many participants experience derives from learning a new set of skills and putting them into practice.

Finally, I was curious to see if any parallels between the ethos of boxing (which stresses hard work, camaraderie, and absolute dedication) and the socio-economic background and values of the participants could be established. My main research question (one that I asked myself as well) was "Why do you box?" Additionally, I asked two additional questions, namely "How did you get involved with boxing?" and "Why do you like boxing?"

Serious Leisure

The conceptual framework I used for the study is that of serious and casual leisure. Given the ethos of boxing, that revolves around relentless acquisition of new skills and aprimoration of the body, built on relentless discipline and almost exclusive devotion to the sport, the acquisition of new skills in order to participate/engage in higher levels of the sport is paramount. Further, the distinction between amateur and professional boxers mirrors the casual/serious leisure dichotomy (Stebbins, 2007).

Robert Stebbins coined the term serious leisure in the midst of collecting data for his "fifteen year project" of research on amateurs and professionals who formed a long-term

² So profound was the effect of *Body & Soul* on the academic circles that a whole issue of the journal *Qualitative Sociology* (Vol. 28, Issue 2, July 2005) was dedicated to Loïc Wacquant's (2004) work.

commitment to a leisure activity (Stebbins & Elkington, 2014). Serious leisure refers to the “systematic pursuit of an...activity that participants find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (Stebbins, 2007, p. 5). Those who participate in serious leisure do so for the experience of it (the intrinsic reward) and generally attain a high level of performance. They have a sense of self-identity related to the activity and are often involved with social groups engaged in the same activity. For example, someone who participates in serious leisure related to skiing is likely to define him or herself as a skier and be heavily involved in social groups related to skiing (Stebbins, 2007). Research has yet to explore boxing specifically from the perspective of serious leisure, but past literature has suggested that sport and other types of physically active leisure can be ideal settings for serious leisure (e.g., Heo et al., 2012; Stevens-Ratchford, 2016).

Methods

This study can best be described as an embodied ethnography (Bernard, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Wacquant, 2004). Through participant observation (Lichterman, 1998; Ribeiro & Foemmel, 2012) and in-depth interviews (Weiss, 1994), I tried to record patterns of behavior, social systems, values, beliefs, and understandings, in order to generate a “thick description” of life in the gym (Geertz, 1973, p. 3). As much as possible, I observed and participated in daily life at the gym, in order to garner enough knowledge about boxing life so that I could not only understand what goes on in the gym, but also be able to participate in a meaningful way (Wolcott, 1999). By doing so, I attempted to “place specific encounters, events and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455), that of boxing as a leisure activity.

The Body as a Research Tool

An embodied ethnography involves the use of the body as an actual research tool, that is, one’s own body becomes the/one of the medium(s) through which experiences are lived, catalogued, and analysed. Embodied ethnography(ies) acknowledge the physical presence of the anthropologist in the field as necessary, and recognizes that such presence, while impacting the cultural milieu which the scholar seeks to study, in condition sine qua non for sound analyses of culture (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). Furthermore, the physical presence among those the scholar seeks to study and understand aids in the comprehension of culturally prescriptive and culturally proscriptive behaviors (i.e., what one should and should not do as part of a given culture: “culture can be understood to be embodied and sustained and developed in practice, interaction and disposition” (Turner, 2000, p. 53).

The body memorizes and internalizes the praxis of a given culture; nowhere is that more evident than with boxing, where the most minute movements, and combinations of movements, must be practiced over and over again, thousands of times, so that they become memorized by the body and consequently become instinctual. The boxer need not think about he is going to do; his body should do the thinking for him. As training progresses, the body of the boxer changes; so does the researcher’s; the relentless punishment withstood both in training and in the ring (sparring or fighting), leaves its toll on the body and imparts painful lessons, never to be forgotten. As Wacquant (2004) points out, imbedded in a boxer’s body is an entire culture; and with time the astute observer/researcher learns to recognize the marks of careful training, skills, and devotion to the “sweet science.”

Given the type of questions asked, and the fact that a thick description of a particular culture is only possible through immersion in that same culture (Geertz, 1973), an ethnography-type study was deemed the most suitable methodology. I wanted to not only describe what was going on at the gym, but also understand *why* it goes on the way it does (Bernard, 2002). Out of the five “traditions of inquiry” (Creswell, 1998), ethnography appeared to be the one that would provide the best results in this particular case.

Intent on staying in shape and wanting to escape the claustrophobic rigors of academia, I enrolled in a boxing class at Pete’s Gym³, in a mid-size college town in Pennsylvania. Mirroring the academic calendar, to each academic semester corresponds a block of classes and, with the exception of summer, rest periods correspond to typical academic vacation periods (e.g., Christmas, Thanksgiving). Depending on the participant’s skill and previous experience, Pete⁴, the owner and manager, places him or her in the appropriate level class. Although I had had some previous experience with combat sports (e.g., kickboxing, Thai boxing) when younger, I knew very little about boxing, and was thus placed in the beginner’s class.

Although I had not intended to conduct research on boxing when I first joined the gym, as soon as the opportunity presented itself, I disclosed my identity as a researcher to Pete, Daniel (an advanced boxing student who was instructing the more advanced boxing classes), and my gym mates (Fine, 1993). By then, I had already established rapport (Henderson, 2006) and was considered a “regular” at the gym, and Pete, Daniel, and my boxing mates were supportive of my research project.

Over the course of the next three years, I conducted fieldwork by means of participant observation (ranging from non-participant observation to complete participation), structured and semi-structured interviews with coaches, athletes, and students, and accompanied my gym mates in several of their endeavours both inside and outside the gym as much as possible. I took copious fieldnotes throughout, but refrained from doing so while I was in the gym unless I was interviewing someone (Van Maanen, 2011). After leaving the gym, I briefly wrote down my impressions of the day (i.e., “jottings” – see Emerson et al., 2011), and composed and enlarged my notes at the end of each day. I tended to focus on the “regulars” – about 20-30 people (all male), who attended classes or boxed on a regular basis, along with a handful of coaches and instructors. Of these regulars, I conducted lengthier (>3 hours) interviews with two coaches and five athletes. I used purposeful and snowball sampling (Patton, 2005) to select my informants: I was primarily interested in the regulars who (a) had been boxing for more than one year; (b) were over 18; (c) were “serious” about boxing, meaning that they saw and experienced boxing as an integral part of their lives; and lastly (d) boxers with whom I had established closer rapport and were more familiar with the purpose and details of my study. On two instances, one of the coaches suggested someone: “*You should talk to (...) he’s been boxing for a long time and he’s got a good shot (at becoming a good boxer).*” Other times still, serendipity dictated who to talk to, as when I bumped into one of my gym buddies at the university library and he inquired as to what I was doing. When I mentioned that I was writing about the gym for a class project, he sat down with me and answered my (multitude of) questions, in a most fortuitous encounter for me. For the interviews, I followed a semi-structured model (Seidman, 1998) wherein I began by asking some ice-breaker questions (e.g., age, place of origin, occupation, major in school, future career, etc.), followed by some questions on when/where/how the participant(s) had begun his interest in boxing, past boxing/related sport(s) experience, their perceived level of skill, aspirations for the future, and the importance that boxing played in their lives. In addition to these preliminary questions, I

³ Fictional name.

⁴ To protect the participants’ anonymity and ensure confidentiality, all names have been changed.

asked two main questions of all participants: “*Why do you box?*” and “*Why do you think others box?*” The interviews were fluid, and I allowed participants to interject, bring up other topics, asked followed up questions, etc. Often, I followed up on a new topic brought up by the participant (e.g., past martial arts history, drop-out rate of athletes after the first semester of classes, decrease in boxing popularity among the general public vs MMA, etc.).

Often, I checked my findings against what more senior athletes (i.e., who had been boxing for more than 2 years, or with the gym for more than 3 years), thought. These were informal affairs, where, taking opportunity of a lull in “gym life,” I would, notebook in hand, check perceptions, analysis, or discuss events that were pertinent to my research question(s). This study was conducted in accordance with my academic institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols for studies conducted under the supervision of senior faculty as part of a course project.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data followed canon in ethnographic fieldwork, drawing on the traditions of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and phenomenology (Rogers, 1983). I sought to understand *why* the participants boxed, on their own terms, and allow, as much as possible, data to rise to the surface without any preconceived assumptions. I worked primarily from my fieldnotes, analytical memos (Emerson et al., 1995), and interview(s) shorthand/notes. Interestingly, participants were uncomfortable with digital recording of the interviews, which I tried in the beginning. Instead, I used shorthand and took copious notes during the interviews, often stopping the speaker mid-interview to make sure I had gotten a particular quote correctly – these the participants were perfectly able and willing to do. Further, it was not uncommon to have participants return to me a few days later to expound on something they had said earlier and that I had noted down – they were very patient and courteous with my many questions and requests for repetition.

I used the qualitative analysis software QSR NVivo to organize my data and assist in the analysis. Data was initially coded using open coding, noting and recording “words and phrases that identify and name specific dimensions and categories” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 150). I also wrote analytical memos on particular topics, or “core themes” that I felt were important (Emerson et al., 1995), or that I had noted as important in my fieldnotes; often a particular event at the gym (e.g., a sparring session between two uneven opponents) spurred the need to enlarge that day’s fieldnotes on a larger memo (e.g., on sparring as a defining moment in an aspiring boxer’s trajectory). I then recoded the data using axial coding, based on the interrelations between the open codes, attempting to piece together a coherent picture of life at Pete’s Gym (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998). I further narrowed down the number of codes using selective coding, attempting to bring them under the umbrella of an overarching theme or set of themes that I after many re-reads of the data, subsumed the boxing experience at Pete’s Gym, and answered my main question “*Why do you box?*” adequately.

Reliability and Validity

I used a number of procedures in this study in order to verify accuracy of data, confirm evidence, and assure representativeness of findings (Creswell, 1998; Golafshani, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell (1998) recommends “qualitative researchers [to] engage in at least two” out of eight possible verifying procedures (prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, thick description, and external audits; p. 203). First, I used multiple sources and methods of collecting data (Denzin, 1978; Webb et al., 1965). As was mentioned before, data were

collected using participant observation and in-depth interviews. Additionally, comparisons with similar studies were established (*vide supra*), and alternative sources of information (e.g., informal conversations with boxers, other ethnographies, non-academic works) were used. Second, one of the researcher's mentors, acted as a "peer debriefer" (Creswell, 1998), meeting with the researcher once a week in debriefing sessions. Third, I engaged in negative case analysis, that is to say, I "refine(d) (...) working hypotheses (...) in light of negative or disconfirming evidence" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Namely I worked under the assumption that boxing may not have been as important for all the participants in the study. Whether it occurred or not (see findings below), an ongoing process of "looking for negative evidence" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 271), done not only by the researcher, but by the peer debriefer as well, will strengthened the study. Fourth, researcher's bias (see below) were clarified from the onset of the study, and permanent reflection on how the same has affected the processes and outcomes of the research occurred throughout the study (Naples, 2003). Fifth, I conducted periodic member checks, so that I was sure that I "got it right." Finally, I attempted to generate a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the boxing experience, ensuring "transferability" of information gathered to other settings (Creswell, 1998).

At the onset of this study, I positioned myself as a white, single, heterosexual, male, with all the cultural baggage that such condition entails (DeVault, 1999; Kimmel, 2000), in line with the participants in this study (all were white, single, heterosexual males, with the exception of one of the coaches who was married, and a boxer who was African-American. No doubt cultural, race, gender and sexual positions played a role in the outcome of the study (Naples, 2003). What is more, although I possessed some past martial arts/combat sports experience, I knew precious little about boxing and still entertained pre-conceived notions about boxing in general and boxers in particular, most of which generated by the media and non-scholarly readings, which I tried to reflect upon and negotiate as much as possible. Peer debriefing and member checks stood out as means of addressing these issues. It is also possible that the mere presence of the researcher influenced the outcome of the research (Bernard, 2002; Creswell, 1998). If, on one hand, the researcher must abandon the "naïve view that the fieldworker is a mere observer outside and independent of the observed phenomenon (Emerson, 1987, p. 78), on the other hand the researcher must also try not to purposefully influence either participants or settings, as it would no doubt taint the results of the study. I endeavoured to adopt a permanent reflective stance, as well as a critical view of settings, participants, meanings, and myself (Naples, 2003).

Amateur Boxing as a Leisure Activity

Pete's Gym is situated downtown, between a motel and a fast-food franchise outlet, within walking distance to campus. It is a medium sized gym, with two levels, and the usual equipment one would expect to find in a martial arts/boxing gym. The main area of the gym (lower level) consists of a large open space, dominated by the ring, where the heavy bags and double-end bag stand, and with a large mirror lining the outdoor wall. To the right of the ring are a few cardio machines and the weighting scale, along with two vending machines, on top of which sits the round timer. To the left of the ring is an open area where classes are held, and separated from a workout/weight training area by a long canvas curtain hanging from the ceiling. Two doors on the opposite wall lead to the locker rooms and Pete's office, respectively. A tall iron stairwell leads to the upper level, and entrance to the gym is done by a side entrance.

Originally a martial arts academy, Pete's Gym is not a "traditional" boxing gym, that is to say, it offers activities other than boxing, such as kickboxing, MMA (by far the most popular activity), Muay Thai (Thai boxing), Filipino martial arts, self-defense, youth martial arts, and personal fitness and weight training lessons. Pete's Gym is also a co-ed gym, with the

kickboxing classes being offered for females only. Furthermore, a significant percentage of the members of the gym are youngsters (aged 8-16), who are enrolled in a number of youth martial arts classes. Indeed, taking into account the number of participants, boxing is the *least* popular activity at the gym, with smaller-sized classes and a higher drop-out rate than any other activity.

Thus, Pete's Gym is not the "typical" boxing gym, as described in most of the existing boxing literature: it is not situated in a "black ghetto" (Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 2004), nor is it particularly well known for turning out top contenders or even well-known boxers (Anasi, 2002; Beattie, 1996; Woodward, 2004), minus one or two exceptions. Nor is Pete's Gym an enclave of violence and masculinity, where women are barred entry and only men are accepted to learn the "manly art" (Hargreaves, 1997). In summary, Pete's Gym is a small martial arts/boxing gym, singly owned and operated, common to so many others throughout the country (Tharrett & Peterson, 2006). What distinguishes Pete's Gym from other boxing gyms is precisely the less dominant role of boxing as an activity within the gym (particularly when compared with more popular and more lucrative activities such as MMA), and the (almost complete) lack of interaction between the boxers, the coaches, and other gym members outside the space of Pete's Gym. In this regard, Pete's Gym seems to be for many of its members a sort of "third place" (Oldenburg, 1999) that is to say, a place which is neither home nor work, but where they find fulfilment through social interaction and symbolic belonging (Oldenburg & Brisset, 1982)

Why Do You Box?

Over the course of three years of fieldwork, I gradually learned that there is not one, but many reasons that draw participants to boxing. Some merely see in boxing a way to stay in shape, others see it as a natural progression from other sports, such as wrestling, others still wish to learn some basic techniques of self-defense. Unlike other, more boxing-oriented gyms, especially those situated in large metropolitan areas (e.g., Frasier's Gym in Philadelphia, PA; Gleason's in Brooklyn, NY), it is not the prospect of a boxing career, often as an alternative to unemployment or worse, especially in disadvantaged urban areas (see Sammons, 1988; and Weinberg & Aron, 1952) that draws participants to boxing at Pete's Gym. For example, to my knowledge, only one boxer, Kenneth (aged 19), had dreams of becoming a professional boxer. Another boxer, Mark, a young man of fifteen, joined under the advice of his father (who will often accompany him to workouts and observed from a distance). Thus, a host of personal factors seemingly come into play as the origin of the decision to join Pete's Gym boxing classes.

The drop-out rate of boxing is high: from beginner classes with almost twenty students, the numbers dwindle rapidly as the semester progresses, and most advanced classes have ten students or less. Time constraints and the physical demands of boxing, coupled with the academic and extra-curricular activities of collegiate life (the latter especially) contribute to trim the numbers of the participants, to the extent that Pete has been forced to change the regular boxing classes' schedule on Fridays (from the usual 7:30pm-8:30pm to 5:30pm-6:30pm) due to low attendance. Only the most dedicated boxers will frequent the gym outside of scheduled class periods, and a clear distinction is made between those who are "serious about boxing," as Daniel (the head boxing instructor) puts it, and those who are not.

Interestingly, there seem to be no negative repercussions for those boxers that miss a class or even a number of them, sometimes for extended periods of time (I have been guilty of the same myself, especially towards the end of the semester). Other than an occasional "*Where have you been!?*" or "*Long time no see!*" returning students are welcomed to class without sanction or penalty, and they are not treated differently (from what I could see) afterwards. Naturally, they must be brought up to speed on the material (boxing techniques) that they have

missed, but that seldom disrupts the class, nor does it cause any (visible) irritation to the instructors. This stands in contrast with existing literature on the relationship between boxers and their trainers/coaches (Coates, 1999; Wacquant, 2004), which stresses that “the coach plays an important role in the self-development of a boxer and in building a trusting relationship” (Coates, 1999). In such cases, missing a workout is an unpardonable sin, a sign of lack of interest from the boxer, and cause of concern and/or punishment by the coach (Wacquant, 2004; Weinberg & Around, 1952). At Pete’s Gym, there seems to be little emotional attachment between the coaches and their students, at least not to the extent reported in “boxing-only” gyms (Anasi, 2002; Beattie, 1996; Sugden, 1987; Toole, 2000; Wacquant, 2004). This study’s preliminary findings point toward a lack of personal and emotional investment from both the coaches and the boxers at Pete’s Gym, but especially from the latter ones, who (with some exceptions, which I will discuss later) regard boxing as another leisure activity, for which they pay a price (the monthly gym fee – \$50.00) that in turn entitles them to come to boxing class or not, depending solely on their will.

Therefore, the question “Why do you box?” takes added meaning when asked to those who, like Daniel, are “serious” about boxing. The following quotes from a semi-structured two-hour long interview with Daniel (age 30), in a downtown bagel shop, illustrate how he first got interested in boxing:

I’ve been a fan of boxing my whole life, I always used to watch the fights, since I was about 14. I’ve always been interest in self-defense, in being able to depend just on myself (...) I did karate, kung-fu, and wrestling (...) Then in about (...) when I came here [for graduate school] I think it was 2003, I saw the sign (to Pete’s Gym) (...) and then I joined in 2005 (...) I wanted to box and also to stay in shape, I wanted to get in better shape.

Daniel has fought three times at the amateur level and, although he lost all three fights, that has not diminished his enthusiasm for boxing, nor has it dampened his desire to improve his skills and return to the ring:

You know, I only fought three times – I feel I need more fights – and I lost all three (laughter), but I loved it (...) people fighting, screaming (...) what a great feeling! (...) you’re in there fighting to win (...) I lost, and I wanted to get back in the ring.

The exhilaration of the fight itself is common amongst the “serious boxers” at Pete’s Gym who, despite constituting the minority, are looked upon with awe and respect. Pete’s Gym is also, for a number of boxers, an antechamber for the University’s collegiate boxing team, of which Daniel is now the assistant coach. They feel that working out at Pete’s Gym will give them an advantage over “all the other meatheads” during the demanding tryouts for the team and increase their chances of being accepted (which seemed to be true – all of my boxing mates that tried out for the team were eventually accepted). These two worlds – Pete’s Gym and the University’s Boxing Team – intersect in more ways than one, but further research is needed to draw any definite conclusions as to their relationship.

Finally, Daniel’s opinion on why people in general and boxing students at Pete’s Gym in particular like boxing and subsequently join Pete’s Gym to learn how to box is an evident sign that he has reflected on this matter:

Why? (...) There is a range of possibilities (...) Well, this is a college town, so the reasons are more narrow (...) I would say self-defence, fitness, and because

it's enjoyable, it's fun (...) There's a definite pattern, you know, they're not jocks, they're not thugs (...) they're smart, nice kids, well-spoken, that make a conscious decision to want to box (...) maybe for self-defence, to build confidence (...) and [kids] that can afford it (laughter).

Thus, it seems that at first glance, the decision to join a boxing class at Pete's Gym is not a product of one's (disadvantaged) socioeconomic environment, in contrast with most existing literature (e.g., Hauser, 1986; Wacquant, 1992; Weinberg & Arond, 1952). Other factors, mainly of a personal nature, usually rooted in one's childhood (e.g., being bullied at school) also manifest themselves as reasons why one wants to learn how to box. Moreover, given the ever-increasing corporatization and politization of culture and leisure, (Henry, 2001; Rojek, 2000; Schiller, 1989), boxing provides a sort of last refuge for an authentic and pure means of expression, different from mainstream society's sanitized and overly health conscious leisure activities (e.g., Caldwell, 2005). As Daniel puts it,

For us [those that box, i.e. me and him], boxing is a rite of passage (...) it's a test of manhood (...) we of more privilege, feel we have to prove our manhood (...) You know, someone once asked Pete just to stand in the ring (...) That's right, just to stand in the ring (...) That's what it means [to box] (...) how many people are fascinated and look at you in awe (...) You need guts and talent [to] (...) be able to do it [Daniel, 30, personal interview, March 30, 2008].

Daniel's remarks echo Zoja's (1989) thesis on the "modern search for ritual," which states that modern society's inability to "provide institutional initiation" (p. 3), leads individuals to seek such rites of passage elsewhere, namely their leisure pursuits. Moreover, Sammons (1988), posits that modern society's fascination with boxing lies in human nature and society itself: "Supported by a culture that values physicality and manliness, boxers pursue a sport at once scorned and glorified for its violence by a confused people who have prided themselves on civility and modernity but cling to atavistic instincts" (p. 251).

This desire to cling on to something pure, untouched, not dependent on favor, politics, or influence, but based on hard work, skill and guts alone is something that most "serious" boxers at Pete's Gym, as well as Pete himself, appreciate and value as an intrinsic part of the sport. The blue-collar values of hard work and acceptance of punishment (both physical and mental), which are at the core of the ethics of boxing (Wacquant, 1995a), seem strangely out of place in a hegemonic society where most leisure pursuits are massified (Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958), commercialized (Baudrillard, 1970; Plumb, 1973; Rojek, 2000) and stripped of their intrinsic value (Linder, 1970; Urry, 1995). Nevertheless, this working-class view of leisure in general and boxing in particular finds support in Durrenberger and Duka's (2008) research on the "gospel of work." In their dual research in white Central New York and the hinterlands of Eastern Pennsylvania, these authors have found evidence of working-class values and beliefs, such as hard work, frugality, and community spirit, i.e. the "gospel of work," which stand in direct opposition to the current hegemonic notion of "meritocratic individualism," i.e., the "gospel of wealth" (Carnegie, 2006 [1900]).

It is my belief that such working-class values are still very much present in a number of (marginalized) leisure activities (Floyd et al., 1994), but further research is needed before definite conclusions can be drawn in regard to the applicability of the "gospel of work" hypothesis to boxing as a leisure activity at Pete's Gym.

Amateur Boxing as Casual and Serious Leisure

Boxing at Pete's Gym was a far more complicated matter than it seemed at first sight, and boxing itself constituted a complicated nexus of practices that occurs within a particular social space (Bourdieu 1984). First, there was a marked distinction between boxers who were "serious about boxing" as one of my informants put it, and those who were not (the vast majority). For the former, boxing was undoubtedly serious leisure: they persevered, found leisure careers and identities in boxing, exerted significant effort in the acquisition of new skills, derived durable benefits from the activity, and shared in boxing's unique ethos (Stebbins 2007, pp. 11-13). For those who weren't "serious," or, merely "want[ed] the t-shirt (that proclaimed their status as boxers/fighters)," boxing at Pete's constituted casual leisure.

The exhilaration of the fight itself is common amongst the serious boxers at Pete's Gym who, despite constituting the minority, are looked upon with awe and respect by all others, no doubt because Pete's Gym was also, for a number of boxers, an antechamber for the local college boxing team, which Daniel also coaches. They felt that working out at Pete's Gym gave them an advantage over "*all the other meatheads*" during the demanding tryouts for the team and increase their chances of being accepted (which was true – all of my boxing mates that tried out for the team were eventually accepted). These two worlds – Pete's Gym and the University's Boxing Team – intersected in more ways than one, and the serious boxers tended to gravitate towards the team sooner or later, or abandon the activity altogether. Interestingly, for an even smaller minority, boxing could be considered project-based leisure but nonetheless with a high level of involvement and emotional attachment to the sport: because the majority (if not the totality) of the boxers at Pete's were college students, many of the older ones wanted to box only until they graduated, thus devoting themselves fully to boxing for a few years and then abandoning it. As Ralph, a senior, put it: "*This is it man(...)this is my last chance(...)you know we won't have another opportunity like this(...)we won't have the time to box when we get jobs.*"

Moreover, given the ever-increasing corporatization and politization of culture and leisure, (Henry 2001; Rojek 2000; Schiller 1989), boxing provided a sort of last refuge for an authentic and pure means of expression, which was often equated with a rite of passage of sorts, the lack of which in modern life most participants bemoaned, in eloquent and less than eloquent terms.

Discussion

The findings of this study point towards the applicability of Stebbins' (2007) serious leisure framework to amateur boxing in the context of Pete's Gym. Stebbins (1997, pp. 17-18) defined serious leisure as the "systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or a volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience," whereas casual leisure is "immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it." No doubt for the "serious" boxers at Pete's, amateur boxing was very serious business indeed, but what to say of all the others? While it was true that for the majority of participants at Pete's Gym boxing was nothing more than a "short-lived pleasurable activity," a great deal of training was necessary to enjoy it, as I discovered at my own expense. Even for the least dedicated of boxers, each workout was challenging in itself, and thus forced each individual to keep him or herself in shape and learn an entire new set of skills. Furthermore, attachment to a certain boxing culture, or boxing ethos, particularly in regard to the conspicuous display of items that denoted one's status as a boxer, was a characteristic of some of the "less serious" boxers at Pete's. These findings

support and extend existing research that used Stebbin's serious leisure framework to explain emotional involvement in other leisure settings, such as Gibson et al.'s (2002) study of college football fans.

Boxing at Pete's Gym serves also as an illustration of the often tenuous difference between leisure and work, and the "common ground of two separate worlds" (Stebbins, 2004). Given the demands and rigors of training and the fact that, for the majority of the boxers at Pete's, such work will not culminate in a fight, one would expect participants to classify boxing at Pete's Gym as leisure. It is a freely chosen activity ("no one is forcing me to be here" – said a participant), it is done in one's economically free-time, and furthermore, one has to pay to do it. Why then, do many boxers and coaches persist in denominating it as work? For example, one doesn't "play boxing," like one plays basketball; one boxes, or fights. Furthermore, a boxing workout is not fun in a ludic, child-like (see Pieper, 1998 [1948]) sense, but hard work, and one would be hard-pressed to find a single boxer at Pete's who disagreed. The findings of this study point towards new avenues of research in regard to the work/leisure dichotomy that scholars may wish to pursue in the future, and validated the use of ethnographic research methods with which to do so (Coates, 1999; Wolcott, 1999).

Limitations, Conclusion, and Directions for Future Research

It is important to acknowledge that this study possesses some limitations. First, it should be noted that the scope of the fieldwork is small: I studied only the microcosm of a small working-class gym in Pennsylvania, that barely numbered 100 in athletes. Second, the type of sampling procedures used (i.e., purposive/convenience) do not allow for generalizable comparisons beyond the participants surveyed; further, given its scope this study should be classified as exploratory. Third, while the amount of fieldwork was extensive (more than three years), this study should not be any means be considered a longitudinal study; long-term comparisons should be drawn with care. And fourth, I attempted to write an ethnography account of what boxing is like at Pete's Gym using my body as a research tool; it is by no means *the* ethnography of boxing, but merely *an* ethnography of boxing in a specific temporal, geographic, and cultural nexus.

Nonetheless, as leisure scholars weave together existing threads of established theoretical frameworks, ethnographic studies that reveal the complexity of leisure phenomena become increasingly important. This study's findings point towards the applicability of an important existing theory in leisure studies – serious leisure – to a controversial leisure activity – boxing – that is often thought of as outside mainstream society, or is even considered deviant by some (Lundberg, 1983). This study also reinforced the importance of individual detail when validating existing leisure theories. The level of detail that ethnographic research affords provides scholars with a unique arena in which to add intricacy and texture to the tapestry of leisure studies. As we strengthen the threads of our field and add new ones we as leisure scholars and educators should encourage the study of new and controversial leisure contexts and activities, under penalty of ending up with a functional, yet dull pattern in our tapestry.

Boxing at Pete's Gym is a far more complicated matter than it seemed at first sight, and Pete's Gym itself a more complicated nexus of practices (Bourdieu, 1984) than I had thought. Indeed, the position that boxing occupies at Pete's Gym as a less popular activity than other activities at the same gym (e.g., kickboxing, MMA), stands as an accurate metaphor of boxing (both amateur and professional) as a marginalized sport and leisure activity in mainstream society (Sammons, 1988). Furthermore, Pete's Gym can be seen as a bastion of resistance of a certain set of working-class values, beliefs, and practices, embodied in the coaches, the athletes, and the place itself. As a commercial recreation business (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2007), Pete's Gym has thus far been able to avoid the inescapable logic of franchised sport and

fitness facilities (e.g., LA Boxing[®], Gold's Gym[®]), and it would be interesting to investigate further as to why that has occurred.

Lastly, Pete's Gym can be seen as a metaphor of resistance of a certain set of leisure values, beliefs, and practices, embodied in the coaches, the boxers, and the place itself. Pete's Gym has thus far been able to avoid the inescapable logic of franchised sport and fitness facilities, and thus escape the inevitable commercialization of leisure (Rojek, 2000). The values of hard work and acceptance of punishment (both physical and mental), which are at the core of the ethics of boxing (Wacquant, 1995a), seem strangely out of place in a hegemonic society where most leisure pursuits are massified (Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958), commercialized (Baudrillard, 1970; Plumb, 1973) and stripped of their intrinsic value (Linder, 1970; Urry, 1995).

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