

Embodying the fight game:
Confessional notes on being a ‘boxing insider’

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Introduction

This paper draws upon my experience as a Doctoral student conducting ethnographic research among amateur and professional boxers based in Luton and London, England. My ethnographic presence during this research was somewhat differing from previous scholars conducting ethnographic investigations of boxing as by the time of entrée into the field I had accumulated many years experience and was still actively embroiled in the boxer’s lifestyle of training and competing. Accordingly, I ventured into my ethnographic project enamoured with a belief that as the ‘boxing insider’ it would be possible to add valuable insights to existing discourse. Whatever suppositions I may have harboured at that time, however, it is safe to say that as a novice researcher with only an undergraduate level of education I had little, if any, appreciation of the academic terrain that lay ahead as a PhD candidate. In echoing Van Maanen’s (1998 p. xii) sentiment that “...appreciation and understanding of ethnography comes like a mist that creeps slowly over us while in the library and lingers with us while in the field”, my understandings of boxing similarly emerged over a messy five year period spent in the field and during the period (two years) of writing-up and amending the thesis. As such, I wish to convey something of the physical, intellectual and emotional turmoil entailed of the ‘insider’ journey realised as I reflexively grappled with the ethnographic processes of fieldwork, scholarly contemplation and identity re-positioning. Some years on from my last full-blooded

experience as ‘the boxer’ and presently rather more embroiled in the life-world of academia, I argue that my situated presence and embodied intuition as the ‘boxing insider’ during the research process - in synthesis with the challenges entailed of collecting and analysing a mixed bag of data, historiography, theoretical analysis and writing – became a “...research instrument *par excellence*” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 19) through which I was able to ‘plausibly’ and ‘credibly’ (Brewer 2000) represent both the cultures of professional boxing and the values, beliefs and actions of those submerged within it.

Key words: Insider ethnography; embodiment, emotional turmoil, identity
confession, reflexivity, impressionism

The research: Context and strategy

The sport of boxing in England (and overseas) has historically been socially demarcated into two distinctive versions, each with its own long established traditions and experiential conventions – amateur and professional boxing. Since its inception in 1880, the Amateur Boxing Association of England has governed its own schedule of regional, national and international level competition for a network of amateur boxing clubs situated in most cities and towns in England. The professional code of boxing in England, on the other hand, is organised under the aegis of the British Boxing Board of Control and is practiced within network of rather subterranean social worlds located in and around inner-city conurbations of Britain’s largest post-industrial metropolis – most prominently London, Sheffield, Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham and Glasgow (Shipley 1989). Thus, although closely related and intertwined nationally and globally, on a cultural level grounded in practical experience and steeped in symbolism the codes of amateur and professional boxing in England can be considered as unique on their own terms (Sugden 1996).

Over a period of five years I conducted ethnographic research among amateur and professional boxers based in Luton and London, with the aim of critically examining how and why boxing signifies meaning to boxing-practitioners and the limits and possibilities of their association with either code henceforth. Key to this research agenda was the ethnographic imperative to empathetically comprehend and represent the worldviews and lived experiences of the boxing-practitioners studied ‘plausibly’ and ‘credibly’ (Brewer 2000) and, in fact, ethically (see Stewart 2008 for fuller discussion). The strategic rationale for conducting this ethnography was from the outset premised upon my insider boxing identity, in particular my ability to adopt a research role as a cultural insider who had garnered experience as a ‘real’ (competitive) boxer.

Prior to undertaking this research I had invested many years of my time, sweat, blood and ambition as a competitive amateur boxer and, as such, access to my local amateur boxing club - the Luton-Gym (a pseudonym) - was unproblematic. I was also in a position to utilise my athletic capital to gain a professional boxer’s licence. Henceforth, I was in a position to become an insider among ‘pro’ boxing-practitioners based in and around Luton and London, fully partaking in their everyday gymnasium routines of practice and social interaction, and also experiencing first-hand the front stage rituals of boxing competition and backstage aftermaths entailed.

The task of sustaining this dual insider ethnographic identity - training alongside and also analysing the Gym-milieu of amateur boxing-practitioners and simultaneously competing as a professional boxer - was labour intensive in that I trained alongside the Gym amateur boxers for three nights per week and accompanied them to tournaments on a weekly basis. In addition, as an active featherweight ‘pro’ boxer I made twice-weekly forays into the few pockets of professional boxing in and around

Luton. Thereafter, after a period of insider identity transformation (read on), I collected qualitative data from two gymnasiums situated in London - 'Boxing Inc' (a pseudonym) in North London and 'The Workhouse' (a pseudonym) in South-East London – for extended periods of 'observant participation' (Wacquant 2004) in each respective gymnasium. The building blocks to conducting a comparative and theoretically critical examination of amateur and professional boxing were thus set in motion.

Further than the pragmatic and physical demands entailed of engaging the field, it is important to acknowledge also the, at times almost overwhelming, disorientation and emotional turmoil experienced as this ethnography developed. In fact, the reality of this ethnography was one far removed from it being somehow systematic and disciplined, an academic enterprise seemingly conducted through the foresight and intuition of many years of experience, both as an academician and researcher. I feel to portray such an impression would not be doing justice to the holism of the research task undertaken both in terms of an investigative research endeavour of a dynamic and inherently complex cultural arena and also as a learning experience. Rather, for much of the five year period of fieldwork I agonised at my lack of academic focus and my inability at formulating understandings that appeared to be coherent enough to contribute to the existing pool of academic knowledge. Having retreated from the field to 'write-up' the final representation of my 'findings', and fully aware of impending deadlines I was expected to meet by my academic paymasters, the feeling of disorientation as to how I was supposed to convey the cultural dimensions examined - as much through sensed, felt and emotionally conceived embodied intuition as by logico-deductive reflection - persisted. My lingering suspicion was that academic convention insisted that I articulate a final representation of knowledge

through demonstrating the authorial capacity to write ‘about’ the research using clearly stated and systematically represented findings through logically stated prose. I did this as I could, choosing to instil my ‘In the Field’ chapter – an essentially descriptive account of data collection methods and procedures - in the appendices of the Thesis, mindful of the necessity to provide some ‘proof’ that the ethnography had, in fact, been undertaken with the necessary rigour. The thesis and I were examined. Upon receiving mainly positive remarks regarding my ethnographic representations, I was urged to consider repositioning my methodological accounts more prominently in the Thesis structure. Left pondering as to what my two examiners could see in regard to my methodology that could add value to both my research and competence as a researcher/academic, I re-engaged the literature.

In due course I adopted a rhetorical convention referred to as the ‘confessional’ (Van Maanen 1998; Sparkes 2002). Rather than pursuing an “...author-evacuated and methodologically silent” (Sparkes 2002 p. 57) representational style to write about the research, the confessional makes explicit the research process from start to finish. The intention is to be open about the messy and problematic experience of fieldwork and bring to the fore the many methodological and ethical dilemmas encountered. As such, the procedures of data collection and analysis become in themselves topics of research. Moreover, the plausibility and credibility of the findings are strengthened by making “...explicit, the relations between the author, the object of analysis and the final constructed text” (Wheaton 2002 p. 249). Also, as Sparkes (2002 p. 71) points out, by recording the perils and pitfalls of the research experience as a hermeneutic process, the community of sport scholars benefits through raising, “...a host of ethical and methodological questions about the basis of ethnographic authority – how we come to know about ourselves and others via our research activities”. Of course from

a more pragmatic standpoint, the research experience documented in this way may also provide the basis for relevant guidance for future research.

Explicitly describing but more vitally *analysing* the ‘sense assembly procedures’ (Brewer 2000) through which collection, analysis and representation of the data developed (or not), in consequence with my evolving reflexivity as ‘the boxer’ and ‘academic researcher’, thus becomes integral to the research endeavour. The discussion henceforth is thus mindful to convey something of the (albeit always messy and overlapping) journey through which I reflexively arrived at the knowledge claims presented throughout this thesis.

Knowing – an insider’s privilege?

As a fully participating professional boxer the insights gleaned during the first two years of the research were essentially filtered via what a number of other scholars have termed ‘performative’ (De Garis 1999) ‘autoethnographic’ (Sparkes 2000), ‘experiential’ (Sands 2002), ‘carnal’ (Wacquant 2004) sport ethnographies. This phase of the research was of great benefit in allowing ‘insider’ engagement with the web of lived experiences through which boxing-practitioners collectively allotted symbolic, sensuous and emotional attachments to boxing. Also, my insider identity as a bona fide boxer afforded me vantages of social interaction among significant and generalised others whose demeanour towards my ‘status’ was an invaluable insight of the social norms, cultural aesthetics and power relations defining values, beliefs, relations and actions logical to those steeped in boxing. Thus, my interactions among ‘friendly’ or ‘antagonistic’, ‘trusted’ or ‘duplicitous’, ‘respected’ or ‘inferiorized’ boxing-practitioners were as informative as they may have taken place among other social-actors during similarly culturally coded interactions. As such, data were

collected from multiple subjects, contexts and through different guises, for instance: while attending coaching seminars run by the Amateur Boxing Association of England; while having formed Uncle-like relations with amateur boxers as their coach; when fraternising with parents as a guiding figurehead responsible for the well-being and success of their son; by being party to front and backstage negotiations involving matchmaking, financial issues, personal disputes and other gossip. At the same time I occupied the identity of a licensed professional boxer undertaking the rituals of *'making weight'*, early morning *'roadwork'*, *'sparring'* and partaking in back and front stage rituals of boxing competition. Additionally, I remained observant as a more peripheral spectator watching high profile contests both live and on satellite broadcasts in pubs, at local 'grass-roots' venues such as leisure centres, hotels and working men's clubs and also as an academic discussing and listening-in upon perspectives involving the social significance of boxing. Following Wacquant (2004 viii), by being able to experience boxing-practitioners 'way of life', I was effectively conducting sociological analysis "...from the body, that is, deploying the body as a tool of inquiry and a vector of knowledge". By embodying the lived cultures of amateur and professional boxing in this way, I felt it was possible to elucidate vistas of symbolic, sensuous and emotional 'reality' as shared and collectively understood by boxing-practitioners that, when theorised, would add valid insights to the body of existing discourse.

Whatever suppositions I may have had regarding the 'privileged' understanding of boxing I was able to grasp as the 'boxing insider', it is safe to say that as a novice researcher with only an undergraduate level of education I had little, if any, appreciation of the academic rigour that lay ahead as a PhD candidate. Rather, my formative standpoint for analysing and interpreting boxing was, consciously and

unconsciously, grounded in the cultural praxis of the practitioner community I was an integral part of. With the benefit of hindsight that only time and persistence can offer, I now realise that instances when I would vehemently reject much of the literature's criticisms of boxing and the significant periods that I was unable to 'see' anything new to add to my field-notes, was an indication that my vantage of analysis was firmly situated in my 'native' understanding of boxing.

As a researcher who has invested many years as a competitive boxer I was/am, in academic terminology, a 'native' of the cultural context through which boxing is practiced and defined. The term native or the notion of 'going native' implies the researcher, either through priory identification or over-identification during the research process, is or becomes so saturated in the beliefs and values normative to the milieu under investigation that s/he is unable to exercise a balance between personal involvement and detachment (Wheaton 2002). Albeit barely able to logically discern the dualism of involvement and detachment to guide my interrogation of lived cultural codes and norms somehow 'out there', I earnestly observed, listened and diligently noted all coming's and going's in my diary of fieldwork experiences.

As time wore on, however, I found it increasingly difficult to allot symbolic value to my own identity as 'the boxer' and, by definition, felt increasingly uncomfortable scrutinizing the boxing life-worlds I was submerged in. This emotionally disorientating process of disenchantment was vital for me to slowly and at times painfully become aware of the extent that as much I was 'looking for' the cultural truths of boxing, in fact 'boxing', as a social and cultural phenomenon, had consciously/unconsciously inhabited me.

The boxer in crisis

Throughout the time-span of this research agenda I was *forced* to reflexively grapple with the literature and in doing so continuously re-position my insider identity as ‘the boxer’ within the cultural contexts through which I sought to analyse. Over the first eighteen months of data collection as an ‘observant participant’ I increasingly lurched into modes of (self)doubt when estimating the intentions of those round me while questioning cultural truths and moral codes of boxing per se. I found this to be an uncomfortable period in which the seeds for developing a critical attitude towards the cultural ‘truths’ informing my own and other boxers’ interpretative logic fully took form. For instance, when undertaking the ritual of 5 am ‘road work’ in the guise of a professional boxer it was usual for fresh ideas and thoughts assimilated during an uninhibited sleep-state to converge in floods as I listened to my personal stereo. The fledgling ‘pro’ met the fledgling academic in this sense in a bid to arrive at ‘objective’ understandings of boxing as an athletic experience and as a social practice. How do I feel right now? Should I be thinking like this? How do other boxers perceive their own actions, interpret my actions, understand this or that value orientation, relationship or practice? Is my status as a professional boxer intact? In fact have I got status? Is boxing really the sporting equivalent of prostitution? Am I simply inventing academic absurdities and contemplating too much? In what felt at that time as ‘paralysis by analysis’ my motivation to train with the verve and dedication I had cultivated over a number of years steadily declined.

Interestingly, by way of apposite contrast, Wacquant (2004) discusses how once having discovered the boxing way of life while conducting ethnographic research among professional boxers in Chicago, he suffered from deep depression upon his disengagement from the field to the extent he seriously considered retiring as an

academic of world renown to take up boxing as his main vocation. Either way, boxing-practitioners compare the process of withdrawal from competitive boxing to the withdrawal a heroin addict is subjected to during the protracted detoxification phase (Wacquant 2004). In the context of this research, acknowledging and stressing analytical focus upon the disorientating and emotionally draining processes of reflexive mediation informing my lack of desire to box – i.e. getting to grips with the processes leading to my consciousness transformation from an active boxer lurching towards rather apathetic non-participation, to progressively adopting the identity and consciousness of ‘the academic researcher’ – was a vital process through which I developed a critical focus during this research journey. It is only with the benefit of hindsight some years on, however, that the understanding of one’s identity transformation, shedding old consciousness and acquiring new identities and the lessons learned, takes any semblance of clarity.

Going academic

It is worth pointing out that for a significant period of this research it was far more alien for me to sit through a departmental meeting at University than it was to participate in a two-hour workout in a professional boxing gymnasium. Nonetheless, as the research journey progressed, my understanding of boxing (as well as familiarity with the working culture of higher education) evolved in tandem with my developing grasp of the literature. Two pivotal texts in particular allowed me to slowly and incrementally comprehend my evolving situatedness in relation to the field of inquiry.

The study of boxing in sociological terms has benefitted from John Sugden’s (1996) and Loic Wacquant’s (2004) excellent ethnographies. I was instantly drawn to and

identified with, and perhaps sought solace in my 'reading' of, their culturally grounded understandings of boxing. Nonetheless, my initial interpretations of either author's work shifted over time as a consequence of my improving academic literacy, namely my evolving capacity to more clearly comprehend the contextualised vision of their discussions. More profoundly, both author's understandings of boxing and their positioning as inquirers within their respective fields of analysis, influenced my own learning curve as a novice academician/ethnographer. Ultimately, the rationale of both scholars thesis on boxing, once comprehended in sociological terms, greatly influenced my own understandings of boxing that, in turn, contributed to the production of insights and claims made in this research. For instance, while reflecting on Sugden's (1987; 1996) critically theorised arguments regarding the material and symbolic exploitation of boxers, I initially harboured considerable ambivalence, if not a measure of reflexive disdain, towards his essentially deterministic understanding of boxing as a cultural practice of the dispossessed and powerless in society. As 'the boxer' gradually turning 'academic', however, I was forced to acknowledge the extent matters of my own and other boxers taste and stylistic orientations and meanings were divergent despite the associational truths of our shared passion for boxing. Moreover, I was once again reflected upon, or perhaps more accurately stated *forced* to acknowledge, the manifold contradictions I often felt and sensed in relation to my involvement in boxing. More explicitly, the possibility that social and cultural childhood socialisation processes since my arrival in the UK - as an Anglo-Greek male of no explicitly class-specific cultural identity – consciously/unconsciously at work as I forged an identity as 'the boxer' among 'other' boxers were brought to the fore.

Much like criminologist Hobbs (1988) before me, by digesting the theoretical debates and methodological concerns of academic literature and becoming more conversant with the cultural nuances demanded of negotiating my identity within the divergent social worlds of boxing and academia, I avoided remaining 'native' by going 'academic'. Nonetheless, by having lived-out the processes leading to my identity transformation it became possible to revisit old truths held and evaluate new ones through what amounted to processes of embodied engagement and introspective disengagement (and vice-versa). Over time, my embodied 'academic awakening', as it were, served to better situate my own and other practitioners' understandings of boxing. Moreover if, as the 'boxing insider', I was able to freely interact with other boxing-practitioners from an associational vantage of knowing, over time it became increasingly apparent to me that the reality I was at liberty to access, share and communicate was as much articulated through intuition and/or symbolic association as it was reasoned discursively by way of deliberative logic.

This realisation, however, more fully took on meaning during the time spent 'writing-up' my thesis. Unbeknown to me at this stage, the task of writing-up proved to be a protracted, immensely challenging yet ultimately analytically enriching task. The technical and rhetorical skill necessary to capture and convey the multifaceted and multi-vocal lived dimensions fabricating the cultural production of boxing was/is for me an immense intellectual challenge. Moreover, the procedure of logically and coherently 'getting things on the page' enabled me, through on-going dialogue with the literature, to more comprehensively interpret the field. By grappling with the reflexivity entailed in producing this analytical quandary, the final and in my opinion vastly improved representation of the always multifaceted and dynamic lived cultures of boxing in England emerged.

Embodying the fight game: Insider impressions

I have documented how my comprehension of the field and the academic focus through which I sought critical enlightenment messily emerged during the five year period spent collecting data and during the period (two years) of ‘writing-up’ and amending the thesis. Thus, I argue that theory building throughout the time-span (and beyond) of the research journey merged in synthesis with processes entailed of the ‘insider’ ethnographic journey. These processes, in turn, were understood in theoretical terms only as I reflexively grappled with the various (messy and always overlapping) demands of fieldwork, scholarly contemplation and my identity re-positioning and transformation in the field and beyond - from ‘the boxer’ to ‘the academic’. By fully recognising the methodologically and theoretically embroiled reality of the research journey, it is important to stress that critical awareness of both the field and dialogue with existing literature was mediated through the iterative processes called upon by conducting fieldwork as ‘the boxer’. As such the holism of research process itself was as a learning experience (Fleming 1992). Thus, following Wheaton (2002), rather than ‘writing about’ the field of inquiry I account for my reflexive presence as ‘the boxer’ and ‘the researcher’ during the research journey as a constituent force shaping, defining and ultimately informing the final production of knowledge represented. Consequently I am, as ‘the boxer’ and ‘the researcher’, “...written into, and not out of, the text” (Sparkes 2002 p. 17). Subsequently, following Sugden and Tomlinson (2002), I argue that my ethnographic representations of boxing can be understood as being analogous to the representations of reality conveyed through impressionistic art:

“...The impressionist painting...is constructed over time and incorporates the various dimensions of the artist’s gaze and what is known about the places and people that are painted. It also leaves room for interpretation by

those who view the work in the gallery. Thus, what is produced is not reality per se, but an informed *impression* of that reality. The artist then offers the painting for public appraisal, acclaim or ridicule, implicitly challenging other artists to depict the chosen scene differently”. (p. 18)

Much like an impressionist painter’s canvas, therefore, my ethnographic impressions of boxing sought to convey to the reader the “...external factors and the internal sensations that intermingle to make the boxer’s world” (Wacquant 2004 p. 7), by blending my own embodied/autobiographical understandings of boxing, historiography, the mixed bag of ethnographic data collection and theoretical and methodological analysis. From this physically, intellectually and emotionally embroiled ethnographic process the researcher’s ‘insider’ presence and embodied intuition, once realised, may become a “...research instrument *par excellence*” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 p. 19),

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Bio

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