

PART TWO  
MEN'S VIOLENCE AND SPORT

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“Be a Buddy to Your Buddy”

Male Identity, Aggression, and  
Intimacy in a Boxing Gym

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Boxing has been represented as a powerful metaphor for (Early, 1994) or symbol of (Oates, 1995) masculinity. However, the role of gender relations is conspicuously absent in most previous empirical research on boxing culture (Hare, 1973; Sugden, 1987; Weinberg & Arond, 1969). Where gender relations are mentioned, they are dismissed matter-of-factly, as if no explanation is needed (Wacquant, 1992). To the contrary, gender relations in boxing culture are not unitary and self-explanatory. Rather, gender identities in boxing culture are historically diverse and actively negotiated and interpreted, with significant variations in subjective experiences.

Therefore, this chapter questions the presumption of masculinity in boxing. By examining masculinity both as a rhetorical construct and as patterns of behavior, this chapter explores the complexities and variations of masculine identity and expression in boxing culture. Based on

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the results of a 10-month ethnography of a New York City boxing gym, I discuss the salience of gender in the construction of male boxers' identities; aspects of sparring and men's friendships that do not conform with an aggressive, emotionally repressed masculinity; and the influence of age in moderating dominant forms of masculinity.

### Boxing and Masculinity

Wacquant (1992) asserted but failed to articulate his position that "Needless to say, all members are men: The gym is a *quintessentially masculine space*" (p. 234). In her textual reading of boxing, Oates (1995) explained in a bit more detail how boxing is a "purely masculine activity," discussing the representation of masculine bodies and raw aggression through boxing's vocabulary. Oates suggested that boxing appeals to an innate male misogyny in that boxing repudiates femininity. In a more complete and compassionate textual reading, Early (1994) discussed how elements of race, ethnicity, class, and industrial culture interact with masculine identity in boxing culture.

Most writing on boxing focuses almost exclusively on young, African American, male professional boxers. Consequently, the literature often provides monolithic notions of both the meaning of "boxing" and the identity of the "boxer." Monolithic notions of masculinity and the boxer are now being challenged by recent research that provides insight into variations within boxing culture. In his study of National Collegiate Athletic Association boxing, Wallenfeldt (1994) lamented that professional boxing has dominated representations and writing about the entire sport. He discussed the experiences and meanings collegiate boxers—mostly white and middle class—associate with boxing, but did not specifically address questions of masculinity. Jones (1997) discussed the motivations and experiences of a participant in unlicensed boxing matches, focusing primarily on the issue of deviance and mentioning masculine identity only in passing. Interestingly, the only study on boxing to focus exclusively on the formation of gender identity was Halbert's (1997) study of women professional boxers, as if gender relations are salient for women but not for men. No research on boxing has systematically approached the question of gender relations as they relate to men. Masculinity has been a presumption, rather than a problem, in writing on boxing.

### Masculinity, the Body, and Intimacy

Messner (1992b) argued that masculinity is a "problem" in sport because, among other reasons, the dominant form of masculinity in sporting cultures is destructive to the body and denies emotional intimacy. Aggression, or a will to dominate, has long been associated with masculinity (Klein, 1995b; Oates, 1995). An aggressive attempt to dominate "others" (opponents, teammates, women, racial and ethnic minorities, members of the working class, and gay men) both promotes destruction of bodies and prohibits intimate personal relationships.

Dominant masculinity in sport, Messner argued, promotes an attitude in which the body is used as a weapon, as a tool to achieve goals. Two former professional football players in Messner's study suggested that masculine prowess is enhanced by being "hard-hitters," by tackling so hard as to cause injuries in one's opponents. The goal is domination. The body is both the medium and the target. As Messner noted, these practices carry enormous health costs to athletes, especially those in American football.

Insults and jibes, or a kind of verbal jousting, often have been seen as characteristic of men's friendships in sporting cultures (Curry, 1991; Klein, 1995b). In his ethnography of a Mexican League baseball team, Klein (1995b) argued that many players use jokes as a "weapon." In his analysis of the locker room talk of collegiate football and wrestling teams, Curry (1991) suggested that competition extends into male athletes' personal relationships. Similarly, Messner (1992b) argued that relationships among teammates are characterized by an "antagonistic cooperation," in which friendship is balanced by competition. The goal is domination. The medium is language. Messner (1992a) argued that men's friendships are impoverished by competition and aggression. When male athletes do bond with each other, it often takes the form of sexist and homophobic talk and actions (Curry, 1991; Messner, 1992b). Again, the goal is domination. The targets are women, gay men, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Aggression in personal relationships prohibits intimacy. As Rubin (1983) argued, "Intimacy is some kind of reciprocal expression of feeling and thought, not out of fear or dependent need, but out of a wish to know another's inner life and to be able to share one's own" (p. 90). Positions of power in personal relationships must reach some kind of equilibrium to reciprocate and share. Therefore, relationships characterized by attempts to impose a will preclude intimate sharing and reciprocity.

However, Messner's research, like most research on masculine ideology in sport, has been limited to young males in mainstream organized sports. The influence of age is largely absent from discussions of masculine ideology in sport, as are experiences from nonmainstream, or marginalized, sporting activities. Albert (1991) argued that cooperative elements in bicycle racing are marginalized because they run against the hegemonic ideology of competition in sport. Whether or not competitive practices have been selectively observed, the study of masculine ideology in sport has been limited to competitive activities.

### *Resistance and Transformation*

Messner (1992a) suggested that the men in his study developed a "covert intimacy, an intimacy that is characterized by *doing* together, rather than by mutual talk about their inner lives" (p. 232). Rather than evaluate styles of intimacy in a gendered framework, Messner asked, "How do male friendships fit into an overall system of power?" (1992a, p. 217). As Crosset and Beal (1997) pointed out, caution must be exercised in analyzing the relation between sporting practices, on the one hand, and larger social structures such as economics, politics, and notions of national or ethnic cultures on the other. Efforts to "pigeonhole" specific practices as hegemonic or resistant to dominant ideologies overlook anomalous practices (such as egalitarian practices in a hierarchical culture) and may impose a moral order or psychological framework that is alien to the population being studied (Albert, 1991; Crosset & Beal, 1997; Ortner, 1996).

During the 1970s, critics of Western culture and American sport, notably Leonard (1974), looked to the East for alternatives to dominant ideologies in sport. In his volume on revisioning sport, physical education, and the body, Leonard outlined the problems of competitive sport, such as violence and anxiety, and proposed "Oriental" sporting practices, such as *aikido*, as alternatives. During the 1980s, feminist critics proposed alternatives to dominant sporting ideologies. Birrell and Richter (1994) suggested, "Through reflexive social action, women (and by extension other traditionally disenfranchised groups) can overcome the hegemonic grasp of alienating ideologies and institute social practices which have authentic meaning in their own lives" (p. 221). During these periods, many people sought and found personal freedom and deep meaning in "Eastern" or "feminist" sporting practices. By no means do I suggest that these solu-

tions are based on a false consciousness or are somehow disingenuous. However, the potential problem with Eastern and feminist critiques of competitive sporting ideologies is that, by "Orientalizing" or "feminizing" alternative ideologies, we run the risk of reifying the very gender and ethnic differences that constitute the relations of domination we wish to disrupt.

Klein (1995b) described machismo as a "system" that operates along a bipolar continuum with extreme forms of masculinity and femininity at opposing ends. Klein discussed many behaviors exhibited by Mexican baseball players that, by American standards, would be considered less masculine and more feminine. As Flax (1987) argued, the meanings attributed to gender relations require socially critical and self-reflexive analysis. What is unclear in Klein's study is how the Mexican players themselves attribute meanings to their behaviors. Klein ascribed primacy to gender relations by conforming specific behaviors to a masculine continuum that he himself created.

Messner's notion of "the larger gender order" and Klein's "masculine continuum" are bipolar systems. For Klein, men's behaviors are either masculine, to a greater or lesser degree, or feminine, to a greater or lesser degree. For Messner, men's behaviors either disrupt or contribute to "the gender order." A problem arises when conforming fragmented field experiences to unified analytical wholes (Tyler, 1986). What is missing are the possibilities that men's and women's identities are not formed around an axis of gender, and that some discourses, logics, and practices are simply "there," "other," or "different" (Ortner, 1996).

What needs to be teased out is the salience of gender in sporting cultures. Because most sporting cultures historically have been predominantly male, there has been a tendency to attribute characteristics of sporting cultures, such as aggression, to masculine ideology and/or personality traits. In her study of Walpiri widows in Australia, Dussart (1992) proposed an approach that "avoids a normative and rule-bound perspective that would depict women categorically and dichotomously vis-à-vis men" (p. 337). This approach questions, rather than presumes, the salience of gender in women's lives.

The amount and quality of data being collected regarding men's experiences in sporting cultures now place us in a position to examine the salience of gender in the study of men's experiences in sport. In their study of masculinity, sport, and violence, Messner and Sabo (1994) searched for possible alternatives to "hegemonic" masculinity in sporting practices. In an 11-point strategy, Sabo and Messner (1994) suggested practices that

they hope will change men by changing their sporting experiences, as seen in their first point, "Be a Buddy to Your Body":

Resist definitions of masculinity that put bodies at risk, glorify pain, and promote or ignore injury. Develop athletic potential in ways that are challenging but not physically harmful. Renounce painful and risky training practices. Confront and report instances of verbal or physical abuse of players by coaches. Reject locker-room clichés that encourage athletes to disregard the limits and vulnerability of their bodies, such as "No pain, no gain," and "You gotta pay the price to win." (p. 214)

Sabo and Messner (1994) did not specify under what conditions we might "resist," "develop," "renounce," or "reject," that is, the point is more ideology than strategy. At any rate, Sabo and Messner associated physical risk with masculine ideology. In their second point, Sabo and Messner suggested, "Change the rules and challenge the underlying values of games that promote violence and excessive aggression" (p. 215). Here, the focus shifts from a hegemonic masculine ideology to a hegemonic sporting ideology.

New questions must now be addressed: Are aggressive sporting practices attributable to masculine ideology, a competitive ethos, or both? Under what conditions? What are the "axes of prestige" (Ortner, 1996) for men's identities in sporting cultures? What is the salience of gender in the construction of male athletes' identities? Are egalitarian practices possible in a competitive and hierarchical culture? If so, are they constructed so as to contribute to or disrupt hegemonic ideologies? Or both? Or neither?

### The Study

#### Data Collection

The research design for this study followed MacAloon's (1992) outline for an ethnography of sport, an "intensive, long-term, and face-to-face participant observation in natural settings and the systematic recording of conceptions, discourses, relations, and behaviors of the sports actors, agencies, and communities selected for analysis" (p. 104). The site for this study was a commercial boxing gym, which I call the "Gym," located on the second floor of an industrial warehouse in downtown Brooklyn, New York. Participants for this study were all active members of the Gym. For

the ethnographic portion of the study, participants consisted of a core of about 50 active boxers, trainers, and Gym employees. In addition, this study includes visitors to the Gym—journalists, camera crews, photographers, and other observers—who did not maintain a consistent presence at the Gym.

Descriptive data were collected for the participants who participated in formal interviews ( $N = 30$ ). Most of the participants who were formally interviewed were active boxers ( $n = 19$ , 63%). Other interview participants included trainers ( $n = 6$ , 20%), retired boxers ( $n = 2$ , 7%), the Gym owner, and an agent who books boxers for personal appearances. Of the participants interviewed, 46% ( $n = 14$ ) identified themselves as "white," 30% ( $n = 9$ ) as "black," 17% as "Latino" or "Hispanic," and 7% ( $n = 2$ ) as Asian or Pacific Islander. The mean age for boxers was 32.8 years and for trainers was 52 years. Four of the participants interviewed were women, all of whom were boxers. Twelve of the 30 interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed. Skill levels of Gym members ranged from novice to active world champion professional.<sup>1</sup> Almost all boxers, except for 2, had previous or active competitive careers in boxing.

Data were collected over a period of 10 months, from July 1996 through April 1997. During that period, I was an active member of the Gym, where I trained as a wrestler and trained aspiring wrestlers at a professional wrestling school. Data collection techniques included participation, observation, and interviews. The study was conducted under the principle and guidelines of informed consent. Participants' privacy was protected by the use of pseudonyms.

#### The Political Economy of the Gym

The political economy of the boxing industry has changed drastically during the last decade. According to the Gym owner, the number of boxing gyms in New York City has decreased from approximately 100 to 5 during the last 10 years. Unlike gyms studied in previous ethnographic research (Sugden, 1987; Wacquant, 1992), the Gym is a commercial gym, not a neighborhood club. Rather than rely on patronage or percentages of purses from professional matches, the main source of revenue for the Gym owner is monthly dues (\$45 per month). Likewise, trainers, who in the past were paid only a percentage of professional purses, are wage laborers paid on an hourly, weekly, or monthly basis by their trainees. Therefore, there is a vested interest in maintaining the health and safety of Gym members.

Only 1 out of approximately 10 to 15 trainers relied solely on boxing for income. In fact, 3 trainers in this study charged nothing at all for their services. Other trainers commonly charge \$5 to \$10 per session.

In addition, opportunities for competition in boxing have become extremely limited during the past 10 years. There are currently two amateur tournaments in the New York area—the Metros and the Golden Gloves. Because the tournaments are single elimination, an amateur boxer may have a maximum of 8 to 10 matches in a year, coming within a span of 2 to 3 months. A professional boxer who boxes every 3 months would be considered prolific. Because of the paucity of competitive matches, sparring becomes less “practice” in the sense of preparation and more of a practice in that it is an action in and of itself. Furthermore, the Gym sponsors public sparring exhibitions called “White-Collar Sparring,” in which participants spar in front of spectators but no winners are declared. All participants have their hands raised and receive a trophy at the end of the bout. However, the title of the event often precludes, without formally excluding, individuals on the basis of class, and to a large extent race (but not gender).<sup>2</sup> Gym membership swells during the months prior to the Golden Gloves, but there is a core membership that trains year-round.

### Sparring and the Body

As Gorn (1986) argued, masculinity is most often proven in a homosocial world of other men. With respect to time, boxing is primarily a solitary practice. Many more hours are spent jumping rope, shadow boxing, and working the bags than are spent in actual matches or sparring. The interactions in “floor workouts,” in which there is no contact, take place between an individual boxer and a trainer. Social interactions among boxers, therefore, are limited to sparring, showering, dressing, and perhaps hanging out in the Gym, though most Gym members are not sociable in that respect.

Wacquant (1992) argued that sparring warrants close examination because it illustrates the “codified and collectively managed nature of pugilistic violence” (p. 242). Perhaps more important, sparring is a social relation in which social identities are formed and expressed. Sparring is strongly associated with masculine identities because the practice involves a negotiation and representation of dominance and subordination.

Boxers in this study engaged in sparring practices that varied in intensity, violence, and contact. In many cases, boxers practiced noncontact

sparring in which two boxers face each other and throw punches without ever touching. This practice hones skills of seeing punches, bobbing, weaving, and countering without even a remote chance of injury. The violence of sparring sessions ranged from gentle tapping punches to full-force. Intensity in sparring ranged from very active to lackadaisical. However, sparring intensity was described in a rhetoric that invoked masculinity and social class. Variations in sparring practices were observed along the lines of class, ethnicity,<sup>3</sup> and age, adding further evidence that these variables influence the expression of male identities.

*Violence, aggression, and the body.* Many novice boxers are motivated to join the Gym because they want to be competitive. Contrary to the mainstream sport motto, “practice the way you play,” novices are quickly taught that competition is for amateur and professional matches but has little place in the Gym. The more experienced participants in this study stressed the importance of cooperating during sparring in an effort to learn. This is often accomplished through caring and trust. Nigel, a 43-year-old Guyanese trainer, described his philosophy on sparring:

Sparring aspect is that you do not want your fighters to spar like they're in a fight. In sparring you come to learn so you need that aspect of looking at your fight and learning, not hurting each other in training. Any kind of serious sparring is when you're fighting, that's a fight. In the Gym, you're supposed to just try to learn from each other. (December 18, 1997)

Trainers and boxers both accept responsibility for the well-being of sparring partners. A sparring partner accepts responsibility for preventing injuries while learning techniques and improving fitness.

Often, the rhetoric used to describe sparring intensity invokes masculinity. Particularly aggressive sparring partners are said to be “macho.” Many boxers in this study were originally attracted to boxing because it seemed to be a macho quest to assert dominance through violent competitive victories. As Mickey, a 73-year-old Jewish trainer, put it, novice boxers “gotta have that macho feeling. Otherwise they're going to fall short.” But then Mickey argued that with few exceptions, novice boxers quickly learn differently. Mack, a 63-year-old Irish American trainer, said, “You've got to be macho to come in here. But then, that's the first thing you lose.”

Historically, the practice of sparring has been strongly associated with upper social classes, whereas competitive and professional fights have

been strongly associated with the lower classes (Gorn, 1986; Isenberg, 1988). Referring to 19th-century England, Gorn (1986) argued that the contrast between the "professors of pugilism" and their prizefighting counterparts is a clear example of the manifestation of class divisions in popular culture, suggesting that sparring matches were not as "gory" as the prizefights preferred by members of the lower classes and therefore a "fine compromise" for members of the gentry. Perhaps as a historical artifact of the interpretation of class differences in boxing, cooperative sparring practices are described in a rhetoric of class as well as gender. Cooperative sparring is widely referred to as being "gentlemanly." Red, a "white-collar boxer," put it this way:

Yeah, you know what? I've been here a couple of months. But I've noticed it. I never would have thought that before. You mean—watching these guys spar. If someone gets hurt, they back off. You know, if someone loses a mouthpiece or whatever it's a, it's more of a friendly thing when they're sparring, which surprised me. You know, I thought that that killer instinct would take over. A guy sees blood and it's over. But I've seen guys back off, and they're almost *gentlemanly* about it. (January 17, 1997)

"Gentlemanly" sparring was not limited to middle- or upper-class boxers. Many trainers, professional boxers, and other Gym members, paradoxically including women,<sup>4</sup> referred to cooperative sparring as *gentlemanly*. Unlike Klein's (1995b) "masculine continuum," Gym members' rejection of a macho ethos did not imply femininity. No Gym members suggested that cooperative sparring was in any way "feminine." Rather, Gym members invoked an alternate masculinity based on a vocabulary of historical class differences.

The costs and benefits of aggressive sparring are weighed by many boxers. Because modern boxing is a relatively new sport, developed in this century for the most part, little was known in the past about the long-term physiological effects of regular, repeated, aggressive sparring or competitive matches. Rocky described his training for a Police Athletic League boxing team in 1964:

To be honest with you, I took my lumps. We had [two guys], two real good—a heavyweight and a light heavyweight. And, uh, you know, learning the rudiments of boxing and everything, I took my lumps. But anyway, I made the team and I went to the Golden Gloves. (January 15, 1997)

Historically, boxers trained more aggressively and did not hesitate to assert their physical superiority over lesser-skilled opponents. This view was supported by other "old-timers" in the Gym. However, all boxers are now acutely aware of the potential damage, and most moderate their sparring practices accordingly. The consequences of aggressive sparring and excessive fighting are illustrated daily by the slurred speech of some older retired professionals in the Gym and elsewhere.

*Somatic intimacy.* The decision to renounce aggressive sparring is not purely rational and reasoned. To suggest so would deny the exuberance of shared intimacy and reciprocity many boxers experience and enjoy during sparring. Sparring offers a space in which men may share a somatic intimacy that otherwise would not be socially sanctioned. As Theberge (1994) argued, sport is often "an exclusively male realm that allows for expressiveness and intimacy—qualities that are typically absent from what is generally viewed as appropriate behavior" (p. 190). One of the few times in which two scantily clad men may, in a socially acceptable manner, emotionally and intimately embrace each other is immediately after they beat each other up. The Gym is a "safe" place to express intimacy because the textual representations of boxing as masculine and violent deter allegations of weakness or femininity.

Wacquant (1992) argued that choosing a sparring partner requires looking for some kind of equilibrium with respect to weight, experience, or skill. Birrell and Richter (1994) argued that skill too often assumes a privileged position in sport and proposed that more opportunities should be made available for lesser-skilled individuals. For the boxers and trainers in this study, the most crucial element in choosing a partner was trust, not skill. Trust was culturally encoded by boxers and structurally supported by trainers.

Trust was assumed or negotiated in different ways. Red recounted an invitation to spar:

Some guy—actually in the shower, in the locker room, an older fellow, I found out he was 45, he told me he was 45—asked me if I ever did the white-collar boxing. I said, "No, I just started. Maybe in six months." And he just started, "Would I like to come down this Friday to this white-collar thing and box with him?" We're about the same size and it looks like he'll take it easy on me. So he picked me out and said, "Why don't you come down and we'll spar together?" Cause he got the feeling I wouldn't kick his ass and that I wouldn't kick his ass. But I said no, forget about it. I said, in three months. (January 15, 1997)

Red was approached because of similar physical attributes, but perhaps also because of his "white-collar" looks and the assumptions that this identity entails. Red declined the invitation largely because his trainer had already told him that he would not be ready to spar for another 3 months.

Beginners who are unable to control the intensity of sparring sessions are often matched by their trainers with other beginners who are unable to hurt them. Jimmy discussed a beginner's sparring experiences:

He's not, he's not beating guys—he's not boxing with good men in the Gym. He thinks he is, and thinks because he hurts them, he's good, you know. And I said . . . this is not a real, a real fight. This is a workout. That's all this is. This here, I tell you so many times that don't try and hurt a guy cause you're just sparring with him. He's learning just as much as you are. And he can continue—I don't throw him in with good guys. I just throw him in with guys who are equal with him. (December 18, 1996)

In this case, a bullying beginner was being protected by his trainer from the potential wrath of more experienced fighters. In response to this bullying tactic, I asked Jimmy if he thought it would be a good idea for the bullying beginner to be "taught a lesson" by a more experienced fighter. However, Jimmy held hope that the young boxer would learn how to cooperate in sparring without being humiliated or injured.

Giles, a 31-year-old Guyanese trainer, disagreed with holding a bullying beginner back from more experienced boxers. Instead of verbal reasoning, this trainer advocated sending a physical message:

When you sparring with somebody who don't know how to control himself, you gotta hit him hard so they will know. Now, if you hit me hard, I will hit you hard. So then, they will go easy because they don't want to get hit hard. (January 24, 1997)

It is important to note, however, that increased intensity is a response to inappropriate aggression. Furthermore, the experienced boxer physically communicates the message without causing injury. The intention is to sting the transgressor without a knockout or severe injury. Few boxers undergo a "trial-by-fire"-type masculine rite of passage in which a beginner is hurt as a test of toughness or courage. However, if rough sparring is initiated by a novice, some trainers advocate a measured violent response as a method of teaching proper sparring etiquette.

However, similar experience, skill, and physical strength are not sufficient to establish trust. Many participants in this study preferred to spar with boxers of unequal skill. Contrary to Wacquant's (1992) requirement for an equilibrium of skill in sparring, many participants in this study actively sought a disequilibrium as an opportunity to learn different skills. Lou, a 63-year-old boxer aspiring to box professionally, sparred only with professionals:

Well, we have a lot of guys in the Gym here and I like to box with somebody who's professional. I don't like to go in with just like amateur-type fighters and take a chance with getting hit with a wild, swinging punch. So I like to box with professionals, guys who've been around, that know how to work with you in the ring. And move. And, uh, try new different things, and experiment. And, you know, you're working out in a nice pace without trying to take somebody's head off. (January 20, 1997)

Ironically, amateur boxers are more dangerous than professional boxers to this older boxer. This sentiment was shared by many others. Experienced, highly skilled boxers have more control of their strength and rarely slip up and cause injury. Furthermore, Lou sought the increased educational benefits derived from sparring with someone who is more skilled. But Lou's comments suggested more than the routine acquisition of skill. Lou desired a partner who knows how to "work with you," who can safely share a learning experience. Lou also stressed creativity and experimentation.

Similarly, Nigel strongly advocated that professionals spar with amateurs as a learning experience. He suggested that when sparring with a lesser-skilled partner

you don't try to kill him. You try to learn from him. As much, as much as you are better than him you can still learn from him. That is why it's good for a professional to spar with amateur because an amateur do things unorthodox, things that are not really expected to be done by a seasoned professional. So that is why it's good to spar with amateurs from time to time. You make them miss and slip and roll, so as to create an awareness that anything can come at you. Because when you're fighting, hey, anything goes.

Like Lou, Nigel stressed sparring as a shared learning experience in which each partner recognizes and values the other's skills and efforts. When sparring with a lesser-skilled partner, the focus is often on defense, but hardly ever is the partner's weakness exploited. Unlike the participants in Wacquant's study, the boxers in this Gym often were deliberately

matched, or matched themselves, in a disequilibrium of skill. The disequilibrium is managed safely by establishing and maintaining an ethos of partnership.

Wacquant (1992) argued, "There must always be a measure of equilibrium between partners, even if that requires purposefully handicapping one of them" (p. 242). What is unclear is how, or by whom, boxers are handicapped in sparring. Wacquant's use of the passive voice suggests that boxers are handicapped by some outside force or because they receive orders from a trainer. Wacquant failed to consider the process of self-handicapping, as articulated by Boulton and Smith (1992). Because sparring partners are hardly ever perfectly matched, and because trainers are not capable of accurately monitoring and completely directing sparring intensity, equilibrium in sparring requires the establishment and internalization of trust and caring.

Sparring sessions are sometimes opportunities for touching experiences of warmth and sharing. Immediately after a sparring session with a long-time partner, Barry, a 47-year-old Jewish professional turned white-collar boxer, was exuberant: "It was great. We were waling on each other. But we've sparred so many times, and know each other so well that it didn't even hurt." Lou recounted a sparring session with a current professional world champion, after which the champion kissed him on the head and said, "You're like my grandfather. How do you do it? God bless you." For Lou, this sparring session was an intimate experience of sharing. He recalled the sparring session quite warmly. The 31-year-old African American middleweight champ's use of "grandfather" suggests that he, too, experienced the sparring session as intimate, shared, and familial.

Cooperative, nonaggressive sparring fits in with Rubin's (1983) definition of intimacy as sharing one's inner life. That sparring is a shared experience is expressed in a vocabulary of cooperation: sparring "partners" work "together with" each other. Such experiences of sharing do not constitute a "covert" intimacy, as Messner (1992a) argued. Sparring is not hidden or disavowed. Rather, I suggest that cooperative sparring is "somatic" intimacy. Like dance partners, sparring partners share their inner (and outer) selves via their bodies. What is being shared is knowledge, creativity, and the bodies themselves. In this sense, the sparring body is simultaneously medium and message.

*Nonviolent aggression.* The avoidance of violence and injury does not preclude aggressive attempts at domination. It is possible to assert masculine domination without transgressing sparring codes and causing

injury. Higher-skilled boxers who spar with novices sometimes taunt the novices' inability to connect with solid punches, although the higher-skilled boxers hold back from inflicting physical punishment. Sometimes, experienced boxers "pull" punches but nonetheless assert their dominance.

Denzel, a recently retired 31-year-old African American professional, argued that an experienced boxer could frustrate another boxer by tapping the other boxer at will. He demonstrated on me by tapping me in the stomach, and in the head, and back to the stomach, all at will. He said, "You know, after a while he gets frustrated and starts swinging wildly." I could easily imagine because I was humiliated by my inability to deflect or block any of his blows and wanted to grab him myself. I witnessed similar sparring sessions several times. In one instance, for example, a seasoned professional sparred with three amateurs in succession. In an attempt to improve conditioning and work on defense, he did not throw any punches but did not allow himself to be hit. However, his demeanor was aggressive and taunting and a couple of the amateurs became visibly frustrated. The professional demonstrated what could easily be interpreted as masculine aggression, but not at the physical expense of the amateurs. In no way could the session be interpreted as intimate, because there was no ethos of partnership. The session was characterized by antagonism rather than warmth. Nonviolent aggressive sparring may serve as a way to maintain a masculine trait without transgressing the Gym's cultural code of physical safety. The practice is somewhat evocative of the Native American practice of "counting coup" during warfare. In this practice, warriors would come close enough to kill their enemies but tap them with a stick instead of inflicting a lethal blow. Both the tapping described by this participant and "counting coup" are attempts at domination. But the target of domination is the will or soul rather than the body.

It also should be emphasized that the partnership ethos exhibited by Gym members in this study does not extend to the "world of boxing." Josh traveled from his home in the Bronx to train at the Gym because the Police Athletic League gyms near his home are "too rough." Josh said that the Gym takes care of its members much more than do other gyms. On a continuum of aggression in sparring, the Gym, as a whole, is likely on the less aggressive end. This is likely because of the generally older membership relative to youth clubs and boxing teams.

*Age and experience.* Many boxers in their mid-20s or older expressed an aversion to sparring with younger men, whom they deemed likely to



be more aggressive in asserting their masculinity. It is difficult, however, to judge the effects of age without considering experience. Many novices who are older are as aggressive as their younger counterparts; that is, exposure to and internalization of sparring etiquette moderates aggression more so than does chronological age.

One possible reason why older boxers are likely to be less aggressive is an appreciation for pain and injuries. Veteran boxers often have experienced injuries during their boxing careers and may subsequently develop sympathy for others. Lou conceived the process of becoming a "fighter" as a rite of passage:

I think it kind of makes men out of boys, you know, being a fighter. It gives you a little more insight into who you are and how vulnerable you are. Good point. I like the way I just said that. Vulnerable. (January 20, 1997)

For Lou, learning not to be aggressive was a sign of "being a man." Ironically, Lou constructed a mature masculinity in which the recognition and acceptance of vulnerability is an asset.

#### Age, Locker Room Talk, and Verbal Intimacy

Age moderates masculinity most noticeably in the nature and content of locker room talk. In Curry's (1991) study, the participants were all undergraduate college students. Although Curry did not include the ages of his participants, no participant could have been more than 25 years old because of Division I regulations. The locker room talk in this Gym (restricted to the men's locker room) was very different from the locker room talk in Curry's study. The men in this study were much less concerned with asserting dominance through verbal taunts. In fact, I shared several moments of emotional intimacy with male Gym members, especially in discussing relationships with women.

There is a contingent of teenage male Gym members who sometimes engage in a kind of locker room talk similar to the talk in Curry's study (I witnessed two "outbursts" during the period of this study). However, this kind of behavior is closely monitored and discouraged by older Gym members, myself included. Older Gym members rarely issue verbal sanctions. But that is not necessary to moderate the scope and content of the teenage braggadocio. Furtive glances and looks of disapproval almost always do the trick. Furthermore, successful professionals who are more concerned with their wives, children, and making a living establish and

monitor models of appropriate locker room talk and behavior. Sexist locker room talk was successfully resisted (see Sabo & Messner, 1994, p. 215) by integrating adolescent and adult male athletes.

Perhaps the sharpest difference between the results of this study and Curry's study is in talk about women. First, the increasing number of women Gym members is widely, and often enthusiastically, accepted by male Gym members. Most of the male participants in this study talked about their relationships with women in an emotionally sensitive way. Of course, most of the participants in this study were in their mid-20s or older. Furthermore, unlike many other professional and collegiate athletes, professional boxers are not coddled and sheltered and must keep full-time jobs to support themselves, that is, male Gym members are, by and large, adult men, sharing the same concerns many men face: making a living, finding a life's partner, and raising a family.

As a 32-year-old recently married man, I was a likely candidate for discussions with men who were considering marriage. Stretch, a 26-year-old Guyanese American professional boxer and a 6-foot-tall welterweight, often discussed his live-in girlfriend and asked about my feelings on marriage. Stretch spoke openly, freely, and warmly of his relationship, and he was more interested in discussing romantic relationships than in boxing or wrestling (even though he was an avid wrestling fan). One day while getting dressed in the locker room, Paisan, a 33-year-old Italian American amateur and aspiring professional, lamented that he wanted to get married, but "I guess I haven't met the right girl." Our conversation was warm and open, albeit brief. He shared a sense of emptiness because he was not involved in an intimate relationship with a woman. I shared the emotional fulfillment I derive from being married and offered encouragement for him to actively pursue his desires. Far from treating women as objects, these men openly spoke of their desire to establish and maintain intimate emotional relationships with women.

As Rubin (1983) noted, desires for intimacy often are associated with fears of intimacy. After discussing at length how his wife was his best friend, Nigel noted that he also fathered several children with other women during his marriage. After discussing an emotional turmoil caused by ambivalent feelings toward his live-in girlfriend, Denzel emphasized that he was still always willing to engage in sexual intercourse because, as he said, "I'm a man, you know?" After discussing vulnerabilities he attributed to a recovery from drug addiction, Paisan discussed his prediction that "no one will hurt me" during the Golden Gloves tournament. Biker Dude, a 37-year-old Puerto Rican man, followed his discussion of the

emotional pain he experienced in a failed marriage with the sexual objectification of a younger woman with whom he was currently involved. Male boxers were able to express vulnerability and emotion at times, but they often (though not always) balanced such moments with assertions of masculine dominance.

Like Klein's (1995b) Mexican baseball players, many boxers in this study exhibited a broad range of seemingly inconsistent behaviors. One teenage boxer who recently turned professional was particularly aggressive with his peers in locker room talk and competitive matches, yet he was one of the more delicate and gracious sparring partners. Conversely, Paisan was delicate and warm in locker room talk but aggressive in sparring sessions.

### Conclusions

Boxing culture in the Gym promotes sparring practices that avoid injury, treats the "opponent" as a partner, and often is characterized by a shared intimacy. Here, I return to Sabo and Messner's (1994) strategy, "Be a Buddy to Your Body," and address some of the questions raised earlier in this chapter. According to the sparring practices in the Gym, this strategy might better be changed to "Be a Buddy to Your Buddy." To avoid violence and injury, boxers in this study adopted a view in which the "opponent" is a partner. This ethos of partnership facilitates the expression of a somatic intimacy in which sparring partners share their bodies, their knowledge, and their creativity. The presence of older men in the Gym facilitated expressions of verbal intimacy and vulnerability.

However, there is no evidence to suggest that the men in this study considered their practices and ideologies as either subversive or supportive of male dominance. With respect to expressions of emotion and vulnerability, masculinity and manhood were redefined in a way that perpetuates a somewhat ironic notion of masculine strength and virility: "Be man enough to be gentle (as in a *gentleman*)" or "Be man enough to cry," so to speak. One might argue that these redefinitions were attempts to shore up threats to hegemonic masculinity (though certainly none of the men in this study did). Yet, benevolent attitudes toward the body and intimate relations with other men (either somatic or verbal) are at many levels inconsistent with dominant forms of masculinity.

In his theorization of male dominance in sport practices, Dunning (1994) argued that social conditions profoundly influence the intensity of

male aggression. Similarly, Messner (1992b, pp. 171-172) argued that changes in macrolevel social institutions—such as child rearing, family, politics, and education—are necessary to effect the "humanization" of sport. Although macrolevel influences are undoubtedly significant, these positions neglect the possibility of specific, fragmented egalitarian practices within hierarchical structures.

Ideologies and practices in the Gym that are inconsistent with dominant forms of masculinity can be only partly resolved by structural considerations of age and the political economy of the Gym. At this point, many people would agree that isolating groups of young males, notably in college fraternities, the military, and athletic teams, has a potential for deleterious outcomes. For many men in this study, intimacy, the rejection of women's objectification, and the expression of emotion and vulnerability were redefined as symbols of strength in a framework of an adult masculinity. Perhaps as adult men develop intimate relationships with female partners and children, they also develop empathy for girls' and women's issues (see Early, 1994). For the men in this study, the primary axis for verbal intimacy is age, not gender.

Although verbal intimacy may be attributed in large part to the influence of age, cooperative sparring cannot be so attributed. Structured cooperation and the economic benefits of participation for trainers and the Gym owner are enabling conditions for a benign approach to the body, but not sufficient explanations in and of themselves. Boxers are actively engaged in maintaining cultural codes that engender an ethos of partnership in sparring practices that often provide a space for somatic intimacy, creative expression, and exuberance. A rejection of physical aggression in sparring did not entail a rejection of masculinity. Rather, definitions of masculinity were redefined so as to be congruous with boxers' cultural codes, that is, deterring physical aggression in sparring had less to do with new definitions of masculinity than with an enculturation into boxing culture.

The broad range of men's behaviors and ideologies exhibited in this study presents problems for the theorization of gender. Psychoanalytic frameworks of dichotomously opposed masculine and feminine traits alone fail to address the situationally specific experiences and meanings and the range and inconsistencies of ideologies and practices exhibited by boxers in this study. Messner's (1992b) combination of personal agency, personality, and social structure is particularly useful in dealing with broadly diverse ideologies, discourse, and practices. But although Messner (1992a) enjoined us to locate these ideologies and practices

within a "gender order," I suggest that the egalitarian discourses and practices in the Gym neither disrupt nor contribute to broad relations of male dominance. Although certain egalitarian practices in the Gym may be related to sexual egalitarianism (e.g., accepting women as Gym members of equal status), there is no evidence to suggest that men in this study reached an epiphany of egalitarian enlightenment that extended to other areas of their lives. In fact, some men who treated women as equals inside the Gym objectified and oppressed women outside the Gym. Finally, the salience of gender relative to age and sport's institutional structure is called into question.

Boxers in this study successfully created a cultural and institutional space that allowed egalitarian relations alongside and within a competitive boxing society and a hierarchical larger society. The results of this study give concrete examples of some of the points brought up by Sabo and Messner (1994) in their 11-point strategy intended to change thinking about sport. The results of this study also, I suggest, point to a need to discuss social issues in sport without reifying gender differences by conforming ideologies and practices to a gender framework or order. Although physical aggression in sport is still a problem for men, it is also increasingly becoming a problem for women. Rather than discussing aggression and the denial of intimacy as immanent in a male model of sport or looking for alternatives only in Oriental or feminist sporting practices, I suggest that we might well focus on the hegemonic ideology of competition and the age- and sex-segregated institution of sport and develop and nurture the egalitarian sporting practices that already exist.

### Notes

1. It is difficult to categorize boxers as recreational, amateur, or professional. For example, many former professionals continue to train for fitness and recreation. Many amateurs aspire to become professionals, whereas many others do not. Also, there are so few competitive opportunities that describing someone who trains all year and has one bout as "competitive" fails to reflect the diversity of motivations and experiences.

2. "White-collar sparring" is predominantly engaged in by whites. African Americans and Latinos, even those who box primarily as recreation, rarely participate. However, not all participants are college-educated or employees in professional occupations. That the division falls primarily along lines of race speaks more to the public performance of racial and ethnic identities than to practical differences in sparring.

3. Many Gym members suggested that Latino boxers and trainers took a more aggressive approach to sparring. These allegations, however, are contested by Latino Gym mem-

bers and not conclusively verified. The complexity of this issue requires more space than is possible in this chapter.

4. Women's experiences in the Gym invoke many rhetorical paradoxes. Gender relations in the Gym are complex and varied. Again because of space limitations, women's experiences in the Gym are not fully developed here.