Fighting to Survive: Class, Gender, and Ethnic Relations Among Boxers

Chris Dundee, a famous boxing promoter, once said, “Any man with a good trade isn’t about to get himself knocked on his butt to make a dollar” (in Messner, 1992, p. 82). What he meant was that middle- and upper-class males see no reason to have their brain cells destroyed in a quest to get ahead through a sport such as boxing. Of course, this is why nearly all boxers always come from the lowest and most economically desperate income groups in society and why boxing gyms are located in low-income neighbourhoods, especially low-income minority neighbourhoods, where desperation is often most intense and life piercing (Wacquant, 2004).

The dynamics of becoming and staying involved in boxing have been studied and described by French sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1992, 1995a, 1995b, 2004). As noted in chapter 7, Wacquant spent over three years training and hanging out at a boxing gym in a black ghetto area in Chicago. During that time, he documented the life experiences of fifty professional boxers, most of whom were African Americans. His analysis shows that the motivation to dedicate oneself to boxing can be explained only in terms of a combination of class, race, and gender relations. Statements by the boxers themselves illustrate the influence of this combination:

Right [in the area where I lived] it was definitely rough, it was dog-eat-dog. I had to be a mean dog . . . young guys wan’ed to take yer money and beat ya up an’ you jus’ had to fight or move out the neighbo’hood. I couldn’t move, so I had to start fightin’ (Wacquant, 1992, p. 229)

I used to fight a lot when I was younger anyway so, my father figure like, you know, [said] “If you gonna fight, well why don’t you take it to a gym where you gonna learn, you know, a little more basics to it, maybe make some money, go further and do somethin’ . . . insteada jus’ bein’ on the streets you know, and fightin’ for nothing’” (Wacquant, 1992, p. 229)

The alternative to boxing for young men in this area was often the violence of the streets. When Wacquant asked one boxer where he’d be today if he hadn’t started boxing, he answered with these words:

If it wasn’t for boxin’, I don’t know where I’d be . . . Prob’ly in prison or dead somewhere, you never know. I grew up in a tough neighbo’hood, so it’s good for me, at least, to think ‘bout what I do before I do it. To keep me outta the street, you know. The gym is a good place for me to be every day. Because when you’re in d’gym, you know where you are, you don’ have to worry about getting’ into trouble or getting shot at. (Wacquant, 2004, p. 239)

Wacquant explains that most boxers know they would not be boxing if they had not been born as poor minority persons or if they had excelled in school. A trainer-coach at the gym explained the connection between social class and boxing when he said, “Don’t nobody be out there fightin’ with an MBA” (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 521). Wacquant sees the men he studied as being tied to boxing in the form of a “coerced affection, a captive love, one ultimately born of racial and class necessity” (1995a, p. 521). Many of the boxers realized that, despite their personal commitment to boxing, their sport involved exploitation. As one boxer noted, “Fighters is whores and promoters is pimps, the way I sees it” (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 520).

When Wacquant asked one boxer what he would change in his life, the boxer’s answer represented the feelings of many of his peers at the gym:

I wish I was born taller, I wish I was born in a rich family, I . . . wish I was smart, an’ I had the brains to go to school an’ really become somebody real important. For me I mean I can’t stand the sport, I hate the sport, [but] it’s carved inside of me so I can’t let it go. (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 521)

Even though the boxers were attached to their craft, over 80 percent didn’t want their children to become boxers. For example, one said,
No, no fighter wants their son [to box], I mean . . . *that's the reason why you fight, so he won't be able to fight*. . . . It's too hard, jus' too damn hard. . . . If he could *hit the books* an' study an' you know, with me havin' a little background in school an' stuff, I could help him. My parents, I never had nobody helpin' me. (Wacquant, 1995a, p. 523)

These mixed feelings about boxing were pervasive; the men were simultaneously committed to and repulsed by their trade.

We can understand the sport participation of these men only in terms of the social-class contexts in which they lived their lives and how those contexts influenced their identities as black men. For them, boxing and the gym where they practise their craft provide a refuge from the violence, hopelessness, and indignity of the racism and poverty that framed their lives since birth. As a French sociologist looking at the United States, Wacquant concludes that being a young, poor, black man “*in America is no bed of roses*” (2004, p. 238). This, he says, is the major reason that they excel in the few sports in which they’ve had opportunities to play.