

Critiquing and Creating Spaces in Sport

I was happy to be asked to write a blog post shortly after publishing this [paper](#) in [Gender and Society](#). I was really happy to do it and sat down at my laptop to start the process of translating my academic arguments into less opaque language. Part way through this process I realised that what I was writing didn't have the impact that I was hoping for; the post was turning into a simplified summery of my paper. "Surely", I remember thinking to myself, "a blog post can be more than this?" With some time I realised that my frustration was connected to broader issue related to the translation of research, public engagement and active scholarship.

Publishing a paper in *Gender and Society* is one of my most significant contributions to academia. In fact, getting papers in a relatively high impact factor journal is an important goal for many academics and it certainly gets us a symbolic 'pat on the back' from supportive colleagues. This can lead to a feeling of 'job done' once it has been achieve. But in the case of my work and the job that I feel I need to do, this is at best a significant first step. So when I tried to write my blog post I felt like I was telling a story that not only didn't have an ending it didn't even have a 'middle'.

There have been useful attempts within academia to begin developing such 'middle' point, that is, actually doing something based on research findings. One crucial element of this in the UK has been the significance that is place on evidencing the impact of research. Impact can be considered as a measurement for the ways in which academic research changes society (hopefully for the better) beyond simply the production of knowledge. Unfortunately, my research in boxing has had almost zero measurable impact when considered in this manner. This is why I struggled to develop what I considered to be an interesting blog post at the time. I wasn't ready to start telling people beyond academia about my research, as I'd not done anything really significant with it yet!

While shifts in academia have given scholars the language of impact around which to develop our work, it is a more simplistic idea that has driven me to consider my research in this manner; what's the point of researching a problem if you are not going to do anything about it? I have always considered my job as an academic to have this practical dimension, after all there can't be many people better placed than I, in my privileged position of being free to study the social world, to use my knowledge to improve it? A useful way of capturing this idea is to centralise the need to **create** which must follow on from our **critiques**. Let me start with a snapshot of the critique.

My paper was based on ethnographic research I undertook in a boxing, martial arts and weight lifting gym in England (see Matthews, 2014, 2015 for more detail). The central critique I made in the paper was that while there's lots of evidence of broad societal shifting in various ways towards equality there are social-cultural spaces that remain, and perhaps become increasing, resistant to such change. When my analysis is broken down to this level it becomes a simple idea, and it is, so while the paper makes a relatively significant contribution to

academic knowledge, the obvious question follow, so what? Or what's next? And this is why I feel the need to create not only critique.

Boxing, as a cultural phenomenon, has a long history of being a site for difference, inclusion, diversity and challenging norms. Yet, it is still dominated in symbolism and number by certain men and narratives about manhood. The legacy of boxing's historical roots in a powerful, aggressive and often violent masculine body culture still shape and frame contemporary experiences inside and around the gym. However, the rise of women's boxing, perhaps highlighted most significantly at the London 2012 Olympic games, has made stories of female boxing fair easier to tell and live (See Woodward ([2012](#)) for a discussion).

[Embed video – This girl can box -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=DdBF1qG0Z7A]

England boxing and many boxing clubs around the country and have significant contributions to continuing this process. And while there is still much work to be done, I believe we are on the right path towards boxing clubs being spaces where powerful, skilfully and strong female bodies are presented, expected and respected.

Where boxing clubs in a general sense appear to be more resistant to change is in their ability to attract and cater for LGBTQI+ communities. In many cases this is not through any sort of open or even covert homophobia, but rather a lack of knowledge about how, and in what ways, it might be possible to break the symbolic association between boxing and certain images, ideas and stories of aggressive men. For example, I heard recently from a gay man who really wanted to try boxing, but when attending his local gym simply couldn't walk through the door, as if there was a socially learned force field keeping him out.

The clearest way of tackling this issue, is to create spaces where these 'social force fields' can be eroded. Indeed, there are some great examples of how this is already happening ([Orlando Cruz](#), [London Gay Boxing Club](#), [Velvet Gloves Boxing NYE](#)). So I began working with my local gym, the [Eastbourne Boxing Club](#) (EBC), to explore the potential for starting an LGBTQI+ boxing class.

The first stumbling block is funding. One of the main reasons boxing clubs do not have such sessions already is that they believe, in most cases quite rightly I would suggest, that they simply won't be popular enough to cover the expenses. Most clubs simply don't have the finances to enable them to take risks on sessions for groups that have not traditionally been associated with boxing. I was able to secure some funding from the University of Brighton's [Community and University Partnership Programme](#) to help in this regard.

The next issue is to find coaches who can deliver boxing in a manner which is inclusive and considered. Fortunately the coaching team EBC is not only well qualified in the sport but they also hold progressive personal political ideals. They have been really interested in the idea of promoting boxing to the local

community. I have also taken the England Boxing level one boxing qualification so that I can assist where possible.

So we found some free time at the gym and now we have picked four dates in Wednesday evening in May where we will run free boxing classes for the local LGBTQI+ community. We are currently promoting these sessions with flyers and posters both on the internet and in hardcopy. Indeed, England Boxing has helped us with this [post](#) about the sessions.

I will conduct some research based on these sessions which will help develop my existing academic explorations of boxing, produce monitoring and evaluation information for the specific sessions while also highlight best practice and areas for improvement. The goal is to combine this information with research from other similar projects to produce guidelines and suggestions for the national governing body and other clubs who are interested in doing something similar.

This is how I have attempted to create something based on my academic critique, and this is also why I now feel like I can produce this blog post now. Simply put, I have more of a story to tell about how my research is doing something in the world rather than sitting on a shelf in the library.

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