

Bourdieu, Bodies and Boxing: The Multidimensionality of Bodily Capital

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Abstract. In this paper, I further Bourdieu and Wacquant's concept of bodily capital and develop a framework around three dimensions of bodily capital – phenotypical, trade-specific, and ritualized. I illustrate how each translates into social status or social capital using empirical examples from an ethnographic study of a San Francisco Bay Area boxing gym. I extend my findings beyond the boxing gym by arguing that bodily capital matters in most social situations. Finally, I point to future directions for research on the intersection of bodily capital and social structure, suggesting that further research should highlight the translation mechanisms that turn bodily capital into social status and social capital.

In March 2008, I broke my shin training in Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing). It was not a full fracture; 'just' a hairline fracture that made my leg swell and turn blue for eight weeks. I still fought my first scheduled amateur fight a couple weeks later, on April 4th: I was not going to let a 'small' injury get in the way. I won my fight, and was hooked to fighting. But between me and my hopes to continue muay thai fighting lay a small problem: a broken shin. I was devastated. To console me from my injury, my good friend Donna Winston, also a fighter, gave me Wacquant's (2004) 'Body & Soul.' I devoured it in about three hours, and started reading Wacquant's critics. Krueger and SaintOnge's (2005) critique, in particular, piqued my sociological interest:

Unfortunately, bodily capital will likely receive only modest attention due to Wacquant's specific focus. He only alludes to the possible conversions of bodily capital into various forms of social and cultural capital (e.g., access to influential groups within the boxing community), and he fails to situate bodily capital within a broader sociological framework (Krueger and SaintOnge, 2005: 187).

My 2008 ethnographic study of a boxing gym in the San Francisco Bay Area was designed to push further Wacquant's idea of bodily capital and answer Krueger and SaintOnge's criticism, which has serious sociological implications: how do we make Bourdieu and Wacquant's idea of bodily capital more pertinent to sociological inquiry? To answer this question, I joined a San Francisco Bay Area boxing gym, got IRB approval to study boxers and boxing-gym interactions, and asked: What are the different forms of bodily capital? How do bodies and bodily capital matter for social and cultural capital? The 'Gym' became the microcosm for my investigation; my fists and sociological eye became my weapons.

This paper has three parts. Part I contextualizes my inquiry, describes the gym and lays out my methods. Part II provides the theoretical justification for my investigation, and the theoretical framework I developed as a blueprint to make sense of mechanisms through which bodily capital becomes social or cultural capital. Part III illustrates the mechanisms through which bodily capital becomes social and cultural capital using vignettes from my experiences in the Gym and out as an (over)educated white woman who has come to call herself a boxer.

PART I – Context: Changing Sports and Gender Norms

Much has changed in the sport and exercise realm over the past forty years, especially in the United States, as women and girls defended in court their right to play contact sports (Fields, 2005). Women have entered many previously exclusively male sporting spaces, one of these being the boxing gym. In his book on a Chicago South Side boxing gym where he did observant participation in the late

1980s and early 90s, Wacquant (2004) describes boxing as a quintessentially masculine sport where women play at best instrumental roles as sex objects, lovers, wives, mothers, or sisters. Famed writer Joyce Carol Oates, boxing aficionado, provocatively noted that boxing excludes women just like childbirth excludes men, and that '[i]n any case, raw aggression is thought to be the peculiar province of men, as nurturing is the peculiar province of women. (The female boxer violates this stereotype and cannot be taken seriously – she is parody, she is cartoon, she is monstrous. Had she an ideology, she is likely to be a feminist.)' (Oates, 1987: 73). Yet women have been boxing and fighting in the United States for over a century (Hargreaves, 1997), even though the first fully sanctioned boxing fight among women did not happen until 1993 (Boyle et al., 2006).

Simultaneously, boxing-style workouts have proliferated as one of many fads in the fitness industry (Hargreaves, 1997). The chain LA Boxing, for example, features a website where scantily clad men and women with muscular bodies show off the benefits of boxing-style workouts that are 'Proven to burn 800-1000 calories per hour, making *LA Boxing* a popular workout option for anyone who wants to quickly and effectively get in shape' (www.laboxing.com). Consequently, the doors of what used to be protected spaces controlled by ascetic coaches have been opened to a broader public interested in fitness, demanding workouts, and prospects of weight loss, shapely six packs and toned bodies. Trainers like Wacquant's coach DeeDee, or coach Frankie, impersonated by Clint Eastwood in the movie *Million Dollar Baby*, seem to have become scarcer on the boxing scene, while the number of business (wo)men with an eye for profit has soared in a money-driven fitness industry (Crossley, 2006; Pronger, 2002).

The Gym: A San Francisco Bay Area Melting Pot

The boxing gym of today typically serves an eclectic mix of people from a wide range of gender identities and variegated levels of fitness, socio-economic statuses, races, and religions. As such, it is a hybrid space that affords a rich setting for the empirical study of bodies, gender, and social selves. The boxing gym where I did my observant participation is not, like Wacquant's South Chicago gym, almost uniformly black and poor. It was a space where an extremely diverse set of people and aspirations cohabited: from Latino immigrants with professional boxing aspirations to high-profile white business executives, men and women who paid for personal training by the hour. And in the midst of this heterogeneous crowd, there was me: a white PhD candidate with a non-descript foreign accent, feminist inclinations, boxing aspirations and a research project on the body.

The Gym is a relatively small boxing gym in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unlike bigger gyms, it is the home of only one coach ("Coach"), who is also its owner, and to about 70 members. The Gym is

in a warehouse transformed to accommodate more than ten heavy bags (both sand and water bags, all in perfect repair), two speed bag platforms (but only one speed bag), a full-size ring, stationary bikes, weights, and many different workout instruments, from skipping ropes to cones, steps and medicine balls. The cement floors of the Gym are covered with shock-absorbing surfaces of one kind or another: carpet, artificial grass, or padded rubber.

There are no change rooms and only two bathrooms. One is labeled with a co-ed sign, and the other with a women-only sign, although men do use it when the coed bathroom is busy. Many women get changed in the bathrooms, while most men come in their workout clothes or get changed in front of others, stripping to their boxer shorts. Between the bathroom doors is a corkboard with announcements and current boxing tournament posters, and articles about the Gym's boxers and Coach; under it lie two weight scales. Boxing posters crowd most available walls. Artifacts from the sixties cohabit with month-old tournament posters. Coach's own fighting pictures and trophies are lost among the others. I noticed only two mentions of women on the walls of the gym: one on a poster for a state-wide event, which noted that women and children would also be fighting; one on an event poster where the 'California Ring Girls' logo was featured among sponsors.

The Gym's membership is always in flux, which makes it difficult to provide ratios for gender, racial, or class representation. Many members have been coming for years; 'new meat' (Fussell, 1991) came at a rate of three to five people per month during my stay, and people dropped out at about the same rate. The numbers I present here are thus approximations. The larger part of the clientele is male (my estimate is a 6:1, male/female ratio), white (a 5:3, white/non-white ratio). Members are aged between fourteen and forty-five years-old, and about one in four adult members is overweight – most of them men. There are two 'classes' of members in the Gym: competitive boxers, and those whom I will call 'non-boxers' throughout, in a 1:7 ratio. Non-boxers are people who are coming to the gym for boxing-style workouts, and take circuit training classes that are given twice each evening and include boxing moves and bag work. Boxers pay a monthly fee that is equivalent to about half the price of monthly memberships elsewhere in the Bay Area, while non-boxers pay extra. As such, non-boxers are de facto sponsors of boxers in the Gym. Boxers have a greater status than non-boxers, and rarely mingle with non-boxers. They are also the only ones allowed to do sparring. Worthy of note is a group I call the 'hopefuls,' a small group of (mostly) men who are waiting for Coach to notice them and give them a chance to box. Some of them are working hard to get in shape, lose weight; others are the boxing equivalent of the village idiot.

Only amateur boxers fight out of this gym, even though Coach fancies himself a coach of world champions, and some professional boxers have come to use the facilities and for sparring a few times during my stay. A few of Coach's boxers are nationally ranked, some are up and coming, and some, including myself, are beginners. During the course of this study, most of Coach's boxers were white. Among adult boxers, ages ranged from 22 to 31. Coach's male boxers fight at weights ranging from 145 to 201 pounds, although a male Japanese boxer fighting in the 105-pound division trained temporarily with Coach during the course of his English immersion program. Next to Julia, the only other female boxer in the gym, I looked and felt like a monster (Fieldnotes, August 13): twenty pounds lighter than I, and maybe three inches shorter, she fought three weight categories below me. Interestingly, then, I was simultaneously the heaviest female boxer in the gym and lighter than every competing male boxer, fighting at 138 pounds.

In line with Wacquant's (2004) observations about the Woodlawn Boys Club, little information about private lives was exchanged in the gym, and current events that were not sports related rarely surfaced. It takes time to learn explicitly about people's jobs, origins, marital status, education, etc. Yet visual clues such as people's clothes, gear, cars, etc., tell a lot about their financial means: blue-collar jobs for most men; white- or pink-collar jobs for most women.

Methods: Ethnography of Sports and Theory Building

Sport has become an increasingly appealing field of inquiry for body scholars over the years. From studies of dancing (Hancock, 2005, 2007; Olszewski, 2008) to studies of boxing (Heiskanen, 2004; Jefferson, 1998; Lafferty and McKay, 2004; Sugden, 1996; Wacquant 1995, 1998, 2004, 2005; Woodward, 2004, 2008), bodybuilding (Bolin, 2003; Heywood, 1998; Klein, 1993; Miller, 1991), mixed martial arts (Spencer, 2009), and of variegated gym settings (Crossley 2004, 2005, 2006, Dworkin, 2003; Smith, 2008), the bodies of athletes and of 'normal folk who exercise' has been exposed to increased scrutiny, and so have gym-based interactions. These studies have often exposed the social structure that gets built in spaces where people exercise, filling a previous theoretical void.

The recognition of both the surface (or appearance) and health-related impacts of physical activity on the body has led to growing attention in the health field to the social dimensions of exercise, which make different kinds of activities more or less prevalent among different sub-groups of the population, such as women, the obese, and the poor. Comparative studies have traced the growing importance of 'body panic' and body management among men (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). Nick Crossley has called the conscious use of exercise to impact the body's surface and health '*reflexive* body techniques' (Crossley, 2004: 38) in recognition of their looping effect, and

noted how social interactions were one of the principal motivations for people to stick to their workouts (Crossley, 2006).

With my own ethnographic work in a San Francisco Bay Area boxing gym, I am further theorizing the way bodies – as surfaces where people read meaning, and as ‘machines’ for the enactment of a trade (Wacquant, 1998) – influence social status and social capital. My study is both a reflexive ethnography of sports (Bolin and Granskog, 2003) and an observant participation in a trade (Wacquant, 2009). Bolin and Granskog (2003) identified the following details of a reflexive (and feminist!) ethnographic methodology for sports studies: the ethnographer should reflect upon their position as researcher within interactions; informants should be ‘consultants’ rather than objects to be studied; it is okay to ‘go native’ and redefine the emic / etic dichotomy if one’s goal is to fully participate in the lives of those one describes (Bolin and Granskog, 2003). The latter point, stated otherwise, suggests that in order to better understand the life of athletes, one has to be(come) one. Similarly, Wacquant (2009) described his method of ‘observant participation’ as the process of going native but armed ‘with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal of initiation, to objectivize this experience and construct the object—instead of allowing yourself to be naively embraced and constructed by it’ (Wacquant, 2009).

I collected my data following ethnographic fieldnotes guidelines found in Emerson et al. (1995), with a particular emphasis on bodies. I visited the Gym 64 times between June 9th and October 23rd, logging close to 200 hours of training and observation, and collecting some 150 pages of typed notes. From June 9th to August 21st, I took detailed notes after every training session. After August 21st, I continued training, but stopped taking detailed notes daily to instead record elements that had not yet surfaced as routine, and important events that would help me reconstruct a timeline for the study.

Several of Wacquant’s critics have questioned Wacquant’s legitimacy as a boxer in DeeDee Armour’s gym, and thus his status as insider (Hoffman and Fine, 2005; Krueger and SaintOnge, 2005; Lloyd, 2008; Zussman, 2005). Given my previous martial arts experience, my 1-0 muay thai record, and my initial skill and fitness levels, I was perceived as a legitimate fighter by people in the gym as early as my first week, as is evident in many of my fieldnotes (more below). Furthermore, Coach introduced me as a boxer at least twice: once to the group of youth I helped coaching (“This is [[author’s first name]], she’s a boxer here.’ [Fieldnotes, September 10th]), and once to a friend who came to pick me up after practice, but whom Coach thought was a prospective client (Fieldnotes, October 9th).

It soon became clear that it wouldn't make sense to restrict my study to interactions in the Gym. My identity as a boxer permeated every aspect of my life: my diet, my work schedule, my sleeping needs, and also my social interactions *outside* the gym. To study the boxing body as a social phenomenon quickly appeared to require the documentation of my interactions with the non-boxing world as well. Outside the world of boxers and boxing-gym rats, for whom the idea of a female boxer was unlikely to be revolutionary fifteen years after the landmark first, fully-sanctioned women's fight and sensational boxers like Christy Martin and Lucia Rijker, the reactions that I got from my family, friends, colleagues, and strangers seemed worth recording, as they ranged from 'You're too beautiful to box!' from a professor with whom I teach to 'Kick ass, Woman!' from a feminist friend who also calls herself a warrior. Finally, the high status of male boxers *outside* the gym (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 1995, 2004) could not be assumed to hold true for women, and certainly deserved investigation.

People in the Gym learned that I was a 'Stanford kid' when I begrudgingly admitted it over the course of my study, and I told everyone that I was writing about boxing. As a white, foreign-born graduate student, I probably did not signal a class background that was very different from the other women's, and when I related to others in the gym, it was as a boxer with a genuine interest in learning the skills more than as a researcher. Given the isolating nature of the trade, with intense training and very few women around, my time in the Gym was spent mostly in training, punctuated with observations and interactions with others. In those, I was more often looking for support, advice, and companionship than I was looking for 'members' meaning' as separate from mine (Emerson et al., 1995). Most of my observations happened when I was a focal character in the interaction, and the knowledge I constructed from these recorded observations hinge more on the *co-construction* of meaning than on the *extraction* and *reproduction* of meaning from members by an outsider 'me': our interactions were based on learning the trade, on the meaning of boxing and training, and on the specifics of boxing with women. Rarely did I have the luxury to pry for information without sharing lots about myself. I was in a constant dialogue with others, and in this manner we at the Gym built our common social world. As such, my investigation tried to follow as closely as possible the methodological guidelines discussed by Bolin and Granskog (2003) and Wacquant (2008).

Following Emerson et al. (1995), after my extended fieldwork I conceptualized my notes as a standalone dataset in order to identify major themes and trends, keeping in mind my initial questions: What are the different forms of bodily capital? How do bodies and bodily capital matter for social and cultural capital?

Coding and iterative versions of my findings resulted in a framework around three main dimensions of bodily capital (Part II). Vignettes were chosen for their illustrative potential (Part III), and often edited or re-written for clarity. They remain true to the original notes as much as possible. Conversational lines, when noted verbatim, are in square quotes (“like this”); lines based on recall are in regular text. Finally, many of my informants read parts of this paper, and were asked for permission to use their comments and feedback. Their voice is included herein explicitly on occasion; it shows them contributing to my own understanding of the boxing world. All names are pseudonyms.

Part II – Framework: Of Bourdieu, Social Structures and Bodily Capital

Kath Woodward wrote: ‘The human body is ambiguous, subject to natural laws and to the human production of meaning’ (Woodward, 2008: 542). If the body has a ‘natural’ part subject to physical laws, I argue that the other part, which I will call the ‘socialized’ part, is seen through a whole score of social meanings. These social meanings participate in the attribution of value to the body.

Beyond the bodily capital that translates into performance, and which is the focus of Wacquant’s investigation, I see in the body a latent source of both social and cultural capital. In what follows, I briefly review Bourdieu and Wacquant’s work on bodily capital, before turning to my own framework: the three dimensions of bodily capital, and their associated translation mechanisms.

Bourdieu and Bodily Capital

In 1978, Bourdieu published ‘Sport and Social Class,’ the translation of a paper he gave in Paris at the International Congress of the History of Sports and Physical Education Association. In this paper, Bourdieu attempts to answer questions he says come ‘from outside’ of the sports and exercise realm: they come from sociology. He wonders about the ‘statistical distribution of sports by educational level, age, sex, and occupation,’ but also about the ‘meaning which the practices take on in those relationships’ (1978: 819). His model is a theory of supply of, and demand for, sport. He connects sports to class structure, educational institutions, norms, and gender. He writes:

At this point I shall take the opportunity to emphasize, in passing, that the *social definition of sport* is an object of struggles, that the field of sporting practices is the site of struggles ...; that this field is itself part of the larger field of struggles over the definition of the *legitimate body* and the *legitimate use of the body*, struggles which, in addition to the agents engaged in the struggle over the definition of sporting uses of the body, also involve moralists (Bourdieu, 1978: 827).

This observation allows Bourdieu to further question the association between class and the expected effects of sporting practice on both the ‘outside of the body (bodily hexis)’ and the ‘inside of the body, health, mental equilibrium, etc.’ (1978: 835). Class variations in sporting practices, argues Bourdieu,

reflect differing attitudes to the body: ‘On one side,’ he writes, ‘there is the *instrumental* relation to the body which the working classes express in all the practices centred on the body ... On the other side, there is the tendency of the privileged classes to treat the body as an *end in itself*’ (1978: 838).

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) hypothesizes the following ‘general law’:

a sport is more likely to be adopted by a social class if it does not contradict that class’s relation to the body at its deepest and most unconscious level, i.e., the body schema, which is the depository of a whole world view and a whole philosophy of the person and the body (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 216-7).

The 1978 article foreshadows Bourdieu’s future work: bodily differences resulting from different sporting practices reflect class preferences and values; they are part of one’s habitus, cultural capital in an embodied form. In his very short 1979 ‘Les trois états du capital culturel,’ Bourdieu distinguishes between three kinds of cultural capital (my translation): cultural capital (1) in the embodied state, i.e. durable bodily dispositions¹ - a ‘have’ turned into ‘being,’ or ‘habitus’; (2) in the objectified state, i.e. in the form of cultural goods (such as paintings, books, etc.); and (3) in the institutionalized state, i.e. a sort of objectivation mediated by institutions and conferring some guarantee of a set of particular and original properties upon its owner (such as a school diploma).

Part of the foundations of Bourdieu’s sociology, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), is the following hypothesis:

There exists a correspondence between social structures and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the social world – particularly into dominant and dominated in the various fields – and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 12).

Embodied traits – be they physical or intellectual – become valuable because they are associated with a specific form of cultural capital, which is recognized as habitus, and valuable in specific social locations.

A Bourdieuan, sociologically-informed inquiry into the body, I argue, arises from this triple conceptualization of embodied traits as cultural capital, of the body as an unconscious depository of worldviews, and of social structures as internalized means of categorizing. One of the main goals of sociological inquiry, then, is to illustrate the way embodied cultural capital is perceived and acted upon by individuals or how bodily capital gets translated into other forms of capital.

Loïc Wacquant, a disciple of Bourdieu, also took on the body, as both a tool for and a target of sociological inquiry. He focuses on the acquisition of the ‘durable bodily dispositions’ posited by Bourdieu (1979), *without* engaging the translation mechanisms that make bodily capital valuable outside of the actual – and limited – performance of the trade in question, or how it shapes opportunity for

further individual development through activation of social capital. In Wacquant's studies of boxing, the body is one that learns the trade but is developed in isolation from the social meanings associated with it.

This critique is not solely mine. Kreuger and SaintOnge (2005), quoted in the introduction, formulate a similar one. Others have noted Wacquant's lack of theoretical recognition of bodily differences (Eliasoph, 2005: 166), his blindness to 'micro-level status distinctions (which) connected gym and neighborhood' (Hoffman and Fine, 2005), his lack of a framework for comparing bodies (Farquhar, 2005) and lack of insight into boxers' 'sensibilities about their bodies' (Young, 2005: 183). I hope the following framework addresses some of the shortcomings found in Wacquant's own articulation and exemplification of bodily capital. Because meaning is always context-dependent, I propose a theory of bodily capital that forefronts the role of context in establishing values, and thus in constructing the social and cultural capital that arise from the reading of a body.

The Three Dimensions of Bodily Capital

As stated previously, my project attempted to document the different forms of bodily capital, and to identify the ways bodies and bodily capital matter for social and cultural capital. Inductive coding of my fieldnotes yielded three main dimensions of bodily capital. These dimensions should be understood as analytic foci rather than independent dimensions in a statistical sense. As my analysis below will show, these dimensions' value and connotations interact with one another to complicate the way a body is read, and *together* matter for social interactions and the definition of social status. The first dimension, which I call *phenotypical*, refers to the body's physical characteristics: gender, age, phenotypic race, (dis)ability, general looks (incl. beauty, eye color, etc.), height, body size and proportions. Phenotypical dimensions are relatively fixed and carry status characteristics that will generally hold across contexts. This phenotypical dimension and its impacts are often studied in the social psychological literature on stereotypes, and will be given only limited attention here.

The second dimension, which I call *trade-specific*, refers to the qualities of a body that are understood contextually to be indicators of the ability to perform the trade in question. They are, of course, mediated by phenotypical bodily traits. For example, black people in sports are assumed to be *more* competent than white people (Azzarito and Harrison, 2008; Stewart, 2008). In the case of boxing, gender, speed, strength, muscularity, body fat percentage, etc. will be held to be good predictors of one's current, but also potential, ability. Other trades would provide different blueprints for competence: visual acuity, manual dexterity, cool-headedness under pressure may be seen as good indicators of one's potential as a surgeon, but these will tend to vanish in front of other, more highly

regarded forms of cultural capital such as diplomas, awards, and years of experience. This is what Bourdieu calls institutionalized cultural capital.

Trade-specific bodily capital may appear ‘natural,’ but the ‘naturalness’ of these characteristics at high levels of performance is the result of continued effort and repetition: nobody is born a Mohamed Ali or a world-renowned neurosurgeon. Thousands of hours of practice are necessary to create greatness; trade-specific bodily capital is merely a proxy.

The third dimension I call *ritualized*. It refers to the capital that is built through body-related rituals, individual or collective. Choosing clothes, putting on makeup, sharing food or drinks, and training regularly all are rituals that have bearings on how the body looks, how it is perceived, and the habitus that is read on it. The wrong clothes, too much drinking, and slacking off on training have visible effects on the body, and negative impacts on one’s bodily capital. Through rituals, however, it is not merely the body that is nurtured: hierarchies are made and undone. The team-building and bonding exercises football players undergo together (beatings, public humiliation, sleeping in the cold, over-indulging on food and / or alcohol) are such rituals. Successful participation in those rituals has consequences that go beyond bodily capital as seen in sports performance: it matters for social interactions, and therefore for status and belonging (Stewart, 2008). When it comes to boxing, sparring and weight-maintenance / dieting are such rituals. Rituals are learned, contextual; access to them, as we will see later, depends partly on one’s phenotypical and trade-specific bodily characteristics.

In what follows, I will illustrate the fruitfulness of this framework in analyzing group interactions in the specific context of the Gym. In line with the Bourdieuan project outlined above, I argue that the interpretation by social agents of the phenotypical, trade-specific, and ritualized dimensions of bodily capital reflect broad social values, as well as context-specific ones; and that these interpretations and ensuing classifications matter for actors’ social and cultural capital.

PART III – The Multidimensionality of Bodily Capital

A. Phenotypical Dimension

One of the most obvious phenotypical aspects of the body that matter in a boxing gym is gender. The relative scarcity of women in competitive boxing, combined with the hypermasculine nature of the trade and its mythology, makes gender highly salient in sports overall, and in the boxing gym in particular (Boddy, 2008; Lafferty and McKay, 2004; Wacquant, 2004; Jefferson, 1998; Hargreaves, 1997; Oates, 1987).

Witness this interaction between a competitive boxer and myself:

A. [June 24, 2008; 9th visit] I get in front of the mirror and start working. I am concentrating on my stance, on keeping my back straight, on punching while keeping my core tight, without leaning. I feel like I'm getting a feel for this. James is getting changed behind me. I can see him in the mirror, but I concentrate on doing my thing. ... He shouts at me; there are a lot of people and noise around:

J. *Bleb-bleb-bleb bleb.*

At first I don't understand what he says. He has an accent that I find hard to understand.

E. 'Pardon?' I ask, without turning around to face him. I am looking at him in the mirror.

J. 'You still wanna fight?'

E. 'Yes.'

J. 'It always makes me laugh when a girl wants to fight.'

I turn around, face him; he's standing up, taller than I. Bigger than I – 140 vs. 165 lbs.

E. 'Why?'

There is defiance in my voice, and probably in my stance too. I am standing tall, looking at him straight in the eye. I am trying to act tough. I am scared to death. I wonder if he's going to punch me. Or if I'll punch him first. Do fights ever break out in the gym?

J. 'Don't see that too often.' And he starts laughing.

I look behind him at the guys who were there, who may have heard everything. ... I avoid everybody's eyes. I try to get back to the task, but I can't. I am torn between the need to say something and to write the interaction down so that I don't forget his exact words; I battle my impulse to run to the bathroom to cry. I was on the edge when I stepped into the gym; it's now unbearable.

Before this one interaction, I did not know James' name. I had heard that he fights at 165 pounds from someone else. We had spoken once, a few days earlier, when he asked whether I was going to fight, or whether I was 'just workin' out' [June 20, 2008; 7th visit]. On June 24th, after this second troubling interaction, Coach asked me how I was doing and why I was upset. When I told him about the incident, and the tall guy who had made those comments, Coach struggled to identify whom I could be talking about. Further descriptions made us agree that the culprit was James, but Coach expressed his surprise, for James had been supportive of Julia, the other female boxer in the Gym. Coach told me he would speak with James immediately, that he considered this behavior inappropriate, and that the Gym should feel like a second home to everyone, including me.

Social studies that do not pay attention to bodies would see a male boxer picking on a female boxer and would posit sexism. The complicating factor that James supported another female boxer would be either ignored, or rationalized away: maybe he was in a bad mood that day? James and I had never had a conversation, so he knew as little about me as I knew about him. He could not have reacted much to my foreign accent, my value system, or my level of education, especially since I had

kept to myself as much as possible at the beginning of my training in the Gym, to better study the people, the space, and to learn to box. When I discussed this event with Julia, she told me she has also received flak from James at times, but that he did cheer her on at her fights. And I saw them interact on friendly terms many times.

The things James may have reacted to were some of my body traits, what I have called my phenotypical characteristics: a woman, tall, muscular, attractive, and white. In contrast, Julia was a woman of color, short, lean, and attractive. She received conditional support; I received grief first, then was ignored by James till the end of my stay at the Gym. This example is but one that illustrates the importance of the crude phenotypical characteristics of bodies as they are perceived by social actors. In the Gym as in real life, the experiences of women are not uniform: I was made to feel uncomfortable by an experienced boxer while another woman boxer was not. If we fail to look at bodies, we provide limited explanations of social phenomena and construct a uniform world where the experiences of women (or of men) do not vary. Beyond gender, other traits such as height, muscularity, and ethnicity play critical roles in shaping interactions and determining social outcomes. In the following section, I push these ideas further and look at the importance of the trade-specific dimension of bodies for social interactions.

B. Trade-Specific Dimension

I have argued above that trade-specific embodied traits depend upon the phenotypical traits of the body. I illustrate this argument in three different ways. I show how images of the ideal-typical body import in attributing status, how the woman-specific bodily process of menstruation affects performance and within-group status, and how the same body – mine – is read and experienced differently based on context.

Ideal-typical bodies and social status

Each trade has an associate set of bodily characteristics that serve as a blueprint to define the ideal-typical body of the skilled practitioner. What my fieldnotes suggest is that, net of skill, someone with the ideal-typical bodily characteristics will have greater social status within her or his trade *because* they own some bodily capital that directly translates into beliefs about trade-specific ability. Consequently, such ‘bodies’ are very likely to be attributed a greater skill level than those bodies who lack this embodied bodily capital. Such attribution has very real consequences in terms of performance and social status. Owners of bodies high on trade-specific bodily capital are likely to receive more attention from coaches and peers, obtain favors, get more feedback, and opportunities to grow than owners of bodies low on this dimension.

Above, I have quickly contrasted these characteristics in the case of boxers and surgeons. To determine the ideal typical body of the boxer is a relatively hard task, as the many weight classes allow for a wider range of body sizes than is typical in other sports. Compared to professional American football, for example, where the absolute smallest players almost always weigh over 175 pounds, boxing has champions that range from 105 pounds to more than 260 pounds. Especially among ‘the rank and file, the ‘preliminary’ boxers, club fighters, prospects and contenders, journeymen and opponents, trial horses and bums, who constitute the overwhelming majority of practitioners’ (Wacquant, 1995: 490), variation among fighting bodies is immense. From tiny and wiry to huge and overweight, boxers come in all sizes, shapes, and forms. Regardless, athletic ‘specimens’ [August 8, 2008; side notes] who fit the widely available ideal-typical image of the professional boxer – muscular, lean, dark, and fierce – command a lot of attention from everyone. The following portrait is of Theo. It illustrates the consequences, positive and negative, of having the ideal-typical body for the trade.

Theo is back!

I had been a member of the Gym for three months when I first met Theo. I saw him for the first time on the train. His hair had grown into a large Afro, but I immediately recognized him from the shirtless pictures of him that I had seen on the Gym’s website, on posters in the Gym, and on the flyers Coach distributes to newcomers. When he got up to get off at the same stop as I, I overheard part of an animated conversation he had with a train employee: ‘Do you play soccer?’ He wore long, knee-high white socks. I heard Theo answer: ‘No, I’m a boxer.’ [August 11, 2008; 32nd visit], and saw the train employee get into a very animated conversation with him. My first intuition was confirmed. Over six feet tall, handsome, in his early 20s but with a thick beard and the body of a very committed body builder – he had very visible eight-pack abdominal muscles which he showcased by walking around shirtless at the Gym – he stood out so much in the Gym that he was the only boxer a straight male friend of mine mentioned after his visit [October 9, 2008; 58th visit].

When he walked into the Gym after me that day, the whispers began: ‘Theo is back!’ ‘Theo is back!’ Coach and Theo had a long conversation as soon as Theo got in the gym, after which they both worked together in the ring. Theo kept his street shoes on: an action that would have resulted in severe reprimand for anybody else who dared to do so. Boxing shoes, we were told, were a *sine qua non* for getting in the ring.

Upon noticing Theo, Ahmed, a non-boxer, told me: Theo is back. He looks fit; he’s probably still been working out [August 11, 2008; 32nd visit]. To Ahmed, the fact that Theo had not been coming to the Gym was less important than his visible level of fitness. As she joined us for stretches, Gloria, a

non-boxer, pointed out that Theo was back. When she arrived to teach the 6pm class, Julia also noticed that Theo was back, went to see him and got into a lengthy discussion with him. For two and a half hours that day, there was a ‘Theo’ buzz throughout the Gym. Theo is back! Theo is back! I heard people say everywhere around me.

However, as I watched him skip rope, shadow box, or work on the mitts with Coach, I was not impressed, and I did not see the boxer that I was expecting from the body or the continuous murmurs. He skipped slower than Bob; looked less focused than Vlad; his moves were not as fluid as Yasu’s; he did not hit as hard nor as fast as Jack, a boxer his size; and he was nowhere close to Mark’s skill level. All of these guys were regulars, showed more obvious skill on at least one significant level, but none of them were on promotional material, nor was there a buzz around them – if not for rumors among the teenage girls of Jack as a player and Mark’s popularity with older men in the Gym who saw him fight.

When, during my coding, I stumbled upon my fieldnotes for that day, I decided to cross-check my intuition by calling Mark, a white boxer with a lot of experience and acclaimed skills. What did he think of Theo’s skill level? The conversation went for at least five minutes, but can be summarized by three sentences that Mark uttered: Coach thinks he’s great, but ‘I personally don’t think he’s a boxer’; he has ‘muscle, but they are beach muscles’; and ‘Jack has the same feeling’ [January 10, 2009; fieldnotes]. Theo embodied the ideal-typical boxer, and received a lot of attention and enjoyed quite some status in the Gym for it. His skill level, however, did not match his body, and his boxing record, which I can’t disclose here, certainly did not match it either. In short, visible embodied traits that were not boxing-specific paid off not with his trade but certainly for his social standing among non-boxers and with Coach.

Bodily processes, trade-specific requirements, and status

Biologically-driven bodily changes have bearings on the level of bodily capital one gains from embodied traits. Ageing, for one, affects appearance and hormonal levels, and shapes the way people perceive and interact with others. In the boxing gym, a woman-specific body change often goes under the radar: menstruation. The example of Julia’s weight management is used to illustrate the consequences of this body change on her performance and status with other women.

Julia’s Weight

B. [August 5, 2008; 29th visit] I saw Mark and a few youth weighing themselves today in preparation for the State Championships. Julia and I are supposed to drive down together, but she thinks it unlikely that she’ll be able to make weight because of her period. I give her my phone number so that she can let me know whether or not we’ll be driving down. Gloria is sitting on the bench next to us. With a sad smile on her face,

Julia tells us both how men never have to worry about their period; they don't have to worry about added water weight.

While every man boxer who enrolled to fight at the State Championships made weight, Julia did not, and Coach decided that it was not safe for her to fight in the category above her regular fighting category – five pounds heavier. It is impossible for me to know whether Coach had weight-related conversations with Julia, of the type that I witnessed with men boxers, for example when he gave a youth boxer grief for failing to make weight [July 1, 2008; 12th visit], or when he told a nationally-ranked boxer that he needed to lose twenty pounds if he wanted to be competitive [August 18, 2008; 38th visit].

It seems that women's periods seems to conflict with the weight class system of boxing, especially for the lighter women who fight in five-pound-wide weight classes. And it is a fact that women's weight management task is much more complex than men's. Yet serious women fighters have come up against the discourse that posits women as victims of their period. Monica, a boxer I met through a friend and who aspires to be a professional in the near future, wrote in response to a previous version of this paper:

C. I hate to be critical of Julia, but give me a break—we all have to make weight when we have our periods at some point or another and we all do it, it is not impossible by any means and water weight is the easiest kind of weight to lose. It sounds to me like she was looking for an excuse to get out of fighting ... you cannot be a fighter halfway, either you're going to do it and you do whatever it takes to do it or you're going to be a fitness boxer, it's very simple [January 13, 2009; Sidenotes].

Similarly, in an interview with FOX News, Tara LaRosa, a professional mixed martial artist said she 'was absolutely mortified, horrified' when she heard of the recent weight mishaps of professional fighters Gina Carano and Cristiane Cyborg Santos, which were blamed on 'female problems' (FOX News, April 30, 2009). This type of discourse, she says, is sending professional women athletes years back, and makes women fighters 'look terrible.'

On the one hand, a sex-specific bodily process complicates the weight management task of women and may affect performance; on the other, women who act as victims of biological processes are often demoted to recreational status by serious women athletes. They are called 'fitness boxers' (says Monica) or make other women fighters 'look terrible' (says Tara LaRosa). Making weight is both a biological and a political embodied process for women.

Context and changing experiences of the body

More than ten years ago, Lynda Birke (1999) urged sociologists to undertake a phenomenological study of the body to emphasize 'the *lived body* ... This is a body that is not given but

is both signifying and signified, historically contingent and social' (Birke, 1999: 43). The following discussion, which takes my fieldnotes as a departing point, shows how the same body – here, mine – can come to mean different things across contexts, and impacts the way social actors come to act and interact with others.

Dancing / Fighting Body

D. [July 26, 2008; Sidenotes] I go dancing with some friends in the Mission. I am the last one in our line as we make our way to the patio area. As I walk past him, a man steps in front of me and grabs me by the shoulders. He is shorter than I, wearing a summery shirt, cargo shorts and a hat. He says: 'Oh my god you look so fit!' before turning to his friend and asking:

M: Doesn't she look fit? She concurs, smiling shyly behind him. What's your workout?

E: I box.

M: Awesome! That's so great!

I laugh, look to the floor; it is quite embarrassing.

E. [October 11, 2008; Sidenotes] Monica and I decided to go together to a fighting event in San Francisco. She is wearing a black tank top, revealing awesomely muscular shoulders, large blue jeans that sit low on her hips, and brown flip flops. I am wearing my favorite jeans, my cowboy boots, and my red spaghetti-strap tank top. The doormen let us go through for free, telling us that – rather than asking us whether – we're fighting tonight. It feels funny. People look at us constantly, as there are few women in the room at that point, and certainly none that are as muscular as we are. I'm smiling, happy to be there, standing tall, muscular and lean.

While one could think that either (1) my body had changed over that two-and-a-half month period; (2) I had grown accustomed to my new musculature. Neither is totally right. The pictures I have of my body over this time period belie the possibility of (1); and I still regularly feel uncomfortable with my 'bulk' when I am not in a sporting context, belying (2). What this hints to is the extent to which the value of a certain embodiment is experienced to be context dependent. In the dancing club I felt embarrassed, while at the boxing event I felt proud.

Perry and Marsh (2000) write that:

Athletes must develop their bodies in order to exert force in their competitive environments. For most sports, that requires a physique that is strong, powerful, and lean. These concepts of force, power and strength are atypical of the societal stereotype for women. In many cultures, women are regarded as submissive, nurturing, and demure. Women may perceive that these are desirable traits in attracting partners and establishing relationships. If the female athlete accepts this image of women, there is the potential for role conflict to develop (Perry and Marsh 2000: 70).

I want to complicate the theory of Perry and Marsh and bring context to the forefront. The woman athlete experiences her body differently because others around her also see it differently. It is not merely a psychological process, where women question the desirability of their bodies; it is a complex

dialectic between the athlete's body and different local definitions of what bodily traits are valued, as they are manifested in the reaction of social actors and in interaction with the athlete. Others are critical in this process of self-definition, and context determines which 'others' the athlete will interact with. The athlete's social capital in interaction with others is therefore contingent on the value others attribute to different embodied traits. In my case, it is lean muscularity, height and a posture and demeanor that signal strength.

Revisiting James' response in light of embodied bodily capital

In the previous section, I discussed possible reasons why James would have responded the way he did to my presence in the Gym. In my previous answer, I emphasized phenotypical traits. What I want to suggest here is a more complex explanation that combines phenotypical with the value of trade-specific embodied traits. My body, even if read as 'woman,' signaled 'fighter' to others in the Gym, even before they saw me fight. One of the most vocal youth in the Gym championed my 'muay thai fighter' status among the youth, and once I started teaching the youth classes, they came to me asking for tips on kicks, elbows and knees, which are all above and beyond the boxing curriculum. Mark, a high-status boxer in the Gym, asked me if I had been a professional muay thai fighter [July 14, 2008; 19th visit], and a middle-aged non-fighter with whom I had never spoken asked, upon my return from a two-week holiday:

- F. [September 12, 2008; 41st visit] S. 'Where have you been?'
E. My sister got married, so I spent two weeks back home.
S. 'I was wondering whether you had gone pro or something.'

I cannot know for sure how Julia was perceived at the Gym. Yet it is possible to revisit my interaction with James (see Fieldnote A above) in light of the understanding of embodiment that I have developed in this section. James, like other people in the Gym, may have read my muscular body, my attitude, my focus, and my posture as those of a fighter, if not of a boxer. I looked like a boxer, and acted as one; Julia was smaller, more feminine, always smiling, and played a nurturing role with non boxers through teaching – she did not embody the boxer the way I did. I was (and am?) a little bit like Theo – closer to the ideal-typical boxer – and thus more an irritant to James than Julia, who was much more compliant with typical womanly behaviors of nurturance and meekness, and thus much less of a threat.

To conclude, when we study social interactions, we should pay attention to the raw features of the bodies of the people in the interaction: gender, race, body size, etc. However, to better comprehend interactions in specific contexts, our analyses should also include an analysis of trade-specific bodily

traits: whether actors' bodies fit the ideal-typical body for the trade; whether they are undergoing bodily changes that may affect their interactions and performance; and how actors experience their bodies across social situations.

C. Ritualized component of bodily capital

In American culture as elsewhere, the body is maintained and transformed through individual and social rituals. One can see how eating and exercising, which can be done individually or socially, take on a special meaning and value when they are done in someone else's company or in a group. Think about dates over lunch or dinner; think of fitness clubs where people get their workouts in alongside silent strangers (Dworkin, 2003); or think of individual competitive sports such as running and cycling, where 'the nature and strength of one's athletic support network' really matters for performance (Granskog, 2003: 28).

With regards to boxing, it has been noted that '[b]oxing bodies are saturated by disciplinary techniques and are highly regulated and self-disciplined through a set of routine practices and mechanisms' (Woodward, 2008: 542). These routines are highly social. Even if boxing is an individual sport, boxers develop collectively, in deep connection with their coaches and the people they train with, and it is commonly said that a boxer is only as good as his / her sparring partners. Two types of boxing-specific social rituals were particularly prominent in the Gym: sparring and weight management. In what follows, I illustrate how sparring and weight-management rituals impacted both the bodily capital and the social capital of boxers.

Sparring: Learning together and defining status

Sparring is a critical part of a boxer's training, as it is at once the best approximation of actual fighting, and the riskiest of all drills. In the words of a woman boxer whom I interviewed, sparring is 'fighting that no one ever sees' [July 18, 2008; Interview notes]. Wacquant's own accounts of sparring are of undeniable quality. Briefly: two people are selected to work on their fighting skills together. There are no points, no judges nor declared 'winners' and 'losers'; only coaches and curious onlookers watching boxers hit each other in order to learn to fight and fine-tune their skills.

In the Gym, sparring occurred when Coach thought a student was 'ready.' Beginners started by being paired with a boxer with more experience who is expected to be in control and limit potential for escalation and injury (see also Smith, 2008b, on wrestling, and Spencer, 2009, on mixed martial arts). Typically, the least experienced or smaller boxer works on offensive strategies – punching, moving around – while the more experienced or larger boxer works on defensive strategies – avoiding,

blocking, ducking punches, sometimes counter-attacking, and getting out of the ropes. Over time, the goal is for boxers to progress through different types of sparring and build up the total set of skills that is required to fight a good fight. Before a fight, Coach makes his boxers spar each other in rotation: a few rounds with the toughest lined up opponent, a few rounds with the second toughest, etc., until the line is over or the lead boxer collapses in front of a much weaker opponent, signaling extreme fatigue.

What 'being ready' means seems to vary as much as the general atmosphere of the gyms, based on the 'personality, pedagogic style, and authority of [the gym's] head coach' (Wacquant, 1995: 492), but for Coach it meant (1) being USA boxing certified, and (2) being conditioned – in good boxing shape [June 9, 2008; 1st visit]. The risk of injury that *necessarily* comes with boxing is summarized in the nifty little phrase 'one does not 'play' at boxing,' seen in Wacquant (1995: 496), and heard from the mouth of a boxer with whom I went to watch fights: 'You don't play at boxing!' she said, critical of a boxer who told her mother that she had 'had fun' during her fight, even though she lost by referee stoppage (TKO) [October 11, 2008; Sidenotes]. As my days in the Gym went by, it became clear that Coach's reticence to have just anyone spar was rooted in more than an imperative to minimize injuries.

G. [July 2, 2008; 13th visit] [After I told him that I was not happy with the speed at which my training was going,] Coach tells me that he's particularly tough on the rookies. They work really hard, get little playtime, he says, adding: 'I will neglect you.' He continues: You need to show dedication and commitment. If I did not do this [put newcomers on a tryout period], and accepted everyone on the team, I'd have 500 people or something. It takes patience. I watch you from the corner of my eye, and I know what we need to work on. But you have to be able to work on your own and do your own thing.

Coach, just like Wacquant's DeeDee, talked as though he felt the need to preserve the sport from the contaminating influence of those who were not serious about it, thus acting as a gate keeper. While DeeDee routinely kicked out of his gym people who lacked dedication (Wacquant, 2004), Coach lets everybody in, making them 'pay their dues' in cash and sweat while he protects his coaching time by issuing a universal warning to newcomers: you will not become a boxer until I think you are ready. Among members of the Gym, only a select crew of about ten percent was approved by Coach to get in the ring, automatically creating a very visible divide between boxers and non-boxers. Beyond this divide, a further status hierarchy was maintained and challenged *among* boxers based on three main mechanisms.

First, Coach's management of sparring reinforced a skill-based hierarchy. He chose the matchups, thereby choosing who will put pressure on whom in the ring, who will learn from whom. By defining who is the underdog in his matchups, Coach identifies his favorites, who gain status by

association. Second, sparring is a simulation of fighting that happens in front of people with whom you are acquainted through training. The fact that the hierarchy of skills is showcased regularly reinforces or shakes the Gym's members' perception of the dominance of certain fighters. Third, and more interestingly, I have found that the hierarchy among boxers is visible through people's bodily displays. In what follows, I look specifically at the way men displayed their bodies in sparring. This social ritual bespoke the hierarchy among fighters.

Men's Shirts: Frogs, ponds, bodies

I did not come into the gym looking specifically at how men dress and undress in social contexts, but progressively grew more interested in it with time. Early during my stay at the Gym, I made an observation that I shared with Ahmed, a non-boxer with whom I frequently interacted during workouts:

H. [June 26, 2008; 10th visit] I ask Ahmed whether he's noticed how the big guys seem to take their shirts off in the ring [Jack, Mark], while the smaller guys do not [youth fighters, Vlad, Yasu]. He says that he hasn't noticed, laughs and says 'I can see that.' Coach and Jack are currently in the ring, sparring time away. Coach is wearing a shirt. Jack is not.

Thus started an investigation of men, their bodies and their shirts, that made me take notes such as: '[June 30, 2008; 11th visit] Both Mark and Vlad take their shirts off in front of everybody. I notice that there's no other big guy around today. Jack is not here; James is not either. Ahmed is wearing a very large red t-shirt.' Compiled, these notes yielded the following insights and lists (boxers are sorted in decreasing fighting weight): (1) Some guys always take their shirts off when sparring: Jack, Mark. (2) Some guys sometimes take their shirts off when sparring: Theo, James, Jake. (3) Some guys walk around the gym shirtless, but keep their shirts on when sparring: Bob, Vlad, Yasu. From these lists, I came to make two solid observations, and a tentative third one that would need further investigation:

1. In the Gym, only boxers take off their shirts and walkabout shirtless. I could not find any instance in my notes of non-boxers taking off their shirts. The closest I have seen are three guys, really good friends who came together to the gym to lose weight, who looked at their abdominal muscles in the mirror together without taking off their shirts [June 17, 2008; 5th visit].
2. While sparring, the bigger guys [Jack, Mark] always take their shirts off. They are also the only ones who almost always walk around the Gym shirtless. An exception is Jack, who almost always wears a shirt when he is teaching the evening cardio-boxing classes.
3. The smaller-sized boxers will take off their shirts only if their opponent has less experience than them, is smaller, or has more body fat than they do. For example, when James spars with Jack or Mark, he keeps his shirt on. But when he spars Jake, he takes his shirt off. Similarly, Jake will keep his shirt on if he spars Mark, but will take it off if he spars the younger guys, who have less body fat than he does, but also much less muscle. Bob, a newcomer, keeps his shirt on at all times in the ring; the same holds for another newcomer,

Vlad. And Yasu, the 105-pounder, took his shirt off only when getting changed or to weigh himself.

What these observations suggest is that the ‘frog pond effect’ noticed in schools in terms of academic performance, group means, and self appraisal may also hold subconsciously for boxers in relation to their bodies and physical performance. Boxers assess their bodily worth and choose to display it based on who else is present in the Gym. In doing so, they reinforce a hierarchy based on looks and take their place within this order. A social psychological study or a more rigorous time study could be designed to test this hypothesis in other gyms. Probably unconsciously, boxers in the Gym dressed and undressed in ways that revealed a sort of social hierarchy based on bodily traits. Whether and how such a display of bodily capital impacts performance and social capital would require further inquiry.

Weight management and social rituals

Weight is a critical aspect of boxing culture as boxing is done in weight classes and champions are champions of a specific weight class. The expression ‘pound for pound best fighter’ tries to write skill across weight classes, but weight so fundamentally shapes boxing styles and the stakes of boxing that it is unavoidable. In the Gym, boxers and non-boxers alike interacted around weight in their attempts to lose, gain, or maintain weight. I already discussed the example of Julia, who argued she could not make weight because of her period, and briefly mentioned two male boxers who were strongly advised on their weight by Coach. In this section, I use three weight-related interactions to illustrate how social interactions partake in the transformation of the body, but also enter into a feedback loop that further determines social status. I then revisit the case of Julia, in order to highlight gender components of weight management and their effects on performance.

I can see it, Man!

If weight is critical in boxing, it also is in the broader American culture. As such, weight also figures in social interactions among members of the Gym who do not box. For example, I saw the following types of interactions quite regularly:

I. [June 23, 2008; 8th visit] Ahmed and Raid arrive as Peter is doing sit-ups on the bench. Loudly, Ahmed asks Peter how he’s doing with the weight loss. ‘I can see it, Man,’ he adds. Peter says that he’s hoping he’s lost 5 pounds, that he’ll weigh himself at the end of the month. He started on a diet at the beginning of the month. He was 165, he says, and wants to drop down to 155, and then to 140. Ahmed insists: I can see it. It shows.

These men feel comfortable discussing their weight openly, and losing weight appears as a very legitimate goal that commands support. There is no ‘invisible fat man’ (Bell and McNaughton, 2007) in the Gym. Ahmed, who lost a lot of weight by attending the Gym’s boxing-style classes, is showing

sympathy for Peter – an aspiring amateur boxer who had not yet received Coach’s okay – with his weight-loss goal. Ahmed and Raid very regularly stated their weight loss goals and how attendance to the Gym had helped them. They told me they wished they had taken pre- and post-training pictures, to show their progress over time [June 17, 2008; 5th visit]. This finding aligns with the findings of Crossley (2006), for example, who found weight gain to be one of the main motivations for joining a gym.

Among boxers, weight is not *allowed* to be a taboo. As Oates wrote, ‘Like a dancer, a boxer ‘is’ his body, and is totally identified with it. And the body is identified with a certain weight’ (Oates, 1987: 5). The discussion I witnessed between Coach and a youth athlete was held in a very public space, on the sit-up planks. The youth manifested some discomfort – looking away from Coach as he spoke – but his many years of competitive boxing suggest that it is probably not the *contents* of the discussion (weight) that made him uncomfortable, but rather his failure at meeting his weight goal: a serious mishap for someone who claims to be serious about boxing [July 1, 2008; 12th visit].

My experience in the Gym suggests that weight management is also a bonding ritual among boxers, just like it was for Ahmed, Raid and Peter. Indeed, weigh-ins in the Gym are bonding ceremonies. Before competitions, there was a sort of weight buzz around the scales. Mimicking the procedure for official weigh-ins, many would strip down to their underwear while others looked over their shoulders and cheered them on. Yasu, the Japanese 105-pound boxer, also stripped to his underwear. Yet when he weighed himself he moved the scale a little to the side, and remained silent when I asked him how much he weighs [June 30, 2008; 11th visit].

Even if our weight was public knowledge, and Coach asked me how much I weigh as early as my first visit, neither Julia nor myself participated in these public weigh ins. For my part, I would be extremely self-conscious if I had to strip to my underwear in front of people I train with. My own attitude can’t be assumed to be that of other women boxers. While in Quebec we did strip to our bathing suits for the Golden Gloves, for my local weigh-in in October 2009 the officials asked that I keep my pants on. Still: the fact that I have never seen a women besides myself weigh themselves at the Gym speaks volumes to the gendered nature of weight.

Finally, witness the following discussion between Mark and myself, in the first third of my participation in the Gym:

- J. [July 14, 2008; 19th visit] Mark is weighing himself again. I ask, smiling:
E. Good news?
[He remains silent]
E. Bad news? News?
M. How much do you weigh? I bet you’re heavier than you look.

E. 'I'm huge!'

M. You're huge?? [Smiling]

E. Oh. Yeah.

Mark makes a motion inviting me to step on the scale. I step on it. We're both looking. 146.8, with my pants, sports bra, t-shirt, hand wraps, shoes and socks.

M. You're probably 142. This scale makes you heavier than you are. I weigh 188 on this one, but 182 at home.

E. Interesting...

M. Are you fighting soon? [Very friendly, smiling.]

E. Hopefully! If I ever get certified!

M. Is it your first time...?

E. I did Muay Thai before.

M. That doesn't count, it's all about [and he makes as if he's throwing a knee with his left leg.]

E. [Laugh] I had a first fight there...

M. Pro?

E. [Laughing] No, not at all. Amateur. But I loved it. That's why I'm here.

M. [Smiles.] Alright.

We both get back to work.

Mark and I bonded over this moment, got started on regular boxing-related conversations, and remained in regular contact even after I left the Gym for another training hall. By first claiming loudly 'I'm huge!' then stepping on the scale, I made myself vulnerable in front of a relative stranger. By that point, we had had at most half a dozen conversations. Meanwhile, I got acknowledged *as a fighter* by a fighter with status. I was deeply energized by this encounter and felt more comfortable asking him for advice or support later.

Revisiting Julia's case in light of weight-based rituals

Julia claimed she did not make weight because of her period. The (possibly self-imposed) exclusion of women from weight-related rituals in the Gym highlights how the social support that male boxers visibly give one another with their weight goals was not extended to her. The social capital that men gain from these types of interactions make the effort of managing weight a collective endeavor. On another note, I know that I personally failed to support her, even as I noticed her gain weight in the few weeks before the Championships – it was apparent in her clothing. Was it because I did not want to add to the social pressures placed on women to be thin? Was it because I felt shame for noticing, which meant I was 'checking her out' enough that I would notice a few extra pounds on her tiny frame, thereby violating ethnographic guidelines for keeping distance from 'informants' (Dennis, 2000)? Or did I somehow despise her failure to meet one of the fundamental demands of boxing as she gained weight? Clearly, she and I did not build the social capital that men built in their rituals.

Further, the fact that in my fieldnotes I felt the need to write down all that I was wearing for my weigh-in with Mark highlights my subconscious internalization of gendered weight norms, and my need to ‘justify’ my ‘huge’ weight to a perceived audience.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed a framework for the study of bodily capital inspired by the work of Bourdieu on embodied bodily capital and sports. I have identified three main dimensions (or analytic foci) to bodily capital – phenotypical, trade-specific, and ritualized – and illustrated the different ways these traits shape social interactions, and get transformed into social. While my research could be dismissed as idiosyncratic for its exclusive focus on boxing and boxers, I am confident that the framework can be applied to many other contexts. On the one hand, the many studies on race, gender, height and age, and their associated stereotypes support the importance of my first dimension of bodily capital – phenotypical – and its impact on social interactions. On the other hand, the value people place on bodies varies by context and task, and could have much to do with the salience of the body for these contexts and tasks. The more salient to the task the body is, the more likely it will matter in ascribing status. The less salient, the less likely.

What we learn from the investigation I presented here is the salience of visible bodily traits in shaping social interactions and influencing social status and social capital. The dimensions I identified help us understand the influence of the body beyond its mere appearance, and beyond the embodied, durable dispositions identified by Bourdieu and Wacquant as constituting the main repository of bodily capital in the form of *habitus*. Bodies shape social interactions and social structures, and social structures influence bodily shapes. Bourdieu was quick to note the class-based variation in bodily esthetics; Foucault noted the many self-disciplinary bodily techniques that turn social ideals of the body into self-government of the body. The dimensions I identify here illustrate the way bodies work to structure space and create hierarchies and opportunities.

A more careful investigation of people’s bodies as they change and across contexts, using a variety of methods, is likely to provide us with more refined understandings of how bodily capital gets activated and translated into social status or social capital. It will speak to Bourdieu’s insights into the embodied nature of cultural capital – *habitus* – in its physical dimensions; it will allow for the identification of body-associated worldviews; and will show the way social structures are internalized as body-specific means of categorization. The body and its rituals are important manifestations of culture, and have been thoroughly investigated by anthropologists. The way body rituals, individual and

collective, actually impact social standing and interactions through increased or depleted stocks of bodily capital has not yet been studied systematically, and stands as an opportunity for sociologists to investigate culture through bodies.

Interest in the body is not new. As sociologists, we have to pay attention to the ways bodies matter in social interactions, for social status, and how they impact, reproduce, and challenge social structure. Re-thinking our theories through the three bodily dimensions I have identified above and illustrated in this paper may allow us to go beyond the Cartesian body / mind dichotomy that most of our work too often assumes (Farquhar, 2005; Paechter, 2006). It may also adjust our vision of society, and better document the way social structures are transformed into mental structures, and mental structures into social structures.

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Notes

¹ Original French: ‘à l’état incorporé, c’est-à-dire sous la forme de dispositions durables de l’organisme’ (Bourdieu, 1979 : 3).

² Boxers in the United States need to obtain a license to fight. Among amateurs, USA Boxing and its regional branches are responsible for this process.

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