

On white-collar boxing and social class

Abstract

This article is based on the first sociological research of white-collar boxing in the UK. Grounded in an ethnography of a boxing gym in the Midlands, the article argues that the term 'white-collar boxing' in this context is immediately misleading, and entails the term being used in a way with which sociologists are unaccustomed. Whereas white-collar boxing originated in the context of post-industrial New York City as a pastime only for the extremely wealthy, the situation in the UK is different. Participants actively reject this understanding of white-collar boxing. The term white-collar boxing does not signify the social class of participants, but refers to their novice status. Given that boxing is an example through which Bourdieu's theory of distinction is discussed, and that white-collar boxing is a distinctly late-modern version of the sport containing an erroneous class signifier, this version of the sport is a site through which such discussions of consumption can be furthered. Whilst consumed by actors in various class positions, a logic of distinction is present in white-collar boxing, which becomes recognisable through analysis of the 'plurality of consumption experiences'. This is proffered as a concept which can aid in the analysis of consumption beyond white-collar boxing.

Keywords

Bourdieu, Consumption, Distinction, Ethnography, Social Class, Sport, White-collar Boxing

Introduction

The first wisdom of sociology is this – things are not what they seem.

(Berger, 1963: 34).

White-collar is a term with which sociologists tend to be familiar, and within the discipline it tends to refer to a class position and a form of employment (*eg* Sutherland, 1949; Mills, 2002; Savage *et al.*, 2015). This article, however, presents a case wherein the term white-collar is used in the first order which does not fit within such existing sociological understandings: white-collar boxing. Based on a six-month ethnography of a white-collar boxing club in the Midlands of England, through this article the meaning of the term white-collar boxing can be grasped from within the context of white-collar boxing itself, as articulated by those who make the practice meaningful. Whilst sociologists are accustomed to understand white-collar as relating to employment and class, within white-collar boxing, the term has a use independent of this: in this context white-collar has come to mean novice. Similarly, through this ethnographic engagement an initially counter-intuitive picture of social class and white-collar boxing is discernible. White-collar boxing is, like boxing overall, understandable as a 'sport of the poor' (Woodward, 2014: 61), though with some variation in terms of the social class of participants. Given that boxing has previously been understood as a site through which to understand the relationship between class and taste (Bourdieu, 2010, originally 1979;

Atkinson, 2015), and that white-collar boxing is undertaken by people from differing class positions simultaneously, the article contributes to the development of contemporary Bourdieusian theory on the relationship between class and taste *contra* omnivorousness, through analysing the simultaneous plurality of consumption experiences, which can nonetheless be understood within a logic of distinction.

Social Class, Taste, and Boxing

Though sport is sometimes 'scorned by sociologists' (Bourdieu, 1988: 153), its analysis can contribute to understanding social life beyond it. Boxing, in particular, is a fertile ground for sociological analysis and theorisation (eg Woodward, 2014; Wacquant, 2004; Burdsey, 2007), and in large part this is because boxing is overtly organised according to a three-fold set of social divisions that often define wider social conditions: class, race and gender. Put another way, though this is not by any means exclusively the case, boxers are predominantly working-class men (Sugden, 1996). There is less uniformity in terms of race (Woodward, 2007), though it can be said that race reproduces boxing, and boxing helps to reproduce race (Carrington, 2010). Given that this paper concerns *white-collar* boxing, however, and the term white-collar principally refers to a form of employment (Mills, 2002), and is often taken to imply *not working-class*, this paper focuses on social class.

Though this is not an intrinsic association, boxing has *almost* invariably been a sport of the working classes (Woodward, 2014), and for this reason (Atkinson, 2015) has been understood as a prime example through which to evidence Bourdieu's theory on the relationship between class and taste (Bourdieu, 2010). Whilst promulgated by the 19th-century aristocracy, boxing 'spread rapidly among the working classes' (Sugden, 1996: 27), and in becoming popular became repellent to 'the dominant class' (Bourdieu, 2010: 212). To this extent, Bourdieu notes that 'the values and virtues' of sports such as boxing – 'strength, endurance, violence, 'sacrifice', docility and submission to collective discipline' – are 'contrary to bourgeois role distance' (Bourdieu, 2010: 212; cf Bourdieu, 1988). In a similar way, Wacquant (1995: 502) notes that the fact that 'boxing is a working-class occupation is reflected ... in the *physical* nature of the activity'. Whilst sport is fairly central to Bourdieu's analyses (Widdop *et al.*, 2016), boxing is, however, by no means the only phenomenon through which the Bourdieusian understanding between class and taste is discussed. Bourdieu (2010) also focussed on, for instance, music, food, and art, as do scholars following Bourdieu focus on these sites (eg Brown and Griffin, 2014; Rhys-Taylor, 2013; Cook, 2001). Crucially, between these analyses, the recurrent conclusion is, essentially, that different cultural tastes 'can be attributed to

different classes' (Bennett, in Bourdieu 2010: *xxii*), with Bourdieu's (2010) general argument being that those shorn of capital stocks consume the practical and necessary, and those in dominant social positions develop a taste for the abstract.

Notably, there is debate over whether and how Bourdieu's ideas on consumption apply contemporarily, social life no longer being akin to that which Bourdieu took as his object of study (*cf* Olliver, 2008). Changes in economic mode – which can be encapsulated here as the *post-industrial turn*, and signifies a shift to consumer capitalism (and its synonyms, such as consumerism) – it is argued, herald a demise of class positions and identities, and therefore collective dispositions in these terms (*eg* Bauman, 2011; Bauman and Hagaard, 2008; Blackshaw, 2016). Under this mode, actors must reflexively craft identity on a continual and individual basis through consumption (which is also to say that consumption is posited to be untethered from class, *à la* Bourdieu). Omnivorousness (*cf* Peterson, 2005) is rather argued to be the style of consumption *du jour*. Whilst there have been multiple rebuttals to the omnivore thesis (*eg* Prieur and Savage, 2013; Rimmer, 2012; de Boise, 2016), versions of this argument continue to be made (*eg* Nuccio *et al.*, 2018; Ferrant, 2018), which, in reproducing the figure of the omnivore, ultimately suggest a severance between class and taste.

Against this body of thought, there have been recent developments in the sociology of class and consumption, through which Bourdieu's account is revised in order to better account for social life in the consumerist mode. Bourdieu's original statements on class and taste are, after all, not to be understood as diktats (Wacquant, 2016). Consumptions of the rare or exotic are not *necessarily* bound to be signs of distinction, as they were in 1960s France (*cf* Lawler, 2005). Moreover, agents from more than one class stratum consuming the same cultural goods do not necessarily signal an end to the relationship between class and taste, and should not necessarily be understood as omnivorousness. Flemmen *et al.* (2018), for instance, find that those from the Norwegian upper and middle classes consume 'traditional, locally produced peasant food' (Flemmen *et al.*, 2018: 145), this consumption being 'refashioned as a badge of distinction in the 21st century' (Flemmen *et al.*, 2018: 145). Similar has recently been argued in relation to other forms of cultural consumption (*eg* McCoy and Scarborough, 2014; Peters *et al.*, 2017; *cf* O'Brien *et al.*, 2017). Bourdieu's original analysis may be rendered an historical account, but inequalities in consumption can nonetheless be understood through the logic of distinction (Prieur and Savage, 2013). There is a need to engage in not only who consumes what, but how and why people consume in qualitative terms (Stewart, 2017; Friedman *et al.*, 2015) in order to discern the relationship between class and taste. Further research, on an ongoing basis, produced through engaging in contemporary

consumption practices, is required in order to reflect the ways in which, if, and how the logic of distinction is reproduced.

If boxing is understood to be an example through which to explore the changing relationships between class and taste, and the relationship between class and taste is supposed by some to have altogether waned under post-industrialism, then white-collar boxing presents itself as a novel site through which to continue this discussion. In this vein, white-collar boxing first emerged in and through the post-industrial conditions of 1980s New York City (NYC), and is directly traceable to Gleason's Gym (Trimbur, 2013). Given its infancy relative to other forms of boxing, its genesis is well documented (Trimbur, 2013). Bob Jackson (a professional boxing coach at Gleason's) and Bruce Silverglade (co-owner of Gleason's) both claim they first used the term white-collar boxing, to refer to their growing number of upper-class 'clienteles' (Trimbur, 2013: 14). Jackson (in Trimbur, 2013: 123) recounts: 'Well most of the people aren't blue collar, they're white collar. And there you are! White-collar boxing!' Whereas the amateur and professional boxers at Gleason's, for whom in the post-industrial quagmire, formal, secure and well-paid employment is not possible, white-collar boxers at Gleason's are the very architects and beneficiaries of this economy: businessmen, lawyers, doctors and celebrities.

Importantly, the use of the term white-collar discussed above does not directly match sociological theorisation. For Mills, the white-collar boxers in Trimbur's study would not be categorised as white-collar, but as 'upper class businessmen' (Mills, 2002: 50) who employ white-collar workers, and are therefore in a position of exteriority to the category. Moreover, white-collar work in the post-industrial context can be understood as a working class form of employment, call-centre work being a prime example of this (Lloyd, 2013; Savage *et al.*, 2013, 2015). The colour of the collar, therefore, cannot be taken straightforwardly as an indication of class. This is not a new problem for class analysis, either: since at least the 1970s, the expansion of white-collar service sector work has made it difficult to sharply delineate a middle and working class (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018). Similar conceptual ambiguities arise in relation to white-collar crime, which is a primary area in which the white-collar category features as a matter of social science (Piquero, 2018). All of this suggests that when white-collar is used in the Gleason's context, it does not reflect class analyses, and *vice versa*. White-collar boxing is, rather, a popular term with a popular etymology, encoded with class (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013), which, whilst describing an inequality (Tyler, 2015) and operating as a first order class signifier, is not strictly reflected second-order categorisation.

Beyond Trimbur (2013), with the exception of passing references (Woodward, 2014: 61; Wacquant, 2004: 100), there is little research on white-collar boxing. No empirical

analyses of white-collar boxing in the UK exist, and this research does not assume that the ethnographic reports of boxing at Gleason's suffice as a universal account of white-collar boxing, automatically valid in terms of describing or explaining white-collar boxing as it exists elsewhere. In fact, white- and blue-collar as a linguistic apparatus for describing class in popular terms (*ie* independently of sociological use) is notably American (Vanneman and Pampel, 1977; Booker, 2012; Southern, 2000), and is not used to the same extent in the UK, meaning that the folk etymology discussed above with Trimbur (2013) cannot be taken to necessarily apply. To this extent, I argue that white-collar boxing in this research context does not resemble the white-collar boxing of NYC and that the social reality of white-collar boxing is betrayed by its name, and presents itself as a case wherein the signifier white-collar is filled with meaning that is currently unaccounted for in sociological literature. That is, white-collar boxing is not meant to signify the social class of participants or their employment status. Given this scenario, white-collar boxing is opened up to an analysis of social class and taste, which one would perhaps not initially expect, which ultimately contributes to the analysis of cultural consumption and social class, against omnivorousness

Research site and methods

The primary research site is a boxing club in the Midlands of England, here referred to as Shadcote Boxing Club. Shadcote is a full-time facility, open seven days a week and all year round. As one participant noted: 'It's a very sort of, um, what I would describe as a 'backstreet' type gym. It's not plush and modern like some of these sort of health clubs'. The punchbags are held together by tape, some gear is well used to the point of *almost* being unusable, but as another participant noted: 'It seems to do the job'.

Whilst neither an amateur nor professional club, Shadcote is irreducible to a recreational gym. It has a history of entering fighters into unlicensed boxing events, as well as other forms of competitive fighting. The vast majority of competitive boxing undertaken via Shadcote now takes the following format: complete beginners sign up for an eight-week, crash course in boxing, which culminates in a boxing match known as Fight Night, held in a public location. At four intervals *per annum*, these courses commence, and approximately 80 new white-collar boxers enter the club in order to prepare for a full-contact, competitive, public boxing match. Whilst 80 enter, ultimately only approximately 40 tend to make it to Fight Night. This model of short-term engagement in the sport exclusively for beginners is referred to by those undertaking it, and by those providing it, as white-collar boxing.

Being 'where the action is' (Goffman, 1969, in Jump, 2017: 11; in Wacquant, 1995: 510) is recurrently narrated as being highly beneficial to boxing research. Engaging with 'the

fighters themselves' (Wacquant, 1995: 489), in terms of how they understand their social reality, allows for a sociological reconstruction based on accounts produced by those who actively sustain its existence. Taking heed from the above, a six-month ethnography was undertaken, comprising daily participant observation and interviews. This paper represents part of the wider study, and largely discusses interview data. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, lasting on average approximately one hour, were conducted with 32 participants. As reflects boxing more widely (Woodward, 2007), participants were largely, though not exclusively male (27 male, 5 female). Interview participants were, overall, opportunistically selected. As white-collar boxing is ordered according to a strict temporality, Shadcote had a rapidly fluctuating and unstable population, meaning that this could not be any other way. The majority of interview participants were white-collar boxers, though additional interviews were conducted with coaching staff. Interview data were analysed thematically, in order to produce an understanding of the phenomenon through engaging with those who are actively engaged in the sport. Themes are discussed below.

White-collar boxing and social class at Shadcote Boxing Club

The following sections represent analysis of the qualitative data collected via ethnographic research at Shadcote Boxing Club. Firstly, narrative accounts of social class are presented, and it is argued that white-collar boxers are from various class positions, none of which mirror the white-collar boxers of Gleason's. Following this, the meanings given to the term white-collar by those directly involved in the sport are discussed: white-collar boxers directly reject the classed meanings of the term white-collar, and understand it to mean novice. Related to this, how white-collar boxing developed to have a misleading name is discussed: my suggestion is that, whilst in the USA, white-collar has a first-order class meaning, this is not the case in the UK, and that upon transnationalisation of white-collar boxing, the term became imbued with new meaning, which reflects the neophyte status of its practitioners. Finally, the complex arrangement in terms of social class is discussed in relation to Bourdieu's statement on class and taste.

The social class of white-collar boxers

In NYC, white-collar boxers are investment bankers, celebrities, lawyers, and doctors. One white-collar boxer in Trimbur's study contemplated earning '\$4 billion' (Trimbur, 2013: 138) and was chauffeur-driven in a Rolls-Royce. Others 'earned salaries of

millions of dollars' (Trimbur, 2013: 176). The amateur and professional boxers, however, with whom these millionaires shared the gym, were precariously employed, working for low wages, if able to find work at all, within the post-industrial economy. Some white-collar boxers at Shadcote occupy class positions nearer in proximity to these amateur and professional boxers, than to the white-collar boxers in Trimbur's research.

Nev works as a 'dogsbody... a jack of all trades, master of none' (Nev, interview). He explained further that: 'Unfortunately I've had m' hours cut so it's on a part-time basis now'.

Craig works in a warehouse. He had 'been there four years, a year and a half was on agency, and then two years on their books... Prior to that [...] various temporary contracts through agencies' (Craig, interview).

Al has been in various forms of employment. After leaving school, he 'started an apprenticeship' (Al, interview), but did not complete it. Following this, Al worked as a porter, and then in a manual trade, and now works in a call centre.

Ash works in horticulture and 'has for about nine months'. Ash explained further that he 'used to work there before' but 'got laid off' (Ash, interview). Between these two employments, Ash worked various temporary, manual jobs.

To be clear, though not narrating identical employment trajectories and class positions, these statements coalesce in terms of narrating precarious and low-paid work, themes which extend beyond the participants quoted above.

Equally, there is some variation in terms of participation in white-collar boxing at Shadcote according to social class. Though none of the white-collar boxers at Shadcote could be situated within social space in positions that were at all approximate to those at Gleason's, some white-collar boxers can be understood as in relatively privileged positions in social space. Though the sample was opportunistic, meaning that the proportion of participants belonging to this group cannot be stated, it can be noted that there were far fewer participants in this group within the opportunistic sample. Clear examples here are Richard and Saul: Richard is university-educated and owns more than one business. Saul is studying for a university degree. His personal earnings are low (below £10,000), though he is supported financially by his parents, who are managers of multinational corporations.

Through the above, it can be understood that white-collar boxing is not white-collar in terms to which sociologists are accustomed. White-collar boxing has previously been

understood as form of boxing specifically for an economic elite, and deliberately named 'white-collar' to refer to the high social class of participants (Trimbur, 2013). Beyond this, white-collar has been understood as a general signification referring to a class position (Mills, 2002), or at least a form of employment (even if the colour of the collar cannot be taken as an indication of social class as per sociological categorisation) (Savage *et al.*, 2015). Here, however, none of these understandings apply. White-collar boxing presents an example of a use of the term white-collar, which is not reflected in sociological literature to date. All of this raises a further question, however: if white-collar does not relate to the social class of practitioner, then what is white-collar boxing?

What is white-collar boxing?

Participants were asked what they understood by the term white-collar. Thematically, answers to this question varied. Participants *rejected the classed meaning of the term white-collar; understood white-collar to mean novice; and to a lesser extent, did not understand white-collar to have any specific meaning.* Crucially, these themes all align on one key point: those who actively engage in this version of the sport, and therefore sustain its existence in meaningful terms, do not understand white-collar boxing to refer to a version of the sport exclusively undertaken by white-collar workers, nor does their understanding reflect current academic convention regarding the meaning(s) of the term white-collar, in boxing (Trimbur, 2013), and beyond (eg Mills, 2002; Sutherland, 1949; Savage *et al.*, 2015). These themes are now addressed in turn.

Though not all participants understood the term white-collar to mean anything prior to their involvement in white-collar boxing at Shadcote, some participants did. These participants indicated that, prior to undertaking white-collar boxing themselves, they presumed that it would entail a similar arrangement to that described by Trimbur, but having engaged in white-collar boxing at Shadcote, they rejected meanings of the term centring on class and employment as appropriate for the understanding of white-collar boxing. The following interview extracts from Al and Mark (who works on site in the construction industry) demonstrate further what is meant by this.

Mark: I think I thought of it differently when I first started, cos I don't know, I thought white-collar would sort of be people in your offices or I dunno, people in your admin jobs, customer service jobs, that maybe hadn't boxed before, um yeah, that sort of background, but I don't think it really is that,

from what I've seen now, because people are from all different backgrounds, so your construction industry and so forth.

Al: For me I always imagined two middle-aged balding dudes in shirts and ties coming out the office, going down the gym and havin' a bit of a tear-up in the ring.

Interviewer: Do you think that's what it's like in reality?

Al: No, not at all. Not the club that we're at. Not at Shadcote I don't think it is.

In this context, the understanding that white-collar is a descriptor of employment and/or social class is insufficient. On entry to Shadcote Boxing Club, participants come to actively reject this understanding of the term. This theme, however, does not provide a positive understanding of what white-collar boxing is, only of what it is not. That participants reject the classed meaning of the term white-collar as accurate for describing white-collar boxing can therefore be situated alongside the understanding that *white-collar means novice*.

White-collar boxing entails a short course in boxing training in order to prepare complete beginners for a public boxing match. When asked about the meaning of the term white-collar in the context of white-collar boxing, many participants articulated that they understood the term to describe this characterisation.

Gary: So, it's [white-collar is] not really a term that has come up in my social group [outside/beyond the gym] really. I'd imagine, um, if I was to associate it with something, I'd associate it with boxing here [at Shadcote], so white-collar, to me would be something, when somebody is fairly new at something.

For Gary,¹ the term white-collar has no meaning beyond the realm of boxing. Prior to engaging in this form of the sport he had not heard the term. White-collar boxing at Shadcote entails an eight-week engagement in the sport, in which complete beginners undertake training in order to participate in a boxing match – they are limited to beginner status – and accordingly, Gary understands white-collar to mean being new to something. The nonalignment of the term white-collar between its sociological uses and this context is demonstrated further in the following extract, taken from an interview with Anthony, who has worked as a laboratory technician since leaving education at 18:

Interviewer: So, the term white-collar, in kind of everyday life, outside of boxing, do you know what it means?

Anthony: Um, it's just beneath your genuine, regular amateurs.

Interviewer: I mean outside of the boxing world, what the term white-collar means.

Anthony: I didn't know the term until I started boxing.

Interviewer: It's kind of an American term, it's like the opposite of blue-collar.

Anthony: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, do you know what that means?

Anthony: I mean, I know roughly now I've started boxing, so before I started boxing I didn't know.

Interviewer: Right, so, outside of boxing, what do you think white-collar means then?

Anthony: Now, I see it as an introduction to boxing, so like, people that do their eight weeks, it's below amateur [boxing].

The miscommunication between researcher and participant entailed within the above highlights that in this social context, the meaning with which the term white-collar is laden is separate from meanings to which sociologists are accustomed. For Anthony, the term white-collar signifies a particular form of boxing, exclusively for beginners and with a purposely clipped timeframe, and nothing else. Whilst white-collar is often meant to signify a form of employment, and there are class connotations attached to this, Anthony does not understand the term to have these meanings in the context of white-collar boxing.

This can be further exemplified by a final theme: a minority of participants articulated in interview that they did not understand the term white-collar to mean anything at all, and did not understand why the form of boxing in which they were participating was referred to in such a way. The following extract from an interview with Ash exemplifies this theme:

Interviewer: And the term white-collar, what does it mean to you?

Ash: You want me to be honest?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Ash: I haven't got a clue.

Whereas in the NYC context the term is deliberately employed to signify the high social class of practitioner, in this context participants do not mean to imply a similar

arrangement when they use the term. In the USA, white-collar is meaningfully used in order to discuss class at the level of interaction (Lamont *et al.*, 2017), and in this respect the etymology of white-collar boxing in the USA is clear. Indeed, white-collar boxers at Gleason's undertake the sport knowing that the term white-collar represents their class position (*cf* Trimbur, 2013). However, some white-collar boxers in the context of Shadcote – a gym based in the Midlands of England – are altogether unaware of this meaning. This is perhaps the clearest example that, in the Shadcote context, white-collar cannot be understood to have the class meaning that sociologists often take for granted, and that without an exegesis of the term as it is used and understood by those actively engaged in the sport is misleading. White-collar boxing refers to a version of the sport for beginners, engaged in a beginners' programme, and existing sociological understandings of the term white-collar do not suffice, or relate whatsoever, to this practice.

Why is white-collar boxing called white-collar boxing?

Whilst nominally the same as the boxing conducted at Gleason's Gym, white-collar boxing at Shadcote represents a different phenomenon in practice. The class connotation that white-collar deliberately represents in the context of Gleason's Gym, is either unrecognised, or recognised but rejected by white-collar boxers at Shadcote. This section therefore discusses how the boxing in which Shadcote fighters participate has come to be referred to as white-collar boxing. Whereas the terms white- and blue-collar originate in the USA (Alpaslan-Danisman, 2014) and are used in popular, contemporary American parlance to refer to social class (DeVault 1990; Lamont *et al.*, 2017), this is not the case in the UK. Taking this into account, coupled with interview data from coaching staff, the suggestion is as follows: that the term white-collar boxing is an importation from the USA, but post-importation it has become saturated with meaning different to its meaning in the context of the USA, and in the UK is used somewhat interchangeably with unlicensed boxing.

In the early 2000s, Shadcote trained fighters in a number of fighting disciplines, in addition to boxing, and would enter fighters onto mixed bill shows. These shows were unlicensed, and the boxing in which Shadcote fighters would participate was referred to as unlicensed boxing. Reflecting on the meaning of the term unlicensed, Rick, a coach, noted that:

'If it's not regulated by the ABA or the Board,² or the pro board, it becomes unlicensed. So, whether it's kickboxing, boxing, mixed martial arts [...] See, promoters are promoters, if they put a fight show on, um, not so much now,

but certainly a year or two ago, on that show they would have two, three, four disciplines. You could have wrestlin', kickboxing, [muay] Thai, boxing, um, y'know, so it's a bit of opening for promoters everywhere'.

One of the Shadcote fighters, who had been fighting on unlicensed cards such as those described above, mentioned to Rick that they had heard of white-collar boxing, and spoke of the potential opportunity for participation in these shows. Accordingly, Rick developed a relationship with a white-collar boxing promoter, and Shadcote started supplying fighters for white-collar shows. Over time, Shadcote's involvement increased, to the extent that Rick became involved in the training of white-collar boxers, rather than periodically supplying fighters for white-collar shows on an *ad hoc* basis. He recalled the conversation in which he spoke to a white-collar boxing promoter:

'Look, we've got this club, seen your white-collar, seen what you're doing, um, we'd probably like to be involved a little bit more as a club' [...] and he said, 'Ah, yeah, great'.

In this way, it can be argued that white-collar boxing became a term used to describe unlicensed boxing. For Rick, in fact, unlicensed boxing and white-collar boxing are one and the same. To this extent, another unlicensed promotion company with which Shadcote has had some involvement, but is based in a neighbouring city, has now 'gone under the white-collar banner' (Rick, interview), referring to themselves as white-collar boxing promotions, rather than unlicensed boxing promotions, whilst effectively promoting the same boxing in practice.

This is not to say that *all* white-collar boxing practices are misleadingly named in terms of social class. Trimbur (2013: 14) notes that 'sister' leagues to Gleason's white-collar boxing have been established in other major metropolises, such as London and Tokyo, and this is not being questioned. Taking London as an example, there are reports in publications such as *Business Insider* of former private school pupils and investment bankers 'doing battle' (Martin, 2016: 1) to suggest this is the case. However, it can also be suggested that the misleadingness of the term white-collar boxing is not limited to Shadcote. Primarily, Shadcote belongs to a white-collar boxing circuit which exists independently of it, meaning that if Shadcote Boxing Club ceased to operate the network would still exist. Beyond this, the following is taken from the promotional material of a white-collar boxing organisation based in London, which suggests that white-collar boxing organisations recognise the disjuncture between label and practice:

'White Collar Boxing? Sure, you know about that, a bunch of posh boys, bankers probably, slogging it out in front of their middle management peers at an anonymous black tie gala somewhere in the Square Mile. While, yes,

that is an accurate picture of some evening's entertainment, it's increasingly becoming the exception rather than the rule' (White Collar Boxing London, 2016).

Between all of the above, it might be concluded that white-collar boxing at Shadcote is ultimately epiphenomenal to the white-collar boxing practised in NYC, but post-transnationalisation of the term, it has been given new meaning, unique to the field, differing from the social meaning it is imbued with in the USA, and to an extent replacing unlicensed boxing as a term used to describe boxing which takes place outside of the amateur-professional boxing nexus. White-collar boxing therefore represents a practice wherein the term white-collar is used at the first order level, but in a way for which sociology has not accounted. Here, white-collar does not describe employment or class position; it is rather meant to signify novice status, and participation in boxing outside of the mainstream, licensed boxing economy.

Throughout this article thus far, white-collar boxing has been identified as a misleading signifier that does not accurately reflect the social class of white-collar boxers, instead being used by white-collar boxers to indicate novice status. It is therefore worth clarifying that whilst a misleading signifier, white-collar boxing is not a 'zombie' signifier (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It signifies a practice that is very much alive, and, whilst misleading in terms of social class, is used independently of this analysis in a meaningful way. Moreover, that white-collar boxing is stripped of its immediately obvious class connotations, does not entail that social class ceases to inform practice in white-collar boxing in ways that are meaningfully understood by those involved, as will now be discussed.

White-collar boxing, class and taste

For its historical variation in terms of the social class of practitioner, boxing has been referred to as 'the classic example' (Atkinson, 2015: 68) through which to demonstrate that whilst Bourdieu's theory of distinction is durable, it is mutable. Of course, there are many other contexts and phenomena through which consumption in terms of class stratification is explored and examined, such as food and art, though when Bourdieu (2010: 212) notes that 'at different times... the same practices have been able to attract aristocratic or popular devotees' which indicates that we should not understand the relationship between class and taste as intrinsic, this is directly in relation to boxing. White-collar boxing, however, is a practice wherein actors from different class positions participate in the same practice *at the same time*. *Prima facie*, this presents a problem for the Bourdieusian statement on the relationship between class and taste discussed

above. As a development in the sport in the post-industrial era, which initially appears to lack a class order, white-collar boxing is a prime site through which to think further about distinction.

White-collar boxers are not all locatable in the same social space, whilst simultaneously consuming the sport, and this would seem to lend weight to the omnivore thesis. However, this (mis)understanding prevails through analysing the consumption of white-collar boxing simply through who, in terms of social class, is consuming. Such a 'classificatory' and 'cold' (Skeggs, 1997: 10) approach to class analysis obscures how a logic of distinction remains despite this arrangement. That is, through 'examining, in greater detail, individual-object interaction' (Stewart, 2017: 48) – by engaging with how white-collar boxing is consumed by those in different positions in social space – a different understanding, against omnivorousness, prevails.

Reflecting on Shadcote Boxing Club's interior, Jack, who works night shifts as a welder, noted that:

Jack: I don't know how to explain it... I mean, I know someone who works at a health club, now that's, it's a lot smarter in there, but, you've not got the homely feel.

The homeliness of the boxing club, despite its materiality, was a prominent theme within interviews with many participants. Homeliness, however, is not an objective state, but a social construction (Sommerville, 1997). In this context, this narration can be understood to demonstrate that participants have a 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1989: 19) in the world according to social class, through which white-collar boxing, and Shadcote Boxing Club, are experienced and consumed. To this extent, fighters also articulated a suspension of feeling judged at Shadcote, in comparison to modern-style health club gyms:

Ash: I can't be doing with going to like um David Lloyd's or somewhere like that. I don't feel like as welcome, if you know what I mean, at them sort of places... just because, I don't know, just cos of where I grew up and that, I'm not really, like, it seems too upper class if you know what I mean.

Nev: I don't really think I'd fit in one of these kinda like plush clubs kinda thing, like a David Lloyds' or somethin'. Plus they're bloody expensive as well... it's like seventy quid a month, y'know in some of those places.

Equally, those few white-collar boxers of a relatively dominant class position also understood sense of place, locatable in terms of social class, which meant that their experience of Shadcote differed from those participants above. Richard reflected on his

first time at the gym, and an encounter with the coaches, which made him feel 'like an idiot' (Richard, interview):

Richard: I mean I've not been in a gym like this before in my life. But I was like, I was like thinking well, maybe when we turn up y'know there's changing rooms to get changed, have a shower after [...] I even said to Rick: 'On Monday, when we turn up is there a changing room anywhere or shower?' and he like looked at another of the coaches and started laughin'. He said, 'Look mate, I don't know if you've ever been in a gym like this before but', he says, 'that door at the back there is for running out of and being sick' um 'and this door on the side you go out of if you need a piss'. He says, 'We're short on space, there's no changing room, no showers, just turn up in yer gear, and clear off in yer gear'. And I went, I went, 'Right, no, I haven't been in a gym like this!' [Laughs].

Similarly, Saul reflected that when he first entered the club he thought:

'Oh shit, maybe I shouldn't be here [...] I was a little bit intimidated because the gym felt a little bit rough as compared to the uni gym which was very nice. I didn't know what I might run into'.

Again, this suggests a sense of place in the world is derived from social class, which informs the consumption experience of white-collar boxing. As Bourdieu (1989: 19) notes habitus 'implies a "sense of one's place" but also a "sense of the place of others"'. When Saul questioned whether his presence was sensible, he was ultimately questioning whether he should be consuming white-collar boxing at Shadcote based on his class identity.

Whilst participation in boxing at Shadcote is not discretely ordered according to social class, in terms of sheer inclusion and exclusion, by engaging with the qualitative experience of consumption, white-collar boxers from different class positions consume white-collar boxing *at the same time, but in different ways*. In other words, once the experience of white-collar boxing is analysed in qualitative terms, distinction is maintained. White-collar boxers are not omnivores, as much as white-collar boxing is consumed differently according to the social class of the consumer, the object being constructed with different meaning depending on position in social space.

Conclusion: in white-collar boxing things are not what they seem

Whilst white-collar is a term and a category to which sociologists tend to be accustomed, this research was an interrogation of a context in which the term white-collar is used,

which does not reflect sociological convention (eg Mills, 2002). Whereas white-collar is often understood in relation to employment and social class (eg Piquero, 2018; Savage *et al.*, 2015; Suttcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018), and following this it might be expected that white-collar boxers are in certain forms of employment and of a certain social class. By engaging with white-collar boxers themselves, however, it becomes apparent that this is not the case. In this context the term has a specialist and particular meaning specific to the field, which does not reflect the meaning of the term in terms of employment. Whilst white-collar boxing might be initially (mis)understood as *necessarily* a case of bankers getting in the ring, as is the case in Trimbur's analysis, once white-collar boxing at Shadcote is understood through ethnographic analysis, participation according to social class becomes far more complex than would initially seem to be the case. White-collar boxing has become a term meaning boxing for beginners, conducted according to short programmes of participation. This article therefore represents a development in the sociological understanding of the term white-collar: whilst there is debate surrounding whether white-collar can be understood as a descriptor of class in the post-industrial context, where much white-collar work is low-paid and has effectively replaced manual work as a working-class form of employment, here the term is used in a way altogether untethered from its meaning in terms of class and employment, which is hitherto unaccounted for in sociological literature.

The situation that white-collar boxing represents in terms of social class also generates its own debate, separate from discussion surrounding its misleading name. Boxing has previously been a site for the analysis of the relationship between class and taste, and white-collar boxing poses questions in this regard. Participants were from various class positions, simultaneously undertaking white-collar boxing, which might initially seem to be a form of boxing conducted independently of Bourdieusian theory, and might initially seem to indicate that white-collar boxing is a sign of the omnivore. However, whilst white-collar boxing here presents an activity undertaken by actors from different social space at the same time, the relationship between class and taste is maintained. This analysis develops sociological understandings of consumption more broadly, building upon recent developments in Bourdieusian theory (eg Friedman *et al.*, 2015; de Boise, 2016; Peters *et al.*, 2017; Flemmen *et al.*, 2018; Stewart, 2017), to suggest that a closer interrogation of the qualitative experience of consumption is necessary to discern the relationship between class and taste. These analyses have centred on the so-called omnivore, and likewise, this analysis of white-collar boxing represents another blow to this idea. It can be read as a case wherein omnivorousness initially seems to be in play, but once interrogated further, according to the qualitative experience of consumption, it is evidently not the case. Consumption – singular – does not encompass the social reality of white-collar boxing, and the construction developed through this article – the

possibility of a plurality of consumption experiences of the same object – can be understood as a means through which to analyse circumstances beyond white-collar boxing, which initially seem to lack a class order.

The lived experience of white-collar boxing in terms of social class differs greatly from what its name might initially suggest, and this takes time to explain, hence discussion here was held in relation to social class in isolation. However, discussion must not end here, and the gendered and racialised dynamics of white-collar boxing, in conjunction with social class, deserve further exploration. For instance, that white-collar boxing is largely undertaken by men is evidence to suggest that it shares other characteristics with other forms of boxing, but whether this form of boxing can be understood as to directly reproduce the gendered reality of boxing, is unknown. Further to this, boxing has a racialised history and present, and how white-collar boxing in the UK can be understood in relation to this is unaddressed in the literature and should be the subject of future research. Analyses of this sort should take as their starting point the following: *in white-collar boxing things are not what they seem.*

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¹ Unlike most participants it is difficult to provide a clear statement of Gary's employment. Prior to the interview, Gary was 'keen to be interviewed' (field notes), but in the interview itself 'he was not at all forthcoming, which I found surprising' (field notes). Gary's interview narrative pertaining to his employment was therefore unclear.

² ABA refers to the Amateur Boxing Association, otherwise known as Boxing England, the regulatory body for amateur boxing in England. The Board refers to the British Boxing Board of Control, the equivalent for professional boxing in Britain.