

ABSTRACT

SATTERLUND, TRAVIS DELMAR. *Fighting for an Authentic Self: An Ethnographic Study of Recreational Boxers.* (Under the direction of Michael L. Schwalbe.)

This study is an ethnographic examination of the rank and file recreational boxers—mostly white and middle-class males—who frequented a gym in a mid-sized southeastern city in the United States. I conducted field research as a participant observer for nineteen months and also interviewed forty-eight fellow boxers and the gym's two owner/trainers. This research shows that gym members used the cultural meanings associated with boxing as resources to construct boxing as an activity from which they could derive gendered identity rewards. At the same time, however, both gender and social class complicated matters considerably, creating dilemmas for the middle-class white recreational boxers, and for the women who claimed space in a masculinist domain. As such, I show how authenticity of the gym was socially constructed to meet these identity rewards and also to resolve these dilemmas.

Gym members were attracted to boxing, at least in part, as an avenue to address feelings of what it means to enact manhood. Such displays of masculinity were important for these men because of the perceived limitation of their professional identities. While most of the men had secure middle class jobs, these jobs weren't the primary basis for their feelings of self worth, especially in relation to their identity as "men." In essence, then, the boxing gym offered a means for the men to compensate for their inability to signify power, control, and toughness in their professional lives. Moreover, for the men at the gym in particular, boxing served as a resource to gain valuable cultural capital.

Women also sought identity rewards from boxing and had reasons to want to signify masculine qualities. For them, too, boxing was a way to signify agency and strength. Yet, they also faced dilemmas in seeking to distance themselves from other feminine women but without being viewed as too masculine. The final chapter has implications for the gym's activity in terms of the inequalities that are maintained and (re)produced.

FIGHTING FOR AN AUTHENTIC SELF:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF RECREATIONAL BOXERS

By

Travis Delmar Satterlund

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Richard L. Della Fave

Dr. Michael A. Messner

Dr. Stacy De Coster

Dr. Barbara J. Risman

Dr. Michael L. Schwalbe
Chair of Advisory Committee

DEDICATED TO JACKSON AND QUINN

BIOGRAPHY

Travis Satterlund grew up in Southern California with a dream of playing shortstop for the Los Angeles Dodgers. This dream derailed when he realized that the Dodgers weren't looking for a scrappy but light-hitting slap-hitter with no apparent base-stealing propensities. Alas, after hanging up his cleats after college (Chico State) and working stints as a waiter, bartender, mover, and Teamster, he became a high school history and American government teacher at Pleasant Valley Senior High (PVSH) in Chico, California. Travis earned a Master's Degree in political science while teaching high school, and after five years at PVSH, Travis moved with his wife, Aly, to North Carolina to pursue his doctorate in Sociology. Jackson Satterlund was born August 17, 2000, two days prior to the beginning of Travis' graduate school career at North Carolina State University. The next three years were a blur of writing papers, changing diapers, and an abundance of sleep deprivation. Travis and his family then moved to San Francisco, California, in September 2003. In the time Travis has lived in San Francisco until now (2006), he has simultaneously worked as a part-time collegiate instructor, carried out ethnographic data collection in the pubs of San Francisco (Really!), maintained childcare responsibility for Jackson, attended a part-time evening law school program, and worked to complete this dissertation. His second son, Quinn Satterlund, was born on September 25, 2005, and added very nicely to the above list of San Francisco experiences. He is scheduled to earn his law degree in 2007, at which time Aly, Jackson, and Quinn will have put a moratorium on all future advanced degree programs for Travis. Who needs the Dodgers anyway?

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I would like to thank the many individuals who made this undertaking possible. In keeping with the theme of this research, this study was akin to a 15 round, knock-down, drag-out, championship fight. There were occasions when I thought I had the fight in my pocket, and other times when I felt bloodied and battered. Fortunately, I had many people in my corner who kept me battling until the end, never letting me think about throwing in the proverbial towel. For this I am appreciative. My chair, Michael Schwalbe, deserves special attention. He not only provided the intellectual and technical foundation which guided this research process, it was his queries, prodding, and intellectual support that made this dissertation much more sociologically insightful had he not been there. He served as my mentor, coach, trainer, and friend, going the full 15 rounds with me—gloves and all—and for that I am, and always will be, grateful. I am also appreciative to committee members Barbara Risman, Rick Della Fave, Stacy DeCoster, and Mike Messner, for their valuable feedback and support as I undertook this process.

I would like to thank the members of KO Gym, and especially the gym's owner-trainers, Jan and Bill, who were always willing to assist me in my seemingly endless quest for answers. Somehow they also turned this "robot" with gloves into something of a decent pugilist, which speaks to their skill and patience as trainers. Finally, my wife, Aly, provided both financial and emotional support through this long, arduous process, and without such support this study would have been impossible. She understood my desire to complete this challenge, and she never wavered in her belief in me. I realize this has not been easy for her to carry such a heavy burden, but babe, we did it!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
Method	5
Setting	8
KO Boxers	12
Motivations to Box	16
Studies of Boxing.....	18
Gender, Masculinity, and Patriarchy	23
Masculinity	25
Patriarchy	26
Class.....	27
Sport and the Reproduction of Inequality	28
The Meaning of Sports.....	29
Dissertation Overview	32
2. CONSTRUCTING AN AUTHENTIC BOXING EXPERIENCE.....	36
Real, But Not Too Real.....	37
A Hierarchy of Reality and Risk of Stigma.....	39
The Psycho-Squad	44
Managing the Reality of Boxing.....	51
Props	52
Real Training	58
Emphasizing Technique.....	60
Sparring.....	62
A Female Trainer in a Man’s World.....	64
The Symbolic Value of Suffering	70
3. THE (GENDERED AND “CLASSED) SATISFACTIONS OF BOXING.....	78
Middle-Class Jobs and a Working-Class Sport	82
Dissatisfaction With the World of Work	82
The Satisfactions of Boxing in Comparison to the World of Work	85
The Physicality of Boxing	86
Individualism	90
Control	91
Objective Results	92
Finding the Real Me at KO.....	95
Status Leveling.....	97
The Women at KO	99
Motivations for KO Gym’s Women Boxers.....	100
Gender Distancing	102
The Gendered World of KO Gym	107

4. EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL IN SPARRING: ACHIEVING A PEAK EXPERIENCE.....	113
Peak Experience.....	113
Learning to Spar.....	116
Regulating Intensity.....	118
Emotional Control.....	121
Emotion-Work Strategies.....	127
Collective Strategies	127
Individual Strategies	130
Getting Into the Right Frame of Mind	130
Depersonalizing the Sparring Session	132
Self Talk.....	135
Emotions and Gender.....	137
Gender and the Code of the Gym	137
Inter-Gender Match-Ups	142
5. CONCLUSION.....	148
Middle-Class Masculinity.....	151
The Contradictions of Compensatory Masculinity at KO Gym	154
Strategic Social Comparisons	158
Boxing at KO Gym as Cultural Capital	160
Defensive Othering and the Reproduction of Gender Inequality	164
Directions for Future Research	169
References.....	171
APPENDIX.....	181

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

A hand-scripted sign on an elongated piece of white plywood announces in purple letters: “KO Gym—Boxing, Thai-Boxing and Fencing.” The sign faces the parking lot and is visible to the northbound highway traffic that speeds by the gym. Without the sign, commuters probably would never notice the decrepit, warehouse-style building. In the evening, the glare of the indoor lights suggests the building is still in use. It is, in fact, an active, thriving space, and it is here that I spent over a year and a half researching a boxing gym and its participants.

I expected to find a gym filled with young, working-class men of color. After all, this is what I saw when I turned on the TV and watched boxing. In fact, part of my desire to research a boxing gym was to study working-class men. I figured a boxing gym in an urban setting would be a perfect place for such a study. However, when I arrived at KO Gym and took my first look at the gym and its participants I was surprised at what I saw. Though there were indeed young men of color training, the place was also filled with white men—both young and middle-aged—who were also training. Moreover, there were a couple of women training, and the two trainers were white, one of whom was a woman. This countered my expectations and piqued my interest. I wanted to learn about these mostly white boxers (that I would later learn were almost entirely middle to upper middle class). What brought them to the gym? What did they get out of it? Sociologically, what was happening?

While boxing gyms might be prevalent in big cities, KO Gym was unique in its locale—a mid-sized Southeastern city with a few tall buildings and a prominent public university two miles from downtown. During my research, I toiled alongside KO Gym members, sweating and enjoying the doses of macho that the boxing rituals invariably brought me. I learned how to throw a variety of punch combinations; how to defend and parry punches; how to “take” a punch; I learned of the hard work, commitment, and dedication necessary to become an average boxer; and, most importantly, I learned about the culture of KO Gym and its members.

Many KO members came to the gym with only a vague idea of what they were seeking, though they were almost universally able to pinpoint what they didn't want. A precondition for KO Gym boxers to derive satisfaction from their activities was a belief that they were engaged in real boxing—not Tae-Bo, cardio-boxing, or boxer-cise. The members didn't want any of these forms of non-contact activities. Instead, they wanted an authentic boxing experience, complete with the exchange of blows, the pain, the bruises. What they wanted, in other words, was action they could define as real boxing.

The public perception is that real boxing is a bloodsport: two combatants dishing out pain and injury with the ultimate goal to incapacitate the other. Such a perception only intensifies boxing's poor reputation and leads to condemnation. Critics of this sport assert that it is barbaric, a vestige of our uncivilized past. The American Medical Association, after examining a wide range of research on the effects of blows to the head and brain injury, as well as death in the ring, has called for boxing's abolition (AMA 1984). Everyone is familiar with a boxer

suffering from shaking extremities and slurred speech, and everyone seems to understand why it happens—one shot too many to the head. This is pugilistic dementia, or “punch drunk syndrome.” Boxers know at the very least that boxing is dangerous.

So why box? Its proponents characterize it as “the sweet science,” a combination of cunning athletic skills and tactical strategy that signifies physical bravery, courage, and determination. For some, to follow conventional wisdom, it is a way out of the ghetto. For many urban minority youth, boxing provides the hope that the wealth and status of the American Dream can be attained (Wacquant 2004; Sugden 1987). The list of boxing champs, young and old, includes many who boxed themselves out of the ghetto.

Yet, at KO Gym, most boxers weren’t fighting for economic gain. Boxers at KO Gym were mostly middle-class white males—and a small handful of females—who trained to achieve an authentic boxing experience. In fact, only a small group of boxers—mostly African American males—trained for competition and future opportunities for income. On its face, then, it seems surprising that people from middle-class and professional backgrounds came to an urban gym to box. Such participation no doubt gives new meanings to a sport that has historically been defined in ways aligned with working-class men of color. So what was happening at KO?

For one, the middle-class members of KO Gym saw themselves as doing something special, something that most other middle-class people would not do. KO boxers expressed contempt for those who preferred a sheltered middle-class world and

who weren't willing to test themselves. As one guy put it, "I don't want to be one of those guys who gets home from work, sits on the couch, watches TV and eats potato chips all night. No way, not me." Yet, of all the activities one could do, why boxing?

Clearly there was a gender story here. Part of the satisfaction the men and women got from boxing, as will be explained, came from its identity rewards. For the men, boxing attested unequivocally to their manhood. In the ring they were able to signify masculinity in ways the rest of their lives did not allow. Similarly, the female boxers derived rare identity rewards from participating in a male-dominated sport. In this way, they, too, could feel they were doing something special that testified to their toughness and courage, and set them apart from most women.

For members of KO Gym the sport was aptly chosen. Boxing's symbolic status is significant. It is synonymous with power, strength, and virility. Gendered notions of boxing are pervasive in literature, television, and film. Boxing is considered to be quintessentially masculine (Mailer 1976; Oates 1994; Scannell 1967), and no other sport is equally celebrated for its sheer physicality and brute maleness. Perhaps only war itself more directly evokes warrior imagery. As Joyce Carol Oates states, "Boxing is a purely masculine activity and it inhabits a purely masculine world" (Oates 1994:71).

Middle-class white men, however, couldn't just jump into an activity that their middle-class peers regarded as savage and stupid. Nor did they desire to expose themselves to serious injury. So they faced the problem of how to get what they wanted from boxing, without also going too far and taking on stigma, or getting badly hurt. This study looks at how that balancing act was performed; that is, at how the (mostly) white,

middle-class recreational boxers at KO Gym constructed an authentic boxing experience from which they could derive identity rewards without stigma or injury. Gender, as we will see, was a central part of the story.

METHOD

This study began in the spring of 2002 as a project for a research methods course. I attended KO Gym at least once a week during that first semester. By the time I left the field in August of 2003, I was attending up to four sessions per week and had joined the elite training subgroup known as the “psycho-squad.” In those 19 months, I trained hundreds of hours and was as much a participant as an observer. Data also derived from formal interviews with the two owner/trainers and with forty-eight fellow boxers. My observations went beyond the gym, extending to competitions and exhibitions, and to social events with gym members. I documented as much as possible, writing fieldnotes immediately after the workouts and social outings.

The interviews lasted from 25 minutes to two hours. I began by asking boxers how they got involved at KO Gym. I then asked about their experiences at the gym, their lives outside the gym, and their feelings toward gym activities. My strategy was to bring up general topics and then probe for specific details. In the course of the fieldwork I also had dozens of informal conversations with boxers before, during, and after workouts. This degree of immersion into KO Gym allowed me access to data that couldn't have been gained from observation or interviews alone, and provided me opportunity to interpret the cultural practices at the boxing gym, as well as the boxers

themselves. As Stoecker (1991:95) noted, such immersion, through both participation and interviewing “allows the researcher to find how different issues hold different significance for different people.”

I was initially apprehensive about entering a boxing gym, mostly based on my preconceived notions of the sport. As a white academic, I feared I wouldn't belong in a setting dominated by working-class men of color. My preconceptions were challenged in two ways. First, the demographics of the gym were not what I expected. As it turned out, KO Gym was not a working-class gym, and men of color were not the numerical majority. In fact, most members were white and middle-class. My expectations were also jarred by the women who trained at KO Gym. Second, I quickly learned that occupational status was unimportant inside the gym. As long as I participated seriously, I would have no trouble fitting in.

My initial plan was to observe the activities of the gym from the sidelines. However, after watching one workout, I knew that observing would not be enough. To understand what I was seeing, I would have to experience it for myself. As a former athlete, I was eager to try. In retrospect, I could not have conducted meaningful interviews without this immersion, which informed both my questions and the interpretations at which I eventually arrived.

The two owner/trainers were aware of my research interests from the beginning, as were the other boxers to whom I introduced myself upon entering the site. I also made it a point to tell newcomers that I was studying the gym for my dissertation. No one ever objected. Because I participated in every aspect of gym life, my identity as a

sociologist receded into the background. On the other hand, because I often stayed late after workouts to conduct interviews, my identity as a researcher was never entirely forgotten. Occasionally someone would ask how the study was coming along, but for the most part, it didn't matter. At KO Gym, I was seen as a boxer first and a researcher second.

Though participant observation offered me the opportunity to immerse myself in the site, this could be considered to be both an advantage and a disadvantage. It is advantageous because I accessed data from various perspectives, including my own. I thus had a rich and diverse body of data from which to develop an analysis of the happenings at KO Gym. On the other hand, being closely involved with the members of KO and its activities meant that, as a researcher, I had to be constantly mindful of my own subjectivity, prejudices, limitations, and suspicions (Adler and Adler 1994: Stake 1994), including my own eagerness for doses of macho.

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Charmaz 1983; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Throughout data collection I wrote analytical memos interpreting the emerging themes and processes. I also went through my fieldnotes and coded them according to themes. Each theme was then examined in detail, with particular attention to the behaviors and meanings that gave rise to it. The resulting analysis shows how rank-and-file participants constructed their activity in ways that allowed them to maximize the benefits of participation. My goal was not to generalize to all boxing gyms, but to understand—by studying the microcosm of KO Gym—some of the key

processes through which people construct the experiences that both affirm and transform their identities as women and men.

SETTING

In some ways, KO Gym didn't look like a gym. The industrial blue/gray carpet and the wires hanging from the walkway corridor made it initially suspect to newcomers. However, the fragrance of sweat, the sound of bags being beaten, and a view from beyond the corridor wall provided the most necessary of visuals: the boxing ring, a host of heavy and speed bags, and a hodge-podge of other boxing essentials scattered about. The ring was situated in the farthest corner of the gym, with various punching bags surrounding it on two sides, and walls bordering the other two. The showers were still to be added (wish-list items for the owners/trainers), and a little area off the main floor served as a dressing/locker room where boxers changed their clothes and wrapped their hands prior to the night's workout.

Portable lockers marked with athletic cohesive tape stood against one wall. A back room was cluttered with building material and wires and tools that appeared to be remnants of previous tenants. There were two other small rooms in the back of the gym. One functioned as an office with a library of hundreds of boxing matches on tape, while the other had become a spot to watch the video tapes. Two old couches and some metal chairs sat in this viewing room.

A four-foot wide purple painted stripe bordered the white-peeled walls in the main room. Body-length mirrors were mounted on the walls in two corners of the room.

One far wall, consisting of large makeshift shelves, held the communal equipment: gloves, padded jocks, headgear, jump ropes, focus mitts, belt pads, medicine balls, and leg pads (for Muay Thai boxers). In another corner, the double-end bag attached to both the ceiling and floor by elastic straps. Next to the front desk was a small area with a weight bench, free weights, and assorted dumbbells collecting dust. On the opposite end of the desk rested the fencing equipment.¹ Boxing posters and pictures, promotional fight cards, and magazine covers lined three walls of the gym. Featured prominently were famous boxers of the 1980s and 1990s: “Marvelous” Marvin Hagler, Thomas “The Hit Man” Hearns, “Sugar” Ray Leonard, and Mike Tyson. On a wall above the stereo was a mini-shrine to Muhammad Ali.

The ceiling was like a half-completed jigsaw puzzle. Square pieces of the black industrial ceiling paneling covered the room in some spots, and open spaces revealed water pipes, electrical wires and wooden joists in others. The heavy bags dangled from chains wrapped around the wooden ceiling joists. Bare fluorescent lights illuminated the grimy mix of dust and sweat that covered the gym floor.

The equipment was worn. Many of the communal pairs of gloves had been repaired with duct tape. In fact, duct tape was a necessary component in the gym, wrapping pipes as well as gym bags, securing work benches, ring ropes, and posts, holding up posters, connecting the sponge floor ring together, and lining the industrial carpet in various squares and rectangles used by the fencers. While the structure and the

¹ Though the fencing equipment seemed out of place for this setting, KO Gym was headquarters for the local university’s fencing club, as well as a handful of elementary school fencing programs. When I asked Bill about the fencing equipment he explained, “It pays the bills.”

equipment had seen better days, the gym as a whole was well ordered. At the start of every night's workout, everything was in its proper place.

KO Gym presented its mission in its motto, which was printed in purple block letters above the front desk: "True Sport, True Training." KO Gym opened in 1997, though the first incarnation was in a nearby strip mall, and the gym space was less than half the size of the space currently leased. In September of 2001, Jan and Bill—the owner/trainers at KO—moved to their current location, the bottom floor and corner end of an old warehouse building. "We got a great deal on our lease because of what they do upstairs," stated Jan with a smile. "Who would want to have a business with bands practicing upstairs all the time?" On most nights, covers of classic rock songs with screeching guitar feedback and 80's dance music with synthesizer rhythms could be heard while KO boxers trained.

In business terms, KO Gym was unremarkable, and closer to what could be construed as a not-for-profit operation than a lucrative goldmine. The gym ran on a slim budget. The members' dues barely covered the overhead, utilities, and upkeep. While Jan and Bill's goal was to make a living from KO Gym, during my period of study they both held full-time day jobs. Jan worked at a technology firm, while Bill was a cinematographer and contracted outside video work. "Your money, your dues that you pay, pays for this place. That's about it," Jan explained one night after everyone had left the gym. "Someday it would be nice to actually pay ourselves [Jan and Bill] for what we do here. Oh God, that would be the day!"

Jan and Bill were former competitive boxers who at one time worked out together under the tutelage of the same trainer. It was while training together for a handful of years that they became good friends and talked of someday opening their own gym. Their talk became a reality when Jan and Bill decided to lease a space in a strip mall to teach boxing, martial arts, and fencing. KO Gym was born. Two years later they moved to their current location in the old warehouse.

Jan, white, 31 years old, a bespectacled self-proclaimed tomboy often wearing baggy sweats and extra large athletic T-shirts and hair pulled back, looked the part of a female athlete. Her ready smile and easygoing demeanor masked her passion for boxing. There was a genuine effort by the gym participants to please her, not for fear of getting yelled at or criticized, but to gain her respect since she herself was so respected. As one gym member put it, “When Jan compliments you, you know you are doing something right. She is quick to point out your flaws, but she is also great about giving people positive feedback.” During workouts Jan and Bill worked together, but often Jan took charge of the gym proceedings. Similarly, Bill commandeered the fencing that took place at the gym, and Jan would assist him in that venture.

Bill looked the part of someone who participated in martial arts. He was about five-foot seven, had long curly black hair wrapped in a ponytail, and his black rimmed glasses were always slipping down his nose. Though he didn't look to be the prototypical fighter or coach, he was in no way slight. His legs were massive and spoke to his athleticism. At the gym Bill wore ragged T-shirts and shorts, and often walked

around the gym barefoot. He seemed to be in a perpetual good mood, always friendly and offering encouragement.

Two-person drills and sparring dominated the training regimen at KO Gym. After the initial jump rope, stretching, shadow boxing, and mitt work that commenced every night's workout, Jan and Bill would gather the boxers and explain some drill they wanted us to do. (Occasionally, Jan or Bill would divide the participants into two groups—those who sparred, and everyone else.) With everyone sweating profusely and breathing hard, one of the trainers would explain a defensive/offensive tactic that required an impending drill. From there, boxers practiced the drill and Jan and Bill would walk around and check-in on the pairs, assisting boxers who were having problems with their technique. A whole training session usually lasted about two hours, with the most intensive segments taking place at the beginning and end of the night. The vast majority of the sessions were repetitive, although some of the specific drills changed slightly from workout to workout.

KO Boxers

To Jan and Bill the number of people who came to KO Gym to train was bewildering; it fluctuated erratically from month-to-month and even week-to-week. Over the course of my year and a half at the gym, approximately 150 people walked in the door to train for boxing. Some quit within a workout or two, others remained for a few weeks, while several others lasted longer. Often, members attended inconsistently, showing up and training for a few consecutive months, dropping out for months, and

then starting again. In fact, the inconsistency of the middle-class recreational members might have been one of the most consistent patterns of gym attendance. These members usually cited their busy schedules to account for their variable gym participation. Bill liked to joke that the erratic attendance was related to members' low tolerance for pain and their poor memories: "Once somebody gets hit in the face, they realize boxing isn't for them. And then they forget and come back, and do it again."

Most of the members were men—upwards of 90%—and the vast majority were also white—approximately 80% of the total gym population. The majority of the members were middle class. Nearly all were college graduates or current college students, with five holding advanced degrees. Most had steady jobs and middle-class incomes. Blue-collar workers were in the minority at KO gym, but were more likely to be regular attendees and therefore made the ratio of attendance on any normal workout night about 50/50 between middle- and working-class members.

The turnout for workouts at KO Gym varied in size depending on the night of the week, the time of the year, and a host of other variables. Attendance ranged from five to 20 people, and most nights the gym averaged 8-12 members. Every week a new person or two would walk through the door looking to take up boxing. Some weeks produced more newcomers than others, but no discernible pattern emerged.

Among the members of the gym there were nine boxers—one of whom was a woman—who made up the core group. I call these members the core group because they remained at the gym throughout my study. This core group consisted largely of working-class fighters who competed, the majority of whom were African Americans.

They were the most dedicated participants. They often traveled to exhibitions and competitions even when they weren't competing. It was this core group that would often lead drills and help the newcomers. Through it all, the core group remained essentially the same. Dues for the participants were \$55 a month, three months for \$125, or \$8 per session. Most people paid per month, with a handful of regulars paying in three-month installments, and a few people paid per session, usually buying multiple sessions at once.

Nearly all of the boxers were, white, male, middle-class, and between the ages of 18 and 48. But this sort of description doesn't tell us about what was in the lives of these men that brought them to boxing. Nor does it tell us why the cultural representations of boxing meant so much to them; why they had a need to box; or why they felt the need to seek out something seemingly risky. In looking at the common experiences in their lives, some of these answers can be discovered and offers insight into why these members sought action in a boxing gym.

The members of KO Gym were different in many ways, yet there were some commonalities of experience and background. I do not have the extensive biographical data necessary to generalize about the connections between childhood, family background, and the action sought in the gym. However, based on the information gleaned from the interviews and conversations, the men can be divided into two groups. One group of men had a background in sports, and these members spoke, in one way or another, of boxing filling a competitive void in their lives. Many who felt this way said they defined themselves as athletes during childhood and adolescence. In fact, many of these members still referred to themselves as athletes. The other group consisted of men

who were less attached to sports as they were growing up. Several of the men in this latter group also noted that they often got picked on by others growing up, and they saw boxing as a way to learn self-defense and to compensate for their youth experiences. Finally, all the women interviewed described a background immersed in sports. Many said they had grown up as “tomboys.”

The male boxers came to KO Gym from different backgrounds. Yet what eventually came out was both groups of men—those with a strong athletic background and those who avoided them altogether—were drawn to what boxing could offer them—a masculine identity derived from the cultural meanings of boxing.

But it wasn’t just an athletic background or absence of this background that led these men to the gym. These members rejected the middle-class labels often bestowed upon them—as “paper pushers” or “wimps.” Several men described their middle-class peers as “soft.” This will be examined in greater detail in the core chapters, but it’s worth noting that this was common among all the middle-class recreational boxers. Boxing was, in large part, a way for the men to fashion an image of manhood for themselves—and wear it.

As they grew up, all the men (all were U.S. citizens) were exposed to the idea that a real man is tough, strong, and willing to fight for what he thinks is right. A real man, in short, is a warrior who fights, wins, and in the end gets the girl. Such is the masculine fantasy that the men imbibed from television, movies, comics, magazines, and video games. In essence, this notion permeates our society. So boys learn from a young age the warrior fantasy that shapes their understandings of what manhood is about.

These sentiments gave rise to feelings that, at least in part, led men to seek out experiences that would validate them as men. It's not surprising, then, that the men were motivated to seek gender-affirming action in a boxing gym.

Motivations to box. The participants came to KO Gym a number of different ways. Most remembered watching boxing on TV and admiring the famous fighters of their youth; or at the very least hearing stories about the greats—such as Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, and Mike Tyson. The famous boxers of their youth, as well as the mushrooming popularity of the sport on TV and in movies, remained a point of intrigue for KO members and drew many to the gym. A good number of members spoke of wanting to enhance their martial arts training with more of the “real” combat of boxing. Several members spoke of being involved with fencing at KO Gym and were interested in the boxing training that they observed. Others followed their friends to the gym, while some others said that they wanted to compete or learn self-defense. Still others couldn't pinpoint any one reason for joining the gym, stating simply that they thought it would be fun and a good workout.

Several members spoke of looking up KO Gym on the Internet, and noted it was the only boxing venue in the area that advertised “real boxing” with “real training.” The KO website had pictures of the gym facilities, and perhaps of more import, pictures of the gym's competitors appeared on the website along with their respective win-loss records. According to those interviewed, this was crucial. The competitors at the gym signified that the gym was indeed real.

For most boxers at KO Gym there was an evolution in their motivations to box. In the beginning, most viewed boxing training as a good fitness workout and exciting in its own right. These initial motives, however, evolved as the boxers began learning the intricacies of the sport. How the meanings of boxing changed will be discussed and analyzed in later chapters of this dissertation.

Once members began training, they realized that the sport was harder than it looked on TV or on film. In this manner, nearly every boxer at KO Gym reported some degree of surprise at how much technique, strategy, and mental aptitude boxing required. Many likened the action in the ring to a chess match, noting that for every move there was a counter move. As one participant stated, “If you want to be successful, you can’t just react when you’re in the ring; you need to think three steps ahead of your opponent.”

While learning the basic punches was easy, learning how to combine punches with footwork and defense was extremely difficult and proved frustrating for almost everyone. The frustration tended to be greatest for newcomers who had athletic backgrounds and expected to pick up the nuances and technical aspects of boxing immediately. In fact, Bill would often say that most people had to first unlearn their bad habits before they could learn basic boxing techniques:

Some guys come in here with really bad habits, like they’ve learned boxing from watching bouts on TV. They try to emulate those guys and they don’t realize all the bad things they pick up—the professional boxers have been doing this for years and years, they know how to do things the right way, but have learned to get away with things, like not keeping their hands up. You can’t do that when you start. You’ll get killed. One guy [at KO Gym] would spar off the ropes thinking he was Muhammad Ali doing his “rope-a-dope.” He got that beat out of him real quick. There are no Muhammad Alis in here. Trust me.
--Bill, White Male, Owner/Trainer KO Gym

Because of the difficulty associated with learning boxing technique, many described a sense of satisfaction and subsequent motivation when they started to “get it.” Moreover, part of the satisfaction derived from the perception that boxing was a useful skill. There existed a strong sense of self-sufficiency at KO gym; it was liberating for these boxers to learn something that they perceived would better equip them for the real world. Yet, no matter that these members would probably never face such dangerous situations in their middle-class world, perceiving boxing as a form of self-defense enabled the members to feel confident about their newly acquired ability to protect themselves and those around them, and this proved to be further motivation to keep at it.

It was not, however, simply seeing boxing as a form of self-defense and a useful skill that motivated boxers to remain at the gym. There was a sense of satisfaction of learning a valued skill set while facing, managing, and overcoming the fear of getting hit and hurt. Such skill achievement boosted feelings of self-efficacy of KO Gym members. This boost in self-efficacy proved to be a great satisfaction in boxing at KO Gym, and worked as added motivation to return to the gym for more training as well.

STUDIES OF BOXING

While boxing has been a rich source of inspiration for literature and film, it has garnered comparatively little attention in academic circles until recently. From the 1950s to the mid-90s there appeared only a handful of studies of the sport. In the past decade, however, the number of studies on boxing has mushroomed. Most of these studies have examined the professional ranks (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Hare 1972;

Sugden 1986; Wacquant 1992; Halbert 1997; Mennesson 2000), and most emphasize the exploitation of the poor and disadvantaged. In some ways, then, the subcultures depicted in most other boxing studies are quite different from that of KO Gym.

Weinberg and Arond's (1952) germinal study of the occupational culture of professional boxers examines the recruitment, practices and beliefs, and the social organization of the world of boxing. The authors suggest that there is a similarity in the social processes that contribute to juvenile delinquency and those that motivate one to become a boxer. As such, they claim that boxing is an extension of the street culture in which it exists. Additionally, they argue that street fighting, earning large sums of money quickly, limited opportunities, and isolation from "middle-class culture," all contribute to both boxing and delinquency. The defining characteristic that distinguishes whether one chooses the path of delinquency or boxing, according to Weinberg and Arond (1952), is whether an individual's role model is a boxer or a criminal. The authors also describe the structure of the boxing business, essentially arguing that boxers are treated as commodities and exploited by managers and promoters. They conclude that professional boxers are rarely financially successful, and that more than half of professional fighters end up with symptoms of "punch drunk" syndrome.

Scannell (1967) argues that romanticized views of boxing, and a desire to emulate the heroes of boxing, are what first attract young males to the sport. Moreover, he asserts that once initiated, young male boxers enjoy displaying a masculine prowess and enjoy the exhibitionism of the sport. In Scannell's (1967) view, boxing is a means by which young males elevate themselves above mainstream culture and compensates

for feelings of inadequacy. Such compensatory motives were also found at KO Gym, as will be shown in the analytic chapters.

Though recreational boxers are a substantial part of the boxing world (Anasi 2002), most research ignores them (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Sugden 1987; Wacquant 1992; 2004). For instance, Hare (1972) focuses almost exclusively on the occupational aspects of fighting, arguing that boxing amounts to economic exploitation of the lower classes. He adds that much of the exploitation has racial undertones, since it is white promoters who often exploit African American fighters. Similarly, Sugden (1987) focuses primarily on the occupational aspects of boxing, conducting an ethnography of an inner-city boxing gym in which gym members were mostly young African American males. The fighters in Sugden's (1987) study compete in the professional and amateur ranks, and he describes amateur boxing as a farm system for up-and-coming fighters from poverty stricken urban areas. He argues that fighters are easily cultivated from these down-and-out places because delinquent juveniles possess qualities required to be successful in boxing: aggression, athletic ability, and a willingness to take risks. He adds that, "The main, but largely unspoken, objectives of the club revolve around the production and training of the professional fighter" (Sugden 1987:208). He notes that the young fighters who came in to box—the amateurs—were pushed to become professionals. Hence, just as in prior studies of the professional fighters, boxers are treated like commodities. Again, this contrasts the boxers at KO Gym who, in a business sense, were treated as consumers of a product that Jan and Bill were selling.

Like Sugden, Wacquant (1992; 2004) studied an inner-city boxing gym. However, Wacquant's study was set in Chicago, and though his study in many ways parallels Sugden's, he reaches different conclusions. First, he clarifies the demographic composition of professional boxers. He refutes the stereotype that boxers come from the "most disenfranchised factions" of the lower classes. Instead, he argues, most boxers derive from the working-class that stands above the lowest strata of the inner-city population. He also argues that the gym situates itself in symbiotic opposition to street culture, rather than as a continuation of urban street culture, as other studies claim (Weinberg and Arond 1952; Hare 1972; Sugden 1987). Wacquant posits that the gym provides safety and an environment of stability that is in stark contrast to the chaotic street life outside the gym. Similar to the other boxing studies, however, Wacquant notes the exploitation of professional fighters, particularly by promoters.

My study of middle-class recreational boxers follows more closely the pro-feminist boxing research of the past decade. This research (Halbert 1997; DeGaris 2000; Mennesson 2000; Lafferty and McKay 2004) has begun to look beyond the young, African American male professional fighters central to most previous studies. For example, in her research on female professional boxers, Halbert (1997) examines how the women manage stereotypes and discriminatory practices lodged against them when they box. She asserts that women professional boxers must develop strategies to balance their feminine identity against the liabilities of participating in a masculine activity. Essentially, Halbert (1997) argues that the women had to display a public identity in such a way as to appear neither too masculine nor too feminine. Their strategies include

sporting long hair with pony tails, dressing in pink and other “girly” colors, and wearing bright lipstick and make-up (Halbert 1997). Mennesson (2000) notes similar strategies in her study of female professional boxers.

Studies of female boxers have also examined the resistance women encounter to their gym activity. As Lafferty and McKay (2004) show, women have to go above and beyond regular training to prove to the men that they indeed belong in a boxing gym—while still embracing some aspects of traditional femininity. (I’ll return to these studies in chapter five.)

Only recently have researchers explicitly examined the relationship between gender and boxing (Halbert 1997; Hargreaves 1997; Lafferty and McKay 2004; Mennesson 2000). These studies focus, however, on those who compete in sanctioned events, and examine only the female experience, with no comparative dimension. Conversely, Wacquant’s (1992) study, though it offers valuable insight into the culture of boxing, takes masculinity for granted. Since only men boxed at the gym he studied, Wacquant simply treats the gym as a de facto “quintessentially masculine space.” This, of course, is problematic. And, as will be presented in the analytic chapters, it was the various signifying performances of masculinity that emerged and stood out in this study. Thus, as DeGaris (2000:88) notes, “Masculinity has been a presumption, rather than a problem, in writing on boxing.” Although recreational boxers have been present in many field sites, they have rarely been the focus of analytical attention.

For instance, Wacquant (1992) notes that some people at his research site boxed for fitness, social, and recreational purposes. Yet he focused solely on those with

professional aspirations. Similarly, Sugden (1987:203) observed non-professional fighters who boxed mainly for health, fitness, and recreational reasons, but then excluded this group from his study on the grounds that they were on “the periphery of the main activities of the club.” DeGaris (2000) comes closest to offering a study of a gym’s rank and file. However, most of those in DeGaris’ study had competitive fighting backgrounds, and he chose to focus primarily on sparring. Thus, while other studies have noted the presence of recreational boxers in their respective gyms, little has been done to understand the motivations of these boxers, the meanings they give to boxing, and the consequences of their activities. Those meanings and consequences are examined here, as are the connections between gender, boxing, and life outside the gym.

GENDER, MASCULINITY, AND PATRIARCHY

The basic premise of feminist theory is that our society is structured on the foundation of gender, which is socially constructed (Bem 1993; Kimmel 1995; Lorber 1994, Risman 1998). Two seemingly distinct categories of people—women and men—exist in our society, and are given different rights, statuses, and privileges based in part on an ideology that holds women and men to be biologically different. Moreover, this difference is constructed to elevate men to a dominant position, thus establishing a hierarchic gender order (Connell 1987).

A social constructionist view of gender treats gender as a process of “doing” (West and Zimmerman 1987). West and Zimmerman (1987:176) write that “a person’s gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something

that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others.” Women and men “do” gender in ways that are culturally expected, and it is done in front of others so it can be validated. Kimmel (2000) writes that, “Gender is a performance, a form of drag, by which, through the successful manipulations of props, signs, symbols, behaviors, and emotions, we attempt to convince others our successful acquisition of masculinity or femininity” (Kimmel 2000:104) The idea of viewing gender as a performance allows us to understand the socially constructed conceptions of gender, and it thus can be seen as both an identity and a behavior (Lorber and Farrell 1991). Schwalbe (1996) writes:

As natural as gender may seem to our way of life, we still must learn how to “do gender” in the right way for our place and time. A large part of what we must learn is how to present ourselves as men or women. In this view, gender identities must be accomplished through acts of signification. The secondary sex characteristics of our bodies do much of this signifying for us; but we must do it also with clothes, speech, posture, gestures, and so on. To be recognized, unambiguously, as a man or a woman, requires that we learn how to do the right kind of identity work for our sex (Schwalbe 1996:106-107).

Because of the embeddedness of gender, we perform gender in every situation, every interaction, and in every institution where we involve ourselves. Not adhering to the norms that define appropriate gender behavior creates a “risk of gender assessment” (West and Zimmerman 1987:177). Hence, gender identities are not “roles,” nor are they a simple consequence of socialization. They are, rather, interactional accomplishments that are subject to situational variation, and to challenge and change (Messner 1992).

Masculinity

Schwalbe (2005) asserts that masculinity is a social construction that can be defined as a quality attributed to people and objects based on signifiers of the capacity to dominate and affect other things (or the capacity to effectively resist domination). Additionally, Johnson (1997:6) associates masculinity with qualities such as “control, strength, efficiency, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency” Hence, instead of viewing masculinity as simply a characteristic of the male sex, it is of import to understand masculinity as a way to signify the capacity to dominate (Schwalbe 2005).

In this sense, masculinity is a virtual reality rather than a material one. In order to signify the capacity to dominate, one must know not only how to “do gender” properly (West and Zimmerman 1987), but also be able to wield the necessary signifiers. Masculinity, then, is culturally specific and often situation specific. However, simply knowing how to signify masculinity properly (or in other words “do gender”), or knowing the identity code, is not enough if one does not possess the symbolic resources or behavioral skills needed to signify effectively (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). It is when one can effectively signify the capacity to dominate that one elicits the attribution of a masculine self (Schwalbe 2005). By this I mean that qualities are imputed to a person, and these qualities are based on the signifying performance. Masculinity, as well as femininity, are thus qualities attributed to people based on interpretation of their signifying behaviors (Schwalbe 2005).

Patriarchy

Because this dissertation examines the culture and activities of a boxing gym through “gender lenses” (Bem 1994), it is imperative also to have an understanding of the concept of patriarchy. It is through the system of patriarchy that gender oppression and gender inequality are produced (Johnson 1997; Bennett 2006).

The present study is formed by Allan Johnson’s conception of patriarchy. A patriarchal society, as Johnson defines it, is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered (Johnson 1997). The *male-dominated* aspect of patriarchal societies means that positions of authority are, for all intents and purposes, reserved for men. The few women who make it to a top position of authority are exceptions to the rule in patriarchal society. The *male-identified* component of patriarchy refers what Johnson calls the “core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (Johnson 1997:5-6). He states that work and other core institutions (business, law, military, medicine, and sport) in our society are most readily associated with men and masculinity. Finally, patriarchal societies are *male-centered*, meaning that men are the main focus of attention. In essence, Johnson states that the male experience is often viewed as the human experience. For instance, Johnson (1997) notes that men tend to be the main characters in the popular movies of Hollywood, and he notes that one only needs to peruse a newspaper to see that they are filled with stories and pictures of men. In sum, patriarchy is organized around the core principles of control, competition, domination, and hierarchy. The end result is the cultural devaluing of women and the privileging of men

(Johnson 1997). Such privileging of men over women is prevalent throughout our society and it was evident at KO Gym as well.

Though this research is a case study of a boxing gym it is helpful to view what took place at KO in the larger context of sport, which in turn may be viewed in the larger context of society. As such, it is useful to see how boxing, as a sport, is an institution that reproduces gender inequality. The next section, then, discusses the sociological import of sport as an institution worthy of study and focuses on how gender inequality is perpetuated through sport.

CLASS

Understanding the motives and experiences of the KO boxers requires examination of how their lives were circumscribed by social class. The issue of how to conceptualize class has been a contentious one for sociologists. Some, following Marx, have defined class position as a function of one's place in a system of production, as determined by one's control over labor and capital (see, e.g., Wright, et al. 1982). Others, following Weber, have defined class using ranking systems based on indexes that take income, education, and occupational prestige into account (see, e.g., Blau and Duncan 1967). It's beyond the scope of the present discussion to overcome this long-running divergence. Here, my analytic concern with "class" focuses mainly on occupational conditions, especially autonomy and control in daily work, and thus my use of the concept echoes its use in studies of "social structure and personality" (see, e.g. House 1981; Kohn and Schooler 1983; see also Mills 1954).

The class categories used for this research emerged in a fluid manner based first, on educational background, and then on occupational. The simplified class-labeling scheme for this study differentiates middle class and working class based on answers to a series of interview questions about current and former job status, educational background, and also parents' educational and occupational background. With these data I was able to categorize the boxers as either the middle class or working class. If a boxer possessed a four year college degree, this typically meant assignment to the category "middle class," unless the boxer's current occupation was working-class. The exception to this was the college students. For those who were currently attending a four year university, I examined their family background, and specifically, their parent's educational level. If one or more of their parents had a four-year college degree and the jobs performed were white-collar in nature, then I deemed them middle-class as well. All of the college students interviewed for this study were not only on a middle-class trajectory, but they also came from middle-class backgrounds. As such, I categorized them as middle-class. Only one boxer in this study possessed a four-year degree and worked a blue-collar job. If a person didn't have a college degree and neither parent had a college degree, I categorized them as working class. Only two of the KO boxers with college degrees came from working-class backgrounds.

SPORT AND THE REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY

Gramsci (1999) wrote that a dominant system of cultural beliefs and practices legitimates the status quo in any society. This occurs when one group has power over

others. The institutions in society sustain the ideologies that pervade the culture, and in effect, maintain and perpetuate inequality. I argue that just as social institutions like the family, work, school, business, government, and the media pervade our culture with sexist ideology, so does the institution of sport. Sport both embodies and promotes core patriarchal notions about what it means to be women and men in our society. Such beliefs were evident at KO Gym as well, and, in fact, in many ways the boxing activity that took place at KO was a microcosm of the patterns and processes by which sport reproduces inequality. In this manner, it is worth describing how the institution of sport in general reproduces inequality.

This section addresses the reproduction of gender inequality and patriarchy in sport. I argue that sports like boxing valorize men and masculinity, and in doing so, naturalize male superiority. I propose that this dynamic points to a powerful role for sport in the reproduction of patriarchy and gender inequality. By gender inequality I mean the unequal distribution of socially valued resources, such as power, status, income and wealth, between women and men. By patriarchy I mean a male-dominated, male-centered, and male-identified society based on the core principles of hierarchy and competition (Johnson 1997), as discussed in the previous section.

The Meaning of Sports

Americans tend to see sport in a positive light. It is assumed to be a developmental tool for desirable traits and democratic citizens, as well as an instrument to reaffirm general values of society—that competition is healthy, success derives from hard work, and playing by the rules is important. Yet, sport must be viewed as having

meaning beyond the initial representation that it is merely a leisure activity. Meanings are attached to sport, and as will be discussed in later chapters, such meanings were of particular import to KO boxers. Therefore, it is important to illustrate how meanings are used and what the consequences of such meanings might be. For example, Lorber (1994) argues, one way women are socially constructed as inferior, symbolically, is through sport. Similarly, Connell (1995: 54) theorizes that

the institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations: competition and hierarchy among men, exclusion or domination of women. These social relations of gender are both realized and symbolized in the bodily performances. Thus men's greater sporting prowess has become...symbolic proof of [their] superiority and right to rule.

As Connell (1987) argues, gender itself, as a system of oppression, is legitimated by beliefs that naturalize it; that is, beliefs that make gender seem not like a social construction but like a fact of nature. I argue that sport functions ideologically to bolster gender inequality by valorizing men and masculinity and thereby making male supremacy seem only natural.

Naturalizing male supremacy refers to the way in which sport, as an institution, reinforces an ideology of male superiority. By superiority I mean that a higher ranking or greater value is attributed to something or someone. In this case, men. Or, to put it another way, it simply means a belief that men are better in certain important ways. As a precondition for hierarchical ranking, the organization of sport both reflects and reinforces the belief that there are gender differences rooted in biology. Such a view was common for KO boxers, who spoke of boxing's physicality as "natural" and also viewed the activity as "manly" and "masculine." In other words, they essentialized boxing and

their involvement in it. This ideology, diffused throughout the culture, distorts men's notions of their capabilities and entitlements vis-à-vis women, and this may in turn inspire discriminatory behavior. Highly masculinized sports not only uphold the ideology of gender difference, they also support the cultural celebration of power, strength, and domination.

When men and women are organized in a system that naturalizes male superiority, the consequences go beyond the realm of sport. A more general cultural belief in male superiority is created. In Messner's (1989:79) study of masculinities, one man summed up this belief: "A woman can do the same job as I can do—maybe even be my boss. But I'll be damned if she can go out on the football field and take a hit from [professional football player] Ronnie Lott." Such beliefs—embraced by men in positions of power—may then form part of the cognitive basis for overt acts of gender discrimination.

Sports like boxing embody patriarchal ideologies and are a symbol for legitimizing and naturalizing gender inequalities between women and men, because they foster an essentialist ideology of gender. Boxing thus does not mere make use of natural differences between male and female bodies, it helps construct the meanings that privilege male bodies—and men—over female bodies—and women. The consequences of these meanings are not confined to boxing gyms or the world of sport. The consequences pervade everyday life I patriarchal society.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This study is, in part, a study of the activities and culture of a boxing gym. One goal is to show what the members of KO Gym sought, and how their experiences were constructed such that they could find what they were looking for. However, the sociological story is much bigger. Members of KO Gym did not walk in to the gym without an understanding of the cultural meanings of boxing. In fact, this research shows how gym members used these meanings as resources to construct boxing as an activity from which they could derive gendered identity rewards. At the same time, however, both gender and social class complicated matters considerably, creating dilemmas for the middle-class white recreational boxers, and for the women who claimed space in a masculinist domain.

In the next chapter I examine how the authenticity of KO Gym was socially constructed and why KO Gym members sought identity rewards through boxing. The boxers at KO Gym wanted real boxing. KO Gym members saw “real boxers” as special, and they looked down on those who did only Tae-Bo or cardio-boxing. Such stuff was not the real thing. Some of this reality was suggested by the gym environs—the stark, cave-like warehouse space, the wafting odor of sweat, bodies in motion, and the ring itself, as well as the competitors who trained intensely. On the other hand, it wasn't real—for the non-competing recreational boxers. My analysis shows how the owners and boxers collaborated to make this kind of activity satisfyingly real.

While the boxers craved a real experience, they were also concerned about their physical well-being. Hence, it was also essential to balance an authentic experience with

one that was safe for the mostly middle-class members of the gym. As a result Jan and Bill, the owner/trainers of KO Gym, offered components of real boxing while also closely monitoring the risk level. Ultimately, KO Gym—via Jan and Bill—faced the dilemma of offering middle-class boxers a real experience that wasn't so real that they would get hurt. Chapter two also examines how this dilemma was interactively resolved.

Chapter Three analyzes the satisfactions the members derived from boxing. Most members felt surprised by the mental demands of boxing, but then came to take pleasure in meeting these demands. In addition, boxers believed they were learning practical fighting skills, a belief that further boosted their feelings of self-efficacy. The satisfaction of facing and overcoming fear was another psychological reward. Many felt that if they could do this in the gym, they could do it in other realms of life. And perhaps most important, the satisfactions members acquired from boxing were often in viewed in direct contrast to boxers' lives outside the gym, especially their work lives. In Chapter Three I show how these dissatisfactions—and satisfactions constructed at KO Gym—were linked to the boxers' search for affirmation of their gender identities.

Chapter Four focuses on sparring at KO Gym, the one activity that offered the physical and emotional rewards that members wanted (i.e., the “peak experience”). Sparring was the activity that most resembled a real boxing match, and, as such, members viewed it as “the real thing.” Sparring was highly controlled by the trainers, and required a great deal of learned control on the part of the boxers. For sparring to work—for it to provide an authentic experience and a genuine test of ability—both

boxers had to have at least basic skills and know how to cooperate. It was also essential that sparring partners be able to control their emotions.

Emotional control can easily be lost when one boxer does the wrong thing and gets angry. In fact, such loss of control was common among novices, and required that many sparring sessions be stopped short. Boxers thus had to learn to control their fear, frustration, and anger—emotions that invariably emerged during sparring sessions. To maintain this control, boxers used a variety of collective and individual emotion-work strategies. The analysis presented in Chapter Four shows how these strategies were gendered.

In Chapter Five, the conclusion, I draw out the sociological lessons of the study, focusing on the notion that boxing was, in many ways, compensatory for KO members. The male members of KO Gym wanted to feel more manly. The well-established cultural meaning of the sport made a difference, and the members also perceived the “naturalness of violence” of the sport, as well as the pain and injury involved, as decidedly masculine. Boxing and its symbolic representations, then, compensated for what was denied by the bureaucratic and alienating workplaces of KO members. KO became the place where boxers sought to deal with the contradiction between a dull workplace reality, and the cultural expectation that real men live exciting, action-filled lives. In this final chapter I also consider how boxing was used as cultural capital to benefit the middle-class male boxers.

Women also had reasons to want to signify masculine qualities. For them, too, boxing was a way to signify agency and strength. Yet, they faced other dilemmas in

seeking to distance themselves from “weak” women and what Connell (1987) calls “emphasized femininity.” Chapter Five considers the implications of this defensive othering for the reproduction of gender inequality. Finally, I offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

CONSTRUCTING AN AUTHENTIC BOXING EXPERIENCE

The recreational boxers at KO Gym wanted an authentic boxing experience. They wanted to think of their activity at KO as real boxing, which meant boxing complete with the exchange of blows, pain, and bruises. Yet they were not seeking to train for competition or to risk serious injury. Nor did they want to stigmatize themselves in the eyes of their middle-class peers by actually becoming boxers or looking like macho muscleheads. Their dilemma was thus how to get a boxing experience that was real but not too real. The owner/trainers of KO Gym faced the problem of how to create this kind of experience for their clientele.

Simply lacing up the gloves didn't necessarily mean that members were getting an authentic boxing experience. The members were acutely aware of this fact. They could have taken boxing exercise classes in posh health clubs. In such places people put on gloves and learn punching techniques, they hit the bags and participate in a "boxer's workout," and may even shadow an opponent. What they don't do is hit each other. Members of KO Gym did not want this kind of pseudo boxing experience. They wanted boxing that was real enough to signify a degree of toughness and bravery that set them apart from their softer middle-class peers.

The goal for the trainers was to give the recreational boxers an authentic experience—one where members could learn useful skills and develop what Wacquant calls the "boxer's habitus." The KO Gym motto, posted on the wall, was, "True Sport, True Training." For the recreational boxers this meant arduous workouts, technical

training, and sparring sessions—all of which the owner/trainers provided. Yet, in order for KO to survive financially, they also had to make the gym safe for the recreational boxers.

This chapter provides an ethnographic account of how an authentic boxing experience was constructed, by both the owner/trainers and the boxers themselves. Though competitive fighters trained at KO Gym, as previously noted, I focus here on the recreational, mostly middle-class boxers. How did they create a boxing experience that was real enough to provide the physical and emotional rewards they were seeking, without it becoming so real that it undercut those rewards?

Real, But Not Too Real

Goffman (1967:260) says that people may seek risky situations in which to test themselves and display character. In the course of their everyday lives, however, most middle-class Americans have few such opportunities, and thus may have to go out of their way to cultivate risk. This was true of the recreational boxers at KO Gym. They longed for a real boxing experience, but feared getting seriously injured. John, an emergency room doctor, notes this balancing act:

And the other thing, you know, you're dealing with a variety of people here and it's kind of real in here as opposed to some other stuff. I was talking to one guy here that just came down from New York and he said he's been boxing out there some, but it's more like aerobics, with little physical contact. That's not what I want, you know. I'm trusting these guys are not going to let you get hurt too bad, but at the same time, this is the real deal, you know. I mean, they put you in there sparring if you want it.

--John, White Male 48, ER Doctor

As John suggests, KO Gym was “kinda real,” and that’s how he wanted it. He didn’t want the aerobic boxing that lacked the physical contact, but he also didn’t want to “get hurt too bad.” Finally, he noted how he was “trusting these guys,” referring to the confidence participants had in Jan and Bill to keep the boxing safe. Sidney, a computer programmer, also wanted the real thing but was concerned about the danger, and sparring was the most dangerous aspect of training:

You know, it’s funny, I wanted real boxing, but to be honest with you, I didn’t want to get beat up all the time. This seemed like a place where I could learn the real thing but go at my own speed. When you’re ready you can spar, but before that you can just sort of learn the fundamentals.
--Sidney, White Male, 32, Computer Programmer

This sentiment predominated among the middle-class recreational members at the gym. As Holyfield (1999:5) posits in referring to consumer adventure and adventurous situations, many of us want the appearance of risk, thus to reap its emotional dividends, but without facing real danger. The recreational boxers wanted risk, but not too much.

Yet it wasn’t simply about the boxers. Though these boxers wanted a “real” experience entailing risk, in order to provide it Jan and Bill, the owner/trainers of KO Gym, had to orchestrate and control the boxers’ behavior. What they did—to attract members and keep the gym in business—was to carefully manage the risk, allowing boxers, when ready, to exchange punches and bang each other up a bit. The inevitable pain and bruises attested to the reality of the boxing in which the middle-class recreational boxers engaged. If not for the possibility of experiencing some minor harm, the activity would not have been real enough to be satisfying, and KO Gym might have been knocked out financially.

A HIERARCHY OF REALITY AND RISK OF STIGMA

For the KO Boxers, real boxing was “like what we see on TV, where tough guys with real skills hit each other hard and sometimes get hurt.” Skill, power, full-time dedication, pain and injury were the criteria by which the reality of boxing could be measured and graded. The risk of pain and minor injury provided members with the feeling that what they were doing was real. As one participant stated, “How can my bruise not be real?”

While the risk of minor injury made recreational boxing real enough to appeal to the middle-class members, many of the boxers initially worried that real boxing also implied a hyper-masculine culture, which was not what they were seeking. As one male member said, “I was worried at first that it would be a bunch of muscleheads like at Gold’s [Gym], but the people at this gym aren’t like that.” KO Gym thus did not threaten the men’s feelings of being different from men of lower caliber, men who might be skilled at beating each other’s brains out, but who had few brains to begin with. Here another dilemma arose: just as the middle-class recreational boxers wanted an authentic experience that was not too real, they wanted a masculinity-enhancing experience that was not hyper-macho. As one boxer put it:

For lack of a better word, it’s manly. That’s not to take anything away from the girls in here, but coming in here and doing all this physical training, working your ass off, getting pounded. It’s definitely something I would consider on the manly side. Now I don’t mean we try to pound each other’s heads off or anything like that. It’s not that masculine shit like at some places. But what we do here is real, and you gotta be a little crazy too.

--Kyle, White Male, 29, Manager, Furniture Store

Worry about excessive machoness came up often in the interviews with the middle-class members. In their view, men who cared only about their sculpted body, or acted violently, or were overly boastful were “assholes.”² Toughness and strength were okay, but ignorant hyper-masculinity was not. Blatant acts of toughness beyond the level of gym training, from the perspective of these middle-class members, were seen as signs of stupidity. One boxer noted such behavior in another boxer:

I remember one guy, I think he was an ex-Marine or ex-Army guy or something. He was all gung ho, beyond gung ho, like just a big jackass. He didn't last long. Anyway, during the wall [conditioning exercise] he would yell at people to work harder like he was the coach or something. Then when it was over he would ask people if they wanted to do another full circuit with him, like two circuits weren't enough [shaking head]. I still remember one night he decided he would practice his hooks on the ring post—he said it was something he learned in the Army, I don't know. Anyway, he was throwing these imaginary hooks around the post, but his biceps were hitting the post [showing how he was swinging his arm]. Like he was swinging across the post, and his biceps were just getting pounded. I remember he was making all these primal noises, like, “UGGGHHHH” each time he did it. After he finished Steven went up to him and said something like, “That's gotta hurt.” And no lie, with a straight face, the guy said, “No pain, no gain.” Like, what an idiot!
--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

The boxers' desire to signify masculinity, but not hyper-masculinity, is consistent with Farr's (1988) observation that middle- and upper-middle-class men show contempt for the exaggerated forms of masculinity and misogyny of the lower-class. Similarly, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994) argue that a new type of masculinity predominates among the middle class; the contemporary ideal is a man tough and brave, but also sensitive. The middle-class recreational boxers at KO Gym fit this pattern.

This may have been one of the ultimate paradoxes of the gym. Though

² Other terms used by gym members to describe those who displayed masculine bravado: “muscleheads”; “macho pricks”; and “macho assholes.”

everyone wanted and expected an authentic boxing experience, hyper-masculinity was frowned upon in the gym and noticeably absent. Rarely, if ever, were boxers boastful; there was no trash talk between boxers or misogynist locker room banter, and excess demonstrations of toughness or “show boating” were nearly non-existent. Jan and Bill took great pride in this fact.

While the manliness of boxing was appealing, the popular image of boxing as brutal and savage was a problem for middle-class recreational boxers. Manliness was fine; brutality and savagery violated middle-class norms. The physicality of the sport was likewise appealing, but the risk of serious injury was a problem, since putting one’s self at risk of brain damage is not what most middle-class people think of as a smart way to signify manhood. In fact, members were mindful of the ways in which others might categorize them. It was thus important for KO Gym to allow recreational boxers to distance themselves from the image of boxing as brutal, savage, and stupid. To avoid being stigmatized because of their boxing, the middle-class members had to carefully manage their conversations about boxing. Some spoke directly to this stigma:

Sure I talk about it [boxing], you know, in normal conversations with my friends and some co-workers. Most people are really interested, but I don’t—I don’t tell people who I just met, like, tell them I do this—that’s pretty weak, like “look at me, I’m cool because I box you know? I hate guys like that.

--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Representative

Oh, sure, it comes up. I may talk about it, but I don’t want to come off like a big, ragin’ testosteroned asshole. Like, I don’t say, ‘Hey, I box, look at my big dick, you know? No.

--Andy, White Male, 22, College Student

Other boxers noted that they would “candy coat” their accounts of boxing if they felt that others were likely to disapprove. For instance, they would tell their co-workers about the

health benefits of boxing, or speak of it in terms of self-defense, or emphasize its mental demands.

Goffman (1963) notes a variety of strategies used to deflect stigma. One strategy that boxers used was simple concealment. As one boxer stated, “I choose carefully who I decide to discuss this with.” Some middle-class men noted that they refrained from telling certain women at their work about their boxing participation, because “some women just don’t get it.” Thus, depending on whom they were talking to, they would describe boxing as something as benign as “a good workout,” or, at the other end of the spectrum, as something “really brutal.”

Yet the members liked feeling that they were doing something that uniquely attested to their masculinity, and so they did not always disavow the violence and brutality of boxing. In fact, the popular image of boxing as violent and brutal was a resource for doing identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). This image could be embraced or rejected, depending on the audience and circumstances. Members thus sought to reap the symbolic benefits of participating in boxing, without being stigmatized for doing something that contravened middle-class values. Randy explained his strategy:

Well, it sort of depends on who I tell. For instance, I tell my buddies about what we do in here—like doing “the wall,” [conditioning drill] and “toe-the-line” [contact drill] or I’ll tell them about guys like Dwight or Gary [two competitors]—how they are just badasses. I also joke around and tell them how I always get beat up—some of them have even seen the blood on my shirt. They dig that shit [laughing]. On the other hand, when my mom asks I tell her that we don’t really do contact, that it is more about conditioning and self defense training. I don’t want her to get worried, you know? But anyway, there’s certainly a difference in how I talk about this place depending on who I’m talking to.

--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

Randy’s comments were typical of the male members of the gym. Female co-workers and family members of the boxers were most likely to hear candy-coated accounts of the experience. Some of the men also gave their wives or girlfriends a minimal amount of information in order to “alleviate any fears,” as one male member put it. In contrast, it was male co-workers and friends who heard “all the gory details,” as one boxer stated.

But even with male buddies, one of the first things boxers explained to others was that the sport was more technical and mental than people think. Boxers might be quick to point out the risk involved in their activity, but they also noted that the strategy involved in the activity was “akin to a chess match.” This served to counter the notion that boxing was nothing more than a violent primate spectacle. The boxers thus had to walk a fine line in crafting an image of boxing for outsiders. If they spoke only of the workout or the technique, they did little to bolster their masculine identities. If they spoke only about the danger and physicality of the sport, they risked being stigmatized. For example, John, an emergency room doctor, didn’t like to tell others about his boxing experience:

It's just a little odd, you know, and it sounds macho, but I don't look at it as macho, but I'm sure others do. The only people I talk to about it are my wife and my two little boys because they get excited about it, you know...and, so they're the only people I talk to about it. I don't think anybody else knows about it.
--John, White Male, 48, Emergency Room Doctor

Though John didn't like to talk about his boxing experience with those outside his family, John's comment regarding concern about being seen as "macho" by others captures what was common for the middle-class members. While most enjoyed talking about their experience at KO Gym, they were cognizant of the stigma attached to boxing. The common concern was that their middle-class peers would think of them as, as one person said, "macho assholes." Hence, they wanted to use boxing to enhance their identities. Yet, from interacting with these boxers and observing them it was obvious that they were not at KO Gym to become macho tough guys. One boxer joked about this: "What, now all of a sudden because I box I'm going to pull my dick out to show people what kind of man I am?"

The Psycho-Squad

A development that seemed to run contrary to members' avoidance of hypermachoism was the emergence of what was called the "psycho-squad"—an elite subgroup of gym members who participated in an intense once-a-week strength and conditioning program run by Butch, a retired Navy man and KO Gym member. Butch, who had a background in extreme martial arts training, often worked out with the competitors, many times offering them pointers and training tips. After convincing a

couple competitors of the benefits of an intense conditioning program in an effort to be better prepared for bouts—both mentally and physically—the psycho-squad was born.

Psycho-squad workouts consisted of two hours of boot camp-like strength exercises and pain absorbing rituals. Workouts were heavy on push-ups—narrow and wide grip, military style, one-armed and vertical—and abdominal exercises—crunches, leg lifts, and sit-ups—and interspersed with wind sprints, crab walks, wheel barrels, and a host of other movement drills. The workout always ended with “gut busters” and “killers,” both of which were drills to presumably toughen up one’s stomach muscles—by taking a constant barrage of punches and hits from a medicine ball—often accompanied by loud grunts and groans. Butch told prospective psycho-squad recruits that the group had just two rules: (a) no slacking allowed; and (b) no puking on the gym floor. These rules suggest, on one hand, the seriousness of the undertaking, and yet, on the other hand, some tongue-in-cheek perspectives on the squad’s hypermacho rituals.

Though the psycho-squad began with only competitors, on one psycho-squad night when none of the competitors showed up, Butch opened up the special workout to everybody in the gym. After some good-natured prodding by Jan and Bill, seven of us stepped forward—six men, one woman. The others in the gym watched with curiosity, but showed no expression, favorable or not. Two hours later, just two men remained, myself one of them. Psycho-squad membership became purely voluntary after that night.

A typical psycho-squad workout usually had about four to five gym members participating, though it ranged from just two people up to seven, depending on who

showed up on any one night. By the time I left the gym in August of 2003, there were four of us who were considered core psycho-squad members since we trained together under Butch's guidance for about three months, the longest tenure of any group of people since the inception of the squad in the early months of 2003. None of us were competitors, and all of us were white and male. The squad, it seems, allowed white, male, middle-class recreational boxers to see themselves as serious, and seriously manly, for that matter. There were a handful of other gym members—mostly competitors—who would make the psycho-squad workouts from time to time, and they were also deemed psycho-squad “members” by Butch.³ The competitors, however, participated sporadically, perhaps reflecting lesser concern with the compensatory dose of macho. The lack of consistency among the competitors also suggested that the psycho-squad was more about appearing “psycho” than about becoming a better boxer.

About 40% of KO members tried it once, with most never completing an entire two-hour workout. Those who quit did not try again. Those who remained in the psycho-squad, less than 15% of the active membership at any one time, took great pride in the elite club's drop-out rate, and they also took pleasure when newcomers and other members watched the squad's training proceedings with amazement. As one boxer (non-psycho-squad member) said, “The psycho-squad is some heavy shit!”

Though the psycho-squad was open to women, the squad was almost entirely male. The one woman who became a member, Adrian, was an African American former

³ Butch had a mini-ceremony at the end of each psycho-squad workout in which he would honor the new person as a psycho-squad “member.” He would bring in all who participated and say, “we have a new member to congratulate.” Everyone would get in a close circle, clap, and either give a handshake or fist bump to the new member. Then Butch would jokingly say, “Once a member, always a member.”

Army veteran and current medical assistant who joined toward the end of my research (she attended three out of my last four psycho-squad workouts). Though it appeared that some members were skeptical when she came forward to work out with the squad, most likely reflecting the fact that no woman had endured an entire workout, it didn't take long before she was embraced like any other member. It was apparent from the initial exercises that she was committed to completing the workout. In fact, she thrived, in some instances doing more repetitions than some of the male members, and this was immediately recognized by the fellow psycho-squad members. Butch's ceremonial commencement ritual offered her kudos for not only becoming a member of the psycho-squad, but also being the first woman member. In subsequent workouts she was treated by Butch and other members just as any other member was treated.

Adrian's presence, as a woman, didn't affect the elite (and masculine) status of the squad since she was seen as something special. One squad member noted this, saying, "She is one bad ass woman." Members thus differentiated her from "normal" women. Likewise, the one female competitor at the gym was seen as "extreme" and different from other women. In both cases, labeling these women as "different" made them less of a threat to the men. Moreover, because these women were not like most women, the male psycho-squad members could hold on to the fantasy of categorical male superiority.

While the squad offered opportunities for all gym members to get involved, the workout itself clearly had an effect on who became members. The workout consisted of a wide array of strength exercises traditionally associated with masculine constructions

of gender. Although the exercises themselves were not inherently “masculine,” and some women gym members could perform the exercises, psycho-squad members certainly didn’t associate such exercises with women. Hence, the workout had masculine connotations, and the intense physicality of the workouts tended to inhibit women’s participation. At the same time, the lack of women’s participation reflected what was seemingly the psycho-squad’s celebration of manhood.

The demographic of the psycho-squad, and its ideology, was in some ways a microcosm of the gym itself. The psycho-squad, like KO Gym, was perceived to be egalitarian and didn’t explicitly exclude women. However, the men overwhelmingly outnumbered the women in both cases. And in the case of the psycho-squad, there certainly wasn’t a desire to increase the membership of women. The psycho-squad enjoyed its elite status in the gym and members wanted it to remain that way. Squad members, whether they were competitors or not, were held in high regard more for their toughness than anything else. Including more women would have no doubt diminished the psycho-squad’s macho appeal.

For the recreational boxers, the psycho-squad offered an opportunity to train like competitors, but without actually having to compete. Though the squad was initially geared for the competitors, more and more recreational boxers joined its ranks in the subsequent months after its inception. The influx of recreational boxers in the psycho-squad speaks to the aforementioned dilemma these boxers faced: wanting an intense physical experience, without serious risk of injury. The psycho-squad, despite its arduous demands and pain inflicting drills, held little risk of major injury like one might

face actually competing in the ring, and therefore offered an opportunity for the mostly middle-class (male) recreational boxers to feel like they were signifying toughness by working out to the point of exhaustion.

What we do in the psycho-squad is just insane. Butch, that fucker is crazy, he totally lives for that shit. I think he takes pleasure in killing us, like he's some sort of masochist or something. But it's fun, you know? I mean, not fun like playing golf or something, but fun like, this shit is so intense, you know? [Explain] It's just so ridiculous if you think about it, I mean, I've puked a couple times [smiling], but I think it also shows how tough you can be, you know? It's like Navy Seal training without having to go through the bullshit. And for the record, I can now do more than 20 one arm push-ups with each hand [grinning] and I did more than 50 grave diggers [vertical push-ups] last Thursday night [psycho-squad night].
--Jim, White Male, 22, College Student

Part of the pleasure for squad members was imagining that others in the gym saw them as extra tough. Quite often regular gym members would make complimentary comments to psycho-squad members about the grueling psycho-squad workouts. Such compliments, as well the perception that others viewed them as especially tough, provided the squad members opportunities to feel masculine. Julie, shared her feelings of how she perceived the psycho-squad:

It's cool, I just don't think it's for me. They always ask if I want to join them, so that's nice of them, but I don't think I'm ready. Some of it looks painful too, like when they swing the big heavy balls and hit each other in the stomach. They always make these gawd-awful sounds. No thank you, not for me.
--Julie, White Female, 33, Computer Company, Customer Service

The women at KO noted that the psycho-squad was available to any woman who wanted to do it. However, as previously noted, only one woman became a member, reflecting not only the overwhelmingly male presence of the squad, but also its

exclusivity. Psycho-squad members enjoyed their elite status within the gym, and being viewed by others as “insane” or “crazy,” as its name implies, was something akin to a term of endearment since these members endured punishment and even desired the punishment dished out by the intense workouts. Moreover, calling it the psycho –squad marked it as for people who were beyond the bounds of normality at KO Gym. This label also signified that the psycho-squad should not be seen as typical of what went on at KO Gym. The middle-class recreational boxers who didn’t want an overdose of macho could thus define the psycho-squad as not representative of what KO Gym was all about.

Despite the middle-class boxers’ desire to avoid hyper-macho displays, the quasi-militaristic psycho-squad was valorized by most everyone I interviewed. Why? Because it further attested—in a symbolic and safe way—to the reality of the physical challenges available at KO Gym. Clearly, the psycho-squad offered another opportunity for the mostly male members to experience something almost purely physical, and thus provided something meaningful—and masculine—for those who participated. Along these lines, it further legitimized the gym as authentic since the psycho-squad was seen as yet another dose of “real” to the gym members at KO. At the same time, however, the overall non-hyper-masculine atmosphere of the gym and the lack of masculine bravado at the gym in general allowed the psycho-squad to thrive without gym members seeing it as the “masculine bullshit” some spoke of in describing the behavior seen in other gyms. Moreover, Jan and Bill made it a point to keep the hyper-masculinity of the psycho-squad at bay, often cracking jokes about the squad and making it appear that it was an

extra-curricular activity for the “crazies” who wanted it, but not something for most regulars.

MANAGING THE REALITY OF BOXING

The owner/trainers of KO Gym used staging devices—sets, scenes, scripts, costumes, and props—to create the impression that boxing at KO Gym was real boxing. The trainers used the competitors and psycho-squad, the ring and equipment, stories of past bouts, and accounts that employed the rhetoric of real training to give newcomers information with which to judge the gym. Simultaneously, the gym space and its appearance, the activities taking place within the gym, and even the sounds and smells provided information with which those who entered could judge KO Gym to be the real thing.

Like any business, KO Gym had to stand out among its competitors. KO’s owner/trainers catered to those who wanted a real boxing experience, as described above. Hence, it was vital for KO Gym to cultivate an organizational identity that aligned with what the participants wanted, and also satisfied the business and personal goals of its owner/trainers. By constructing images of the gym that tapped into what participants valued, the owner/trainers were able to attract newcomers. KO Gym thus was fashioned to occupy a niche in the local market: a place to get an authentic but safe boxing experience. Below I discuss how they did this.

Props

The dilapidated walls of KO Gym were lined with prints of famous boxers of years past, posters of classic fighting match-ups, and magazine portraits of Muay Thai fighters. Full-length mirrors lined two walls in the corner of the gym. Bags hung from studs in the ceiling, creating spaces where the air ducts, pipes, and wires were exposed. Parts of the ceiling looked like they might fall at any time. The ring sat in the corner farthest from the front door. Strips of sponge-type mats duct taped together formed the ring floor, complete with splatters of blood and sweat.

The locker room consisted of a set of school chairs and makeshift lockers offset in front of the main floor area. The heavy bags, bandaged with duct tape, had permanent indentations from years of pounding. Gloves, focus pads, and headgear were prominently displayed on shelves against one wall. A weight set sat next to the front office area, beneath a sign that read: “True Sport, True Training.” The impression, altogether, was of a no-nonsense, no-frills place to train and box.

The gym and its props produced varied first impressions. Most members’ idea of a real gym was itself a simulation. As one member put it, “I figured there was going to be an old man chomping on a cigar, yelling at people, like in *Rocky*.” One threat to this imaginary comparison was the presence of a group of young fencers, with whom the gym space was shared. Upon seeing a bunch of kids wielding foils, some new entrants wondered if KO Gym was the real thing.

Well, when I first walked in the door, the first thing I saw was fencing, so I was like, “OK, I might be in the wrong place.”
--Bob, Black Male, 23, Software Engineer

Another threat came from the demographics of the participants, who did not fit the stereotype that most boxers carried in their minds. Could a gym full of middle-class white folks be a real boxing gym?

The first time I saw this place I didn't know what to think. As I already said, I wanted real boxing, and I saw a bunch of white guys working out. They didn't look like what I expected. [*What did you expect?*] Well, like the movies, you know, more ghetto, tough guys, tattoos, minorities and all that. But once I saw that people were really training seriously it was cool. Plus, it actually made me feel comfortable to see guys like me training hard. I was a little intimidated walking in because I thought it was going to be more, as I said, minorities. But everyone is really cool here and they take it seriously, and actually, there's a good mix of people in here.

--Randy White Male, 23, College Student

As Randy's words suggest, while the presence of older white guys threatened the impression that KO Gym was the real thing, it also made people more comfortable, since they were in an environment of peers, and eventually seeing the rigorous training methods, and later engaging in them, would be convincing evidence. Yet, at first, it was the sensory experience that assured newcomers that they'd found the real thing. As four boxers commented on their perceptions:

My first impression of this place was like, in some ways, it's a pretty shaggy, crappy gym...and then I realized that it [crappiness] just added to it. I thought, that's pretty cool. I thought it was exactly what I was looking for. I wanted it to be dirty, since that means there's not a bunch of time and money and energy sent into making it look polished, you know, glossy.

--Ronnie, White Male 26, Advertising Executive

I really didn't think too much about it. I just—I saw the actual gym, which made me happy, I mean, excuse me, the actual ring made me happy. It made me feel like it was official boxing...also the gloves and all the different boxing equipment made it seem real. I'd never been to a place with a ring--it kind of felt like--this is a real boxing gym.

--Adrian, Black Female 29, Medical Research Assistant

You could tell by the atmosphere of the gym to know it's for real here. You could tell by just talking to the instructors, talking to people who train there, watching the way that they train, it seemed that people weren't afraid to get sweaty, and weren't afraid to, you know, play rough, and it's totally serious.... I compared it to other gyms—whether it be martial arts or boxing like this—and there was a lot less posing and standing around punching the air, and a lot more practicing, you know, real sparring, things like that.

--Seth, White Male, 37, Consultant, Telecommunications Company

At first I guess I thought it looked like a hole in the wall, but most gyms do, you know? So, it's, really, that's the kind of environment you need to train. I mean, you can't have it all be fancy and looking neat. You get distracted. You're in here to work. So, they give you a working environment.

--Isaac, White Male 28, International Business Consultant

As these boxers attest, KO Gym offered a sensory experience that began as soon as one walked through the door. The gym was hot and the air dank with sweat. A newcomer's first breath delivered the message that KO Gym was a place where people worked hard.

As Ryan and Lowell put it:

I come here and sweat like a pig. It feels fuckin' great! [Why?] Because I know I'm pushing my body to its potential.

--Rich, White Male, 24, Food Server

It is so nice to come in here and sweat. My muscles get tired and the sweat drips from my body. I love that feeling. Look at my t-shirt now [tugging on his wet t-shirt]. I feel like I really did something, you know?

--Lowell, White Male, 26, Law School Student

Other boxers could also function as props. When a newcomer walked into KO curious about the gym, Jan or Bill would point out the competitors and talk, like proud parents, about their latest bouts. These embellished images of the competitors added to the impression of KO as a serious gym. On any given night, the competitors made up about half of the people in the gym (there were just five competitors when I began, but

that number grew to twelve by the time I exited the field). In some ways, the identity of the gym was tied to these hardcore boxers who worked out every night. Seeing the competitors, and doing workouts similar to theirs, gave the middle-class boxers a sense that they too were doing the real thing. As one boxer put it:

When I first came in here and I saw Dwight and Steven sparring, they were just railing on each other, and they looked so good, like real boxers. I knew then that this was the place for me.

--Ken White Male, 20, College Student

The recreational members identified with the competitors, who in turn offered assistance and encouragement to the recreational fighters, and did indeed work the same drills.

When the recreational boxers were engaged in a drill, a competitor sometimes watched intently and intervened to demonstrate proper technique. Moreover, Jan and Bill would sometimes match competitive fighters with novices so the latter could learn to spar.

Seven of the twelve competitors were working-class African Americans. Their presence helped to legitimize KO Gym in the eyes of the mostly white middle-class boxers. Not only did the presence of working-class African American boxers make KO Gym seem authentic, it allowed the middle-class boxers to say (in interviews) that they especially enjoyed the diversity found in the gym.

Many of the middle-class members expected the gym to be full of minority men—mostly African American and Hispanic—who would be training for fights. This was the stereotype, and these competitors fit it. The competitors trained seriously; their chiseled bodies glimmered with sweat; they pounded the bags with rhythm and power; they sparred regularly. And simply by watching these guys train, or working with them,

the recreational boxers—by extension—felt that they too were getting the authentic experience. Kevin, a white college student, spoke of this:

I get totally pumped up when I watch these guys spar, like Dwight or Dean. They're legit, you know, smooth and fluid, and they both can hit like a ton, very conditioned and everything. They'll probably be on TV in a few years competing for a world title. I think that's cool about this place. Someone like me can work out and even get a chance to spar with them, and they're not going to try and kill me in there.

--Kevin, White Male, 19, College Student

Kevin here articulates what the other middle-class boxers felt: the gym was legitimate in large part due to the competitors who trained there. In this way, the competitors added to the experience of the recreational boxers. Jan and Bill understood the positive effect the competitors had on the gym's image and thus gave them intensive support. They opened the gym to them when it wasn't open to others, worked closely with them, offered regular sparring opportunities, set them up with matches, and took them to tournaments.

There were also differences between what was real and authentic among the groups within KO Gym. As discussed in chapter one, the line between competitive and recreational fighters was almost perfectly split between the working and middle-class. All but one of the competitors could be identified as working-class. The one holdout from the competitive bunch was an African American male who grew up in a working-class family and graduated from college by the end of my tenure at the gym. He competed occasionally and aspired to box professionally. His professional aspirations distinguished him from the white middle-class boxers.

The majority of the African American fighters at the gym had dreams of glory and said that they ultimately wanted to be world champions. The consensus among boxing insiders is that it takes years to become a decent amateur fighter, and several more years to become an average professional (Wacquant 1992). These guys were in their 20s, starting a new sport, and yet dreamed of the stardom and riches of professional boxing. Clearly, they overestimated their chances of success. Yet KO Gym was real enough to fuel their dreams. As long as KO had the necessary gym accoutrements—a ring, heavy and speed bags, and willing sparring partners—they considered the gym real and their dreams realistic.

For the female fighters at KO Gym the notion of real boxing was just as important as it was to the men. They too came to KO for an authentic experience, looking for a good workout and something that would make them feel empowered and capable. They didn't want to do what other women did—participate in aerobics or Tae-Bo.

So it's almost a pride thing that I can say I sparred and I can say I box and I can say I fight and I'm a girl.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

Just as the presence of competitors legitimized KO Gym in the eyes of middle-class recreational boxers, the presence of men legitimized the gym in the eyes of women boxers. It was especially important to the women to have the opportunity to go head to head with men. This idea came up often and was described by Jill:

A lot of the time, I'm okay with guys, but I think it also goes back to the [water] polo thing again. I can play polo with other guys, but I can't play real well with

other women. And I think part of it's like the competitive nature, but I think another part of it is women don't like hitting women and I don't care. Mary's [a competitive boxer] different, but you know Mary is definitely not your most feminine female in the world, and most other women aren't of the same mindset, like "I don't want to hit you, I might hurt you." Or, "Don't hit me, you might hurt me" [squeaky child-like voice]. Gawd, it's annoying.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

The women understood that they were participating in a male-dominated sport, and so the presence of serious male boxers attested to the realness of boxing at KO Gym.

Real Training

For the training to be perceived as real, the workouts had to be hard, and yet doable by people who were out of shape. Moreover, it was vital that boxing was presented in such a way that the boxers could learn the mechanics of the sport and understand it as a series of technical maneuvers. Finally, it was necessary that members sparred, which marked the gym as an authentic boxer's venue, as opposed to health clubs that offered only cardio-boxing or boxer-cise. The physical demands, emphasis on technique, and sparring combined to assure the recreational boxers that they were engaged in real training.

The training at KO was set up in such a way that everybody at the gym got out of it what they wanted. The drills and conditioning were strenuous enough that even the most conditioned athlete could be pushed, but it also allowed newer members to successfully complete a workout. This was vital. The boxers wanted to be physically pushed, and they also wanted the mental rewards—the feelings of satisfaction—that came from completing a training session. They also had the option of joining the

psycho-squad for the once-a-week intense strength and conditioning program tied directly to boxing, if they so desired.

Boxers followed a program set by Jan and Bill, but everyone went at their own pace. This allowed less-fit members to complete a workout and feel good about themselves. For instance, between rounds (of floorwork drills) boxers were to perform sets of push-ups and crunches. A novice might do only five of each, while a veteran might do twenty during the minute “break” between rounds. Moreover, the intensity of each drill could be varied depending on one’s level of conditioning and expertise. Hence, a veteran working the heavy bag exerted more energy and power than an ill-conditioned novice, who might throw a few combinations, stop, catch his or her breath, and start over again.

At the end of the night, all members engaged in a “wall,” which was Jan and Bill’s term for the workout’s final conditioning drill. The wall was physically taxing and demanded both cardio-vascular and physical strength. If one wasn’t sufficiently exhausted already, the wall was typically the “back breaker.” A standard wall consisted of five to six stations of circuit training. Each station required a different type of exercise, and it was expected that everybody perform as many of the exercises as they could within the allotted one-minute time period at each station. This pushed people of all levels, and Jan and Bill weren’t afraid to bark encouragement at people who needed extra motivation. Most walls entailed two full circuits around, lasting the final 15 to 20 minutes of each session.

Between the constant motion throughout the night, as well as the strenuous conditioning of the wall, members viewed the boxing at KO Gym as a challenging workout and something you weren't going to get from doing boxing aerobics or Tae-bo.

What we do in here is about the most demanding, physically demanding workout that I've ever done. I can't imagine a better workout, you're working all your muscles and the conditioning is all cardiovascular. In the first 15 minutes I'm already sweating like crazy and sucking air. It's rough, but that's what so awesome about this. By the time I leave I'm just done. You might as well put a fork in me [grinning].

--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

Oh man, this is hard work. I mean in terms of physical conditioning, it is probably the most challenging physical conditioning that I have experienced at a gym, and people seem to be more interested in that than posing or standing around.

--Seth, White Male, 37, Consultant, Telecommunications Company

By the time the workout is over I'm stew. It's amazing because it's two hours of constant motion, and it also involves so much strength conditioning, which is so tiring. And then the "wall"—it kicks my ass every single time. The last 45 minutes of the workout I can't help but think about it. And then when it's over, I feel like mush. But it feels awesome. I'm not sure you can get a better workout than this.

--Jake, Black Male, 43, Human Resources

The intense workout signified to gym members that they were engaged in real training.

It was something physical, and this feeling was thus embodied. Essentially, if it felt real, it was perceived as real.

Emphasizing Technique

Partnered drills and sparring dominated the training regimen at KO Gym. After the initial jump rope, stretching, shadowboxing and mitt work, Jan and Bill circled up the boxers and described the drills that they wanted done, usually explaining a

defensive/offensive tactic that required careful punching and footwork. On occasion, Jan and Bill would forgo some of the partnered drill work in favor of circuit training on the various bags.

During drill work, Jan and Bill walked around the gym and corrected hand positions, footwork, and other elements of bad form. Sometimes verbal interventions were geared for particular persons, and sometimes they were geared for everybody (e.g., “Keep your hands up,” “Keep moving,” “Make sure you pivot”). This technical instruction not only fostered an image of boxing as a sport requiring hard-earned skills, it also reinforced Jan and Bill’s authority and expertise as trainers.

As a result of this emphasis on technique, boxers experienced satisfying gains in proficiency. Rex and Kyle remarked on the importance of this progress:

In here, there’s no messing around. You’re in an environment where you’re gonna learn. And if you don’t learn, you’ll get popped, because somebody else doesn’t care if you learned or not, you know?

--Rex, White Male, 30, Account Manager, Computer Company

One of the great things about doing this is that each night I feel like I’m learning something. Well, let me take that back. In some ways, we do some of the same things over and over again. It’s just that you really learn it, or refine it, when you keep doing it over and repeating it. Jan always says you gotta do this stuff [the drills and floorwork] until it becomes second nature. I totally see that.

--Kyle, White Male, 29, Manager, Furniture Outlet Store

From the start of their training, members began learning the nuances of punches, combinations, and footwork. Jan and Bill demonstrated various techniques and movements, defenses and counters, which impressed upon newcomers an image of boxing as a physically and strategically demanding art form. Mastery of punches and footwork was then seen as evidence of a boxer’s progress. Improved fitness—as

demonstrated in training drills—and the acquisition of technical skill were noted and acknowledged by Jan and Bill and by KO boxers. These gains were a major source of satisfaction for KO boxers. The emphasis on technique also dispelled the image of boxing as a mindless brawl. Without this emphasis, the middle-class boxers might have found the KO training program much less appealing.

Sparring

At KO Gym sparring was the activity that most viscerally attested to the reality of what the boxers were doing. After weeks of fitness and training drills, and shadowboxing in the mirror, boxers were ready for a test of their developing skills, along with the possibility of minor injury. The prospect of sparring gave rise to anxiety and fear. These emotions were in turn taken as evidence of having moved to another level of boxing reality.

Owner/trainers Jan and Bill believed that sparring is primary to learning the craft, and therefore encouraged members to spar frequently. Veteran boxers sparred several times a week, while less-experienced boxers sparred once a week or less. The importance of the activity is evidenced by statements from two of the minority boxers:

You can hit the bags and mitts all day, and work on those things. But you can't just train hitting mitts and bags. Sparring is where it's at, because all the stuff you work on, you get to go out there [in the ring] and see if you really know, see if you can utilize it. Sparring is good for you.
--Dwight, Black Male, 24, Inventory Supply Clerk

Sparring is the thing. I can hit the bags, you know. Shadow box and do all the other stuff. But I only feel like I did something if I spar. That's when it's real for me. I need that contact, the intensity, you know?
--Aaron, Black Male, 26, Unemployed

In principle, a sparring session was supposed to stop short of the force, physicality, or brutality of a real fight. Yet the risk—to both body and self-image—created an emotional intensity that was profoundly real to the recreational boxers:

Sparring is the real deal. You kind of know where you stand after you start sparring. It's like a whole different world. Before you spar you don't realize how difficult it all is, and then you get in there, everything is moving so fast, you're getting hit and frustrated. It just doesn't compare with anything else. But you definitely see why you need to do all the floorwork and drills. And when you finish, you're just on an adrenaline rush. It's intense.
--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

Sparring separates the men from the boys, so to speak. There's a real risk of getting hurt, and I think most people are painfully aware of this—no pun intended [laugh]—and the guys that can get in there and not worry about getting hurt are the ones who will be successful, or at least more successful than the others. I'm still working on it, but I'm learning, slowly but truly.
--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

In sparring, the recreational boxers felt that they were putting themselves on the line—just like real boxers do. There was a sense of pleasure in not only sparring like “real boxers,” but a sense of satisfaction in overcoming the fear of entering the ring. As the data above suggest, fear of a poor performance in a sparring session was often trumped by the satisfaction that came from overcoming one's fears. For the recreational boxers, this was as close as they would come to the thrill of competition. Sparring also gave credibility to the KO Gym's “True Sport, True Training” motto.

A FEMALE TRAINER IN A MAN'S WORLD

The competitors, the sights (other than the kids with swords), sounds, smells, and the experience of getting hit all said, in effect, “This is real boxing we’re doing here; we’re not just messing around for the sake of a workout.” Yet the reality of KO Gym was momentarily threatened when newcomers saw that one of the trainers was a woman. What was she doing coaching a man’s sport?

At first I was a little unsure of how the trainers, of how Bill and Jan would be. I admit it, I was a little prejudiced against Jan because she was a woman and this seems like such a man’s sport.

--Stan, White Male, 19, College Student

I wasn’t sure what to think at first. I expected something different, like someone older, and her being a woman, that just wasn’t what I expected.

--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

Jan knew she was fighting stereotypes as a woman in a “man’s world,” and even putting the authenticity of the gym at risk. Jan thus had to accommodate expectations of the members, particularly the newcomers who were wary of having a female trainer. This meant showing new members that she was indeed knowledgeable, tough—a requisite for boxers—and assertive.

I think in some ways I have to show people that I know what I’m talking about since I’m a woman and they probably don’t expect someone like me as a trainer. So I’m certainly conscious of that, and I think people see that I’m not any different than other trainers, just because I’m a woman. I’ll get on them, yell and prod, whatever it takes to get people motivated.

--Jan, White Female, 29, Owner/Trainer

Jan’s strategy, as suggested above, was to portray herself as a hardnosed trainer. In this role she could signify sufficient toughness to meet the expectations of participants,

without having to be a regular boxer herself, and without risking being stigmatized as too manly. And though members may not have thought of it in such terms, they did pick up on her gym demeanor:

She knows what she's doing, and if you want to learn you better listen to her. And she has no problem, she will kick you out in a second if she thought you were going to be mean or if you had a problem with having a female trainer. I don't think she has any qualms about being mean if she needed to be. She seems to be a very tough lady, and that's very cool.

--Jim, White Male, 22, College Student

She's tough. She's not militant or anything, it just seems to be in her nature. She's a hell of a lot tougher on us than Bill is. Sometimes when she's getting on me I get so mad. I'm like, "shut up!" The worst thing is that she could kick your ass. But at the same time she's a nice person too.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

As the above data suggest, Jan constructed a gym persona in part to manage newcomers' impressions of the gym. Though she was friendly and well liked, Jan could come across as "tough" and "mean." She was much more vocal, and much more "nasty"—as one member put it—than Bill, who had a laid-back style. She could be relentless in her critiques, making boxers repeat drills and movements until they met her expectations. She was a stickler for detail and would voice her displeasure if someone used sloppy technique. Yet, almost to a cliché, she was quick to offer encouragement and praise. She was also mindful of how she came across to others:

I can do the drill sergeant bit if needed. I can motivate people, but I also realize how frustrating this sport can be—it's technical and requires repetition and practice. So I try to motivate people to work hard, but I will also try and find something they are doing right and give them their props. Otherwise, a lot of guys will get so frustrated that they won't come back. Bill's good about that too. He'll praise somebody just for making it through a workout, and it makes people feel good. So I try to do both—get on them a little and motivate, and also praise them.

--Jan, Owner/Trainer, 29

The drill sergeant bits were an important aspect of appearing legitimate to the newcomers. There was no doubt who was in charge once the boxing action began.

Below is a description from my fieldnotes of the coach and boxer interaction between Jan and myself:

The next station was in the ring, moving with the heavy bag. The bag was attached to a chain that was hanging from the ceiling. When the buzzer sounded I swung the bag in a circular motion and “shadowed” it, just as Jan had directed. Earlier Jan said not to punch the bag, so I didn't. Shadowing the bag for three minutes is actually pretty tiring. You're moving the whole time, shuffling your feet, and keeping your hands up. I made sure the bag was in front of me the entire time, so I was keeping my feet moving. A few times Jan came over and yelled at me. The first time went something like this: “Keep your hands up, C'mon! And keep that tongue in your mouth!” The second time it was much the same: “Keep your tongue in your mouth. You're going to bite it off. Hands up!” After the buzzer sounded [three minute rounds] I dropped to do my push-ups and crunches. At this point I was exhausted. Jan came by as I moved to the heavy bag [we were doing circuit training on the various bags]. “Ya gotta keep your tongue in your mouth. It will only take one punch to the mouth that you'll wish you had,” Jan stated. I nodded, although I was extremely frustrated with the tongue comments. I just wanted to tell her: “Don't you know that I can't help it? I don't do it to look pretty!” But of course I didn't say anything, nor would I ever.

The buzzer sounded and I started hitting the heavy bag—the one with the saddle bags attached. During this three minute round Jan came over a couple times. “Get your hands up!” she yelled, *hitting* me with some kind of stick covered in duct tape[I later learned that this was a fencer's foil wrapped in duct tape—it was a favorite of Jan's]. It didn't hurt, but it was annoying, especially when she came

by a second time: “Hands up! [she jabbed me as she said it] I’m going to keep hitting you in the head until you get your hands up! [she hit me again]”

I made sure I kept my hands up, protecting my head for the rest of the round. I was annoyed. Luckily, the buzzer sounded right after she came by again, no doubt preparing to whack me some more. I did my push-ups and crunches, and then headed to the next station, the double-end bag [the double-end bag is shaped like an inverted peanut and is attached to the ceiling and floor by what looks like, bungee cords. It springs back and forth and side to side when it is hit]. When the buzzer rang I started throwing my jabs at the bag. I also danced around and bobbed my head. I was only throwing jabs (as directed by Jan), trying to snap them and then move from side to side to make it seem real. It didn’t take long before Jan came by. “You’re leaning. Keep your back straight and keep your hands up. I swear we’re going to have to knock that out of you!” Jan stated incredulously. I simply nodded and went back to my jabs. At this point I was demoralized. I hit it a few more times. Sensing my frustration, Jan then said, “A little better. Keep working on it, you’ll get it.” I nodded. I wasn’t interrupted for the last few minutes. When the buzzer sounded I did my push-ups and crunches.

--Fieldnotes 3.25.02

As shown above, Jan could vigorously critique boxers’ mechanics and technique. In doing so, she played the hardnosed trainer role to the hilt, compensating for any doubts evoked by her female body.

Vocal toughness, however, was not enough. Jan also had to show participants that she knew boxing. She did this by taking novices aside and demonstrating proper technique. She would do the same thing when boxers were partnered in drills—pausing the drill to demonstrate technique. Occasionally, Jan would put on the gloves and do drill work with gym members, conducting on an impromptu boxing “clinic.” In one case, she enlisted my help:

After I finished a round on the heavy bag Jan came up to me and said: “Hey Travis, we need to do some inside work with you. Have you done any inside drills?” I nodded like I was answering, “no,” simultaneously wondering exactly

what inside drills were. She then said, “Okay, let’s do it. I’ll be right back.” Jan wandered off, and while I waited, I haphazardly went back to hitting the heavy bag, wondering what I was getting myself into. After she put on some gloves and headgear she came back up to me and said, “Okay, we’re going to do this. The key to inside work is to be able to feel the punches. You won’t be able to see ‘em. Everything is short and compact. All your punches are quick half punches. [throwing punches into an imaginary person] You get in close, forehead to forehead, and throw little hooks and uppercuts. Think about your shoulders. They are key.” I nodded. She then climbed into the ring and I followed. We were now in the center of the ring, she popped in her mouthpiece [mine was already in], and she pulled me in tight, so the right side of my forehead was pressed against the right side of her forehead. “Alright Travis, you start, just nice and easy. Try to feel what I’m going to punch and go ahead and counter if you think you have a shot,” she stated. We sort of moved in a semi-circle. Jan then began throwing little punches from underneath, as well as left and right hooks that landed on my ears [I wasn’t wearing headgear]. I attempted to counter with little taps back at her, trying to feel my way around. At the same time, I felt myself getting hit. It felt like I was a split second late in defending her punches. It was a little frustrating because I couldn’t see the punches coming. They seemed to just keep coming. A few times she stopped and said something. One time she stated, “Remember, these are short compact punches. Think about your shoulders rolling back and forth.” Another time she stopped me and commented: “You gotta be able to feel me. If I hit your body, you know I’m trying to open up something on top. See how those are hitting you? I don’t even have to swing hard to make that kind of contact.” I kept getting hit. “Okay, now try and feel me when you get in tight. Use your shoulders to throw punches, nice and easy. Use your forearms to block punches—make the punches slide off your forearms,” Jan directed. Jan was the aggressor and she seemed to be throwing harder and harder. Though none of the single punches hurt, the combination of the multiple punches took their toll. It was frustrating; and annoying. I was getting pummeled by her. Jan was mixing up her hooks and uppercuts until I was just frazzled. The more times she hit me, the more frazzled I got. Worse, I wasn’t landing anything on her. She was able to slip everything I threw her way. At one point she stopped and asked, “Are you alright?” I nodded like I was fine. I was actually more embarrassed than hurt. Not more than 20 seconds later she landed an uppercut-left hook-uppercut combo that landed solidly. I kept going, but about ten seconds later Jan stopped. “You’re bleeding, do you want to stop?” she asked. “I’m fine. Let’s keep going. I need the work,” I replied. At that point my ego was more hurt than my fat lip and bloody nose. We probably had gone another minute before Jan stopped. She was probably tired of landing all those punches. “Okay, that’s good... [Pause in action. We broke apart] We’ll work on this more. It’s really about feeling the punches and the movement. You’ll get it.” Jan explained as we climbed out of the ring. Once out of the ring,

Jan gave me a look and then said, “You should probably clean up your mouth.” I nodded, took off my gloves and then went to the bathroom to clean up the blood.
--Fieldnotes 4.8.02

The fieldnotes above highlight one of the ways in which Jan was able to command respect in the gym. She was able to demonstrate not only technique, but also her toughness and boxing acumen when she laced up the gloves. Such displays solidified her reputation and showed newcomers that she knew what she was talking about. Three boxers spoke of how they perceived Jan and this process:

Jan immediately established a level of respect. I was listening to her and was watching her demonstrate proper technique, and she knows what she’s talking about.
--Jake, Black Male, 43, PR, Media Relations

It was odd at first, to figure out how a female was going to train you, but after awhile, it was no big deal. She proved herself. She definitely knows her stuff and does what trainers are supposed to do.
--Dwight, Black Male, 24, Inventory Supply Clerk

When I first came in it kind of surprised but I say that went totally out the window probably the first half hour I was working with her. Actually, I’m more comfortable with Jan, and I like Jan’s teaching a little bit more. At first it was kind of awkward, but now it’s just like, she just a trainer.
--Rex, White Male, 30, Account Manager, Computer Company

The statements above capture what tended to be an ongoing process of proving to the boxers that she was indeed worthy of their attention in the gym. First, she had to disprove stereotypes, and then demonstrate both her toughness and expertise. And again, she was cognizant of this process, as she noted:

I know what I’m talking about. But I have to prove myself here. Some people have preconceptions. Once people see that I know what I’m talking about, then they listen. I have to show them. It used to drive me crazy, boy! I was really sensitive to it, and now it’s like whatever (laughs), you’re an idiot. I just let it go.
--Jan, White Female, 29, Owner/Trainer

Each night's workout was carefully choreographed, and there was no doubt who was in charge. From the first bell to the night's ending wall, Jan ran the program. She effectively matched novices for partnered drills, kept sparring running smoothly, and was always prepared to provide technical feedback to those training. She delegated other coaching chores to Bill. If Jan was monitoring the sparring, then Bill would direct the drills and bag work for the others, and vice versa. To all appearances, Jan called the shots, and left no doubt that she knew how to deliver them.

THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF SUFFERING

Sparring differentiated itself from other gym activity because of its risk. In sparring, there was a real possibility of getting hurt. Tom, a computer programmer, put it this way:

But the boxing, there's an edge to it. We're in there, you're getting hurt, you know, and it's kind of a real rush. To know you're going to get hurt, and it's scary to get hurt, and I think it's scary for most of the people in here every time, but you go in and you do it and you go through it and it hurts but you feel it's real; it's really a satisfying feeling afterwards.
--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

As Tom suggests, suffering had special meaning for the recreational boxers. While they wanted to avoid getting seriously pounded, the minor pains and bruises produced by sparring attested to the authenticity of what they were doing.

How can you not love the bruises? It's my bruise. This is my bruise, this is my injury. There's a certain feeling of a kind of accomplishment. I'm learning. I'm

learning a skill. I'm learning to protect myself. I'm more fit than I was 3 months ago. I'm learning how to do things better and I get bruises. That's part of it.

--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service, Computer Company

As Julie says, her injuries signified involvement in an activity through which she was developing real skills. As the other boxers likewise saw it, how could their activity not be real when it produced bruises and bloody noses?

The endurance of pain is part of many sports (Curry 1991; Messner 1990; Sabo 1989; Sabo and Paneptino 1990). However, what distinguishes boxing from other sports is that the goal of the sport is to inflict enough pain to incapacitate your opponent. In this way, pain is intentional and inevitable in boxing. Yet, if one experienced pain at KO, the code of the gym didn't allow complaining or "whining" about it. Those who experienced a great deal of pain and did not complain were respected for being tough.

Though the unwritten code of the gym called for silence about pain and injury, when asked to discuss these topics during interviews, most members responded enthusiastically with a list of minor injuries incurred at the gym. The recreational boxers often exulted about their bruises and slight injuries as if they had survived mortal combat. In reality, the knocks taken by these recreational boxers did not compare to those taken by the competitors, who sparred much more often and with greater intensity. Yet, the members often wanted to show me their newest bruises, or describe in detail their worst injuries, or those they had seen others get at the gym.

It was apparent in the accounts of KO boxers that not only did they see pain as inevitable, but they took pride in enduring it. This created a contradiction for the participants. "I hate getting hit" commonly came up during interviews. Members spoke

of the pain, as well as the humiliation of a nose bloodied in a tough sparring session; yet they also described taking pleasure in the pain. As professional boxer Frank "The Animal" Fletcher once stated, "I hate to say it, but it's true that I only like it better when the pain comes" (Oates 1994:39). Members at KO Gym felt similarly about the pain, as the following boxers suggested:

I like it...yeah. I like getting hit. I mean, it's fun and there is the anxiety that you have in this sport that you don't have in other sports in the physical act of...going up against somebody physically like, you against them- and it's very physical and you gotta be tough for this. Getting hit-the blood and bruises and stuff-that's just part of it and I think it adds to the experience.
--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

Oh yeah, the blood, the bruises, once you realize that they're not serious, it's actually pretty cool. After a sparring session, in a weird way, I hope that I get a little bloody. It makes me feel like I really did something. When I see blood on my shirt, or I see the blood on my mouthpiece I actually kind of like it.
--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

Sometimes when I leave the gym I'll have blood stains on my shirt and I get so pumped up-I love that shit, you know? [Why do you love it?] Oh man, it just makes me feel good and, tough. The blood means something, like I've been doing something, you know? Like, it shows that I worked my ass off and I got in the ring and threw some punches and took some punches. It is just a cool feeling, like you're a gladiator.
--Stan, White Male, 19, College Student

The boxers' descriptions of getting hit and incurring pain underscore the riskiness of sparring. But the risk also had to be manifested occasionally in the form of injury, or else sparring would have lost some of its symbolic value. And as Stan noted above, by taking a punch one could partake of the gladiator spirit.

Injuries and pain were signs not only of involvement in real boxing, they were resources for doing identity work. As Tom implies below, taking pain could attest to one's manhood:

Yeah, this is a competition. There's something too, about pushing yourself in here and really working it hard and getting the dings. I mean the pain feels kind of manly. Even when you don't spar or anything like that, or you do spar but it's not even competitive, but you get all dinged up, there's a certain feeling like, I don't know, I earned my stripes, took my dings and lumps. It's kind of a badge of honor. [Emphasis added]
--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

For the recreational boxers, being able to endure the pain signified an important quality of manhood: toughness. Pain and bruises were thus a subtle yet powerful means of signifying a masculine self.

Dude, I can't tell you how many times I've gone home with a fat lip or woke up with a sore jaw. Funny thing is, I kind of like it [Why?] You know, I'm not sure. I think there's a *Fight Club* thing going on. It just makes you feel more alive, like a modern day warrior. "There's truth in blood." Isn't that what the Brad Pitt character said in the movie? Something like that, anyway.
--Trevor, White Male, 25, Computer Programmer

Sometimes taking a clean shot is almost cathartic.[How?] You get hit real hard—maybe a shot you didn't even see coming—and it hurts, hurts like hell, like it shocks your system—you totally feel it—but then you realize you're okay and you can keep going. I mean, I don't necessarily like being hit—I don't think anybody does—but, but the feeling of taking someone's best shot and shaking it off and working through it is, it's exhilarating . I wish I could explain it better. It's just a good feeling.
--Jim, White Male, 22, College Student

If I do a lot of contact work or sparring, sometimes it [my body] looks like I'd been beat with a rubber hose. Black and blue, all up and down. And I show off, I'd show that to coworkers, never mind my wife. My wife saw plenty of it. I'd show coworkers and friends, and be like, "Why don't you come and work out with me. Be a man."
--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

Tom noted what the bruises could signify: that he was a “real” man. By extension, those who didn’t participate, or wouldn’t, weren’t “man enough.” The members’ descriptions of their bruises and other injuries attest to meanings beyond the mere participation in boxing. Cuts, bruises, and the pain that came with them were signs of an indomitable character.

The feelings of fear and pain were essential to the construction of boxing as an authentic experience. Fear and pain rooted the experience in the body, giving it an undeniable materiality. Holyfield (1999) observed a similar phenomenon in her study of commercial river rafting companies that attempt to create an authentic experience for their customers. Perception of risk was vital to the experience:

The interactive exchange is *key* in determining whether the experience is perceived as authentic, spontaneous, or natural. The felt arousal enhances the transformation. The emotive experience of risk is being bought and sold, but for some it moves beyond commercial boundaries. As Denzin (1985) reminds us, we should not overlook the importance of felt experience or “embodied” emotions. The meanings are rooted in group context, mediated by our physiological sensations and self-awareness, and transcended to a specific state of mind. (Holyfield 1999:24; emphasis in original)

Similarly, the boxers at KO felt the reality of their activity. “Boxing” without hitting and without pain would have left them with only sweat as evidence of their exertions, and sweat could be gotten cheaply by anyone.

While the recreational boxers at KO Gym did not want to forgo suffering, too much risk also posed a problem. Trevor describes the balance between risky and not too risky:

It's important that there's a little bit of risk and danger involved and even more important that there's not a lot of risk and danger involved. I feel like you can't really know anything about the sport or about yourself unless you put your neck out a little bit, but as long as nobody's out there trying to kill each other and I don't think anyone here is, and as long as you have all the proper gear and everything. It's ok to get hit a little bit, every now and then, and I guess getting hit easy sort of gives you the same idea of how you're doing as getting hit really hard except if you get hit really hard, then you're feeling worse the next day, so I can learn as much from getting tapped on the forehead by a jab that somebody pulls as I could getting decked out by the same punch.

--Trevor, White Male, 25, Computer Programmer

Seth, a high-level manager at a telecommunications company, similarly noted the balancing act taking place in the gym:

Well, I would say, you know, in defense of here, they definitely stress safety, they definitely stress proper technique and using the right caution, but at the same time they're not afraid to hit hard.

--Seth, White Male, 37, Manager, Telecommunications Company

While the middle-class recreational boxers were adamant about wanting a real boxing experience, most weren't interested in committing themselves to competition, or taking it to the point where they might get injured. In this way, the risk, pain, and injury were appealing to the members as long as they remained superficial. Since most members weren't competing, they could safely embrace the danger implied by popular representations of boxing, knowing that they were shielded from serious danger by the close monitoring of the sparring and contract drills. Even the super, intense conditioning of the psycho-squad allowed gym members to endure pain, but without any real risk of injury. In some ways, then, much of the risk at KO, particularly for the middle-class recreational boxers, was illusory.

Though the risk of injury was minimal, from the perspective of the middle-class recreational boxers, the risk was real enough to turn boxing into a resource for identity work. Facing risk signified courage and toughness to themselves and others. The trick was to create a balance between physical intensity and safety. Brad, for example, hoped to get the real experience from KO Gym, while also controlling the risk involved:

Yeah. That's kind of fun, just to think, I'm doing something most people might be scared of doing or, they might think, "Oh, that's dangerous" or something, but then that just kind of adds to the fun maybe. You just feel like you're doing something and you're taking risks but I don't look at it as anything too risky, but it's quite risky.

--Brad, Asian Male, 26, Computer Programmer

The symbolic value of the risk and suffering was great. As noted, the pain, the bruises, and blood meant something. The boxers embraced the symbolic weight all this carried. Yet, they also weren't interested in training for competition where the injuries and pain would be greater, and the risk of stigma might arise.

The middle-class recreational boxers seemed to make a cost-benefit calculation. Stopping short of the reality of competition, they could derive satisfaction from learning to box and being associated with a sport symbolic of toughness and courage. To go farther, however, would unacceptably raise the risks of injury and of stigma in the eyes of their middle-class peers. They wanted and expected a real boxing experience, without all of the real costs.

KO boxers also saw their participation in boxing as setting them apart from their middle-class peers, who shied away from risk and danger. This, too, was part of their masculinity therapy. A real man not only faces danger, he distinguishes himself from

the common horde, makes his own path. KO Gym gave the boxers a way to get off the safe, middle-class path—though again without excessive risk. And as long as it felt real, it was real enough to meet the needs of the recreational boxers. The next chapter will look more closely at the satisfactions boxing offered the KO boxers, in light of what was missing elsewhere in their lives.

Chapter 3

THE (GENDERED AND “CLASSED”) SATISFACTIONS OF BOXING

Members of KO Gym didn't walk in off the street unaware of the masculine ethos associated with boxing. They were well aware of boxing's cultural representations, which gave boxing much of its allure. Engaging in boxing was a way to feel, as one boxer put it, “like a man should.”

Wacquant (1995) asserts that no other sport has such a “hypermasculine ethos” underlying it, based on the toughness required to go toe-to-toe with an opponent. While toughness is not unique to pugilism, there is a relationship between the two that few sports have. Scannell (1967) writes, “The boxer symbolizes male power and bravery; he is elevated and admired.” These cultural meanings attached to boxing made it a resource for participants to do identity work.

Snow and Anderson (1987:1348) define identity work as the “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.” Few activities can surpass boxing as a way to affirm a desired conception of one's self as tough—or at least tougher than the average middle-class white guy. In addition to manliness, boxing also signifies a zest for life, as experienced through the exertion of bodily strength. As Andy put it:

I know this [boxing] doesn't make me more a man, but I also feel more manly doing it. Does that make sense? When I get home and my muscles are dead tired and I have bruised ribs and I'm all sweaty, I can't help but feel manly. I realize a lot of that feeling comes from endorphins. But my body feels like the way a body is supposed to feel when I get done with a workout. Although I may be tired or hurting, it feels great. That would suck if I went through life and I didn't feel that way. I like

knowing that I'm pushing my body to its limits. It's both mental and physical. [How?] Mentally, I put myself in the frame of mind that pain is good, and that I have to endure some pain to make my body stronger. I guess it's a cliché, but no pain, no gain, right?
--Andy, White Male, 22, College Student

Andy's statement is typical of how many of the boxers framed their experience at KO Gym. When asked to explain why they got involved in boxing, KO members initially gave stock answers: "I wanted a good workout," "I wanted to learn self-defense," "It's a place where I feel alive," "I wanted a challenge," "I wanted a rush," or "I wanted a place to work off frustration." I heard these accounts, or some combination thereof, over and over again. What no one said, initially, was, "I wanted to feel more manly." Yet it later became clear that the masculinity signified by engaging in real boxing was a vital attraction for many members. As Wyatt put it:

I guess it's kind of like, uh—it sounds silly to say it, but, you know, it's kind of got that manly appeal to it. Like you can take care of yourself, you know? You get bigger, you get stronger, you can kick somebody's ass. But at the same time it's, it's more about control [and] conditioning.
--Wyatt, White Male, 23, College Student

As the data suggest, boxing at KO Gym was not simply about getting fit. It was about affirming or reshaping an image of one's self, which was true for both men and women. In comparing KO Gym to a gym that offered cardio-boxing, a female boxer said: "That stuff is for wusses; I'm here to really learn a skill."

Though women, too, sought evidence of toughness, men were unabashed about boxing as a way to shore up an image of themselves vis-à-vis other men. As Andy put it:

First of all, I wanted to know how to defend myself—being in the military, it seems essential. I know this sounds funny, but I also want to know how to kick some ass. I don't want to be one of those wimpy officers that get no respect from their troops. I want my guys to know that I am the baddest motherfucker around. I need to have the physical to go along with the mental. I know going to college and then attending officer training school I'll get the mental stuff. This [boxing] is for the other side, the physical. I need to be a badass if I want the respect of my men. It's all about respect.

-- Andy, White Male, 22, College Student

Stan was equally clear about the importance of boxing as a way to measure himself against other men:

I love what boxing is. And I want to compete with it. So that's why I joined the gym. I wanted to test out my fighting skills. Honestly, I want to see how I match up with other guys.

-- Stan, White Male, 19, College Student

Boxing at KO Gym therefore provided an opportunity not only to signify a masculine self, but to signify a masculine self that was superior to others.

The body was often cited as the locus for affirming one's sense of manhood.

This was contrasted, in some boxers' accounts, with non-masculine passivity. Real men, as Ronnie suggests below, live through their bodies:

A part of this is about being a man. It's like, the sweating we do all the time and the training, and it's kind of a cycle you bring your body through. I think with fighting, when you start doing, you're like, no, I'm supposed to get hurt, my body's supposed to repair itself and it keeps going. I'm not supposed to sit on the couch and be all fluffy and chubby, you know. You're supposed to give your body some workout. And when I say workout, you should be able to get beat up every now and then and give your body some bruises. This is what is supposed to happen.

--Ronnie, White Male, 26, Advertising Executive

Ronnie's statement concretely attests to Connell's (1995:45) argument that "True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body."

Men also sought to experience their bodies as bigger and stronger. Isaac describes physical changes he attributed to boxing:

I can definitely see the difference since I started coming here. I'm totally healthier for one thing. Eating better, doing more exercise, I definitely feel more fit and have more energy. [Have you seen changes in your body?] Oh yeah. I'm sure this sounds narcissistic, but I love looking at myself in the mirror after I get out of the shower. I have more [muscle] definition. I see it in my arms, shoulders, chest. It's cool, I mean, who wouldn't like it? My girlfriend has even commented on it. She likes it [grinning and laughing].
--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Representative

For Brian, a financial representative, boxing provided a combination of the satisfactions discussed above:

I really enjoy getting in the ring and fighting. I like challenging myself that way and putting myself up against somebody else. I really like the physical appearance that it's give me here in the last month- I mean, I could tell like a difference in like my stomach muscles and my shoulders... I feel like I'm getting more fit and... I like that. I feel bigger and stronger. [*How does that make you feel?*] Good. Real Good. The chicks dig it [laughter].
--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

These statements, typical of the younger (20s) male boxers at KO, suggest that the men were alert to boxing's potential to enhance another dimension of their masculinity: heterosexual prowess.

But why was this kind of masculinity display and enhancement so important to the middle-class recreational boxers? They might have sought, more typically of middle-class men, to signify masculinity through the attainment of status, institutional

power, and wealth. Why did they choose instead to take a beating in a working-class sport? For this group of individuals drawn to KO Gym, part of the answer to this question can be found by examining how they earned a living.

MIDDLE-CLASS JOBS AND A WORKING-CLASS SPORT

To understand these boxers' motivations, as well as the satisfactions they derived from boxing, it is vital to understand how gym members viewed their activities at KO in contrast to their work. I argue that gym members gained satisfaction from boxing in part as compensation for what was missing in their jobs. Boxing might have been a step down in terms of class prestige, but it offered a step up in gender status.

Dissatisfactions with the World of Work

In describing their experience at KO Gym, boxers talked about being in control and free, outside the corporate system, and not at the beck and call of any boss or customer. Boxers enjoyed deciding when to work out and how hard to push themselves. They also spoke of the physical pleasures of training, the joy of leaving the gym drenched in sweat, pleasantly fatigued and mildly euphoric from the strenuous exercise. In contrast, their jobs failed to provide similar experiences. Working out at KO Gym thus offered a kind of mind-body therapy:

This place is my outlet. If I come here with stress from my job or anything else, by the time I leave that stuff is an afterthought
--Rick, White Male, 44, Small Business Owner

I could be having the worst day possible, either at work or with something else—maybe problems with my boyfriend—and I come here and once I get going I totally forget about it all. By the time I leave at night I don't even care about all that stuff.

--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service for Computer Company

The hitting relieves so much stress and it is such an outlet for me. I can work off all the bad stuff that builds inside me all day. The job, kids, traffic, everything.

--Barbara, White Female 37, Bartender

While many of the middle-class boxers had good white-collar jobs by societal standards, members often expressed a general feeling of dissatisfaction with work. Some spoke of the physical, emotional, and spiritual deficit created by their jobs, while others hinted at feelings of emptiness arising from doing a job that held little intrinsic meaning. Quite often members spoke of life outside the gym with ambivalence, but became animated when the conversation turned to boxing and the activity inside the gym. Moreover, routine and a lack of stimulation were common themes in members' talk about their work. As Trevor describes his job:

In one sense I'm lucky. I work for a small company. Everybody who works there is young and it's pretty laidback, but I'm still working on a computer all day, typing away, and that gets old after awhile. I'm 25 and my back already feels like it is tweaked from sitting down all day hunched over the keyboard.

--Trevor, White Male, 25, Computer Programmer

As Trevor's statement highlights, he understood that in one sense he was lucky—he had a full-time job in the area in which he was college educated. At 25, however, he was already weary of his job. Harrison, a computer programmer felt much the same.

Work is frequently not very mentally stimulating. What I do is not all that complicated, although some people seem to think it is. I think it just happens to be that, while I don't have the technical background, I do have some skill at figuring out how to sell things. But it's not that interesting.

--Harrison, White Male, 33, Computer Programmer

Although members found satisfaction in some workplace experiences—like brokering a big deal, or completing a large project—on the whole, they described their work as unfulfilling. In some cases, they reframed work as a means to “pay the bills,” as Dylan describes below:

I sort of look at my job as something I don't mind doing terribly that's usually fairly challenging and pays the bills. And I'm certainly glad to have it, you know, I'm grateful to have it, and I think I'm pretty fortunate to have a job in the field that I've chosen to study. But it's not really fulfilling in the sense that I'm really helping other people or anything like that. Like mostly I do e-commerce stuff, so I'm just enabling other people to do retail, which I don't think is really helping anybody.

--Dylan, White Male, 26, Computer Programmer

Seth echoed Dylan's sentiments with his comments about the oppressive bureaucracy he dealt with at work:

You know, there's tons of bureaucracy in my job, tons. The company I work for had a hundred and fifty thousand people in it four years ago, now they have about forty thousand people, but they've retained the management structure of a hundred and fifty thousand person company. And so as you can imagine, there's a lot of executives and a lot of directors, and so the amount of bureaucracy is insane. I deal with that everyday. [*And how do you deal with the bureaucracy?*] I try not to take it too seriously. That's the secret, is try to do stuff outside of your work that's fulfilling to you. I mean I think the biggest change in my professional life started four years ago or whatever, and then I started to do things like this outside of work, whereas before I put all my energy into work. So in essence, the fulfillment I don't get out of work, I do other things like this.

--Seth, White Male, 37, Consultant, Telecommunications Company

Seth's words are telling. Boxing was a tonic for those who felt bored by work and wanted a new challenge. The challenge they wanted, however, was one that offered a kind of satisfaction and intensity their jobs could not.

The Satisfaction of Boxing in Comparison to the World of Work

In his ethnography of professional boxers in the inner city of Chicago, Wacquant (1992:225) argues that “*the boxing gym defines itself in a relation of symbiotic opposition to the ghetto* in which it is situated.” He adds that the gym is “*an island of stability and order where social relations forbidden on the outside become once again possible*” (1992:229; emphasis in original). Wacquant provides graphic and insightful details of the disorganized neighborhood that surrounds the gym in Chicago—the poverty, high crime rate, neighborhood degradation, and so on. He further observes that the gym, “offers a relatively self-enclosed site for a protected sociability where one can find respite from the pressures of the street and the ghetto....” (1992:229). The KO boxers likewise sought a refuge, though not from a dangerous world but from one that was overly bureaucratic and too safe. What KO offered, to those who lived in the mostly sanitized world of the middle-class, was a taste of the physical dangers of the street. It also offered what was perceived as a true assessment of skill and ability, something gym members felt was lacking in their everyday work lives.

Along these lines, four primary themes emerged in examining how KO boxers contrasted their experiences of work and boxing: (1) boxing offered an intense physical experience; (2) boxing was individual in nature; (3) boxing offered control and autonomy; and (4) boxing was objective and unambiguous in its results. The latter three themes were mutually reinforcing for gym members. Boxing is an individual sport that offers high degrees of control and autonomy, which in turn allow boxers to experience a strong connection between effort and results. At times the boxers might have cultivated

a business-like attitude, but in terms of the satisfactions they were seeking, boxing was the antithesis of work.

The physicality of boxing. Gym members referenced the strong contrast between the mental and physical rigors of boxing as opposed to their white-collar work. As one boxer explained, "My job is boring. It is about using my brain. Here, it is much more exciting; it is so physical. There is no comparison between the two." Others expressed similar sentiments:

I think it's nice for someone like me. I mean, all I use is my head, you know? When I'm at work, I'm using my head, I'm constantly thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking. It's nice to come in and just do some push-ups. I don't have to think about the push up. I can just do the push up. it allows my mind to sort of free up and just sort of become reactive and hopefully, the more that I learn the better I'll get at it; the more it becomes subconscious. You know, you start playing and your defense becomes very good and you're not thinking about your defense being good, it just is. Your timing becomes excellent. You know exactly when to throw a combination or when to just throw a couple of jabs and get out of the way. So, I think the better I get at boxing, the more it will become more of a subconscious thing. It will become more of that outlet to get away from that sort of heavy hitting intellectual stress of the job. You can come in and do something that's very natural and you don't have to put that type of intellectual rigor into it.

--Lowell, White Male, 26, Law Student

Work is totally different. At work I sit down. I do have some control over my environment and I realize that not everybody has that luxury, but it's very much a sit down job and it's in front of a computer, or I'm in a meeting. I don't get a chance to get up and move around besides getting up to get some water, and then I come back to my desk, so it's completely different. I just like being able to come here and just being able to move around. Here it is completely physical. There's no sitting down in front of the computer and no "God, I don't want to read this email, I don't want to do this!" This is completely my time under my watch.

--Julie, White Female, 33, Computing Customer Service

While participants recognized the mental challenges of boxing, they were drawn more strongly to boxing's physical nature. Despite the pain of contact drills and punches to the face, they described a pleasure in the sheer physicality of it all—the rush of adrenaline, sweat dripping, the aching muscles, and the labored breathing. It all represented evidence of physical exertion, and with it, a growing sense of power and satisfaction. In interviews, boxers spoke enthusiastically about these types of experiences. Over and over again, the middle-class members of KO Gym referred to the exhilaration of combat:

You know what I love about this? I love the feeling I get, physically. It feels like I'm pushing my body to the limit and just training full tilt. I walk out of here on a total high, and the more sweaty and exhausted I am, the better. It's just an awesome feeling. I wish I could explain it better—it's like a drug.
--Chad, White Male, 42, Graphic Designer

That feeling at the end of the night, I love it. I walk out of here completely exhausted—it seems like every muscle fiber in my entire body is worn out. I'm all sweaty and smelly [laughing] but, it doesn't matter, you know? It's a high.
--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Consultant

Invariably, the physical gratification the members got from boxing led them to reflect about their lives:

Why wouldn't you want to do this? I feel so refreshed and recharged after a workout night that it is just incredible. Sure it's a little crazy, but I think that's part of what makes it so cool. You're doing something most people would never do. I know some of my friends always ask about this—they want to know what goes on here...
--Randy, White Male, 22, College Student

I don't idle well. I don't like to sit still for too long. That's just not me. And basically, I don't know, I'm not settled in life too, so you know I'm not ready to just go home every night after work and sit in front of the TV.

--Reed, White Male, 29, Research Assistant

I want to live an exciting life and do cool things, and I think this is just one of them. Otherwise I would just be working each day being bored.... In some ways I see this as an experience. We should all have as many experiences in our lives as possible—at least that's what I think. Who knows, maybe I'll climb Everest or backpack through Africa someday or live in Costa Rica—the crazier the better. I just don't want to be stuck in my job, my life and being bored. Life's too short for that.

--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

Boxing was thus an exciting escape from humdrum reality. It also allowed the boxers to temporarily forget their personal problems, as well as problems of the world. Coming to the gym and boxing was, at least in part, an opportunity to break out of controlled patterns of behavior. To step into the ring was to escape the iron cage and embrace a sense of authenticity.

Many boxers also expressed the feeling that fighting was something primal, and by extension a more “natural” mode of existence. Part of the allure of boxing, in contrast to work, was that boxing allowed a non-destructive expression of aggressive impulses:

There are times when I'm here [at the gym] and I feel a sense of real power [and] toughness, like this triggers something physiological, like I'm supposed to feel this way, you know? Like when we're doing 'toe-the-line' [contact drill] and I'm hitting someone and they're hitting me. It's a rush, you know? Where else can you do this stuff? I'm not going to pick fights with people on the street or beat people up or anything like that... There's something to be said for doing this and being able to let out your aggression in a good way. I can come in here and feel good about myself and then leave and go on with my regular life.

--Sidney, White Male, 32, Computer Programmer

I think boxing is appealing on many levels. For one, it allows you to just let out your aggression. It allows you to be physical, and for someone like me, there's not a whole lot of avenues to do this, especially at my age. It's not easy....

Essentially, I can come here and get a great workout, let out some aggression and stress, and leave feeling good about myself.

--Howard, White Male, 44, CEO—Advertising Company

As both Sidney and Howard suggest, the physical nature of boxing distinguished it from almost all other activities in which KO members engaged. Boxing's physicality offered these gym members an experience unlike the experiences of their work day. Not only was it a release, but it provided a sense of physical exhaustion, and many contrasted the appeal of this physical feeling over any mental fatigue from sitting at a computer all day. Trevor, who grew up in a working-class family, shares his own insight into the physicality of the boxing experience, and with it his subjective notions of "manhood."

I mean, maybe there's some like evolutionary aspect to the body feeling good and tired or something. My dad and my grandfathers and everything were very blue collar and very hands on. They did physical labor all their lives and that's how I started out. When I was 16 my first job was at a factory doing physical things all day, it seems kind of weird and counter intuitive to just be sitting all day. I don't know, maybe that's ridiculous but it just sort of feels like your body needs physical exertion. And I guess ideally it would be nice if my physical exertion produced something that helped other people or that other people can use. I know boxing doesn't necessarily do that, but there is some personal fulfillment when you push your body to its limits.

--Trevor, White Male, 25, Computer Programmer

As Trevor suggests above, the physical exertion of boxing was part of what made it more fulfilling than sitting all day in front of a computer. Over and over again the boxers described the bodily feeling at the end of the night as a physical experience they craved. For the men, this experience attested to their natural manhood. It also allowed them to distinguish themselves from wimpy paper pushers (Willis 1977; Sennett and Cobb 1972). Nor was boxing tainted by the artificial authority relations of the workplace. As

one man said during an interview, “When I’m out there in the ring, it just feels natural—just me and the other guy competing, and nothing else.”

Individualism. At KO Gym, it was axiomatic that you got out of boxing what you put into it. The achievements and satisfaction that boxing offered had to be attained individually. In contrast, as the members experienced it, success in the everyday world depended too much on the actions of others. Several of the boxers spelled this out:

This is one of the most selfish things you can do, you know? I mean, you train in here for yourself; I mean your trainers are helping you out and everything but they can't do anything when you're in the ring. You're the one taking the contact and you're the one dishing it out. You're the one trying to win; you're the one who's going to lose. If you lose focus, I mean that's your ass. That's your head that's going to be knocked into pavement, or into the canvas.

--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

Everything I do here is about me and nobody else. If I work hard I see the results and if I slack off chances are that I’m going to get my ass kicked when I’m in the ring, but regardless I know it is all on me. It is purely individual and I like it that way.

--Kyle, White Male, 29, District Manager, Furniture Manufacturer

As the above data suggest, the boxers felt that merit in the gym derived from one’s own talent and effort, which was not always how they experienced life at work, where success could hinge on the subjective judgments of bosses. Ironically, then, boxers could achieve a kind of middle-class success—achievement based on merit—through participation in a working-class sport.

Control. Members spoke of “having control” and “being their own bosses” while at the gym, rare experiences at work. This autonomy and control in turn enhanced their feelings of personal achievement.

Nobody here is asking me, 'What do you do?' It's just, 'What's up man? You here to work?' 'Yeah, Okay, you want to glove up?' Everybody is just relaxed here. Everybody is here to work out and have a good workout, so I don't have to think about work. This is just for me. I can come if I want, or stay home. It is all about me. At work, I'm working for somebody—I'm helping somebody, and there's nothing wrong with that. I love helping people and that's what I was hired to do. It makes my company money, but this is for me. I'm helping myself. I'm helping my body and I don't have to act a certain way. I don't have to do this or do that. I'm just working out... It's something that I [pointing to self]want to do. It's all about me, nobody else.

--Bob, Black Male 23, Software Engineer

I feel like I have more control here because I'm here because I want to be and I can walk out that door any time I want to. I could walk out the door at the post office too, but I don't want to because they pay me. They pay me decent money. I'd have a hard time finding a job paying me that kind of money. Maybe not, maybe I would, but I stay there because I feel like it's in my best interest and that sometimes I feel like I need to be looking for other work, so that's part of the work problem. But that's what I come in here to get away from.

--Cliff, White Male, 42, Postal Carrier

Members' control was limited mainly to deciding whether to train on any given night and how hard to train, because once they arrived at the gym almost every activity was directed and scrutinized by the trainers. The trainers ran the drills, decided who got to spar and for how many rounds, and constantly barked orders. Boxers certainly did not do whatever they wanted in the gym. Yet they felt in control because they could choose to be there, to push themselves hard or not, and to expose themselves to risk or not. About work, they had no such choices.

Objective results. KO members viewed boxing as providing a more objective assessment of their skills and talents than their performances at work. During interviews, members of KO Gym spoke of the politics of their work, the collaboration with others, and the subjectiveness of it all. These biases of the workplace offended their belief that achievement should be based on merit. KO members were thus drawn to a venue where their skills could be fairly measured. Isaac, a business development analyst for a large telecommunications company, spoke of his desire for recognition:

I work for a big company, in fact it's one of the biggest companies in the world and I've worked in several departments in this company, and I can't tell you how often I've had bosses more interested in making sure that they're taking the credit for the things that you do, and things like that.
--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Representative

In the views of gym members like Isaac, status at work is gained and lost by indeterminate and subjective assessments that may have little to do with actual productivity or competence. In contrast, at KO Gym each boxer's abilities were assessed unambiguously between the ropes. Seth, a consultant for a telecommunications company, spoke from the perspective of someone caught in a bureaucratic and politicized job:

I mean it's a one-on-one experience here, or it's really just yourself, there is not a whole lot of room for misinterpretation or somebody else taking credit or whatever. You know, it's not a team sport. Whereas work, you're working for a lot of folks, and it's not necessarily a zero sum game or whatever, and there's the fact that there's politics and everything else that comes into play at work that determines what—you know, where you end up, and what happens to you, and things like that. [*What do you mean by politics?*] Well, I work in a large company mentality, so there's an equal if not more amount of energy spent by the people who are, you know, the directors and what not, on internally focused

issues, a lot of internal power struggles that have nothing to do with serving the customers. And so it's easy and it's pretty much inevitable to get caught up in some kind of internal issue that really has nothing to do with your performance review, or your pay, or anything else, but it can suck up your time. And I've seen people end up on the wrong end of political decisions, where they're either leaving the company or demoted or whatever. It has nothing to do with their individual contribution at all, whereas here it's pretty much you get out of it what you put into it... Well I mean here, I think the only person whose, really, evaluation of my performance that matters is me.

--Seth, White Male, 37, Principal Consultant, Telecommunications

While Seth distinguishes between the corporate workworld and the gym, it isn't simply that boxing offered more control and less ambiguous results. It's that in boxing, as the members saw it, irrelevant factors—office politics and bureaucratic nonsense—did not distort the relationship between effort and achievement.

The desire to escape the tainting effects of workplace politics was felt even by those who were successful in conventional terms. John, a physician, put it this way:

The stuff that goes on here—the physicality of it all—makes the posturing and these habitual ways that people deal with the world—and it makes it kind of obsolete. This strips away everything. There is objectivity in this and this objectivity isn't at work when there is always posturing or intimidation from others. I see this with a lot of everyday work and you just see boxing differently. If you get out here and you sweat and your heart's pounding and you do the best you can, then there is something to be said for it. I don't care how much somebody poses and stuff and how much somebody is threatening or how much of a bark they have. It's not because I'm ever going to hit somebody; it's just that it kind of somehow strips it all way and makes all that other stuff just seem kind of dumb...

--John, White Male, 48, Emergency Room Doctor

In a world filled with ambiguity and posturing, boxing, as John says, reduces matters to their honest essentials. The impression management that was seen as critical in the work world was devalued in the gym. As Lowell and Rex experienced it, boxing denied any benefits to pretenders:

To a certain extent what happens here is straight forward. I mean, I make a mistake and I get hit really hard and that's pretty objective, you know. People of reasonable minds can disagree about legal issues but at the same time, I've seen a lot of lawyers do some pretty objectively bad things. And I've seen a lot of boxers do things.... but there is certainly something about this that is very objective. You make a mistake, and there is an immediate consequence to it, and it's really unquestionable because you're laying on the canvas and no one can really argue about the fact that you're lying on the canvas versus in the legal world- even with the judge, I mean, sure, they are the law in some extent, but they are also human beings and they also make value judgments and calls and decisions based on their own beliefs and reasoning and you may disagree and you may be no less right in the objective sense, but they're right because they have a gavel and a robe...yet, like I said, here, if you get knocked down and you're laying on the canvas there's no a whole lotta subjectivity to that now is there?

--Lowell, White Male, 26, Law student

I like it. I mean, it's cut and dried, black and white. Boxing is completely black and white. To me it's about as cut and dried as you can get. [*Is your job like that?*] My job's about 60 percent cut and dried. There's a lot of fluff that I see people giving to management and things to try and make them seem better than anybody else. For instance, you see some people hanging out in the manager's office every single day saying, 'hey, I'm doing this, I'm doing that...' and then you have somebody like me who might be twice as good as this other guy but the other guy who's always in the manager's office kissing ass gets the promotion. Rex, White Male, 30, Manager, Computer Systems Company

The perceived objective results of boxing compared to the subjectiveness of boxers' professional lives offered immense satisfaction to KO members. Chad and John convey how the ring provides feedback that is more satisfying because of its purity:

I gotta tell you, it is refreshing that when you come here, what happens is solely dependent on you. It's not about kissing your boss's ass or anything like that. In fact, it is nothing like that. ...and there is something to be said for something so pure. You certainly don't get that pureness in the outside world. At least I don't see it.

--Chad, White Male, 42, Graphic Designer

As I get older--and I think this is true for a lot of people—you just kind of want to get rid of the illusions and stuff. You try to get to the truth of the matter and see if you can handle it. And this is what is going on here.
--John, White Male, 48, Emergency Room Doctor

As such, the middle-class recreational boxers saw their everyday lives—the routine and politicized work environment—as inauthentic. Lyng (1990), in analyzing the phenomenon of high-risk behavior, makes a similar observation:

Hence, to the extent that people do meet most of the expectations of the social community and adhere to the routines and definitions that have been imparted to them in socialization, there is an artificial character to their behavior. They act in a purposive fashion, yet they often feel (and sometimes verbalize) a genuine ambivalence about the goals they seek. This problem is, of course, a manifestation of one of the central ironies of social life: most people dedicate heart and soul to maintaining role patterns associated with social structures that they themselves had no part in creating. Normal social life is “unreal” in the sense that most of the individual’s action contributes to a social agenda that is little understood and that often appears trivial when examined critically. We often take for granted that some things “must be done” while remaining ignorant of the real reasons for such requirements (Lyng 1990:881)

As gym members’ descriptions of their experience suggest, boxing was seen as a way to realize some truth in life. Part of what made boxing special was that members at KO Gym viewed their accomplishments in the ring as theirs alone. Boxing stood out, against the background of their everyday work lives, for its immediacy, its intensity, its physicality, and its honesty. Work was less satisfying because of its emphasis on conformity, its rigid hierarchies, and its weak and ambiguous signals about one’s merit.

Finding the real me at KO. Not only did KO Gym members speak of boxing as “real” in comparison to their work, they also spoke of the gym as a place where they could enact a

“true self.” Several members noted that they had to “act” business-like at work, alluding to the impression management required in most middle-class jobs. Members thus felt that boxing highlighted the disparity between who they had to be at work and who they really were. Bob described such a disparity:

I went to college and now it's time to apply it to real-life situations. This company's losing a million dollars a day for every time this box [computer] isn't working because they need to do their work and I need to hurry up and fix it and if I don't fix it, they'll lose money—they will know it was me because I'm the person that they contacted and then, on top of that, I have to carry myself a certain way. I have to act a certain way. I have to act corporate-America-ish, but that's not me. But I do that because I realize that that's my job. And coming here is me. This is me. Like, when I met you and you met me here. But if you would've met me at IBM, you'd be like 'that's a different person wearing a different face and just a different person than here'.
--Bob, Black Male 23, Software Engineer

Bob recognized his two distinct “selves,” adding:

This is me. What you meet--what you see is--me. I like to talk, I like to joke, but I also like to box. I like to fight. I like to use my speed. At work, I don't talk as much. I don't clown as much. I don't curse at all. I can't just run up the hall if I feel like it or I can't just go talk to people. I can't go chase women. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I don't chase women here, but when I come here, I can joke. I can joke around with you if I feel like talking. I can be myself.
--Bob, Black Male 23, Software Engineer

Other KO members had a similar experience. This was particularly true for those who held middle-class jobs but grew up in working-class families. For them, the gym was a place where they could “let loose,” in contrast to the genteel middle-class work world.

As Brian put it:

I like being able to do whatever I want and act how I want. Of course, you can't always be yourself at the office, and that is the nature of a job. Here I can hang out and have fun and be myself. [*So is this the real you?*] Well sure, but I wouldn't say that how I am at my work isn't the real me, it is just a different part

of who I am. Here I am Brian the boxer, and at work I am Brian the financial rep, you know? And yes, here I probably get to act like myself more, but that's just the nature of work.

--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

In sum, middle-class gym members were attracted to boxing as a means of compensating for physical, emotional, and ego needs ill met in their work lives. Ironically, boxing also allowed them to feel more like themselves than the jobs from which they derived their central identities.

Status leveling. KO boxers enjoyed the egalitarian culture of the gym. Members were committed to respecting each other for their seriousness and athletic prowess, not for their income or occupational status. By tacit agreement, life outside the gym stayed outside the gym. Adrian, a medical research assistant spoke of this equalizing:

It many ways this place allow everybody to be equal. You don't have to have a Master's degree--you can be somebody with a high school education. You could be working at Target or you could be working somewhere else--you can be doing anything. That's one of the things I like about this place. It really doesn't make a difference. We are equal in here in many ways. But in the outside world what you do is who you are. And that's what I like about it here.

--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

Dylan, too, found the gym to be a respite from status hierarchies of the workplace:

Things outside the gym pretty much stay outside the gym. It's nice to hang out with people with different perspectives who don't necessarily think about their jobs and that are so work centric, at least not in here. A lot of people I meet introduce themselves by 'Hi, my name is Bob, and I work at such and such', you know. And that sort of strikes me as a very sort of sad state that society's fallen into, that people identify themselves by where they work. And I don't see that here, which is refreshing.

--Dylan, White Male, 26, Computer Programmer

The claim that the gym functioned as a sanctuary of authenticity for the middle-class is supported by observation of what was not seen or heard at KO Gym. Jobs and family, statuses, circumstances and events of the outside world were rarely mentioned. The members thus suspended the usual rules of interaction that require small talk and reciprocal personal disclosure. If not for my interview questions, I might have heard little or nothing about members' outside lives.

There is anonymity when you come in here. Nobody really knows who you are. They wouldn't know you outside of here and that's kind of refreshing in a way-- just not necessarily worrying about what these people think of me outside the gym. I'm not saying I'm a totally different person outside of the gym--I'm not-- but in the same way the person I am at work and the person here at the gym are also not entirely congruent, and I like that. It goes back to the anonymity here, I think. It is just different here. It's a different situation. People here don't even ask me what I do for a living. I kind of like that. It's not that I won't tell anybody. I'm not secretive about what I do or the things I do outside the gym, but I don't necessarily come out and say it.

--Adrian, Black Female 29, Research Assistant

When I asked John, an emergency room doctor, why he didn't tell people at the gym what he did for a living, he said:

To their [fellow members'] credit, nobody asks, and I don't ask anybody else what they do while I'm here. There seems to be a mix of people here, as far as I've seen, and I don't know what anybody else does and nobody knows what I do. It doesn't matter here. The gym kind of strips it all away.

--John, White Male, 48, Emergency Room Doctor

The overall perception was that the less people knew about each other, the better. When questioning another member about the lack of job or personal talk, he replied, "I don't know. Who cares about that stuff?"

Members did, however, talk about boxing and other sports. On almost any training night, one could hear a multitude of opinions on any of the latest televised

boxing matches. Members seemed to enjoy talking about boxing, like they were part of a privileged and unique group—boxers—just like those whom they talked about. The light talk of boxing also precluded the members—mostly males—from sharing personal details about themselves or making judgments of each other.

The lack of personal disclosure helped to sustain an illusion of class homogeneity. One boxer, a journeyman electrician, noted that boxing wasn't a sport for the wealthy: “No richies want to get hit in the noggin.” He didn't recognize the doctor, corporate executive, or researcher training beside him night after night.

Men and women alike relished the physicality of boxing, its unambiguous results, and its negation of irrelevant status differences. And to a large extent they pursued boxing's satisfactions as did the men. Yet there were differences in how women and men experienced the satisfactions of boxing. Like the men, the women enjoyed feeling stronger, tougher, and more capable. But whereas the men experienced boxing as consistent with their gender identities, the women had to manage boxing's risk to their identities as women.

THE WOMEN OF KO

Why would women choose to engage in a sport so intricately tied to men and masculinity? The stigma the middle-class men risked by boxing [as described in Chapter 2] was potentially greater for the women. Yet, boxing can offer attractions that seem to transcend gender, as suggested by a participant in Lafferty and McKay's (2004:273) study of female boxers:

Boxing is also powerfully addictive... Once it's in your blood it never leaves. And there's no gender test in that. The addictive forces are just as strong for women as they are for men because they are so fundamentally human that they seem to defy conditioning. The engagement in this sport is intimate, sometimes profoundly so. Your focus on the other is as unwavering as it would be if you were in love. There are emotions you feel as a consequence of boxing that you can't even get close to in day-to-day life.

The above quote captures many of the feelings and experiences of the women boxers at KO. Just as it was for the men, the attraction and satisfaction of boxing was something not found in one's everyday life. This was probably the most prominent theme with boxers, and in this way the benefits from participating in boxing were much the same for both women and men at KO Gym. There were, however, differences in how the women framed their boxing experience. For the women, boxing was not a way to embrace their ascribed gender status, but to distance from it.

Motivations for KO Gym's Women Boxers

Women's introduction to boxing was similar to that of men. Some were introduced to the sport by friends or boyfriends, others signed up to learn self-defense, some had heard boxing was a good workout, and many saw the sign in front of the building and were curious about the sport. A few of these accounts are reported below:

I had been doing it for awhile, almost two years at another gym. It was more of a aerobic boxing place. We hit bags and stuff. Anyways, their rates kept getting higher and higher so I had to find another place. Someone once told me about this place, and when I came here I decided this was the place for me. It wasn't like my old gym. I look back and I think those two years were a waste. I felt like I got cheated. I thought I was learning something over there, but they didn't know anything. When people are trying to hit you, that is when you learn. At the other place I realize how foofoo it was.

--Barbara, White Male, 37, Bartender

A friend invited me. She just wanted me to come as another girl to work with. I don't think there were many girls in here, in the realm of boxing, and she had a lot of fun doing it, and she told me it was a good workout and that everyone was nice.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

I was going to another gym. I used to kick box at night with all these classes but I wanted something more physical. What I was doing, those classes, weren't physical enough for me. I wanted to feel tired every time I came out of a workout and that wasn't happening, so I've always liked boxing and saw this gym, so I tried it out.

--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

As with men, once the women began fighting, they cited the adrenaline rush, the euphoria at the end of the workout, the health benefits of training, the development of self-defense skills, and the satisfaction of overcoming their fears, as the reasons for their participation:

If someone's messing with me or just being a punk, you're like, "I could take your ass down." That kind of thing. But it's not like I really do that, but ya, it's like, "I can kick your ass, go away."

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

It's a good feeling, because it's always a solid workout and so it's a feeling that I did something, I improved myself, you know, I'm working out, that's always good. It's an adrenaline rush.

--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service—Computer Company

This makes me feel alive. It makes you feel like you've worked every inch of your body and all your muscles and I feel exhausted when I leave here.

--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

It just feels good. I can wake up feeling good. I am clear. It is just like, 'whoosh'--things feel better now. Do you know what I mean? I guess sex would be the closest thing to it [grinning]. It just has that air of clearness.

--Barbara, White Female, 37, Bartender

The similarity of men's and women's accounts is striking. To judge from these accounts, the women wanted and expected the same experience as the men. This was

most telling in how the women viewed the physicality of the sport in relation to their own participation in it.

For women, the physicality of boxing negated the weakness implicit in doing what Connell (1987) refers to as “emphasized femininity.” To do what men do was, in this sense, a way to symbolically claim some of men’s power. Barbara spoke of making sure that people understood what she was capable of:

I talk about it [boxing], but I don’t act like a bad ass. Sometimes, though, I need to clarify what I do here. People sometimes think I do Tae-Bo or some of that other foofoo bullshit. I have to explain to them that, yes, it is real [boxing]. I get hit and I hit people. I know this happens because I’m a woman and people think I must be doing cardio boxing. Sometimes I’ll just show off one of my bruises. That always gets people’s attention, and then they understand better.

--Barbara, White Female, 37, Bartender

Other women also made a point of telling others that they were involved in real boxing. For them, as for the men, cuts and bruises served as signs of toughness and indomitability. This set them apart not only from most women, but from many men.

Gender distancing. For the women at KO Gym, boxing was a way to experience themselves as strong and tough, and to view themselves as different from other women. It was readily apparent that they didn’t wish to be placed in the category of women who were “dainty” or “doll-like.” This gender distancing was evident in how the women described their participation in boxing. For example:

So it’s almost a pride thing that I can say I sparred and I can say I box and I can say I fight and I’m a girl.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

Sometimes it's kind of fun to show the guys I work with my bruises or cuts. They think I'm pretty tough. They know I'm not just foolin' around here.
--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service—Computer Company

The women took satisfaction in resisting the dominant codes of behavior imposed on them as women. By embracing the physicality and risk of boxing, the female boxers embraced their uniqueness. In one way or another, every woman interviewed revealed this.

I do a lot of things most people and most women don't do. I mean, I've played water polo on the guys' team for four years, so especially that aspect of my life has kind of adapted me to doing other things that aren't normally done. So, to me doing a guys' sport is arbitrary. I don't really feel boxing has a gender, a gender barrier. It's just something like, women aren't as strong as men are and most women are not going to take too kindly to getting busted up. They're just not going to be too appreciative, so consequently, they don't do this type of stuff.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student,

Sure, I know most other girls would never do this stuff, so it's pretty cool in a way. I'm not into the whole do-my-hair-and-makeup thing and all that other girly stuff. So this [boxing] is more me.
-- Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

Gender distancing was evident in other ways as well. For example, all the women interviewed stated that they were seeking a real boxing experience. They didn't want cardio-boxing or other forms of non-contact fighting. Jill, a college student, explains:

The other stuff, like [boxing] aerobics, it seems wussy, lame. I don't know, I can't really imagine hitting at thin air and dancing around. It's just lame. It just doesn't seem really motivating. And I'm not sure why. It's just like, you're there, you and eighty other people are going through the same routine, and I don't really know a whole lot about cardio boxing. I know that a lot of what they do isn't very functional.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

As I would come to find out, engaging in "real" boxing, as Jill described above, was extremely important to how the women boxers framed their entire experience at KO

Gym. To engage in boxercise, cardio-boxing, Tae-Bo, etc. would've meant doing what most other women could do and probably wouldn't fear doing. Unlike real boxing.

Hargreaves (1997) notes that there was a huge boom in non-contact boxing in the late 1980s and early 1990s after women in Hollywood became devotees. Hollywood's fascination with such workouts coincided with more aggressive and muscular images of women on the big screen, and it soon became something of a cult phenomenon.

Hargreaves further argues that the popularity of various forms of boxercise is based on a rejection by women of the "ultra-feminine." The women at KO Gym indeed rejected the ultra feminine, but they also went farther. They embraced real boxing because it signified for them the same culturally prized qualities it signified for men: toughness and a capacity to exert control (or to avoid being controlled).

While I did not try to explore biographical patterns that led the women to boxing, many told stories of being tomboys when they were young, and of how boxing rekindled such memories for them. All the women I interviewed referred to being tomboys and described various roughhousing and sporting activities during their younger years. For example:

Growing up, I always played with the boys. You know, roughed up my knees, got into scrapes. I was a real tomboy. So this [boxing] isn't a big deal for me—doing things that other guys do. I've always been this way. It's just who I am, I guess.
-- Barbara, White Female, 37, Bartender

I played sports all my life. I was a total tomboy growing up. So this really isn't a big deal.
--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service—Computer Company

This is congruent with what Sekules writes: “Show me a female boxer who wasn’t a tomboy and I’ll show you a liar” (Sekules 2000:17). In one way, then, boxing helped to fill the void after a sports career ended. This was likewise the case for a handful of the men, but this pattern predominated among the female boxers. My data are at least suggestive that some women found satisfaction in boxing because it allowed them to recapture the sense of uniqueness they enjoyed as tomboys.

Some women tried to disclaim the gender violation of appearing overly manly by defining aggressiveness, power, and strength as attributes of a new type of femininity.

As Heidi put it:

A lot of girls have been brought up as, “You should be daintier, you should be that kind of thing.” And that’s starting to go away—Mia Hamm and all those other like Gabrielle Reese—they’re like new role models for girls. They show that you can be athletic as a girl. It isn’t as much of a problem as it may have been 10-20 years ago. My mom is in her fifties, and when she was brought up she absolutely had to wear skirts, you know. You couldn’t play with the guys or anything like that, so I think it’s getting different.
--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

The problem remains, however, that the “new femininity” allows women to be tough and powerful only as long as they remain feminine. Physical strength is also more acceptable than intellectual or political strength. Fragility can be rejected, but not patriarchy and heterosexuality.

Gender distancing was also evident when women spoke of preferring to work out with male boxers. The male boxers were seen as a measuring stick for the women, and it was their presence that attested to the reality of KO boxing.

I would rather work with the guys than the other women. I think I get a better workout when I work with the guys. Also, if I ever have to defend myself, it will be with a man, so I think it is good for me to know how to work with them.
--Barbara, White Female, 37, Bartender

I'd rather work with guys. I just think they're serious. They have a better attitude, in that they take it more seriously. Like a lot of the girls that come in, I don't think are taking it that seriously. With the guys, I like working with them because many of them compete.
--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

Ironically, considering the problems that arose in inter-gender match-ups, the women preferred to box with men. This makes sense, however, as an aspect of gender distancing. To box with men in a man's sport was to implicitly lay claim to at least honorary membership in the higher-status gender group.

Although the women signified a masculine self by participating in boxing, they were not disavowing their identities as women. Boxing was an opportunity to reject femininity as fragility. They remained attached, however, to femininity as an essential element of womanhood:

This isn't a big deal. I still like girly clothes and girly things.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

I'm tough and I do this type of stuff, but I'm not all masculine about it. I just don't think girls have to be Barbie dolls. You can be tough and still be feminine. That's sort of the way I look at it.
--Julie, White Female, 33, Customer Service—Computer Company

Just as Markula (1993:237) posits that the ideal woman's body imposed by mass media is a contradiction ("firm but shapely, fit but sexy, strong but thin"), female boxers at KO Gym sought an experience that was also based on a contradiction. The women wanted to signify toughness and strength, but without rejecting femininity entirely. They were

thus interested in boxing for what it could provide them—without going so far that they would be stigmatized or physically injured. Just like the men.

The Gendered World of KO Gym

The women tended to discount the idea that gender shaped their experience at KO Gym. Part of this myopia about the gym's gender culture is attributable to the status-leveling phenomenon. The exclusion of class as a relevant status, and the racial egalitarianism of the gym, helped to sustain a parallel illusion that gender didn't matter, either. All that mattered, again, was seriousness about boxing and boxing skill.

I like the fact that as a woman I'm not looked at like a woman. Does that make sense? At the other gyms, you know the big gyms, Gold's Gym and those generic places, I am gawked at. I feel like I am on display. It is not like that here. I look forward to coming here. People treat me well here.

--Barbara, White Female, 37, Bartender

I think I was surprised by how much support and help I got, being the new guy. It wasn't like, "well, you're a newbie, you suck," as it is in a lot of places. It was like, "Hey, you're new, we'll help you out, we'll get you on your feet so you don't kill yourself." You know, they really pay attention to you so you don't hurt yourself. That surprised me. Because normally you don't seem to get that much attention in sports, it's just kinda like, go do it.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

Women were not seen as tokens or exotic others as they might be at some health clubs.

They felt like they could work out and train just like the men. At KO Gym, "boxer" nearly displaced "woman" as their master status. Or so the women wanted to think.

Yet, it wasn't simply the supportive atmosphere of KO that created a positive experience for the women. Almost uniformly, the women boxers noted how KO was set

up to give equal opportunity to everyone. They spoke of boxing as both meritocratic and egalitarian.

Everyone gets the same training here. And if you're good and you want to compete they'll definitely work with you.

--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

One of the great things about being here and doing all this is how you get what you deserve, what you train for. If you work hard and train, you'll get better. I mean, so much of the onus is on the individual. It doesn't matter who you are, they'll give you a shot to prove yourself. That's boxing.

--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

Women boxers also noted that status was gained from showing dedication and proficiency. Yet, what the women didn't seem to realize was that to achieve status they had to masculinize themselves—their behavior—in the gym. In effect, they were rewarded for adhering to the masculine codes of the gym—displaying power, control, and toughness, in combination with athleticism. Women, just like the men, were expected to train hard, act stoically, refrain from expressing feelings of pain, and display technical competence. The women earned status, in other words, by “acting like a man.”

Having a female trainer eased the women's transition into boxing at KO Gym. Jan held many hats as an owner/trainer at KO, and in one way she acted as a mentor and role model to the female boxers. Her presence and prowess comforted the women and legitimized women's involvement in boxing. Mary, the lone female competitive boxer, explained:

For me, yeah, I mean 'cause I can relate to her. She knows what she's talking about. She's already pro, so it's like I got something to look up to. I can relate to her, because she been through it. So I think it definitely helps me to have her here.

--Mary, White Female, 25, Prep Cook

Adrian, offered similar sentiments:

When I came in and saw Jan I felt good. I mean, it just kind of made me really believe that it was going to be more of the balance type thing. Like women can actually come here and be a part of the gym and not be outsiders or not taken seriously. So to see a woman here was very important.

--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

A handful of the women said that they hesitated to join a real gym for fear of not being taken seriously. But once the women saw Jan at the reins, there was a feeling of relief.

Others cited Mary, the lone female competitor, as evidence of the equality of opportunity afforded by KO Gym.

In here you can take it as far as you want. Look at Mary. She's totally training to be pro. So I think it shows that the girls can go just as far as the guys if they train hard and become dedicated.

--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

Seeing Mary as an elite fighter at the gym made other women feel like such status was available for all women if they so desired.

In fact, however, Mary was both exemplar and cautionary tale. Women at KO often pointed out that Mary was "like a guy," referring to her masculine demeanor, and few women wanted to go as far as Mary in this regard. The women could thus see that achieving elite status imposed costs on women that were not imposed on men. In achieving success as boxers, men became more manly, while women risked being stigmatized as gender deviants.

Though boxers spoke of the supportive environment of KO Gym and the helpfulness of the gym's participants, many women acknowledged the difficulties they faced when working with male boxers. Problems arose because the egalitarian ethos of the gym conflicted with physical reality:

Sometimes the guys have that little extra twitch. They're a little bit faster, a little bit stronger and you just have to go with it.

--Jan, White Female, 29, Owner/Trainer

The guys need to understand that we're [females] not as strong as them. They can hit harder and with more power. Sometimes I think they forget.

--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

Ironically, the attempt to treat women as equals had the consequence of highlighting inequality. As will be discussed elsewhere, this problem was most pronounced in inter-gender match-ups:

There have been times when they would definitely pull some of their punches. And occasionally it would irritate the hell out of me and I would yell at them and then I got it hundred percent and got what I deserved.

--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

If the men "pulled their punches," as Jill describes above, the women had grounds for disappointment. But if the men used full force, the match-ups would be imbalanced and unsatisfying for both boxers. For the women, the dilemma was how to dispel the stereotype of fragility while insisting that their physical differences be taken into account.

Women thus had to demonstrate to the men either that they had the ability to be in the ring, or accept inferior status as "girls" who needed help from a strong male.

Heidi, a college student explains:

The guys here have been really helpful. They know I'm a beginner and they'll correct my technique if I'm doing something wrong, or like, they'll show me the way my feet are supposed to be, the proper footwork, when I'm throwing some combos. [Pause] I'm sure it makes them feel good helping a girl. I don't mind.

--Heidi, White Female, 22, College Student

To receive what they thought of as fair treatment, the women were compelled to assume the additional burden of helping the men feel comfortable in inter-gender match-ups. Even if an appropriate level of force was negotiated, the understanding that the upper limit was set by women's lesser strength and greater fragility meant that women were seen as the source of the problem. This was perhaps inevitable in inter-gender match-ups in a sport that puts a premium on strength. (See chapter 4 for more about the problems that arose in inter-gender sparring.)

The women understood that, ultimately, they could never be men's equals in the world of boxing. Men always remained the yardstick for competence and the certifiers of KO's reality. In speaking about her desire to work with men instead of women, Jill, a college student, said:

A lot of the time, I'm okay with guys, but I think it also goes back to the polo thing again. I can play polo with other guys, but I can't play real well with other women. And I think part of it's like the competitive nature, but I think another part of it is women don't like hitting women and I don't care. Mary's [a competitive boxer] different, but you know Mary is definitely not your most feminine female in the world, and most other women aren't of the same mindset, like "I don't want to hit you, I might hurt you." Or, "Don't hit me, you might hurt me" [squeaky child-like voice]. Gawd, it's annoying.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

Here Jill engages in gender distancing by deriding other women for being timid and frail. In her attempt to claim equality with men in an essentially masculinist sport, Jill was, like other women at KO, compelled to portray women as inferior others. These sentiments reinforce the gender order, and, because of boxing's association with masculinity, the women found it a way to enjoy the power, control, and toughness that

are anti-thetical to conventional femininity. Such feelings offered the women both the motivation to box and provided them great satisfaction.

For both the women and men, it was thus apparent that alienation from work was not the only motivation for KO members. But work was a major force in shaping how the boxers experienced their participation in boxing and derived satisfaction from it. The authenticity, objective measure of merit, excitement, and mutual respect that were missing at work could be found at KO Gym. For some members, the satisfactions of boxing at KO Gym were such that work came to be seen as no more than a means to the end of achieving a peak experience in the ring. As the next chapter will show, achieving this peak experience paradoxically required the opposite of physical release: emotional control.

Chapter 4

EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL CONTROL IN SPARRING:

ACHIEVING A PEAK EXPERIENCE

If you could see adrenaline, you would see it oozing out of me when I get in the ring to spar.

--KO Gym Member

Sparring at KO Gym was not simply a matter of two boxers pummeling each other in the ring. Rather, it was an activity closely monitored by the trainers, an activity that also demanded a high level of emotional control on the part of the boxers. While the competitors at the gym sparred to prepare for their bouts, the recreational boxers sparred to experience boxing as authentic and achieve a peak athletic experience. For KO boxers, sparring was what Steven Lyng calls “edgework,” which involves facing and overcoming “a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence” (Lyng 1990:857). At KO Gym, performing edgework in the form of sparring required not only boxing skill, but skill at emotional control. This chapter looks at how KO boxers used sparring to create the powerful feelings of the peak experience. I also show how the emotion work that went into sparring was both a product of and served to reinforce the masculine ethos of the gym.

PEAK EXPERIENCE

Sparring was the activity that offered the peak experience being sought by members of KO Gym. By “peak experience” I mean that which involved the most

intense feelings of authenticity, physical exertion, and accomplishment. This is what they sought, and sparring provided it.

It was in sparring that KO members had the most at stake, physically and emotionally. Sparring was also the crucial experience that distinguished KO Gym from aerobic boxing or Tae-Bo. For many of the KO boxers, the physical contact of sparring and its subsequent risk of pain created not only a sense of reality, but added an element of excitement that was essential to achieving a peak experience.

The term peak experience was first coined by Maslow (1970), who described it as a mystical or quasi-mystical experience in which an altered state of consciousness occurs, often accompanied by a heightened sense of awareness and control over one's body and emotions. This notion of peak experience has taken on a variety of meanings in more contemporary times, yet it is in the sporting and leisure world where it has been described as something akin to a "runner's high" or entering a "zone" (Park 2006). Many relate it to an adrenaline rush and the onset of endorphins. I use the term to refer to the boxers' experience of optimal physical arousal and mental focus, accompanied by strong feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment. These attributes of the peak experience often arise in "edgework" activities (Lyng 1990:861), and peak experience is, in some ways, a lot like a "flow" experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1974) as well.

Though boxers never used the term "peak experience," they did use terms such as "exciting," "an adrenaline rush," and "euphoric" to describe their experience of sparring:

Sparring is such an intense rush. You get in there [the ring] and there's a chance you could get hurt, so you know, you can't help but just be pumped. And then when you're done you're just exhausted, sweating and you know that you did something, something risky. It's a great feeling, and this is noble too, stepping into the ring against somebody else, just you and him. You put that all together and it's amazing.

--Kevin, White Male, 19, College Student

I've never skydived or anything like that, but I'm sure it's a similar feeling. You have all that anxiety, all the adrenaline, and then it's just swept away. You finish and you have this awesome feeling. It's a total rush.

--Rex, White Male, 30, Accounts Manager, Computer Company

I know there's a possibility that I can get hurt in here. Boxing can be brutal, you know. But, in a way, I think that adds to the experience and that's why it is such an adrenaline rush-that fear factor.

--Kyle, White Male, 29, District Manager, Furniture Outlet

This is what those who sparred wanted—the excitement and euphoria of completing a successful session, and the satisfaction of physically exerting oneself to the limits. As will be discussed later, the possibility of going to the limit was seen as arising out of the masculine character of boxing.

Similarly, the peak experience sought from boxing was one that was not only exciting and euphoric but totally absorbing. This state of absorption was experienced in different ways. Many spoke of the “hyperreality” of sparring, a heightened awareness of the experience while it was taking place. Many also spoke of this as getting into the “zone”:

Sparring is exhilarating, but it's almost too intense, if that's possible. I hate it, but I love it too. I hate it because I know I'm going to get hit, but I know it's good for me as a learning tool, and the adrenaline of it makes it an incredible rush. My mind gets so focused, it gets to the point where I'm not even thinking, I just sort of react, or at least that's what I shoot for.

--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

There are times during the sparring where my partner and I are in a zone. You have this great sense of awareness—everything is in slow motion, and there is a feeling of power—none of the punches seem to hurt. They jar you, but they don't hurt. In fact, during those times they [getting hit] feel good. It actually feels good to get hit because you know they should hurt, but they don't. It's just such a powerful feeling, like this guy can't hurt me.
--Rick, White Male, 44, Small Business Owner

Csikszentmihalyi (1974) refers what is described above as a “flow experience.”

In this state there is total immersion in the activity at hand, and time flows from one moment to another without “conscious intervention” (Csikszentmihalyi 1974:58).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1974), one's true self emerges within a flow experience, when one is unconstrained by normative restrictions or by self-awareness. This transcendent state typically occurs when one is pushed—both physically and mentally—to the limits without the activity being overwhelming. For boxers at KO Gym, sparring is what did the trick.

LEARNING TO SPAR

Successful sparring does not involve one boxer trying to knock out or even dominate the other. It usually involves careful matching of boxers who are roughly equal in ability, or matching a highly skilled boxer with one of less skill in hopes that the former will safely control the latter. For sparring to work—for it to provide a genuine test of ability and induce a peak experience—both boxers must have at least basic skills and know how to cooperate (DeGaris 2000). It is also essential that sparring partners be able to manage their emotions.

Newcomers had to master core skills before being allowed to spar at KO Gym. After about a month of working out and practicing punches and blocking, one of the trainers would take a boxer aside and say it was time to “gear up,” meaning it was time to spar. This invitation was a significant mark of accomplishment for the recreational boxers. For them, sparring was the most serious test of ability they faced at KO Gym. It was, in fact, as close as they would ever get to a real boxing match. As one boxer put it:

Sparring is really the only way to learn how to fight. If you can learn all the technique you want, you can practice all the drills you want—you can hit the heavy bag as much as you want but unless you actually step in the ring and there the random element of ‘what the hell’s this guy going to do?’ You’ve got to conquer your own fear back. You’ve got to push yourself. You know. That’s really the only way to learn how to do it, and granted it’s not real fighting, but it’s the closest thing you’re going to get to it.

--Wyatt, White Male, 23, College Student

While sparring was essential to learning the craft, the trainers also knew that successful sparring was what kept boxers interested and coming back. As Bill put it:

With the sparring we do here I want to make sure people stay under control and we keep it friendly. Jan and I watch it closely and make sure we tell them to work technique and accuracy and not all power and speed. Especially for the new guys, or else they spar once, get licked, and we never see them again. That’s not good.

--Bill, White Male, 32, Owner/Trainer KO Gym

Jan and Bill subscribed to the view that sparring should be non-competitive and offer a chance to work on technique. They always reminded recreational boxers to “relax” and “keep it light,” attempting to keep novices from getting out of control, although acquiring such control required more than a trainer’s exhortations.

Regulating Intensity

Part of learning to spar was learning how to negotiate the level of force to be used. To some extent, “level of force” was controlled outside the ring, by the trainers, who carefully matched sparring partners, instructed boxers before a sparring session, and monitored the action as it was unfolding. In fact, from their perspective, matching fighters to one another was a central function of their jobs as owners and trainers, because a mismatch, in terms of ability, weight and power, or control, could lead to injury. As Jan put it:

Personally, I think choosing sparring partners is one of my biggest responsibilities as a trainer. I have to think about how much control each person has, and who’s going out there; their weight differences, and their experience, like what can somebody handle? Then if someone like Dwight is training for a bout I try to get him a lot of rounds with different people to give him different looks [boxing styles]... It’s kind of hard some days if there aren’t good match ups. I definitely don’t want to put just anybody out there or somebody is liable to get hurt real bad and you don’t want that.”

--Jan, White Female, 31, Owner/Trainer KO Gym

Jan and Bill also regulated the action by telling boxers to slow it down and go “nice and easy,” or, if the action got too slow, to “pump it up a little.” No sparring between recreational boxers was unsupervised in these ways.

But once inside the ring, boxers had to determine how hard to hit each other. Part of the satisfaction of sparring came from successfully negotiating the level of force being used without relying on outside intervention. Wyatt and Dean describe how they did this when sparring with more experienced boxers:

The first time I spar people—I’m going to go really light—to find out exactly how much they’re willing to take. To kind of calibrate it, you know. Cause the

one thing that you don't want to do is get into a ring with someone like Mike, who's a stud, and accidentally hit him too hard and send him into one of those little 'let me show you what's up mode' cause you don't need that. It's just that you don't know how hard to hit him, so you hit him really light, and if he's like, 'well, you can hit me harder. Hit me harder, really, come on.' And you're like, 'okay. I'll hit a little bit harder.' And then you find an acceptable range.
--Wyatt, White Male, 23, College Student

I keep it like passive-aggressive. I'll be aggressive, but I'll be subtle. I mean I'll be fighting mid-range. I'm hitting you hard enough to keep you off me, but at the same time I'm still getting my workout in and staying under control and how hard I go from there depends on the other guy, so that's the way I always think when I fight.
--Dean, Black Male, 31, Heating and AC Installer

As the above data suggests the trick was to raise the level of intensity to the point where two partners could bring as much of their strength and skill into play as possible, without either losing control. This determination of intensity always required some feeling-out in the ring:

When you spar, you're just feeling the other person out. Like, first round, you'll just feel them out or whatever, and then, if 'Boss' [referring to Jan, a trainer] lets us go hard, we go hard. But sometimes it's just to work on your movement. You can go out there and she can say, 'go about medium,' but you get hit one good time and you'll both start swinging. That's the way it is. I mean, everybody goes out there and does that. She [Jan] can say 'this'll be an easy round and she pops me one good time and I'm like, no, pop, pop, we start hitting back. So, that's the reaction of any fighter. If you get hit hard, you're going to want to make revenge of that. You know, make a payback.
--Mary, White Female, 25, Prep Cook

Boxers thus negotiate about how hard to throw. But, as Mary suggests, once the session begins, sparring operates according to a system of "paybacks." Wacquant (2003:84) refers to this as the "principle of reciprocity" that governs the speed, power, and level of

violence to be used in the ring. If two boxers are equally matched, this may play out as a tit-for-tat exchange of punches of roughly equal force:

I'll go out there, and sort of feel the other guy out, see what he's all about. If he throws hard I'll throw hard. It all depends on the other guy, how he acts, what he does and then I'll mirror it. I think that's why Jan puts me in with a lot of new guys, she knows I'm not going to come out swinging for the guy's grill. Even though I wait to see how the other guy acts or reacts, I can usually dictate the tempo and how hard we're throwing.

--Aaron, Black Male, 26, Unemployed

While it might seem counterintuitive, Jan and Bill preferred novices to spar with experienced boxers rather than other novices. Two novices can turn a sparring session into a brawl. Both fighters then leave frustrated because form and technique are abandoned. So, at KO Gym, novices typically faced veterans. Steven explains the benefits of this practice:

I'd say it's much more dangerous to be sparring with someone that hasn't, that isn't very good, than it is to be with someone that is very good, which seems to contradict itself. Because a lot of people, they don't want to be in there with a guy that's been here for five years or whatever and really knows what they're doing. But honestly, that's the person you want to be in there with, because that's the one that's not going to hurt you. Because he knows how to control, when he's hitting too hard and when he's not and when not, when you're vulnerable and when not to throw anything. Or just like, put it there and say, keep your hand up, you know.

--Steven, White Male, 24, Security Guard

In these match-ups, the novice learns not only boxing technique, but also the etiquette of sparring. If the weaker fighter violates sparring norms, the veteran may retaliate to teach his or her opponent a lesson. If the weaker fighter fails to get the message, or tries to take advantage of an opponent's measured use of force, the better fighter may have to reiterate the message more pointedly. Often this takes the form of one or two punches—

what KO veterans called “a little taste”—that let the novice know the veteran is holding back.

Usually, you got to pop them for their own good. Particularly if you’re working with someone who’s fighting, you know. You’re not doing them any favors by pulling anything, because they’ll develop bad habits and they’ll start walking through the things you throw at them. So, in the long run, you’re not helping them any if you let people do that. But, it is hard to find that balance between what’s the appropriate amount of pop or force to put on this person, based upon their skill level, their size, compared to me.

--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

This system of reciprocity was part of a “code of the ring,” and ultimately allowed the boxers to achieve a peak experience though sparring. Yet, this peak experience couldn’t be achieved without boxers remaining composed under the flood of emotions evoked during any one sparring session. Hence, in order to achieve poise and control in the ring, the boxers needed to learn to do the necessary emotion work (Hochschild 1983).

Emotional Control

Success in sparring calls for composure in a situation that can generate strong emotions. It also requires the ability to control and manage those emotions under pressure. This section describes how boxers at KO Gym managed their emotions so as to achieve a satisfying sparring experience. I also discuss the complications that arose when emotions were not managed properly.

All the KO boxers reported feeling pleasure and joy upon completing a successful sparring session. This was typically associated with an “adrenaline rush” in overcoming fear and pulling off a creditable performance. This was the peak experience

sought by the KO boxers. To achieve it, boxers had to manage anxiety, excitement, fear, anger, frustration, embarrassment, joy, shame, and euphoria. Failing to control these emotions could profoundly affect the integrity of the sparring session and prevent boxers from achieving a peak experience.

The prospect of sparring evoked a host of emotions, particularly fear and anxiety. Such emotions reflected not only the boxers' desire to perform well, but also a concern for their physical safety. KO boxers also feared failure or being humiliated "on stage." As Ronnie described his emotions prior to sparring:

Oh man, that first time sparring was just insane, it was crazy. I remember being so nervous, about as nervous as I ever get, you know, [my] heart racing, not being able to think, and I didn't know what was gonna happen, and that was even before getting into the ring. I mean, I didn't know how I would do when somebody really hit me, could I take a punch, you know? Am I going to cry? [smiling] So that was definitely scary. Man, I was shitting twinkies [laughing]. It was hard core! But it was cool too, really exciting. God, my heart is racing just thinking about it. Anyway, I remember feeling all these emotions, I was nervous, but also excited. I wanted to see what it was like in there. As it turns out, I think I did alright. The biggest part is realizing that you can take a punch.
--Ronnie, White Male, 26, Advertising Executive

Others echoed Ronnie's sentiments:

It's like that feeling when you're on a roller coaster and you're going up before that first big drop. There's the anticipation, and it's exciting, but it's a little scary, I think that's what it's like before sparring.
-- Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

I think it surprised me a little bit that I would get so nervous [prior to sparring]. I started shaking, I mean, not like where people could tell, but I could tell. It's really anxiety-inducing. I mean, you just don't know what to expect.
--Rex, White Male, 30, Accounts Manager—Computer Company

The pre-sparring state of arousal was part of the experience sought by KO boxers. Yet they also knew that the adrenaline rush could make it difficult to go "nice

and easy,” as the trainers liked to say. Achieving initial composure was thus a pre-requisite emotion-work task.

Expectations for emotional control, and sparring in general, were conveyed by the trainers via verbal directives prior to a match. Boxers soon learned to make these messages part of their “pre-game” mental rehearsal. Trainers encouraged this preparatory reflection as a way to help novices relax and remain calm. The majority of the novices’ mental effort typically went into this aspect of sparring. Later, one could think more about overall fight strategy.

Once in the ring, novice boxers had to learn to pace themselves and negotiate their level of force while dealing with the effects of adrenaline. Control of technique thus depended on emotional control. As one boxer described his early experiences of sparring:

The first, probably two or three, realistically, probably twenty times, when I sparred in here I can remember almost panicking [and feeling] anger, when you’re just really losing control and windmill swinging at somebody. Typically you watch, when a beginner is brought in here, the first couple of times they spar, they’re not put with someone who they’re better than, they’re put with someone that they’re smaller than. They’re always usually put with someone who we know is better than them, because if they start to freak out, that person’s not going to get hurt by them, they can control them and be like, ‘settle down,’ you know what I mean? We’re not trying to kill each other, I’m not trying to attack you, we’re sparring. And there’s a neat element, kind of like the mental golf game aspect to that, too, where you learn to go in, and, yeah, it’s nerve-wracking and you’re sparring and you’re hitting each other, but you’re friends at the same time, and you’re working with this guy in partnership.
-- Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

The first and primary lesson of sparring, and the one that could be hardest to learn, as Tom notes, is to remain calm and not to panic in the throes of anger-inducing punches.

Boxers had to learn to control their fear, frustration, and anger. Tom goes on to explain:

You have to have complete trust that your opponent's not really going to try to hurt you ... that they're going to hold back. [That helps you get] control over your emotions where, you go in there and you get hit and you get hurt, but you don't get angry. You learn not to get angry.

Everyone gets angry in the beginning.

--Tom, White Male, 35, Computer Programmer

Despite the pre-session coaching and mental rehearsal, novices often failed to maintain control. It was not unusual to see a novice get hit with a flurry of punches during a sparring session and respond by getting angry and flailing away at his or her opponent. When this happened, the trainers would verbally intervene, or the other boxer, if sufficiently experienced, would try to calm the novice and get the action back under control.

Emotional control, however, did not mean simply "holding back." It meant never allowing anger to compromise the physical control that was necessary to bring the session to maximum intensity and thus elicit its peak value for the participants. The mutual effort to bring a session to maximum intensity often caused even experienced boxers to lose control:

It happens more times than I would like, it's happened a quite few times, yeah. Just because I've had a bad day outside of here and I let it carry over or something like that. Or I'll be all completely engulfed in my fight and I'll get hit, like the other day with Aaron, when he hit me with that upper cut and he dropped me. Yeah, it hurt, first of all. But after that, it was like I shouldn't have been that wide open for him to hit me with a shot that's going to drop me. You know, and I had a fight coming up so that made me mad and when I got up, Boss [Jan] was like, finish the round, so it's like, you dropped me, I'm going to make him pay, I'm going to drop you. So, I'm coming back swinging for his mama.

Which throws me off my game, because I'm throwing these big looping punches and I'm not defending, my head's not covered, so he's throwing shots right back, so, and that doesn't do any good, you've got to stay calm. But most of the time it's when I get hit with a good shot, I just come back and I'm all pissed off. I'm pissed off at myself that I let them get that good of a shot. So, then, I think that my next shot right back has to hurt them, has to drop them or hurt them or whatever, instead of just setting it up, I just come back right then and try to kill them.

--Mary, White Female, 25, Prep Cook

Sometimes it was fear that caused boxers to lose control, but more often the cause was anger, which arose because a boxer's self-image was taking a beating. Dramaturgically, the boxers in the ring were "on stage," and they judged their performance in part based on what they perceived others' perceptions to be, in the manner of Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self."

Goffman (1959,1967) has also discussed the lengths to which people will go to "save face," and fighting back at KO Gym was one such tactic of remedial self-presentation. This tactic could, however, lead to frustration and disappointment, as Randy describes:

I remember one time in the beginning when I first started sparring. I was getting hit, again and again, and I couldn't defend; my defense was just worthless. The other guy was just popping me at will. Not real hard, mostly jabs, but they were stinging and I was tearing up. I was embarrassed, then I got all pissed. It was frustrating as hell. I tuned everybody out and I started swinging for the guy's head, but of course this just made it worse. He [my sparring partner] was cool, just kept slipping my punches and popping me like he was playing with me. I left that night so frustrated and pissed off at the world. At that point I thought I was done, I wasn't coming back [laughing]. I think everybody goes through that phase. This sport can be really frustrating.

--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

Randy's experience was typical for newcomers. Those who sparred learned that there was a proper protocol and acceptable way to conduct oneself once in the ring—respecting your opponent, remaining composed, and controlling one's punches.

From the time they entered the gym, newcomers watched sparring sessions and began to learn what was expected of them in the ring. Hence, losing control was understood by all to be a failure. The key, then, was described by Rich:

If you get punched and you get mad, you're going to keep getting punched. If you get punched and you're able to deal with it and move on, you'll do better. So, emotions really shouldn't be involved in this game.
--Rich, White Male, 24, Food Server

Though Rich states that "emotions shouldn't be involved in this game," emotions were an enormous and important aspect of sparring. Instead, it was a matter of learning how to emotionally adjust or "move on" after getting punched.

Yet, the emotion work required to spar well was not solely a matter of repressing fear or anger. Often it meant dealing with a complex set of related emotions. Boxers sometimes had to repress fear, psych themselves up, and yet remain calm. Thus, learning how to spar meant learning to repress some emotions while cultivating others. It was all about attaining the optimal level of arousal in order to achieve the desired performance:

I try to stay really calm all the time. It doesn't always work, but [I] try to sort of be detached, not interested, [like] I don't want to fight. I don't like getting the [pre-fight] rush because I know that I can get out of control. The problem with that, sometimes, is that when Jan pairs us up, and we step up and spar, I realize that I'm at a disadvantage because I don't want [to win], and they want it, and if they want it, they're going to get it. Especially if I don't want it enough to stop them. So I have to hype myself up. [Use] all these mental images that [psyche me up to] get ready

for it. You pick an image to get mad about first, and then you turn that anger into desire.

-- Wyatt, White Male, 23, College Student

Wyatt's statement suggests another aspect of the emotional complexity of sparring. Anger must be kept in check, yet without something like aggression to motivate oneself, sparring might never reach a satisfying level of intensity. The problem, then, was for boxers to generate the feelings necessary to get in the ring in the first place, without letting those feelings take over. The next section discusses in more detail the emotion-work strategies boxers learned at KO Gym.

EMOTION-WORK STRATEGIES

As has been noted in the previous chapters, there existed an overall "business-like attitude" or professionalism (Wacquant 1992) tied to KO's gym workouts, and nowhere was this more evident than during sparring. Sparring partners who lost control, those who let the adrenaline take over or allowed anger to erupt, were considered poor sparring partners. If members couldn't learn proper emotion-work strategies, then the safety that Jan and Bill touted to newcomers would be sacrificed. Emotion work thus allowed members to achieve a peak experience under conditions of controlled risk. The emotion-work strategies that made this possible were both individual and collective.

Collective Strategies

When told they were going to spar, most boxers asked a trainer to help them put on headgear and gloves, and insert the mouthpiece prior to stepping into the ring.

Working with a trainer to gear-up provided an opportunity for pre-session coaching. This coaching often focused on remaining calm, as well as the particular skills the boxer should work on in the sparring session. By focusing on a game plan for the session, boxers could visualize themselves remaining in control and could imagine the session unfolding according to a predictable script. As noted earlier, however, the relative emphasis on emotions vs. technique depended on a boxer's experience. Fieldnotes from three developmental stages of my time at KO Gym illustrate this. In each case, Jan helped me prepare for the session.

One month into my training:

OK. You alright? [She holds my shoulders] Take a deep breath. You're just getting in there to move around a little bit. Make sure you breathe, keep breathing and go nice and easy. I want you to get used to moving around in the ring—go ahead and throw some jabs, and maybe some one-twos. Dean is just working defense, but I told him to throw some jabs if you drop your hands—so keep them up [throwing her hands up like a boxer protecting the head]. Ya gotta keep them up, alright? Take a deep breath. Relax—just go nice and easy. He's not going to hurt you, I promise [I nod, she looks over to Dean's corner and nods to him]. You'll be fine. OK. Go get em'.
--Jan, from fieldnotes 3.4.02

Seven months later:

Alright. Is your mouthpiece in? [I nod] OK, you're getting in there with Alfredo, he hits hard, real hard, so you gotta keep your hands up, and keep moving. You have a tendency to stay in one place and that's how you get in trouble, don't do that [I nodded]. Ya gotta keep moving, keep throwing jabs to set up your combos. Snap em', nice and crisp. OK? [I nod] Keep your hands up. Alright. Go get em' [Jan taps me on the side of my head hear as I face the ring]
--Jan, from fieldnotes 10.10.02

Toward the end:

[Jan has her right hand on my left shoulder] Travis, I want you to get in there with Randy. He hasn't sparred yet. Take it easy on him. Work your defense, let

him punch a little and just work with him. If he drops his hands tap him with jabs—nothing too hard, just so he knows to keep his hands up. He’s probably going to lose it a little. If he starts getting out of control I want you to tell him—tell him to relax. Slow him down. Give him a couple times. If he’s still outta control, go ahead and pop him. He’ll figure it out. Otherwise, just keep moving and working your defense. Got it? [I nod] OK. I’m going to get him ready.
--Jan, from fieldnotes 7.13.03

At first, Jan wanted me to get the feel of the ring and learn how to breathe and relax.

The veteran fighter assigned to spar with me was no doubt told to take it easy, just as I was told when I faced a novice. Hence, the game plan and verbal directives given by the trainers often depended on a host of variables, including who was sparring and the relative experience of the boxer(s).

Pre-fight instructions, however, were never enough. Members also helped each other learn to do emotion work, sometimes inside the ring. One veteran explained how he helped the novice boxers:

Jan and Bill puts me in with new guys all the time. I do pretty well with them. If someone is going crazy, just swinging haymakers because of all the adrenaline I’ll slow it down, get inside and lock up with ‘em, you know, tell them to relax. I don’t mind doing that. And usually Jan or Bill will be saying stuff to them too, so usually they get it.
--Steven, White Male, 24, Security Guard

Cliff, noted how he’d been helped by others:

I think one of the things that really helped me was Jan. She asked if I wanted to spar and I just sort of nodded like a deer in headlights. I remember being beyond nervous—I mean, I thought my heart was going to explode. But before going in she helped settle me down—telling me that she just wanted me to go in and feel it out, get a feel of the ring, work some combos, and relax. She was great, very calming. Of course, I wasn’t calm, but it helped that they told the other guy, I think it was Aaron was trying to help me out too. He was working on defense so he wasn’t really hitting me.
--Cliff, White Male, 42, Mail Carrier

The experience described by Steven and Cliff illustrate the collective efforts of those in the gym to help boxers manage their emotions. In many ways it was vital for all the boxers in the gym to work together—with the help of the owner/trainers—in order to keep sparring sessions running smoothly and maintain a business-like attitude.

Individual boxers, like athletes in any sport, also had to learn how to manage themselves.

Individual Strategies

The individual emotion-work strategies boxers employed at KO Gym were not unique to boxing. Many boxers noted that they used the same strategies in the gym that they did in other facets of their lives. Essentially, they transferred their “life skills” to the gym. Others spoke of using strategies derived from previous sports experience as well. This was especially true in dealing with the anxiety induced by sparring.

Getting into the right frame of mind. Maintaining a business-like attitude required getting into the “right frame of mind,” which meant focusing on sparring and nothing else. The trainers helped boxers achieve this focus by using the game-plan strategy.

Boxers also had their own strategies, one of which was to concentrate solely on the task at hand. Wyatt described his version of how he did this:

At first, you’re just caught up in all the craziness. You don’t want all these other people to watch you get beat up, and you’re like, “What the hell do I care about them? I don’t want to get beat up.” And they drop away, they’re no longer important. And then it’s just like, “I don’t want to get beat up.” I think you’re like, “But I really want to get the best of this guy,” so even your concern for

yourself has dropped away, and you're just kind of there, you know um. It's— it's kind of like you're going for kind of a zen thing where you're not really in your body.

--Wyatt, White Male, 23, College Student

Wyatt's technique parallels what is found in other high-risk activities. Lois (2001) describes how emergency rescue workers sometimes narrow their focus to the task at hand to keep panic at bay. Lyng (1990) observes the same phenomenon among sky divers. This narrowing of focus frees individuals from thinking about anything but the act itself, displacing worry about what could go wrong. KO boxers did the same thing to quell certain emotions before they emerged, or to mask them if they did emerge.

Another way that boxers got into the right frame of mind was by ritualizing their preparation. This often meant creating a routine prior to stepping into the ring in an effort to calm themselves and focus on the game plan. As Trevor explained:

I try to calm myself down. I've found that if I go through a certain routine, it's easier. I'll get a pair of gloves, the ones used for sparring, then find headgear that will fit me... I methodically gear up, always do it the same way. I'm also aware of my breathing. I breathe through my nose out my mouth, which helps calm me down a little. Then I tell myself that this is the normal feeling. In fact, I probably don't even think about that stage anymore. I'm used to it.

--Trevor, White Male, 25, Computer Programmer

Here Trevor also reports using a cognitive strategy of normalizing his pre-sparring anxiety. Other boxers did the same, telling themselves that their excitement did not mean they were ill-prepared, but that their arousal was simply a part of the sport.

Moreover, KO boxers also took comfort in telling themselves that Jan and Bill were on hand to intervene if a sparring partner lost control. This was important for the

recreational boxers. They needed assurance that sparring, though risky, would be kept within safe limits.

Depersonalizing the sparring session. Another strategy was to focus on the shared desire for a good sparring session, rather than fearing a sparring partner's loss of control or bad intent. Rex describes his use of this strategy:

If I come up in a scary situation, like I'm sparring with someone who's obviously better than me, it's nerve-wracking, and it's kind of a mental game, but I reassure myself with the thought that, you know, everybody here's pretty cool, and nobody's out to hurt me.

--Rex, White Male, 30, Accounts Manager, Computer Company

Defining sparring as an opportunity to work on boxing skills, rather than as a test of skills, enabled the boxers to let go of the frustration and anger that might erupt if a session went poorly. Moreover, as Rex explained, realizing that your sparring partner isn't trying to hurt you is important and something most novice boxers must learn.

Sidney echoes this sentiment:

I've found that if you realize that the other person [sparring partner] isn't trying to hurt you personally, then it takes a lot of the negative emotions away. You can't take it personal. Like, I'm not trying to hurt the guy because I don't like him or anything, I'm just trying to work on my technique, just like I do when I work the focus mitts or something like that. I think you have to learn how to see it like that, or you'll never learn to spar because every time you get hit you'll take it personally.

--Sidney, White Male, 32, Computer Programmer

A novice might step into the ring with the understanding that the other person isn't trying to hurt him or her. Yet the mounting frustration that comes from taking punches to the face often evokes anger and loss of control. Learning not to get angry

and not “take it personal” meant that boxers had to redefine the sparring session as something akin to a technical exercise rather than as combat. By defining sparring as a technical drill undertaken to build skill, boxers could set aside some of their ego investments and thereby reduce the risk of losing control. The notion of sparring (boxing) as strategic thus came up often:

I think it's when you spar when you realize how much strategy is involved. That's one of the reasons why I love sparring so much. It's like you put all your training into practice. And the best is when you block everything out, it's just you and your partner and he can pound on you and you're more worried about countering him than getting mad or anything like that. I think that's when you know you're getting better when you don't get mad. It's more like you're playing a strategic role-playing game with combat.

--Rex, White Male, 30, Accounts Manager—Computer Company

As Rex suggests, boxers often depersonalized the situation to remain in control. This depersonalization strategy is what enabled the business-like attitude boxers aimed to bring to the ring. Sparring thus took on the character of an impersonal problem to be solved, like solving a puzzle or playing a game. As one boxer said, “There's something about this, it's like a sweet science, a game of chess.”

Just as boxers used depersonalization to control anger and fear in the ring, they sometimes had to depersonalize sparring if they feared hurting others. It was fairly common for the novice boxers, particularly the middle-class ones, to worry about causing harm to a sparring partner. This concern led some boxers to pull their punches, or to apologize for landing them.⁴ Ronnie, an advertising executive, described his experience with this dilemma:

⁴ Almost all new boxers would apologize when they landed a hard punch on a sparring partner.

I think that's the one hard thing that was really hard to swallow in the beginning [of sparring], how this, the only way you are successful in boxing is when you hurt someone else. And the more you hurt them, the more you're rewarded for it. And that was a little scary, a little weird to be sitting here and hearing that, you want to do a hook and get your knuckles right under the ribs and you want to move those organs around. That was too intimate for me, I think. Too anatomical maybe, you know, it was just, I was going back to science class and picturing like, how sensitive organs are and stuff. And here I am, and I didn't think about myself, I didn't think, "oh my gosh, somebody's going to be doing that to me." I was just like, am I really going to want to do that to somebody when I spar? You know, like, move their organs around and really shake them up? Now I just go with it and try not to think about it. And you kinda get used to it after awhile.

--Ronnie, White Male, 26, Advertising Executive

As Ronnie's comments illustrate, thinking about the intimate violence that sparring entails sometimes proved to be detrimental to the boxers' psyches. Ronnie felt uneasy about hitting someone where you "move their organs around."

In time, however, these middle-class recreational boxers overcame their discomfort by either depersonalizing the sparring, detaching from the real effects of the sparring, or rationalizing and justifying their actions as "part of the sport." When discussing the violence of the sport or its detrimental effects, many cited the violence and potential injuries in a wide array of other more popular sports. Moreover, the boxers were also quick to point out the safety features embedded in the sparring action at KO Gym, thereby reassuring themselves that they weren't going to hurt anyone too badly.

These strategies transformed sparring into a professional or business-like activity—an orientation that accorded well with middle-class life. Boxers also came to view sparring as a learning experience, rather than as a character contest. For many

boxers, these depersonalization strategies were crucial for managing the emotions evoked by sparring.

Though it might seem that depersonalizing would diminish the authenticity of the boxing experience, this was not the case. In fact, if the boxers were able to depersonalize the situation and focus solely on the task at hand, they experienced a profound satisfaction from discovering their power to exercise control over their minds and bodies in a demanding situation. Quite often the “flow” or total absorption of mind and body, which was part of the peak experience that boxers sought, was intricately tied to this depersonalization, particularly for the veteran fighters. Emotional control was also another mark of masculinity (Sattel 1976; Seidler 1991).

Self-talk. Boxers also employed “self-talk” to remain composed prior to and during sparring sessions. The self-talk was used to quell certain emotions, cultivate others, focus on the task at hand, and to depersonalize the situation altogether. The type of self-talk varied, though most of it focused on overcoming what were seen as negative emotions: fear, anxiety, and anger. Boxers would acknowledge these feelings and then conjure an image of the negative consequences of acting on them. Boxers thus had to develop an awareness of their emotional arousal, identify the feelings that needed to be managed, and then use self-talk to manage those feelings.

The self-talk used most often consisted of motivational and inspirational mantras.

Isaac provides an illustrative example:

Even now, when Jan tells me to gear up it like jolts me. I still remember the first few times. I was scared shitless, but I tried to act cool, you know? [laughing] I

think everybody does that. [*How do you deal with the fear?*] I talked to myself—mentally—in my head. It probably sounds retarded, but that’s what I did. I would be like, “You can do it Isaac. Be tough. [It’s] no big deal.” Those types of things, like little mantras. It helped. I know it probably sounds lame, but it worked.

--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Representative

The self-talk in which Isaac engages focuses on how he wants to perceive himself: “Be tough”—as well as how he wants to see the activity: “no big deal.” He focuses on his own actions and the context of his actions to calm himself and manage his fear. This was common among a segment of KO boxers. Instead of focusing on what was at stake, sparring was reframed as “no big deal.”

Other boxers used self-talk to conjure different images. Jim reminded himself of a slogan he heard in Rocky:

At first I get that little shake, and I start worrying about it. And I try to stop it. It’s kind of hard to explain. There’s one quote on Rocky that says, “The difference between a hero and a coward, is a hero is the one that goes for it.” That influences me too. I have all kind of things I use in my head. Like little inspirational things.

--Jim, White Male, 22, College Student

Just as Isaac spoke of trying to “be tough,” Jim’s self-talk focused on being a “hero” and not a “coward.” Such rhetoric was common among another group of KO boxers. By conjuring a heroic ideal, they sought to motivate themselves and manage their emotions.

Andy provides another example:

Sometimes I’ll get popped with a punch I didn’t even see coming—those are usually the ones that hurt the most. When that happens I’m mad because it hurts, and I’m mad because I let the other guy get a good shot in. My initial reaction is just to start slugging and kick the guy’s ass. But I cognitively tell myself to regroup, like, “It’s okay, stay focused.” I sort of talk myself out of getting angry because then you look bad since you can’t keep your cool.

--Andy, White Male, 22, College Student

Andy's comment highlights the use of self-talk to manage anger. Others spoke of telling themselves to "stay in control," while still others would repeat to themselves, "Don't get mad, don't get mad." Novices used more self-talk to control and condition themselves emotionally. After a while, as the boxer's habitus was formed, the self-talk became less necessary.

EMOTIONS AND GENDER

Overall, men and women had similar experiences in sparring and tended to employ the same strategies to manage their emotions. Part of this no doubt reflects the expectation of the women to follow the masculine ethos of the sport and the guidelines outlined by the trainers—i.e., "the code of the gym." Yet, in some cases women dealt with their emotions differently than the men. Moreover, the complexities of sparring match-ups were exacerbated when women and men sparred and attempted to adhere to the gym's implicit code. This section describes these match-ups and also the differences between women and men in managing certain emotions.

Gender and the Code of the Gym

Men often evaluate women, as well as other men, on the basis of their emotional displays, a loss of emotional control being interpreted as "a sign of weakness and an opportunity to secure advantage" (Sattel 1976:475). As Harry Brod (1987:8) suggests, emotional constraint "confers power on men, in large part, by effectively withholding information about oneself." This same ideology operated in the ring, where it was

important not to show what one was really feeling. Likewise, in the culture of KO Gym the highest-status boxers were those who exhibited the greatest physical and emotional control.

Women, too, when they entered the world of KO Gym, became subject to the same status evaluations, and thus embraced many of the same emotional control strategies as the men. Though both men and women were evaluated based on the same code of the gym, men tended to come to the gym better equipped to adhere to this code. Women learned it quickly, however, once they realized how it worked. Only the female novices were more apt to vocalize pain and thus stop a sparring session if they felt they were in danger or were hurt. Men almost never did this.⁵ In fact, a man who got hit hard in a sparring session would act like the punch didn't faze him, or get angry and try to retaliate for the hard hit. The fieldnote excerpt below describes a common occurrence when a novice woman sparred:

Julie, a fairly new member [six weeks], was matched up with Jason. The session had already started by the time I saw them. I hadn't seen Julie spar before, so I'm pretty sure this was one of her first times. She looked like a lot of new people when they spar—slow and stiff. It appeared that Jason had orders to do defense only, which is something common when newer people get in the ring. He was sort of circling and waiting for Julie to punch him. He easily parried her punches. To her credit, Julie kept punching and she was good about trying simple combinations and following the directions of Bill, who was yelling directives at her from the corner. She had a robotic movement with her punches, while also bopping her head up and down. It was a unique style. The circling, punches and parrying between Julie and Bill went on for maybe 30 seconds when Julie answered Bill's call for body shots with a right hand to Jason's body. Julie's punch to Jason's body was telegraphed and Jason easily blocked it by swiping his left elbow to meet Julie's glove. At least that's what it looked like. However, Julie sort of yelped and turned her back on Jason. She cradled her right arm with her left glove and braced it against her chest while grimacing that she was in pain. Jason stopped in his tracks and Bill yelled out, "Time! Julie,

⁵ This occurred only twice in my year and a half at the gym.

you alright?” She shrugged as if to say, “I don’t know, I’m hurt”. She appeared to be in a lot of pain. Bill then climbed into the ring nonchalantly and headed for Julie. I don’t think he thought it was serious. When he got next to her he asked, “Did you get a nasty one?” He simultaneously looked at her arm. Julie sort of halfway nodded, probably guessing what he meant. A few seconds went by. “Those hurt, I know.” Bill stated matter of factly, attempting to make Julie feel better. Julie appeared to be a little shaken up. There were a few seconds of silence. All eyes were on Julie. Bill then looked at Jason, and asked, “What was it, a forearm?” Jason said, “My elbow caught her forearm.” Bill then said, “Ooooooh. Those definitely hurt. Let me see it.” Julie then held up her arm while bracing it with her other hand (glove). Bill and Jason remained silent and looked on at Julie intently. Finally, Julie started shaking her gloved hand, signaling that the pain was subsiding “You’re going to have quite a bruise. Let’s go ahead and ice it.” Bill told her. Bill led Julie to the ropes nearest the office and helped Julie duck out of the ring. Jason followed. Bill then scurried into the back room looking for the first aid ice pack, while Julie walked in half circles by the heavy bags, still holding her arm, waiting for Bill to arrive with the ice pack.
--Fieldnotes 4.23.03

If a woman took a hard and painful shot, quite often she would react as described above, or else she would freeze up and duck into defensive mode. In either case, novice women frequently vocalized pain in front of others. For the men, expressing feelings of pain was akin to “whining,” a sure way to diminish one’s manhood status within the culture of KO Gym.

Jan and Bill, the trainers at KO, described what they saw as a difference between the novice men and women who sparred:

It’s interesting. People act differently their first few times sparring. Some people—a lot of people—just lose it. They get in there, get hit once, and then spazz out. It’s funny, but it’s really not. It just happens so often with new guys. Then there are the guys that get in there and it’s like they’re in a shell. They get in there and sort of freeze up. They’ll move around and their only concern is defending themselves. It’s like, c’mon, you can throw some punches, really. I think most people belong to the first group, though. I think it’s natural, you get hit, you want to hurt the guy or thing that hurt you. It takes a while getting used to. A lot of the girls, the first couple times they spar, freeze up a little bit. They keep their hands up, they’re really good at that, and they move—that’s a good

thing. But we usually try to get them to jab and throw punches. We'll holler at them. For the guys, typically, I yell at them to relax since they're always on the edge of losing it.

--Jan, White Female, 29, Owner/Trainer KO Gym

I think sometimes it's harder for the women who come in here. When they spar they're not used to the physical aspect, taking the hits. I don't think most people are accustomed to getting hit, but I would guess that the guys have more experience with the contact, perhaps from growing up playing contact sports. The women typically don't get those type of opportunities. So when they spar, in the beginning, a lot of times they work in slow motion, sometimes exceptionally slow motion, like they don't want to hit the other person. The guys are different. When the guys get hit, the new guys, a lot of times they feel like they need to take the other guy's head off. In both cases we try to intervene.

--Bill, White Male, 32, Owner/Trainer

Men came to the gym with an ingrained reluctance to show pain and fear; it wasn't something that they needed to learn. They knew, as Sattel (1976) writes, that to project an image of manly competence they needed to control their displays of emotion. In this sense, the code of KO Gym was just a more stringent version of the manhood code that prevails in US society. As one male members put it:

Everybody knows what boxing's about. You're going to get hit, and it's not always going to feel good, but you gotta deal with it. You can't be whining about it.

--Kevin, White Male, 19, College Student

From the perspective of men, any outward display of pain signified weakness. Men thus often attempted to transform pain into anger. While expressing anger deviated from the code of the gym, anger was accepted as natural and more acceptable for men.

Boxers who got angry in the ring and lost control were much more likely to get future opportunities to spar than those who showed pain. Part of this no doubt reflected Jan and Bill's commitment to safety. They felt that if someone was getting hurt enough

to complain, then there was a real safety risk. Again, those who complained were nearly all female.

Even though women remained less reluctant to show pain, and Jan and Bill tried not to make the women feel bad about doing so, women learned to hide their pain if they wanted to be taken seriously at KO Gym. Many understood what was expected of them, because they knew how things work in a “man’s world.” KO Gym was in many ways like the male-dominated workplaces with which the women were familiar.

As women progressed (and learned the code), they too would get angry after taking a hard hit. Hence, once they learned that vocalizing pain was frowned upon, they were more apt to take the hits and get mad, just like the novice men. Women, it seemed, had to go through an extra step in learning to be competent sparring partners:

That first time. Wow. I remember Jan asked me if I wanted to spar, I think she said something like, “You wanted gear up?” It was scary. I got in there and they had Trent spar with me. He was taking it easy, but I remember just sort of not doing much. Jan and Bill were hollering at me to throw my punches. It got better. Now they tell me to take it nice and easy because sometimes I get all crazy.

--Cheryl, White Female, 23, Dental Assistant

Though the first-time sparring certainly wasn’t easy for anybody, the female boxers at KO tended to have a steeper learning curve because few had anything in their backgrounds comparable to sparring. Many of the men spoke of playing contact sports and getting injured. Those who did not, still tended to have a better grasp of the masculine code of behavior that regulated the expression of emotion.

Some male KO boxers explicitly defined emotionality as a defect associated with womanhood, and even suggested a dose of boxing discipline as a remedy. As Brian put it:

If you think about it, it's a lot like the real world. You can't let emotions get the best of you or you always gonna be hassled by it. I have found, at least in my own life, that remaining on an even keel is much better than letting things get to you and then getting all emotional. My ex-girlfriend was like that—all emotional and shit—sometimes she would be ecstatic about who knows what—the sun is out!—you know, all giddy and happy, and then if something remotely bad happened to her she would be all sad and depressed. She could be a head case. [Pause, shaking head] Maybe this [boxing] is what she really needs [laughing].
--Brian, White Male, 27, Financial Representative

The masculine code of the gym prescribed exactly this kind of steadiness and control. While this control indeed helped KO boxers achieve a peak experience in sparring, it was also a highly gendered experience. Those who could most readily achieve this experience were those who knew how real men are supposed to behave.

Inter-gender Match-ups

Although women were in the minority at KO Gym, men and women were often paired for sparring due to the odd number of boxers at the gym on any given day. Moreover, if the women were going to spar and have a chance to develop their skills, they often had to spar with men. This was also part of learning the code of the gym. From the perspective of the trainers, such match-ups were also necessary to keep the women—who were no less serious than the men—challenged and interested. These inter-gender sparring sessions at KO Gym entailed additional complexity because in many cases it was nearly impossible for boxers to negotiate a satisfying level of intensity.

Men often held back when matched with women, in part because they believed that men shouldn't hit women, and that, even if these strange circumstances allowed for exchanging blows, they shouldn't hit women as hard as they hit men:

That takes some getting used to, when you're sparring with [women], because you've got to find this safe middle ground where you're hitting them and letting them know, okay, I've got you, I've got you, but also making sure you don't hurt them, so I think it's kind of difficult. You try to wash out the thing of like, "this is a girl, I can't hit her hard." And focus on technique and stuff like that, but I think I'd be lying to say that it doesn't affect my sparring or my workout a little bit more.

--Ronnie, White Male, 26, Advertising Executive

I don't mind doing drills with the girls in here, but the sparring is a different ballgame. It gets weird. I grew up being taught that you don't hit girls, no ifs and buts about it. So, when I have to get in there I'm a mess. Intellectually, I know they [the women] want me to go regular and treat them like everybody else, but it's tough. I get real frustrated with myself. It shouldn't be a big deal, and in reality, if I were to get in with Mary, or Jan, they would probably kick my ass.

--Kevin, White Male, 19, College Student

To be honest with you, I have a tough time with that [sparring women]. I know they want a good session, a good workout, but I just have a hard time hitting them. [*So how do you deal with that?*] I try not to spar them for one, but if I have to, then I'll sort of dance around and throw punches without really landing them, you know? I definitely pull my punches, and I try to make it look like I'm really trying.

--Randy, White Male, 23, College Student

These sentiments were shared by most men at KO Gym. The men simply had a difficult time negotiating the level of force to use when sparring with women. When men held back they risked angering the women, who sometimes felt cheated of the intensity they sought from sparring.

There are some guys here who obviously have a real problem sparring women. It's frustrating. I don't necessarily think they do it on purpose, but they totally pull their punches. It makes me angry sometimes. [*How do you deal with it?*]

I've actually told Jan a few times, and she tells me that some guys are just like that. I have also tried to really clock the guys to show them I can fight.
--Jill, White Female, 22, College Student

As Jill explained, the women too found these match-ups problematic. As noted above, this was in part because the men would not go hard enough to provide a sufficiently intense sparring session. But it was also because the women likewise felt themselves in a bind having to deal with men and their egos:

When I spar with the guys I know I got to try and build a rapport with them. I don't want to show them up, I mean, many of them have egos so I'm not trying to show off in front of anyone. I just want to exercise, so if you're going to stand there and you're not going to hit me, or not hit me hard or whatever, then I feel like I need to try and hit them just a little harder so they know I can do it—that I'll be fine.
--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

Like if [a man] says "hit me" it's like you're under pressure, because if you hit them really hard and they get hurt, then [you're a] bad guy. But if you don't hit them hard enough, you're a wimp. So it's trying to balance—trying to figure out what they actually want you to do when they say, "Come on, hit me. I can take it." And then you hit them really hard, and you're like, "Yeah, I got you!" And they're like, "okay." And then you're like, "Okay, now I can really smack the crap out of him" because then [you're] kinda irritated at him that he could take a punch that hard.
--Jill, White female, 22, College Student

A further dilemma arose because the women knew that if they popped their sparring partner with a good punch, they could expect a payback, and many of the women complained that the paybacks were too hard. This meant that the women couldn't easily raise the intensity level of a sparring session in the way the men could. As one female boxer stated, "It's tough. If I spar well against a guy, or too well, then he'll start throwing real hard punches—too hard, you know?"

In learning to spar, the women thus had to employ their skills not only as boxers but as emotion workers. In some respects this was not all that different from everyday life. As Adrian described it:

I think it's funny, and it's a hard thing to deal with because men are always worried about their egos. A lot of this is the same things you're dealing with in other aspects of life. You're going into a male atmosphere, whether it be work, whether it be education, whatever it is, it's male dominated, so as a woman you have to learn how to deal with it, learn how to play them. I mean, that's really what it is. You have to learn how to gently stroke the ego, but at the same time assert yourself enough to really get things accomplished.
--Adrian, Black Female, 29, Medical Research Assistant

Adrian's sentiment was prevalent among the women boxers. They had to learn the masculine code of the gym, but not forget their obligation to "stroke the [male] ego." This certainly added to the complexity of learning to box and to spar with men. Even in the gym, the women had an extra round of work to do.

The men were not unaware of this added dimension of complexity between males and females in the ring:

I think there's an automatic thing when you put a guy and girl and have them do something physical like that, there's an automatic set of thoughts going on in both people's heads. I think in their heads it's like, "I'm going to show this guy you know, he thinks he needs to treat me like a little girl blah blah blah and I'll give him a bloody nose." And I'm sitting there like, "no no no I don't necessarily think that about you but I want to make sure I don't hit you too hard," you know? So in some ways, I'm playing right into what they're thinking. It's damned if you do, damned if you don't.
--Ronnie, White Male, 26, Advertising Executive

If a female boxer hit harder and thereby elicited more force from a male boxer, the male risked being seen, by those outside the ring, as going overboard. Many of the male boxers felt this put them in a "no-win" situation when they sparred with women. Yet

because the women were genuinely skilled, and because there are norms of reciprocity in the ring, the male boxers could not take them lightly.

Most men likewise found it dissatisfying to spar with women because they felt they could test themselves harder against other men. Moreover, some of the men complained that while the women were free to hit as hard as they wanted while sparring with men, men could not retaliate the way they normally would when sparring each other. As one male boxer described the dilemma:

I'll tell you right now, women can swing harder than men can during a sparring session, because they can get away with more, because most men are not going to say, "Hey, calm down." It's like female cops. They can rough up a criminal so much more than a male officer. So I don't like [sparring with a woman]. I'd rather fight somebody else.
-- Rich, White Male, 24, Food Server

These inter-gender match-ups exacerbated the most difficult aspect of sparring—controlling one's emotions in order to successfully regulate the intensity of the session. For example, men were often concerned, sometimes overly so from their perspective, that they were going to hurt the women with whom they sparred. This caused men to experience complex emotions in the ring when sparring women:

It took awhile, but now I'm used to it [sparring women]. I concentrate on their body, like their neck or upper torso. If I don't look them in the eye I think it's easier. I also don't throw quite as hard as I normally would, say if I'm going against someone my size, but that's not about them [women] being bad fighters, it's just like anybody, you gotta throw to the level of their size and they're quite a bit smaller than me.
--Sidney, White Male, 32, Computer Programmer

Sidney's strategy when sparring with women was to depersonalize the partner and degender the women. Other men reported similar strategies, such as concentrating on

the neck or even the forehead of the woman with whom they were sparring. Another strategy some men used was to focus strictly on form and technique:

The reality of it is that some of the women in here are technically superior than me. They might not be as strong and hit as hard, but technically, they have the footwork and punch combos down, the defense, all of it. I know I could probably overpower them with my strength, but instead I'll concentrate on my form. This usually helps me, and I think it gives them a good sparring experience.

--Isaac, White Male, 28, International Business Representative

The majority of the men stated that the more they sparred the women, the more comfortable it became for them. Much of this, according to the male boxers, had to do with overcoming the initial discomfort experienced when acting in a manner contrary to their value system, which forbid hitting women. Part of the solution, the men learned, was to see their sparring partners simply as boxers. It was, at best, an imperfect strategy.

While most of the training at KO Gym was done outside the ring, sparring was what made the gym an authentic boxer's venue. Boxers at KO Gym didn't just punch air; they punched each other, and thus experienced pain and some risk of injury. This helped to construct the boxing at KO as real, as analyzed in Chapter Two. Authenticity alone, however, did not guarantee a maximally satisfying experience. Satisfaction—and, beyond satisfaction, a peak athletic experience—required learning and mastering strategies of emotional control. And just as these satisfactions were gendered, as shown in Chapter Three, achieving maximum intensity and psychological rewards—a peak experience—required emotion-work strategies that were highly gendered. Being a boxer required not only behaving like a real man, but learning to feel like one.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The conditions under which the mostly middle-class men came to KO Gym are a vital part of the sociological story told here. Gym members felt dissatisfied with their jobs. Several members spoke of graduating college with great expectations, only to be disheartened by the reality of the dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment in their work. A handful had the status or earnings that could be construed as successful by societal standards, but even so, these members still felt that something was missing. What many of the men shared was a feeling that their work provided few opportunities to do anything that attested to their masculinity. Unlike the action at KO Gym.

There was a clear connection between work, identity, and how the gym members derived meaning from their boxing experience. The connection between work and identity is a central feature of our culture. As Gini (2000:5) states, “People are what they do, and what people do affects every aspect of who they are.” What work couldn’t do for the men, the men tried to do for themselves at KO Gym.

This relationship between one’s work and a person’s sense of self is nothing new. In fact, Karl Marx, in his critique of capitalism, notes this phenomenon. Marx argued that work is primary to our identities and how we become complete persons. Many other scholars have similarly found work as the primary source of meaning and identity in people’s lives, particularly men (Braverman 1974; Gini 2000; DuGay 1996; Weiss 1990). Gini (2000:2) states that this relationship between one’s work and identity holds

true whether one has what is considered a good job or a bad one, whether one derives enjoyment from the job or not, or is successful or a failure in it; in essence, work defines who we are: “Where we live, how well we live, whom we see socially, what and where we consume and purchase, how we educate our children—all of these are determined by the way in which we earn a living” (Gini 2000:2).

The nature of alienated labor under capitalism exacerbates the work-identity relationship. Braverman (1974) argues that modern work is alienating; it affects how people view themselves in relation to others. Like Braverman, others argue that there is a lack of meaning in work, and such a view can be traced back to Marx. In his

Economic and Political Manuscripts, Marx asks:

In what does this alienation of labour consist? First that the work is external to the worker, that is not part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker therefore only feels at home in his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. (Bottomore and Rubel 1963:177).

As the above passage suggests, work under capitalism often provides little intrinsic satisfaction and fulfillment, and if there was one unifying theme with the gym members at KO, this was it. According to Marx, alienation was a consequence of work that was stripped of meaning and purpose. On focusing on the alienation of the worker, Marx writes:

Alienated labor hence turns the species-existence of man, and also nature as his mental specie-capacity, into an existence alien to him, into the means of his individual existence. It alienates his spiritual nature, his human essence, from his own body and likewise from nature outside him.... A direct consequence of man's alienation from the product of his work, from his life activity, and from his species-existence, is the alienation of man from man. When man confronts

himself, he confronts other men. What holds true of man's relationship to other men, to their labor, and the object of their labor (Simon 1994:64).

As Marx highlighted, alienation affects one's sense of self, one's meaning—a person's "spiritual nature" and "human essence." We thus acquire a sense of self—both self-definition and self-recognition—through the process and product of our labor. As such, middle-class work in which one may have little control over the process and product of one's labor can be as dissatisfying as work on a production line.

Another classic theorist, Max Weber, argued that life in Western industrialized societies was becoming ever more bureaucratized and rationalized. Weber posited that formal rationality could be found in almost all facets of social life and that this was the emerging dynamic of modernity. As Marx spoke of alienation, Weber discussed the notion of "disenchantment." This latter idea referred to the breakdown of meaning in the face of the rational forces of modernity. He suggested that these trends supposedly also created a kind of spiritual deadening. In part, Weber and others argued, this comes from every aspect of life being governed by rules and policies, leaving little room for spontaneity, individual autonomy, and the achievement of greatness. Weber asserted that the rationalizing social world was slowly moving toward the "iron cage" of bureaucracy:

No one knows for sure who will live in this cage in the future or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (Weber 1958:182).

Decades later, Klapp (1969) observed that such societal changes have been the catalyst for a widespread “collective search for identity.” If we consider the opportunities for identity (re)construction and self-recognition at work, it becomes evident that one’s work generally lacks this possibility for most people. The KO boxers were thus far from alone in their feelings of dissatisfaction. Yet it wasn’t simply rationalized work that produced such feelings. Nor even alienation in Marx’s sense. It was the lack of gender-identity affirmation.

MIDDLE-CLASS MASCULINITY

Men whose work experience induces feelings of powerless are often trapped in patriarchal notions of what being a man is about. Patriarchal culture teaches men to expect work to provide wealth, status, and power. In fact, however, a capitalist class structure guarantees that few men will be able to derive much wealth, status, and power from their work. Yet the desire to signify manhood remains strong, and is perhaps even exacerbated by economic powerlessness. For middle-class men, boxing and other risky sports have become a partial solution to their masculinity deficit problem.

KO Gym was a place perceived as risky and dangerous, and thus provided an opportunity for the gym members to demonstrate and solidify a self that they may have otherwise found difficult to signify in the sanitized and sheltered world of the middle-class. Goffman (1967:268) asserts the pull of such behavior in his description of “serious action”:

Looking for where the action is, one arrives at a romantic division of the world. On one side are the safe and silent places, the home, the well-regulated role in business, industry, and the professions; on the other are all those activities that generate expression, requiring the individual to lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during a passing moment. It is from this contrast that we fashion nearly all our commercial fantasies. It is from this contrast that delinquents, criminals, hustlers, and sportsmen draw their self-respect. Perhaps this is payment in exchange for the use we make of the ritual of their performance.

In this way, even those who aren't dissatisfied with their work might still be drawn to a chance for "serious action," since it provides a forum to "generate expression" and show others a self that is difficult to show elsewhere. For the men, engaging in boxing or other forms of serious action offered an opportunity to do gender in a way they couldn't do at work. Men whose jobs required them to perform heavy and dangerous tasks could feel manly at work. But this was not the case for the mostly male white-collar members of the gym, for many of whom a typical day at work was spent in front of a computer screen.

It seems that the middle-class boxers at KO Gym had found themselves with some of the trappings of middle-class life, yet this life and their achievements were seen as insufficient testimony to their manhood. White-collar work didn't demonstrate to others or themselves that they were "real" men. Though they had outward signs of middle-class respectability, the work left them feeling diminished, and this was intricately related to their feelings of masculinity.

In analyzing middle-class masculinity, Kimmel (1996) similarly notes that middle-class men struggle with the meaning of manhood in the postindustrial world. He refers to this as the "crisis of masculinity" and discusses men's entrance into various

men's movements as a way of coping with this crisis. Men, he says, seek meaning through self-control, exclusion, and escape. Additionally, just in the past few decades, women's increased participation in the labor force has transformed the cultural terrain both in and out of the workplace, and, as such, men's identities as the head of household and the sole breadwinner have been undermined. Kimmel (1996) also writes that middle-class men have sought more homosocial relationships as industrialization has created more divisiveness and competition among workers. Such settings for men have included pubs, sporting events, and exclusive clubs—all of which are places where men can go to feel like men.

At KO Gym, middle-class men could do things they couldn't do in their jobs: use their bodily strength; compete head-to-head with other men (without devastating consequences if they lost); get clear feedback about their abilities; and acquire skills that gave them confidence when dealing with other men outside the workplace. Additionally, boxing was viewed as unambiguous, and any merit derived from boxing was perceived as earned. The gym was thus one of the few places where the middle-class men were free from the polite constraints of the office and could signify that they were deserving of full manhood status.

In risking themselves in the ring, the middle-class recreational boxers were constructing their identity as men in contrast to their middle-class male peers who were seen, by almost all accounts, as "soft." Gym members knew that white-collar middle-class men like themselves are sometimes labeled, from a working-class perspective, as effeminate "paper pushers," "yes-men," and "wimps" (Pyke 1996; Sennett and Cobb

1972). The term “couch potato” also came up several times in referring to boxers’ middle-class colleagues and peers, and these other middle-classers were perceived as constant reminders for KO members of how they didn’t want to be. Boxing, then, for these white middle-class men, was a symbol of resistance to what was perceived to be a vanilla middle-class lifestyle. As such, boxing enabled these men to explore an identity that was in opposition to what many perceived as the effeminate cultural definitions of middle-class.

The main premise of this compensatory masculinity thesis is that the alienation caused by work, and its subsequent toll on one’s gender identity, is at odds with the cultural prescription of what it means to be a man in our society. Thus, in the case of the middle-class men at KO Gym, boxing served as compensation for the lack of opportunity to signify and display toughness, bravery, and fearlessness at work, when at the same time these attributes are not only celebrated in the larger society, but they are what is expected of a “real” man.

The Contradictions of Compensatory Masculinity at KO Gym

Risky activity or “serious action” can bolster middle-class men’s feelings of manhood. Yet there is the problem of maintaining a middle-class presentation of self while engaging in such action. Compensatory masculinity thus brought with it a contradiction similar to that noted in the Holyfield et al. (2005) study of commercial whitewater rafting. The authors describe how adventure companies attempt to provide excitement to its customers while at the same time guaranteeing their safety. The

Holyfield et al. (2005) study, aptly titled, “Adventure Without Risk is Like Disneyland,” argues that selling the illusion of risk is part of a growing “adventure industry” that delivers the emotions related to risk, but without serious threat. Missing from this analysis, however, is the influence of social class in shaping the desires of the adventure industry’s clientele. The individuals who sought risk in whitewater rafting were, like the recreational boxers at KO, a mix of professionals and members of the middle-class. Both groups performed a similar balancing act characteristic of a middle-class masculinity: signifying the capacity to dominate—in keeping with the hegemonic ideal—without signifying working-class intellectual limitations.

This self-presentational balancing act proscribed crude displays of hyper masculinity. Hyper masculinity has sometimes been linked to places such as pool halls, biker bars, and shop floors, where lower and working-class males predominate (Pyke 1996). And though one might expect a boxing gym to be such a place, this was not the case for KO. This was, as noted in Chapter One, one of the biggest surprises for me as a researcher.

Prior to entering the gym I expected to find a hyper-masculine subculture, and this simply wasn’t the case. Middle-class informants shared my pre-conceptions. As one guy stated (and noted in Chapter Two), “I was worried that there was going to be a bunch of muscleheads like at Gold’s Gym.” However, most were pleasantly surprised to find no hyper-macho culture at KO Gym. Of course, there still existed the masculine undercurrent that guided gym behavior, but blatant acts of masculine bravado were noticeably absent, and acts of reckless toughness were viewed as acts of stupidity. The

middle-class recreational boxers weren't interested in becoming caricatures of the ego driven, muscle-bound jocks of the sports world. In this way, KO's boxers desired a masculinity-enhancing working-class experience based on strength and toughness, but without the exaggerated displays and bravado that they viewed as often accompany such activities. Such behavior illuminates what is expected of middle-class men in general, and how class complicates the doing of gender.

In some ways, the middle-class members simultaneously embraced and distanced themselves from aspects of working-class culture. It was apparent that these men wanted an authentic boxing experience that was physical and seemingly "working class," yet these middle-class men also implicitly constructed working-class people as "others" in adhering to what could be considered middle-class norms. As such, the middle-class gym members both disdained and desired aspects of working-class culture. They wanted to signify working-class toughness without losing any class privilege.

But even as KO Gym gave the mostly white middle-class men a chance to signify a masculine self, it also allowed them to challenge definitions of masculinity based on violence and aggression. When boxers showed concern for the well-being of others, worked cooperatively with partners, and refrained from making derogatory or boastful remarks to others, it revealed another layer of the type of masculinity signified at KO. Such a masculinity closely adhered to middle-class norms where masculinity is signified by ways other than through overt violence and aggression, and thus illustrates one way that class may affect signifying performances. Yet, though the class restrictions

on signifying masculinity might make it seem like a kinder, gentler masculinity, it was still fraught with contradictions.

For instance, Pyke (1996) notes how privileged men, who enact a seemingly more progressive masculinity, benefit from the hyper-masculine displays of lower status men. She says it is

the higher-class male who cheers male athletes, sports teams, and military victories, and enjoys the vicarious thrill of physical conquest while simultaneously celebrating “essential” masculine strength, endurance, aggression, and domination; he reaffirms symbolically (and nonconsciously) his superiority over women. (Pyke 1996:532)

The working-class competitors at KO Gym were likewise lauded by the middle-class recreational gym members for their boxing prowess. The competitors at the gym were seen as virile and exotic, and in many ways admired. Yet they often said that the competitors were “different.” This alleged difference, from the perspective of the middle-class recreational members, was a matter of how seriously the competitors took boxing. As one recreational boxer noted, “For them [the competitors] it’s their life.”

As Haenfler (2005) writes, “There is a constant tug of war between hegemonic masculinity and more progressive notions of manhood” (94). This was evident at KO Gym, as the middle-class recreational boxers simultaneously admired and distanced themselves from the competitive working-class boxers. Just as they wanted a safe level of risk, the middle-class boxers wanted a safe level of machismo at KO. Too much and it would have threatened a view of themselves as having transcended the macho loutishness associated with boxing.

Strategic Social Comparisons

Why do middle-class men care so much about signifying a masculine self through displays of physical prowess? One reason may be that this is the domain in which most men can outdo most women. And, in the face of women's increasing presence in the "man's world" of business, signifying difference and superiority becomes even more vital in the eyes of many men. As Johnson (1997) notes, men feeling powerless over women's greater entrance into the labor force has more to do with men's participation in patriarchy (and the expectations of what a man is supposed to be), than with what women do. As a result of the ambiguous position of manhood felt by many men, they carry out "gender projects" (Connell 1987) that women are not as well equipped—bodily—to undertake.

On the other hand, middle-class men, by definition, are most obviously controlled by more powerful men. This condition can generate feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and fear—especially fear of being seen by other men as soft or weak. In noting this, Johnson (1997) writes that much of the need to signify masculinity has to do with fear. Men fear being controlled, and in effect, being "un-manned." Getting involved in boxing or any other number of risky leisure activities may thus be a way for middle-class men to cope with this fear.

Middle-class men know that elite men have more institutional power, and that these men don't have to do anything physical to prove their manhood. And while middle-class men enjoy a status advantage relative to working-class men, working-class men enjoy a manhood dividend by nature of the physicality of their work. So what is the

referent for these middle-class men? Do they measure themselves against the elite men or the working-class?

In the case of the recreational boxers at KO, upward comparisons probably would have made them feel bad, since few of them had much institutional power or any great career achievement to their credit. It might be said that these guys wanted to embrace the hegemonic style, yet they lacked the class resources to successfully pull off the act. So, like many middle-class men, they opted for a downward comparison by going physical. Instead, like many middle-class men, they opted for a downward comparison by going physical. Getting into the ring offered them a feeling of power, compensating for what was denied them by the patriarchal arrangements in which they were trapped.

It's thus not surprising that the men turned to sports. As Messner (2000:390) writes,

What is a Real Man? A Real Man is strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a Man's World. To be a winner he has to do what needs to be done. He must be willing to compromise his own long-term health by showing guts in the face of danger, by fighting other men when necessary, and by "playing hurt" when he's injured. He must avoid being soft; he must be the aggressor, both on the "battle fields" of sports and in his consumption choices. Whether he is playing sports or making choices about which snack food or auto products to purchase, his aggressiveness will net him the ultimate prize: the adoring attention of conventionally beautiful women. He will know if and when he has arrived as a Real Man when the Voices of Authority—White Males—*say* he is a Real Man. But even when he has finally managed to win the big one, has the good care, the right beer, and is surrounded by beautiful women, he will be reminded by these very same Voices of Authority just how fragile this Real Manhood really is: After all, he has to come out and prove himself all over again tomorrow. You're only as good as your last game (or your last purchase).

From a young age boys grow up carrying notions of a real man as a warrior, deriving from movies, cartoons, and television shows, as well as video games and comics. The warrior fantasy is of the autonomous hero who resists the forces of unfreedom and, in the end, gets the girl. Participating in boxing—single warrior combat—allowed the middle-class men of KO Gym to bring the fantasy a step closer to reality.

BOXING AT KO GYM AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu (1985) argues that the socialization experiences of youth and beyond, as well as the social networks gained in these life experiences, have an effect on one's attitude and values, tastes, preferences in art, sport, clothing styles, and in all other aspects of participation and consumption in society. He calls this “cultural capital”—a way of seeing the world and assessing it. Applying this cultural capital framework, Bourdieu argues that there are benefits attached to participation in a variety of sports. Past research has shown the unequal distribution of cultural capital through children's socialization into gendered games, sports, and play (Hasbrook and Harris 2000; Jordan and Cowan 1995; Lever 1976), as well as how the transmission of cultural capital is one of the ways in which inequality is reproduced (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Yet, the cultural capital acquired from children's play via socialization is only one part of the equation. The unequal distribution of cultural capital can also be seen when individuals participate in the same activity. The cultural capital acquired by members at KO Gym, for example, tended to benefit some more than others.

As has been documented throughout this dissertation, all the men at KO Gym, whether middle or working class, enjoyed the “action” of boxing, and more importantly, boxing gave the men a chance to demonstrate that they deserved membership in the category “men.” There were differences, however, between the middle- and working-class men. While boxing was compensatory for the middle-class men, those from the working-class didn’t seem to have as much need for compensatory signifiers of masculinity. For most of them, their job already attested to physical toughness, and, as such, there was little need to take up boxing to demonstrate toughness (although in fact many of them still liked the idea of doing something that signified their toughness).

As noted in the introductory chapter, the majority of the working-class members competed, and the most of these boxers were African American. They all spoke of training at KO Gym in hopes of becoming champions. They saw boxing as an avenue for them to seek a comfortable living. The likelihood of any of these boxers, all of whom were in their twenties, becoming world champions, or professional fighters for that matter, was slim to none. It was these unrealistic aspirations that differentiated them from the middle-class boxers. Boxing was, for the working-class fighters, primary to how they viewed themselves. Their status, their identity, was based on how successful they could become with boxing, and this of course set them up for failure.

In contrast, the middle-class members had no illusions about boxing professionally. In fact, a few noted that simply fighting in an amateur match would be the pinnacle of their involvement in the sport. For these middle-class men, boxing added

to their middle-class identity; it set them apart from others; it testified to their manhood. But none of the middle-class men saw boxing as primary to their identity.

For these men, current participation in an activity like boxing trumps mere spectating, which is what most middle-class men do. From the perspective of KO boxers, anybody can sit on the couch, watch sports, and talk a good game. Instead, the KO boxers were getting in the ring and duking it out. This, they felt, took a certain amount of courage, and warranted the respect of their middle-class colleagues and peers.

Such views can be considered reasonable when one thinks about sport in general: sport performances exemplify the ideal forms or styles for doing gender. It is in sport that we see how real men behave. Short of war, there's nothing else like it. Hence, when the men talked at work about their participation in boxing, they were able to cultivate an identity based in part on cultural representations of the boxer as athlete-warrior, thereby enhancing their status as men. In this way, boxing gave the middle-class men a form of gendered cultural capital that earned them a return in their home worlds.

Most of the findings from this research pertaining to the acquisition of cultural capital parallel Messner's (1992) study of ex-athletes. Messner (1992) found that from a very young age boys' participation in sports provided them with acceptance from others, and a form of status. The middle-class (white) ex-athletes in Messner's study had no illusions about professional sports careers. So, after a while, they bailed out and invested themselves in education and conventional careers. It was the working-class men of color, Messner says, who stayed with sports and, in the end, had little to show for

it. Moreover, Messner (1992) noted how many of the middle-class ex-athletes felt their past athletic success “opened doors” for them in their current careers, and having a successful sports background also enhanced their status among other men. Similarly, the middle-class recreational boxers at KO Gym felt that participation in boxing enhanced their status, particularly among other men.

Messner (1992) further contends in his study that prior participation in sport not only provided men with status, it also helped them bond with other men. The bonding and connections of sport were especially salient for higher-status men who continued to “watch, talk about, and identify with sports long after their own disengagement from athletic careers.” Likewise, the men at KO formed bonds with other men at the gym. Andelman (1993:106) writes that “sports talk is the glue that holds many men's relationships together,” and here again knowledge of sport functions as cultural capital. The recreational boxers at KO were quick to point out how boxing became a conversation piece with their work colleagues, friends, and peers. Several boxers noted how they wanted their (mostly) male colleagues to know that they boxed. Members also reported that boxing talk was entrée into other sports conversations, which was a major part of “water cooler” socializing for men. Boxing thus facilitated male solidarity both in the gym and at work.

So, just as boys may benefit from their competitive and aggressive play learned on the playground and through sport, adult participation in sport may also produce unequal benefits for participants. Such participation may in fact provide men with

cultural capital that can be converted to social capital, which is critical for success in a male-dominated society (Lin 1998).

DEFENSIVE OTHERING AND THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Boxing provided women a source of enjoyment and satisfaction; it offered an excellent workout, provided an opportunity to be physically active, gave them a sense of self-efficacy, and allowed them to feel empowered by doing something deemed risky but in a relatively safe environment. Unlike the men who were hoping to construct, develop, or confirm their ascribed gender identity, the women were looking, in some ways at least, to distance themselves from it. By boxing, then, women were doing what men did—something symbolically masculine—and thereby negating and symbolically rejecting attributions of passivity, submissiveness, and fragility stereotypically associated with womanhood. For the women, too, boxing was a way to do identity work.

The physicality of boxing offered the women the opportunity to counteract what Connell (1987) refers to as “emphasized femininity.” The women, like the men, could signify a self that was tough and powerful through their participation in boxing. These women at KO wanted to show themselves and others that they couldn’t be categorized in traditional ways. In this way, they were resisting the dominant codes of behavior imposed on them as members of the female sex. Moreover, the women interviewed were quick to point out that most females weren’t cut out for the sport of boxing, reflecting a desire to see themselves as different from other women.

The women boxers at KO used gender stereotypes to describe other women. In disdaining other women as fragile and weak, the women boxers constructed themselves as different. This process—subordinates distancing themselves from other subordinates—is referred to as “defensive othering” by Schwalbe et al. (2000:422). Defensive othering, as an adaptive process, “is identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group”(Schwalbe et al. 2000:425). Moreover, this process “involves accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, ‘There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me’” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:425).

Schwalbe and his colleagues note how this process, like other forms of “othering,” creates, maintains, and reproduces inequality when subordinates distance themselves from their own group in an attempt to align with the dominant group. They also point out that defensive othering is a reaction to stereotypes and assumptions imposed by the dominant group in the larger society. This dynamic works in such a way that “when members of subordinate groups seek safety or advantage by othering those in their own group, the belief system that supports the dominant group’s claim to superiority is reinforced” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:425). Examples of this process from research cited by Schwalbe and his colleagues include how the homeless denigrate other homeless as “lazy bums” (Snow and Anderson 1987); how Irish immigrants distance themselves from the stereotypical Irish drunkards (Field 1994); and how women disparage other women at the workplace for being unattractive (Padavic 1991).

Yet, the defensive othering that took place at KO included an added dimension. It wasn't simply about women disparaging other women. At KO, it was vital for the women to remain "feminine" while acting "masculine." This was how the female boxers at KO could attempt to claim equality with the men: by distancing themselves from other women, but without embracing any sort of male identity. In other words, boxing was an opportunity to snub aspects of femininity, but not all of it.

Though there was resentment and resistance geared toward the stereotypical female, taking boxing too seriously or being overly physical was viewed negatively as well. For instance, several of the women at KO described the lone female competitor, Barbara, in this fashion—as "masculine-ish," "sort of butch," or "like a guy." The women at KO thus sought an experience that was seemingly contradictory, which makes this "defensive othering" process that much more complex. The women boxers at KO denigrated those who were too feminine ("barbies"), as well as those who acted too masculine ("butches"). The women thus had to find a narrow middle ground between the acceptable and the unacceptable. In doing so, they policed each other in maintaining gender identity boundaries.

Such policing—a routine part of the social construction of gender—takes on added importance when women participate in male-dominated sports. Halbert (1997), in her study of women professional boxers, found that women who boxed both reproduced aspects of masculine domination and also distanced themselves from the more traditional notions of femininity. Similarly, Lafferty and McKay (2004) argue that women who box are both enabling and constraining how women do gender, and this has likewise been

suggested in studies of women bodybuilders (Guthrie and Castelnuovo 1992,1999; Daniels 1992). Female rugby players also resist and comply with the dominant masculine ideology (Wheatley 1994). And when women participate in men's sports they still collide with notions of male superiority (Theborge 1997; Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998). This was certainly the case at KO Gym, where the women had to behave like men in order to gain status.

Such processes are also evident outside of sport. For instance, in her study of young women in gangs, Miller (2002) asserts that young women attempt to differentiate themselves from other women through their gang activity by crossing into "boys' terrain" (443). She notes that in these cases the young women embrace a masculine identity. Furthermore, girls in gangs were often seen by male gang members as "honorary" or "token" males, which the young women viewed as an enormous compliment. The young women also noted how an all-girl gang would be "silly" and that it was important for the girl gang members to be part of a male gang, since it took males to get respect as a real gang.

Similarly, Messerschmidt (1995) notes that girls in gangs valued traditional notions of femininity, as well as the physicality more typical of boy gang behavior. Girls in gangs engage in the physical violence that is found in boy gangs, since fighting, for the gang girls, establishes loyalty to the "hood" and therefore confers upon them respect. Messerschmidt (1995) refers to this as "bad-girl femininity." He notes that such behavior is masculine according to cultural conceptions, but he makes it clear that though they act out in traditionally masculine ways, they still "display themselves as

feminine in culturally appropriate ways” (Messerschmidt 1995: 183-184). Based on Miller’s and Messerschmidt’s accounts, I would argue that gang girls both defy and reaffirm the dominant gender ideology, and in doing so engage in defensive othering. These gang girls, as a subordinate group, “othered” girls in general, and in doing so only reinforced the notion of male superiority. This is precisely how defensive othering works to reproduce a larger system of inequality.

In the aforementioned research on both women in sport as well as women in gangs, it can be seen how women can resist the popular notions of gender and vie for acceptance by men by participating in what are perceived as male activities. In such cases the women can demonstrate to others that they are tough and strong. Yet, it also illustrates that women face tremendous pressure in balancing a gender identity as not too feminine or too masculine. Females may attempt to challenge assumptions of femininity by signifying these perceived masculine qualities as means of exerting and resisting social constraints and control. But, in attempting to assimilate to the dominant group, those in the subordinate group risk sanctions if they go too far—and it’s rarely clear where “too far” begins.

My research illustrates how women who attempt to disassociate themselves from negative “feminine” labels and defy the dominant gender ideology only reinforce the derogatory cultural representations of females on a larger scale. This defensive othering may be situationally advantageous for individuals, even as it disadvantages women as a group. Though these women boxers’ attempted to resist stereotypes of women as fragile and frail, their defensive othering implicitly reaffirmed those very

stereotypes. Additionally, as part of this distancing, women typically seek to construct an identity that is not too feminine and not too masculine. In each case, women reproduce gender inequality by both reinforcing the dominant essentialist conceptions of gender and buttressing the ideology of male superiority.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this dissertation suggest a strong connection between what took place in the gym for gym members and what went on in their lives outside the gym, especially in terms of their middle-class work. Even so, data about these connections was insufficiently detailed to specify the actual social-psychological processes occurring. I could not determine, for instance, whether any particular features of white-collar work threatened the men's gender identity. Nor could I specify how experiences within the family might have led the men to seek high-risk sports and adventure. Future research might explore these connections more closely. Studying the conditions under which men engage in compensatory displays of masculinity might yield further insights into men's violence, health, and economic achievement.

The core of this dissertation has been the masculinity of the boxing subculture at KO Gym. As such, the men were the main focus of my attention. Yet women were an important part of the story. For both women and men, emotion work and identity work were complicated by inter-gender matchups. Future research might profitably focus on these complications. How, for instance, is the intensity of competition negotiated in other mixed gender environments?

Of particular interest is how women gain identity rewards from participation in traditionally male—and highly masculinist—sports. How do women legitimize their participation in terms of their conceptions of gender? What problems and obstacles do they face? There is much more to be learned about these matters.

Finally, research on how middle-class masculinity is displayed and exhibited in a variety of settings can provide valuable comparisons to the findings here. This study demonstrates that the construction of masculinity in the gym is decidedly interactional. It depended on the shared definitions of the situation among the gym members. The middle-class men were able to frame their activity in such a way that it offered them identity rewards. Further research, then, could examine how this is done in other contexts.

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APPENDICES

INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS

*All names are pseudonyms.

+Denotes a person who competed in sanctioned events.

NAME*	AGE	GENDER	RACE	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	MARITAL STATUS
Heidi	22	Female	White	Some College	Student	Single
Wyatt	23	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Jake	43	Male	Black	B.A.	PR Media Relations	Single/Divorced
Harrison	34	Male	White	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Married
Ken	20	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Tom	35	Male	White	B.S	Computer Programmer	Married
Dean +	31	Male	Black	High School	Heating and AC Installer	Married
Dwight +	24	Male	Black	High School	Inventory Supply Clerk	Single
Mary +	25	Female	White	High School	Prep Cook	Single
Aaron +	26	Male	Black	A.A.	Unemployed	Single
Steven +	24	Male	White	High School	Security Guard	Single
Kyle	29	Male	White	B.A.	Manager— Furniture Store	Married
Butch	63	Male	White	High School	Retired Army/Computer Consultant	Married
Mickey	18	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Ronnie	26	Male	White	B.A.	Advertising Executive	Single
Rich	24	Male	White	High School	Food Server	Single
Jill	22	Female	White	B.A.	Graduate Student	Single
Stan	19	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
David	21	Male	Hispanic	High School	Laborer	Single
John	48	Male	White	M.D.	ER Doctor	Married
Donald	46	Male	White	M.A.	CEO Advertising Firm	Married
Andy	22	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Rick	44	Male	White	B.A.	Small Business Owner	Married
Greg +	25	Male	Black	Some College	Student/Bank Teller	Single

Lowell	26	Male	White	B.A.	Law Student	Single
Barbara	37	Female	White	High	Bartender	Single/Divorced

				School		
Trevor	25	Male	White	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Single
Julie	33	Female	White	B.A.	Customer Service—Computers	Single
Reed	29	Male	White	M.A.	Graduate Student	Married
Freddy +	27	Male	Black	High School	Loader—Party Supply	Married
Chad	42	Male	White	B.A.	Graphics Designer	Married
Brian	27	Male	White	B.A.	Financial Representative	Single
Adrian +	29	Female	Black	B.A.	Research Asst.	Single
Bob	23	Male	Black	B.S.	Software Engineer	Single
Randy	23	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Brad	26	Male	Asian	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Single
Jim	22	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Cliff	42	Male	White	B.A.	Mail Carrier	Single
Chuck	29	Male	White	High School	Heating and AC Installer	Married
Sidney	32	Male	White	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Married
Seth	37	Male	White	B.S.	Technology Consultant	Married
Isaac	28	Male	White	B.A.	Int'l Business Analyst	Single
Dylan	26	Male	White	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Single
Kevin	19	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Henry	30	Male	Black	High School	Caretaker—Adult Rehab	Married
Rex	30	Male	White	B.A.	Acct. Mgr—Computer Systems	Married
Vance	22	Male	White	Some College	Student	Single
Joshua	28	Male	White	B.S.	Computer Programmer	Married