Sparring with Stereotypes: An Ethnography of the Main Street Gym

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Abstract: This six-month ethnography focused on the Main Street Boxing Gym in Pinedale, California. The central characters in this case are the young boxers who train at the gym, along with their friends. The Main Street Gym provides young athletes a safe space to explore themselves as athletes and individuals. This case follows the lives of boxers in the gym and helps to uncover the culture of the gym, as well as the gym's role in the lives of those who train in it.

Keywords: Boxing, sports, case study, pedagogy of praxis, recreation

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Research Article, Ethnography

Journal of Emerging Sport Studies

Volume 6, (2021): London, Ontario

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Introduction

This research begins in our family. Joyce Carol Oates (2006) has pointed out that early exposure to the sport of boxing can shape a person's views, and that was certainly the case for us. The first author's father, and second author's grandfather, was a boxer in the United States Navy. As an amateur champion welterweight, he had a 17-0-1 record (17 wins, 0 losses, 1 draw) with 10 knockouts. We watched boxing on a regular basis in our family, with our family members providing commentary. Our naissance into the sport of boxing is important. Although we are white and grew up in highly educated and privileged homes, we never thought of boxing as a rogue sport. Instead, we always had the impression that boxing was as mainstream as football or basketball because of how our family responded to the sport.

This study delves into the culture of boxing and unearths the stories and culture in one boxing gym. Polkinghorne (1988) reminds us:

We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self then, is not a static thing or a substance, but a configuring of personal events into an historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be. (p. 150)

We learned about boxing through the stories told by boxers. These stories are fluid and subject to change, but the narrators often seek belonging through making sense of their experiences.

Questioning the Master Narratives of Boxing

French sociologist Loic Wacquant (1992, 1995, 1998, 2004, 2005) challenges and denounces popular mainstream conceptions of the underclass and argues that the boxing gym is one of many institutions that is available to the lower class. Wacquant explores, through his personal experience as a boxer in Chicago, the elaborate process by which the body capital is developed in boxing athletes. His examination illuminates how the boxing gym is a space where non-dominant cultures can find validation through daily routine, hard work, and the development of boxing mastery. Heiskanen (2012) also questions the master narrative of boxing by delving deep into the Latino boxing culture in Texas. Both Wacquant and Heiskanen humanize boxers, highlighting them as well-developed athletes, rather than 'thugs.' Both researchers also engage in deep inquiry that respects the sport and the athletes who engage in it.

Problem Statement

Our goal was to attempt to unearth the inner logic and subterranean properties embedded in the culture of the gym. We also wanted to identify key characters in the gym and understand their role in creating the gym space. Most of all, after our six-month study, we wanted to tell the story of a boxing gym that would reveal a boxing trope that may contain some alternate narratives.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was shaped around myths that can be found in the master narratives about boxers. Looking closely at boxing narratives, myths about the sport, and those who participate in it, can be challenged. These myths can be used as lenses to interpret data and delve deeper into what our study revealed about a boxing gym. The myths we identified are:

Myth #1: Boxers are poor and dumb. This myth seems to permeate the sport because boxing is most accessible to urban youth in gyms in their neighborhoods. Why boxing appeals to marginalized youth is not explainable with any immediacy. Perhaps urban youth are attracted to boxing because it gives them an opportunity to channel their energy and aggression, but also for its promise of a 'big win.' In this study, we sought disconfirming events that demonstrated that boxers are, indeed, not dumb.

Further, Rose (2004) argues that as a society, we make sweeping judgements about the intelligence of the common worker. Through his research, Rose revealed the intellectual skills that physical labor requires and assesses the costs (educational, economic, and societal) of ignoring them. Ignoring the intelligence that is present in any local boxing gym is both naïve and foolish. Boxing takes intellect and physical coordination.

Myth #2: If people living in poverty work really hard, they can change their circumstances and succeed. Boxing has promoted the dream of the 'big win.' The intensity and rigor of training provide a sense of discipline and structure. However, disappointment marks all boxers' careers. The boxers we watched and interviewed are part of the ranks of thousands of professional and semi-professional boxers who chase the elusive dream of big money and fame; they dream of the fight that will change it all, that will make them an overnight success. This longing is real and that is why a loss can be so traumatic. The pain of a loss remains visible in a boxer's face long after he has physically "recovered." A key factor is that boxers continue to invest in the game, mostly because the identities they are allowed to develop in the gym are more useful and positive in their lives. In the gym, there is the opportunity to experience mastery, something many of the youth in the gym do not experience in school.

Myth #3: Boxers are criminals or linked to criminals. The sport has helped many boxers stay away from crime, drugs, and people who would otherwise keep them down. The gym helps boxers build strong relationships with coaches and mentors, and these friendships help the boxer focus on the future and set goals for life. The intensity and rigor of training provide a sense of discipline and structure. Although crime has always overlapped with boxing, all boxers are not criminals. This myth also provides a sharp commentary on the intersection between race and class in relation to crime.

Myth #4: For marginalized groups or those living in poverty, violence is a language that is understood. This myth is linked to the idea that boxing is the most violent sport. Boxers are trying to make it, just like everyone else. Further, the use and definition of what violence is has as much to do with language and power as the actual or perceived offense.

Myth #5: Luck is necessary for marginalized groups to shift their circumstances. This myth implies that those living in poverty do not have the flexibility to change their circumstances. An affluent American is far less apt to buy a lottery ticket than someone living in poverty; this dynamic is mirrored in the dreams of urban youth, which are tied to the notion of one 'big win.' This myth is oppressive and perpetuates negative ascriptions placed on urban youth and, more specifically, boxers. Neo-liberal ways of thinking can help us frame this stereotype, speaking to the social wage, changing nature of higher education, or how youth today,

outside of meaningful structures of support (education, healthcare), will have a harder time than generations before. In an analysis of opportunity, without structure for upward mobility, every boxer is just one punch away from being a champion.

Methods

This ethnographic study focused on a young, sixteen-year-old, light weight boxer, who lives and trains in a working-class suburb of a large urban area in northern California. We also focused on the Main Street Gym, where Juan Rodriguez (pseudonym), the focal figure in this study, trains. We selected Juan as the focus of this study because he exemplifies the young boxer who dreams of going big. He has talent and the possibility of making it in the sport. He does not like school, and he does not do very well in school. However, he excels in the gym. The Main Street Gym is where he trains and the gym, including a whole cast of characters, will be included in this study.

The second author of this study is a freelance sports journalist who writes about boxing, and he has spent time with Juan and his father, Miguel Rodriguez, who is also his trainer. He has also spent a lot of time in the Main Street Gym, where he is known as a journalist who covers young boxers waiting to get a break. The second author's position as a sports journalist allowed us to enter the gym, and learn more about Juan's experience, as insiders. This means we did not have to invest a large amount of time getting to know people and finding our way into the boxing culture for this study.

We also spent extensive time in the Main Street Gym immersing ourselves in the culture of the gym and getting to know the regulars who train and hang out. The "hanging out" factor is important to this study, as capturing Juan's story is only important in relation to the Main Street Gym's broader culture. We selected Juan and the Main Street Gym because we knew them, and access to the gym was already established.

Procedures

We spent four hours a day, four days a week, with Juan or at the gym. Sometimes, the first and second author would alternate to cover observations. Each meeting with Juan lasted for a minimum of ninety minutes and entailed observing, following, talking with, and interviewing him. There were long periods of time where we watched him train. We did not spend all our time directly interacting with Juan. For periods of time, we stood back and observed the everyday cultural practices of the gym to gain a deeper understanding of what takes place in this environment.

During each four-hour block of time, we took notes, jotting down ideas as they came up. After each four-hour block of time with Juan or at the gym, we would immediately write field notes to capture as much information as possible from our time spent with participants. After each session, we wrote an analytic memo working to capture key points from the sessions, along with quotations, comments, and observations.

Forms of Data

We collected three forms of data: ethnographic interviews, field notes, and photographs. We each carried a small notebook in our pockets, to jot down ideas and key thoughts. We used quotation marks to document direct quotations. We spent time with Juan in conversation, seeking to learn about his life and the way he views his

possible boxing career. We collected informed assent from Juan, as well as informed consent from his father and trainer, the Main Street Gym owner, and we also sought informed consent from any boxers we decided to have in-depth interviews with, as each of them were over eighteen years old.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in an ethnographic manner, but they were derived from question protocols. During this six-month study, we conducted two in-depth interviews per month with Juan. The number of other in-depth interviews was variable, based on gym participants and gym activities.

Photographs

We also took still photographs, mostly in black and white, documenting aspects of gym life or some of the events that occur during this study. We sought photographic release from anyone we photographed prior to capturing an image and only used photographs if we had the explicit consent of the individuals photographed. Photographs were primarily used for documentation. In this way, the photographs helped capture the look of the gym and of training in ways words might have missed.

Field Notes

Taking field notes was a critical part of this study. Field notes are the written record of our perceptions of Juan and the gym. These kinds of notes recorded the emotional reactions to events, analytic insights, questions, and other thoughts we may have had at the time.

Raw field notes were taken by hand. Field notes were written descriptively, outlining observations, events, and details about people. Using specific and concrete details is important because the field notes are the basis for writing up the ethnography. Unlike many other kinds of research, in ethnography, the researcher taking field notes is encouraged to use evocative adjectives and action verbs, along with an emphasis on specificity.

Analysis

We coded our field notes through the lenses of the myths that underpin our study. We then looked for emergent themes from the data. Since ethnography is the quest for cultural meaning, interpretation of what a researcher hears, sees, and learns played a role in shaping the research. The interpretive ethnographer does not seek a holistic view of how individual cultural components fit together. Instead, the goal is to take an element and show how it relates to other elements.

Interpreting a culture means an ethnographer does not try to find a generalized explanation for all behaviors from a single interpretive point of view. Instead, the ethnographer accepts that many features interact in complex and unpredictable ways to form the culture. For this reason, seeking to find the unique elements of cultural ways of being becomes the goal.

In writing up our research, interpretivism was an essential element. We transcribed interviews and made notes from our field notes, but the story that emerged required more than coding data. It required us to dig deeper into our own experience.

Reflexivity

Reflection was a central aspect of writing up these ethnographic findings. Much like an impressionist painting, the ethnographic journey is conveyed with a sense of lived and subjective texture that seeks to openly and honestly convey both the embodied and intellectual tensions experienced in the field.

The Ethnography

Boxing gyms are full of sounds. There is the whoosh of jump ropes, the badadum of hands against the speed bag, grunts from the sparring ring, and the electronic beep of the timer that seems to ring constantly. The timer goes off every three minutes in most boxing gyms, marking the end of a sparring round; in the Main Street Gym, located on Main Street in Pinedale, a suburban town located in northern California, it is no different. The gym is nestled between Monique's Antiques, which sells old and not-so old items, and Victor's Bail Bonds, which has a large, blinking, green and orange neon sign. The Main Street Gym has no sign, so a simple storefront marks its place. The gym serves as a training space for all types of athletes. There is a belief in gym culture that trained martial artists and boxers cannot cohabit the same space, but at the Main Street Gym they do, interacting in collegial ways. In the evening, the gym transforms into a workout space for the local community, offering classes to people from all walks of life. The owner of the gym, Tony Palamore, is a former bodybuilder and son of a professional wrestler. The Main Street Gym is more than a training ground; it is a social club for anyone involved in the fighting arts. The population of the gym is diverse; there are serious fighters who train regularly, but Palamore also has classes for kids and those who just want to stay in shape by attending a class a weekly or semi-monthly.

The gym itself is small. A former ice cream shop, the space has a cold, concrete floor. A small, well-worn boxing ring is fixed in the center, while heavy bags and speed bags hang at the sides. Boxing memorabilia hangs on the walls and workout paraphernalia is littered throughout the gym. There is always a low rumble in the gym, as conversations must compete with the din of others chatting, weights clanking, grunts from boxers sparring in the ring, and bursts of laughter from the corner. The Main Street Gym features a diverse community of athletes: some are very serious about their sport, and others are just trying to stay in shape. Palamore promotes a supportive atmosphere among the athletes, and although there is open competition from time to time, this is a space where many youths, particularly youth of color, come to explore their bodies and selves. Palamore, who is white, believes that boxing helps diverse groups of kids develop both sides of their personality, enhancing a dualistic quality he thinks gives them an advantage in the ring, and in life. He says, "When kids give punches and receive them, it is showing them their strong side, their fearless side. There is nothing soft when they are in the ring. They can be in the ring and be aggressive and fight and when they get out, they are sweet as can be."

The 'fighting spirit' is respected at the gym, but so is demonstrating discipline and a strong work ethic. Serious athletes control their diets, workout routines, sleep schedules, and conduct limited social lives. Like all elite athletes, fighters make many sacrifices in pursuit of their dreams. Boxing is, in principle, a remarkably egalitarian sport. Unlike basketball or football, boxing does not necessitate a particular body type; the range of body types enables a variety of stylistic approaches to the combat. Willpower is tested both inside and outside the gym; boxers are required to balance their personal relationships and engage in social seclusion. Body type and the

development of restraint are gender-neutral requirements of the sport.

The Main Street Gym, like any community, is filled with a cast of characters. Palamore is larger than life, always making promises to the fighters about their abilities, mostly because he does not have the heart to tell the skinny kids they cannot make it. "You look great...We're going to find you a fight...Keep your chin up, it's just one sparring match...I think you are almost ready for the big fight." His endless chatter is seen by some of the boxers as hot air, but they still love to hear it. Jake, a young amateur and regular at the Main Street Gym, says: "Tony is full of it, but when he isn't here, I sort of miss hearing his encouragement." What the boxers miss when Palamore is not in the gym is his love. He views the gym as a public vessel for his caring. The gym barely provides Palamore with an income, but he would never consider shutting his doors. Working with the young fighters is not a job to Palamore, it is more of a calling.

Palamore is over six feet tall, two hundred and fifty pounds; he is a rather intimidating presence. His father, Fred "The Crusher" Martin, had some success as a professional wrestler and he grew up in that life: always traveling. Now he prefers to stay in one place, and rarely ventures far from his home base. He arrives in the morning to unlock the door of the gym and hangs around most of the day. Palamore's priority is supporting his athletes, regardless of whether they are able to pay the monthly fees, and many of the athletes train free because of Palamore's commitment to them. Palamore's wife, Elise, works as a hairdresser down the street from the gym and she often stops in to watch the young boxers spar. She offers some advice of her own to the burgeoning fighters: "Keep your hands up...You look really good...Tony get this one a fight..." One of the amusing things is that Palamore is not a boxing manager, so all the talk about getting fights is just that: talk. Palamore does not make matches or promote any fighters. As the athletes spend more time in the gym, they start to understand this, and it contributes to the humor they derive from his comments.

Meeting Juan Rodriguez

Juan Rodriguez is a seventeen-year-old and a recent graduate of Pinedale High School. Juan is five feet eleven inches tall and weighs in at a lean one hundred and fifty pounds. Juan grew up in a blue-collar family with his father, Miguel, who works as a carpenter in a business he built himself, and his mom Josie, who is a homemaker. Juan took several amateur fights, but he turned professional at seventeen before graduating from high school. Juan is a quiet, somewhat shy, and reserved young fellow.

"My dad said if I didn't finish high school, I couldn't keep fighting," Juan says chatting about his future. "Now, my mom wants me enrolled in community college classes when I'm not training. I don't mind. I do okay in school...you know...BS and stuff like that," he continues.

Juan is a standout in the boxing world; he is known for his ability to knock out opponents, a trait that makes it hard to find anyone to spar him. His well-earned moniker is "Bam Bam," although when we asked if he knew about the cartoon, *The Flintstones*, in which Barney Rubble's son was named Bam Bam, he was clueless. Sometimes Palamore tells the kids in the gym, "Keep that up and we'll let you spar Juan." When the young boxers hear him say that they strut with pride to the heavy bag and throw a few victory punches.

Juan trains six days a week for about two and half hours each day. He loves training at the Main Street Gym because he enjoys a certain anonymity there. "The gym crew is like my family," Juan muses, as he reflects on how much time he spends in the gym training. "I mean I have my family, and then I have my family." We

understand immediately what he means. The athletes at the Main Street Gym seem to form authentic connections that help them with more than just their athleticism.

Juan started boxing when his father got him into an after-school program when he was nine years old. His dad had been a boxer, and he wanted to introduce Juan to the sport. His dad thought boxing would teach his son good decision-making skills and would allow them to spend some time together. His dad, Miguel, told me, "When this all started, I had no idea he had talent. I just thought it would be a good way for him to learn some structure. He was always a good boy—don't get me wrong, but I know teenage boys can have problems and I wanted to influence him before there were any problems." However, unlike some boxers, Juan did not experience any behavior problems. Boxing was never a path to keep on the straight and narrow. Juan would have done fine without boxing; he just loves the sport.

An elite boxer's life is ruled by discipline. There is the need for fitness, but there is also a need to hold their weight down. Juan is no different. One morning, this study's second author arrived at Juan's house at five in the morning for a jog. Miguel followed us in his big silver 4x4 Ford pick-up truck. Juan and I ran his prescribed seven-mile course. After about five miles at a six-minute mile pace, the second author started feeling worn down, but Juan just kept chatting away about movies, video games, and his friends at high school. After the run, Juan showered and I dropped him off at his high school while Miguel headed to work, and then I dragged myself home.

Juan thinks about the future a lot. Adults have fostered this line of thinking, openly discussing with him his talent and potential 'big wins.' Juan's dad, Miguel, is also his trainer, which works for now. Father/son training teams can have complex dynamics. Performance in the sport can mix into relational expectations. For now, Juan wants to please Miguel and he works hard at training. Sometimes father/son training teams become complicated, particularly when the son begins to yearn for more independence. To Miguel's credit, he seems to want the best for his son and the decisions that are being made are not based on greed. This may bode well for Juan, since greed tends to lead to poor match ups and career ending fights.

"Mom wants me in college," Juan shares. "It's not that she hates boxing, but she didn't go to college, and she wants me to go."

"What do you think about college?" we ask.

"Good, I guess," he says reflectively. "I mean I'll take some classes at Fairmont Community College this fall. It's cool. She wants me to have a backup, and I get that. Maybe boxing can't be everything," Juan shares in a voice that has the timbre of uncertainty.

Juan talks a lot about Little Xavier, another fighter his age who lives in Tramlane, a rural town an hour away. Little X, as he is called, has gone to the Junior Olympics, where he won a silver medal. His father, Big Xavier, is his son's trainer, and claims Little X was robbed of the gold medal at the Junior Olympics. Little X turned professional at sixteen, but he could not take a fight until he was seventeen. Big X, as he is called, earned a large signing bonus when his son turned professional and he seems to be highly invested in financial gain, making decisions based on dollars. Juan and Little X are in the same weight class and, in a few years, they will be viewed as primary competitors. One day, we ask Juan why he thinks about Little X so much.

"He's just different, you know. I mean he's a nice guy, but his dad is different than my dad. My dad says Big X is in a hurry. I think my dad is better," Juan says thoughtfully.

"Why do you think that?" we ask.

"Because every little thing can't be about money. My mom says she grew up poor, but they were really rich. I get that. They had what mattered."

"What's that?" we ask.

"You know, stuff like family stuff...love...you know," Juan answers. "I mean I know Little X's mom was shot in a drive-by, and that's intense," he adds, "He has this thing about everything being for his mom. It is really intense. I mean his dad pushes him and he wants to please his mom, who is dead. It's intense."

This exchange exemplifies what distinguishes Juan. Juan's engagement with boxing is tempered by his upbringing and family, along with his reflective capacity. Little X and Juan both took their first professional fights in Reno, Nevada. They both won and won well. In the Main Street Gym, there is an expectation that Juan will follow in the footsteps of Alex Fernando and Vinnie Trenado, two professional boxers in the gym who are signed to a major promoter and are on the rise.

Juan and School

Juan talked with us about his schooling experiences on many occasions. One time, he randomly asked to share something that happened to him in first grade:

"The teacher wanted us to play a game on the playground and she said, 'Mexican kids on one side and white kids over here,'" he told me.

"Wow!" we said in response, taken aback. "What happened next?"

"That night I told my dad about it, and he talked to the principal in the morning. The principal came and talked to the class. I don't know what he said, but the teacher was gone for a while and when she came back, she never called us Mexicans again: not like that time," he said thoughtfully.

"That's heavy," we noted. Juan thought about it for a bit and added, "All my teachers have thought about me as a Mexican kid."

"I did fine on the test," he says one day. "You know, the teachers don't expect a Latino dude to get an A," he responds.

"Why?" we ask.

"You know how it is. Guys like you (pointing to the second author)—white guys—get As. I get Bs."

Racial prejudice directly impacted Juan's life in school and the outside world, but it did not stand in Juan's way in the gym. In the gym, mastery is measured in different ways. Power punches and technique matter. Sparring and winning matches matter. But being decent and participating in the community also matter. Palamore is also known for telling athletes who do not positively participate in the community to not come back.

Juan's school career is tainted by his own feelings of being pre-judged by teachers. "One teacher in middle school asked me if I speak English," he told me. "I have never been in an English learner program ever. I grew up speaking English and Spanish," he continued.

Juan has done well enough in school, although there is little evidence that he truly applies himself. His performance is never stellar, but he never fails either. He is somewhat ambivalent towards school, but his mother is determined to have him do well and continue his schooling. Disrespecting his mother is not on Juan's radar, so he continues to plod along knowing the gym is a place where he can spread his wings.

"Who do you hang-out with at school?" we ask.

"Mostly Todd," he shares. "Todd is an athlete. He plays lacrosse, which is a real game. I went to a match and those guys get rough." Juan lit up as he remembered a time when Todd took him to see a rugby game. Juan spoke excitedly, "You see, they are all standing, and they start pushing and shoving to get the ball and the referee doesn't really make too many calls." He laughed and said, "Rugby is awesome."

From time-to-time Juan helps younger boxers in the gym. In these moments, he becomes the teacher. One amateur, Alejandro, gravitates toward Juan. Alejandro is two years younger than Juan and has been taking amateur bouts. After a sparring round that Alejandro lost, Juan sits with him and offers some consolation:

"I am so pissed that I didn't win," Alejandro says angrily.

"No, no, no," Juan says, "That kind of thinking will get you nowhere. You looked good in there."

"Ralphie beat me again. I know you can beat Ralphie, but I can't," Alejandro says solemnly.

"It's not about that. Don't let Ralphie get inside your head. Alex taught me about this. Focus your mind. It isn't about Ralphie, it is about boxing. Look—put your hands like this," Juan says placing his fists in front of his chest. Alejandro mimics Juan as Juan says, "Now, Ralphie waits for you to drop your hands, but keep your hands up here," and at that moment Juan takes Alejandro's hands in his and moves them into position. Then the two of them perform a kind of pantomime of a sparring round with Juan commentating. Juan says, "Look, if you put your foot here...See what Ralphie will do? He will hit you over here," as Juan mimics taking a hit. Alejandro becomes engrossed in the lesson and forgets his loss.

Palamore sees the two of them practicing and approaches, swinging his arms like an out-of-control frontend loader saying, "Alejandro, do it like this...look, like this." Juan and Alejandro turn and watch Palamore, cracking up. They double over laughing and then, interestingly, they turn Palamore's antics into a lesson: both boys throw their arms up and begin sparring. Alejandro has taken Palamore's advice by holding his left hand tight and punching with the right arm.

Juan's Free Time

Juan's free time is limited. Most of his free time is spent with his younger brother, Enrique. Both boys are handsome, but Enrique is really handsome: he is tall and lean with long black hair and joyful eyes. Enrique knows he is handsome. Enrique's looks are how the two of them hold their relationship in balance: Juan is a world-class athlete and Enrique has world-class looks. They love to play video games. Sometimes they run together, but Juan is so competitive he has to beat Enrique, which makes running less desirable for Enrique. Sometimes Juan hangs out in Enrique's bedroom just talking about stuff. Enrique is a bit of a gossip and Juan always wants to know the latest news:

"So, what was really going on with that girl at school today?" Juan asks.

"Oh, that's a complicated story," Enrique begins, always willing to tell the entire story in great detail. Juan once told us, "My brother, Enrique, he knows what's going on." The second author responded, "Some people call that having your ear to the pavement." Juan perked up smiling and said, "Yep. That's Enrique—ear to the pavement."

Sometimes, Enrique comes to the gym, not to train, but to watch Juan. On those days Juan is in full big brother mode: puffed up chest, extra hard work-out. Enrique always has supportive comments for Juan before he starts circulating around the gym picking up stories about what is going on. Enrique has a unique place in the gym. He is not a boxer, but he is a celebrity: he is Juan's brother, and that is capital. Tony Palamore loves Enrique, and

they sit and talk endlessly. One time Juan said, "Enrique spent one afternoon in the gym this month and he knows more about the people there than I do."

Enrique is careful to never get himself into a competitive situation with Juan in the gym. Once, Palamore suggested they spar each other, and Enrique quickly called his mom to pick him up. It is very clear he understands that he cannot compete with Juan in the boxing ring, so he plays baseball and is quite good.

Miguel and Sophia

Juan's parents are Miguel and Sophia. Miguel is a carpenter who has his own business and Sophia stays at home and keeps the house. Her cooking is famous in the gym and Miguel often invites other boxers over to dinner for enchiladas. Miguel grew up in northern California in a community where there were not many Latinos. His father died when he was four years old, so he was raised by his mother, who cleaned houses for a living. Sophia was raised by her parents, who were farm laborers. Miguel met Sophia in high school. When they graduated from high school, they got married.

Miguel and Sophia live in a simple ranch style home that they own. The home has three bedrooms, so each of the boys has their own room—something Miguel is very proud of and often quizzed us on. "How many bedrooms does my house have?" he asked laughing. "Three," we responded. "How many bedrooms does my family need?" he continued. "Three," we said again. We learned the script, and he loved it.

Their home has simple furnishings. The boys' beds are covered with Hot Wheels bedspreads, a remnant from a sale Sophia found when they were young, and a reminder that buying new bedspreads is a luxury. "I went crazy when my mom first bought that bedspread," Juan mentioned. "I loved Hot Wheels," he said. "Me too," affirmed the second author.

Miguel trains Juan, but he is not a boxing manager. Trainers work with athletes on their strength and conditioning, as well as boxing technique and strategy. Managers find matches and handle contracts. When there is a big match up, trainers and managers both want a piece of the winnings. For now, with Miguel as Juan's trainer, and winnings still relatively small, money has not become an issue, but it may in the future.

Miguel is pushing boxing for Juan, mainly because he understands how good he is. Sophia pushes school and wants her boys to graduate from college. The tension between sports and school is ever present in their household, but for now both boys work to please their parents.

Miguel has taken some workshops from Big X on coaching, but most of his approaches have been developed through observing what works best for the young boxers he develops. Miguel goes slow and never overworks his athletes. He likes to develop a lot of strength and endurance, so his boxers run and lift weights, as well as do more typical boxing routines.

Vinnie Trenedo

Vinnie "The Tornado" Trenedo is a small Latino dude who can fight. He is a flyweight. When he is not boxing, Vinnie wears dark rimmed glasses that make him look more like a bookworm than a boxer. Vinnie has been a professional for four years and in April 2017 he got a huge shot when he landed a fight in Las Vegas on a major undercard. A win would bring him a million dollars; a loss would pay him a hundred grand. When the contract for the fight was being negotiated, there was a buzz of excitement in the air at the gym. Everyone who came in the

door was peppered with questions about the upcoming fight: Vinnie's "big shot."

Six weeks before the fight, Vinnie cut his eye during a sparring match, an incident that was viewed as disastrous. It takes more than six weeks for an eye injury to heal and if his opponent got word about his injury, he could deliberately try to open the cut during the fight. Miguel, Juan's father, who trains Vinnie, was a nervous wreck. They kept training, but they eliminated sparring from his workout regimen. Miguel searched for the best "cut man" he could find to have in the corner for the fight. A "cut man" sits in a fighter's corner and treats cuts between rounds. Some cut men are artists in their ability to stop blood from flowing. Miguel was able to secure Jimmy Valence, one of the best cut men, for Vinnie's fight.

The professionals and amateurs from Main Street Gym flew to Las Vegas to support Vinnie. His fight was the biggest thing to hit Main Street Gym in its entire history. A big poster advertising the event proudly hung on the gym wall. The trip to Las Vegas ended up being something of a disaster. Vinnie folded into himself and became an introvert at the very moment in his life that demanded he be an extrovert. He carried his baby daughter to the check-in counter at the MGM Grand Hotel for the ceremonial check-in, barely smiling at the cameras. When major media outlets tried to interview him, he told them, "No interviews." We took him aside and tried to explain that people wanted to get to know him. He said, "When I win the million, I'm retiring. I don't care what they think of me. I will be the asshole boxer."

Clearly, Vinnie was a little out of his depth. Going from the community at Main Street Gym to the MGM Grand overwhelmed him. When a sports journalist from ESPN asked him why he thought an undefeated fighter wanted to fight him, he hung his head. He responded, "Because I am the best," but he did not believe it. At that moment, perhaps, he realized it was a set up: that no one, except his friends from the Main Street Gym, expected him to win.

The fight day came, and Vinnie gave a respectable performance. He lost but went the distance and his eye did not bleed, thanks to a great cut man. Devastated after the fight, despite the one hundred thousand dollars the loss brought, he retreated into his home life with his wife and daughter and went back to his job as a construction worker. Palamore went by to see him every day, taking him articles from the sports page or cookies Elise had baked. Palamore's persistence in pushing Vinnie back to the gym ended up being significant. After Vinnie started coming back to the gym on a regular basis, he began to heal.

Shortly after his big loss, Vinnie's manager, Harry Giles, who also managed Juan and Alex Fernando, died suddenly of stage four cancer. It was a shock to everyone. Harry had been diagnosed only four weeks before his death. Juan and Alex went with the second author to see Harry before he died, but Vinnie had believed there would be more time, and had put off a visit. Harry's death hit them all hard, but Vinnie was wracked with guilt over the title he could have won for Harry. Trying to comfort him, the second author said, "It's not like that, Vinnie. Harry wouldn't want you to feel guilty about a loss. Harry loved you."

"Harry was like a father to me, and I let him down, and now I can't make it up to him in a way that he will see," Vinnie shared in his grief.

Harry's memorial turned out to be a veritable who's who of the boxing world. Every major promoter sent representatives and most of the American boxers who currently hold a title were there. Alex told Vinnie and me what to wear: "Blue suit, white shirt, not tie," he instructed.

"What's with no neck tie?" the second author asked Vinnie, but between Vegas and Harry's death he was

just too torn up to care. "Just do what Alex wants. Let's make him happy." So, we did. The day of the event, Alex picked us up. Vinnie and the two of us sat in the backseat because Gina was in the front.

"This is really weird...to be in the back seat," Vinnie kept saying the entire trip. When we arrived, a valet parked Alex's old Chevy Impala and we all entered the restaurant where everyone was gathering.

At the event, Alex spoke about Harry with love and appreciation and Vinnie cried. The second author tried to put my arm around him for comfort, but he cringed like a little boy wriggling away from a mother's kiss.

Boxing provides a lot of space to think about winning and losing and what each means. We often think the person who comes out on top is the winner, but sometimes that is not true. Even at the young age of seventeen, Juan seems to think that Little X is not necessarily always a winner, even though he always wins. The pain fighters face in defeat, in the best cases, connects them to humility and caring. In the worst cases, it creates bitterness and resentment. There is plenty of both in the sport.

After we all went back to the Main Street Gym after the Las Vegas fiasco and the memorial, the second author asked Vinnie and Alex if they would like to get a beer after a work-out and talk about everything. They both looked at me, dumbfounded.

"What," he said. "Do you want to go?"

"Beer is nothing but calories. We don't drink beer. Too many calories," they said, half laughing.

"How about a diet coke?" he asked.

"Okay," Vinnie agreed, and we all went down the street.

Vinnie in School

Vinnie never had much interest in school; he struggled with reading and writing from his earliest memory.

"I probably had a disability or something. I really couldn't read for a long time. Now I can, but I need glasses, and I didn't have glasses until high school," he shares.

"My favorite class was P.E. because that's where I could have fun and excel. One year in high school, the counselor didn't let me take P.E. because I needed other credits. That was a drag. I loved running long distances and beating all the jerks who were so mean to me. That felt good," he shared.

No one in Vinnie's life ever encouraged him to consider college, so when he graduated from high school, he turned professional and has been taking matches ever since.

"My uncle has a construction company, so I work in construction on the side, but my main focus is boxing and making a good living from boxing," he comments.

Vinnie is very kind to the young boxers; he always encourages the most helpless cases. Once we asked him why he had such an affinity for the amateurs with the least talent. He said:

"It's not for me to say who will make it and who won't. I just want everyone to have a great experience in the gym. There's no reason for some of these little guys to leave feeling bad about themselves. That's not what this is about."

We observed him mentoring Jamal Morgan, a skinny Black kid with two-left feet. Vinnie had him doing exercises with three-pound weights, praising his progress, and discouraging the five-pound weights until he reached specific milestones:

"When you can do this exercise with your foot off the ground," he demonstrated, "then you can use a five-

pound weight.”

When Vinnie lost his big fight and stayed home for a couple of months, it was the skinny kids who paced the gym looking for someone to provide them with support. When Vinnie finally returned, it was the skinny kids who were the most excited to see him.

Alex Fernando

Alex “The Bull” Fernando is a twenty-seven-year-old Latino boxer. He is a middleweight who is on his way to a big career. Alex trained with Big X at his gym until there was a falling out about the amount of attention he was getting. Falling outs around ego issues are not uncommon in boxing. Working with a trainer can be intimate work. It is a kind of partnership and, because the training process can create a stressful environment, one side or the other can walk away over relatively small stuff. In Alex’s case, he thought Big X was giving him workouts that were too easy, which made him feel like all Big X cared about was Little X. With all the buzz surrounding Little X, it is not surprising that such a rivalry arose.

“I mean, he could at least treat me like I am the athlete I am,” Alex told us before he left Big X’s gym.

After he left Big X, Alex started training with Miguel. Miguel has a more laid-back attitude; he gives his boxers equal amounts of attention and tries not favoring anyone. Juan and Alex often workout together despite their age difference. One day, the three of us went to the track. After running endless laps, Alex and Juan decided we would run up the hills in the park. Like gazelles, they sprinted up a hill in twenty-nine seconds. The second author lagged behind, and they thought it was funny. Training with elite athletes can bruise a person’s ego.

Alex has had two big fights. He won both and earned twenty-five thousand dollars for each. That is what the boxers call “real” money and it means he was able to give up his job as a security guard to train full-time. Now Miguel is looking for a fight that could win Alex a championship belt. Alex is engaged to Gina Mendez, who works at the Mexican restaurant her parents own. They have set a wedding date and Gina supports Alex’s boxing career.

Of all the boxers in the gym, Alex is the most intense. Alex does not suffer fools lightly. More accurately, Alex is likely to crush anyone he thinks is a fool. Earlier in Alex’s career, his father was his trainer. Their father/son training relationship dissolved about two years ago, although his father remains a supportive force in his career. Alex’s mom died when he was eight years old, after succumbing to a battle with cancer. His father raised him alone, but he recently remarried.

During this study, Alex had a big fight in Los Angeles. We attended as members of “Team Fernando,” which meant travelling to Los Angeles with Alex and his entourage.

“Could you put the room at the Marriott on your card? I’ll give you the money for the room tonight at the gym?” Alex asks.

“Sure. That’s not a problem for me. Is there an issue?” we ask.

“I’m just afraid if I book it my credit card will go over the card limit and then they charge me.”

“No big deal,” we reassure him. Alex is not at a point where boxing provides a steady income, and there are always small reminders that his life often balances on the edge.

For Alex, the superstitions always relate to food. After a weigh-in, we all go eat at the Olive Garden. Alex orders the same dish, the “Tour of Italy,” which is chicken parmesan, a meatball and bow tie pasta with marinara

sauce. After the fight, we all ate at the Yard House. There we usually order hamburgers and French fries, and Alex orders two Cokes. We googled both restaurants to see how far we would be driving. As luck had it, both were close to the venue. These meals are a tradition and a welcome treat for Alex. Two weeks before a fight, he eats only bell peppers stuffed with white rice, avocados, and canned tuna. Two nights before the fight, he fasts and takes hot baths to lose the last few pounds to get to his fighting weight. After the weigh in, he eats.

The night of the event, Alex suits up in green satin trunks and a green satin robe that a local car dealership purchased for him. The dealership's logo appears below Alex's name on the back of the robe. Gina embroidered his name on the robe, and it looked fantastic. He makes his way to the ring, punching the air and dancing on the balls of his feet. His opponent, Mario Millendez, is a formidable adversary. Millendez is a brawler: more of a street fighter than a technical fighter, like Alex. The brawler/technical fighter match up, coupled with this being Alex's first fight aired on ESPN, made tensions run high in the locker room before the fight.

When the bell rings to mark the beginning of the first round, we feel our hearts beating so hard that we see our shirts pulsate. We sit in folding chairs in the front row and try as best we can not to cry or fall on the floor.

The first round starts slow, with Alex measuring his opponent. The bell sounds to begin the second round and Millendez comes out swinging. He walks forward, like brawlers always do, throwing punches like a maniac, but landing only a few body shots. Alex lands a three-punch combination and then he pivots on his right foot, enabling him to land an uppercut, catching Millendez off guard. Millendez falls to the mat. Dazed and confused, Millendez tries to stand as the referee counts him out. Alex has won with a knockout. Alex raises his hands above his head. We are on our feet leaning into the ring from the outside, with a huge smile on my face. Alex gestures to us and mouths "Thank you," but his mouth guard is in the way. We give him a thumbs up.

Alex and School

Alex always did well in school. He got good grades and his father thought he might go into Engineering, since he is especially good at math and science. Alex talked about possibly becoming an engineer after his boxing career:

"I love math and science, and I think I would enjoy being an engineer of some sort. I have looked at some programs, but if I do it, I will probably go to a State school just because of the cost," he shares.

When we asked him if he worried that being hit might impact his math and science skills, he was nonplussed, "No, this stuff is no big deal. I'm boxing now and school might come later. It all depends on how much money I earn in the long run."

Alex was not much of a teacher in the gym, except when he helped Vinnie and Juan. If the younger kids asked him questions, he would direct them to Juan and Vinnie, knowing they were better at it. We asked him about this, and he said, "I don't have the patience for the kids. You tell them to do something, and they don't execute it, and then you have to tell them again and again. Vinnie doesn't mind, but it makes me crazy. If I tell you what to do—do it."

Daily Life in the Gym

In the gym, the electric timer can be heard every three minutes. Buzz, Buzz. The sound marks the end of each sparring round. The boxers alternate getting in the ring, throwing punches at each other or at Miguel while he holds the mitts. Juan, Vinnie, and Alex are like movie stars at the Main Street Gym. For any of the local amateurs,

an invitation to spar with one of them holds a lot of prestige.

Holding his hands high, Ralphie Sanchez, a nineteen-year-old amateur, gets in the ring with Juan for a three-minute sparring match up. Juan is light on his feet, dancing and swaying as Ralphie holds his gloves in front of his face. Swoosh. Juan lands his first punch and knocks Ralphie back. Undaunted, Ralphie collects himself. Acutely aware that the entire gym is watching, Ralphie lands a jab, trying to give it his all. Unfazed, Juan throws a three-punch combination. Bam. Ralphie falls to the mat. Buzz. The round is over.

Life in the gym transgresses boundaries. Most of the elite boxers are Black and brown, and being elite makes them the most important people in the gym. It does not matter how things are going for them in other parts of their lives: in the gym, they are masters. The spaces in the small gym are distinct and help clarify the norms of function. There is the locker room where boxers change into their work-out gear. There is no shower at the Main Street Gym, so they either leave in their work-out clothes or change back into their street clothes, still sweaty. Corners mark separate spaces in the gym. One corner has the big punching bags, another has the hand weights, another has speed bags, while the fourth is a free space for jumping rope or practicing footwork. In the morning hours, when the elite athletes train, they divide organically. Someone is always in the ring, while the others rotate through their workouts. Later in the day, when people come into the gym for workout classes, the space is open to all.

The gym is a safe space for those who engage in activities there. Juan says, "Tony tells us the gym is for us and we should make it a positive place...I really try to do that."

After work, the gym is filled with white-collar types that work in the courthouse down the street. Attorneys and people from other walks of life squeeze into their spandex workout clothes and move through exercises as classes begin. Juan, Vinnie, and Alex are seldom around when these people descend on the gym, but occasionally they show up to play celebrity. One evening we went to the gym with Alex. He was wearing sunglasses.

"Why are you being such a jerk?" the second author asks, laughing.

"I have a role to play for my fans," Alex says half-joking, half-serious.

Pugilism

Anyone who has ever put on gloves and punched a heavy bag can attest to the stamina it takes to box. The sheer mental and physical exhaustion in the boxing ring is indescribable, even at the amateur level. It is not merely the physical exhaustion, but also the mental concentration required of fighters. It is the willingness to confront your opponent, but also your own fear. Fear occurs in many sports. Skiing and surfing are dangerous, but the mountain and ocean are not trying to destroy you on purpose. In football, a knockout may be a byproduct, but it is not the goal. In boxing, your opponent has one objective: to hurt you. That makes boxing intoxicating, brutal, barbaric, and troubling; it is perhaps the toughest sport that exists.

Danger stalks all boxers and it is no different for Juan, Vinnie or Alex. "That's why I train one hundred percent, so nothing bad happens," Juan tells me. "One thing I hate about boxing is getting hit. I don't want to get hit in my face, but that's the risk you've got to take in the sport."

Juan, Vinnie, and Alex all believe they will retire from boxing with their senses intact. "It all depends on a boxer's style. I'm more of a boxer. I hit and move," Alex explains to me continuing, "I like to make the other fighters miss. I've never gotten hit with a solid punch. That's why I've never been knocked down. I've been dazed,

but never hurt."

The view of boxing as a poor man's sport feeds a persistent stereotype. I ask Vinnie about that, and he says, "... about money, I never needed anything. You know what, to be honest, I never had what I wanted, but I never needed it either."

Boxing is also about money and fame.

"In boxing, you can make a lot of money, if you are good at it and if you are a man," Alex told me. "I think I can be somebody because I am a good fighter. It's been rough, but I like it, because I like to win."

"What do you mean – if you are a man?" we ask. Alex rolls his eyes. Question answered.

Juan's Life in the Gym

Juan's day-to-day life in the gym takes place around a cast of boisterous characters, but Juan prefers to hover in the background. He leans against the back wall with one leg perched, flamingo-style on the other, taking it all in. I was not always convinced Juan enjoyed boxing. One day he even told me, "Boxing sucks, but I'm good at it so I guess I should see how far I can get."

Juan has talent and he has the capacity to be mean. Being mean is not a bad thing for a boxer. In the ring, aggressiveness is helpful. Juan is edgy and tough, and much more mean-spirited than Vinnie or Alex. We asked him about this part of himself one day and he says, "I know I am aggressive. Sometimes I shake so bad because I am pissed. I want to win, and I guess I can be mean. I think my family helps me with this but in the ring, when I'm on my own, watch out—I'm coming for you." It is his "I'm coming for you" attitude that can have a chilling impact on those who fight him. Even at the young age of seventeen, Juan never smiles in the ring. For him, it is about the fight, and it is about winning.

As the date of a fight approaches, Juan, Alex, and Vinnie meetup on Saturday mornings at the Main Street Gym. Palamore lets them lock the front door and the three of them go at it. Passers-by stop and peer into the gym through the large pane glass window in the front. One Saturday morning the second author picked up a jump rope and says, "Hey Champ, can I use your rope?" Comically, Vinnie, Alex, and Juan all turn and answer "Yes," in unison.

Juan often uses this time to engage in an intense training routine. First, he lifts weights, then he punches the heavy bag. Vinnie or Alex call for him and he enters the ring to spar for three minutes, and then he returns to his workout. "On those mornings, it's like we own the gym," Juan says. "I love those mornings. I feel...you know, important. I'm good at it and when no one else can come in but the best in the gym, well, you have to earn that." Juan is right. He did earn the right to be in the gym on Saturday mornings. For some, the fighters' behavior may look like it is all pedal and no brake in the gym; however, their bodies withstand the training.

On the last morning before this study ended, Juan approached the second author at the end of the workout.

"Would you take me out and teach me to drive?" he asks apprehensively.

"Sure. Just let me know when you have time. We can start in a parking lot and then practice on some backroads," I say, remembering how I learned to drive.

"Great. I will let you know. It is hard to make time," he muses. In that moment, his sacrifice hits me full force. Learning to drive, which is a rite of passage for many teens, has been put off in lieu of training, just like so many other things: school dances or nights out with friends. The intensity of Juan's training has shaped his

adolescence and I wondered for a second what the unintended consequences of all that lost experience might be.

Camaraderie

The intimacy of the relationships at the gym is notable. Juan, Vinnie, and Alex are friends, in part, because they view each other as equals. In their eyes, they are each a champion. From time-to-time, when the three were together a kind of arrogance surfaced, similar to what might be found at the monthly meeting of the local MENSA club. However, each one of them was also acutely aware that the odds are not necessarily in their favor. Although they are big fish in the Main Street Gym, when they venture outside it gets increasingly complicated. Each of these friends are being shaped by the other. Their comradery and the gym environment create a form of liberation for them, and they use that freedom to explore who they are in the world of sport.

The friendship between Juan, Vinnie, and Alex exemplifies the culture of family in the gym and the possibility for good to come from the time spent there. A close examination of the friendship between the three young boxers defies stereotypes. These are thoughtful, talented, and caring young men who were drawn to boxing in different ways and started at different levels, but they have all experienced a degree of success.

When a boxer enters the ring, their sole aim is to score more points than their opponent. Of course, risk is involved on both sides, but it is the sport, not the intention to harm, that motivates Juan, Vinnie, and Alex. In boxing, one person's actions put another person's life at risk. It is perhaps respect for that solemn fact that creates strong comradery between boxers.

Juan, Alex, and Vinnie were all managed by Harry Giles and, after his death, they find themselves in limbo. Finding new managers is not easy, and replacing Harry is proving to be impossible. It is hard to know who to trust and whether managers will have a boxer's best interests at heart. Alex drove two hours to meet with a possible manager, but when he got back, he said:

Not having a trustworthy manager right now is proving to be problematic and Miguel is stepping in to set up some fights. Miguel does not want to be trainer and manager, so he is clear that the current situation is temporary, but we will see if that changes when money gets involved.

Juan's prospects for a future in boxing are good. He has talent, a lot of support, and encouragement. As Juan approaches adulthood, he will make more clear decisions about his schooling. He may finish college, or he may just focus on his career as a boxer. Either way, he seems to be getting a lot of positives from the Main Street Gym.

Discussion

Stereotypes are kinds of half-truths, and while some boxers may fit into one or more of the myth/stereotypes that formed our conceptual framework, none of the boxers we studied did. We consider Juan and his friends in relation to the myths that formulated the framework for this study:

Myth #1: Boxers are poor and dumb. Juan and his many boxing friends had not chosen the sport of boxing because they lacked intelligence, they chose boxing because it appealed to them in the same way running appeals to a runner or tennis appeals to a tennis player. Juan was aware of the risks of boxing, but nonetheless decided to pursue a professional career.

Myth #2: If people living in poverty work hard, they can change their circumstances and succeed. This myth is not solely owned by boxing; instead, it permeates all major sports at this time. Although a big fight can

bring with it big money, I found that the boxers were first and foremost engaged with the sport. Boxing might pull some boxers out of poverty, but it might also, by the same token, be responsible for others ending up in poverty.

Myth #3: Boxers are criminals or linked to criminals. Juan and his friends lead highly disciplined lives. They are obsessive about their health and diet. None of the boxers we interviewed were involved with drugs or alcohol. Most of the boxers regarded alcohol as wasteful calories they could not afford to imbibe.

A lot of the boxers acknowledged that boxing kept them away from people they did not want to be around and, in turn, kept them away from crime. Some of the boxers grew up in high-crime, urban areas, but to think that is the profile of every boxer is a misconception of huge proportions. Many of the boxers at Juan's gym were middle-class youth looking to the sport for a challenge and the discipline.

Myth #4: For marginalized groups or those living in poverty, violence is a language that is understood. The boxers we worked with in this study did not characterize boxing as akin to violence. To them, boxing is a sport, and they would recount the many ways athletes in any sport can be injured.

Myth #5: Luck is necessary for marginalized groups to shift their circumstances. Spending time with the boxers at the Main Street Gym clarified the poison of this myth to me. Juan and his friends work very hard at the sport of boxing. They put in hours each day, training endlessly, maintaining strict diets, and making many social sacrifices. Although Juan and his dad hope for a big fight in the future, they are strategic in their choices. Neither one of them would talk about luck. Instead, Miguel emphasized the importance of putting together the right matches for Juan, trying to avoid missteps along the way. Success in boxing might look like luck from the outside, but from the inside, for the boxer, success is earned, fight by fight and win by win.

Summary of Key Understandings

Youth in the gym experience positive youth development.

This study points to the importance of positive youth development. Although boxing may be viewed by those outside the sport as a rogue enterprise, for the boxers in this study the boxing gym provided a supportive environment where they could act with agency and learn mastery over their bodies and minds.

The reality is that many urban schools and districts are failing to effectively support youth of color, immigrant youth, and low-income youth in succeeding academically (Wright, 2015). It is commonly understood that schools across the United States are not trying to engage students. The old Industrial Era school systems (Tyack, 1974) were designed to supply the assembly lines of factories across the country. Skills such as compliance, compartmentalized thinking, and execution of tasks in isolation were emphasized.

This study also presents significant evidence that after-school activities can enhance the lives of youth. The young men in this case were drawn to boxing, but more significantly, they found something they loved. After-school settings can provide the opportunity for youth to learn about their interests and find out what they might commit to in order to learn. The boxing gym is one example of the kind of safe space urban youth create for themselves.

Participation in regular physical activity has numerous health benefits for youth, including positive mental health outcomes and decreased chance of childhood obesity (CDC, 2002). Although physical activity intervention during the school day holds great potential and remains important, after-school programs are emerging as

potentially useful and feasible locations for physical activity promotion (Beets et al., 2009). Data show that as many as 6.6 million youth in the United States participate in some sort of after-school programming, and an additional twenty-two million families would be interested in after-school programming if it were available to them (Smith, 2007). Additionally, after-school programming offers safe environments for youth to engage in activity and develop lifelong physical activity habits.

Concepts of adultism are at play for youth at all times.

The concept of adultism aligns with critical youth studies scholarship, which finds that dominant youth discourses frame young people as profoundly different from and inferior to adults in terms of needs, interests, and abilities (Wyn & White, 1997). Adultism refers to a set of assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that young people are inferior to adults in terms of their abilities, needs, perspectives, and concerns, and those notions are embedded in practices, policies, behaviors, social institutions and systems (Wright, 2015). Adultism results in the systematic exclusion of young people from decisions that directly affect their lives.

Our society assumes that by age eighteen, young adults are capable of active participation in a democracy through effective decision-making, such as voting or other forms of civic participation (Hart, 1997). However, it is unrealistic to expect that young people will suddenly be capable of democratic participation at a certain age without previous and gradual engagement and adult-supported activities (Atweh, Christensen, Dorman, 1998).

In many school settings, young peoples' voices are delegitimized, and their input and ideas are rarely considered in planning, designing, implementing, or evaluating programs. Yet in the boxing gym, involving youth in their own learning, supporting them to create training plans, and talking through their ideas led to greater participation, observable motivation, and a commitment to their goals and the process. In after-school settings, such as the Main Street Gym, it is possible for youth to have input into their activities. In the gym, youth engage in a pedagogy of praxis, in which they learn about the nature of the problems they aimed to address. Further, life in the gym has a strong relational component that centers on sharing ideas through a collaborative process. Probably most importantly, life in the gym is largely youth-led by employing an approach in which the youth share power and intervene to support their goals to build their leadership capacities.

One of the best examples of youth-led activities were the times Juan and Vinnie helped younger or less experienced boxers. In these moments, they became the teachers, the experts, and, as such, were relied upon for advice.

Youth in the gym responded to a pedagogy of praxis.

Through a pedagogy of praxis, learning is situated through young people's lived experience, which builds their confidence to use and develop existing expertise. Through this pedagogy, boxers were encouraged by their trainers and other boxers in the gym to analyze problems and take action, based on their observations and learnings.

Freire (1970), a foundational scholar on the pedagogy of praxis, noted, "...knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 53). As a process of collective inquiry is built, it affords the possibility for young people's subjectivity to shift from being passive consumers of knowledge to becoming active producers of knowledge.

For the young boxers in the gym, they are learning by doing on a day-to-day basis. Lectures about how and why a particular approach may work are substituted with physical experimentation. This validates the boxer's experience as a form of knowledge and it is a powerful way their learning is underpinned.

Relational understanding is necessary when working with youth.

To facilitate interactive, participatory learning approaches, it is important to create environmental conditions characterized by trust, relationships, safety, and respect between peers and between youth and adults. For youth to experience healthy development, they need to experience situations in which they are not just acted upon by their settings, but also have agency to act upon their settings to make change (Lerner et al., 2002). In the gym, the boxers experienced their learning in line with a larger purpose that was connected to their own personal growth and development, as well as the improvement of the gym writ large. Trainers and coaches in the Main Street Gym promote a sense of community. Although not everything in the Main Street Gym is positive, the positive aspects of the relationships are felt by the athletes who train there.

The intimate comradery forged between Juan, Alex, and Vinnie is the perfect example of relational understanding. These champions hold space for one other. They celebrate with one other and console one another. In a few months, the entire gym will attend Alex's wedding. Bonds formed through common interests have forged a level of support for Juan, scaffolding him into adult life.

Power with, and power over, youth came into play for the athletes.

Trainers have particular roles and responsibilities in supporting young boxers. Guiding and supporting Juan requires Miguel to refrain from domination, and yet intervene to support whenever needed. Sharing authority with youth does not require an abandonment of authority. Instead, part of the adult's responsibility in sharing power with youth is to support and guide the work, to hold respectful relationships in accordance with the boxer's needs and to set up young people for success.

Family and friendship bonds mattered to the athletes.

Juan and his friends have strong bonds and the friendships in the gym focused on the sport that grounded these young athletes. Our conviction is that the Main Street Gym is more typical than unusual. Many boxing gyms function like the Main Street Gym, and the youth who train in those gyms are not involved in clandestine activities. Sparring with stereotypes is never-ending, even for us.

Juan and his friends live healthy lives: drug and alcohol free. There are boxers who are into drugs. There are boxers who have been in gangs or prison, Mike Tyson being one famous example. These interests are not prerequisites to excel in the sport. The bad boy image that haunts boxers is merely perpetuated by boxing's master narratives, which work to subjugate marginalized persons and keep more privileged persons, like ourselves, as the main characters in narratives of power.

Conclusion

The Main Street Gym is a complex social community. For many of the youth who train there, their training results in positive outcomes. Even if there is no intentionality on the part of the adults in the gym with regard to creating

positive youth development, development occurs in an organic way, allowing for negative outcomes as well.

Emphasizing the physical development of youth in school may lead to a place where it would be possible to integrate some of the understandings made from this case through practical application. Testing how the development of physical discipline relates to the development of academic discipline could be significant for many youths, who experience feelings of marginalization in their school communities.

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