

Fast-track fisticuffs? An ethnographic exploration of time and white-collar boxing

International Review for the
Sociology of Sport
1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1012690218815139
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Abstract

Whilst white-collar boxing at first appears to be named according to the social class of its practitioners, this paper will argue that this initial appearance is misleading. Based on the analysis of 32 interviews and six months of ethnographic data collection at a boxing club in the English Midlands, it argues that white-collar boxers do not recognise the classed connotations of the term white-collar, to which sociologists tend to be accustomed. Within this lifeworld, white-collar has become a temporal signifier, referring to a version of the sport in which participation is for beginners and limited to eight weeks, culminating in a public boxing match in front of a large crowd. This eight-week participation model is outlined and identified as being drastically different from other forms of boxing, which are emblematic of modernity. White-collar boxing therefore provides entry into a wider discussion on the social construction of time. Acceleration and condensation of time are routinely discussed in this field, and it is suggested that a conceptual split between condensed and accelerated time allows for this white-collar boxing to be understood. Ultimately, white-collar boxing is theorised as the condensed reproduction of the idealised career of the professional boxer.

Keywords

acceleration, boxing, embodiment, ethnography, time, white-collar

Time is a central category for sociological theorisation, not least in the notion of acceleration (Giddens, 1990; Rosa, 2015). However, little of this theorisation is empirically-driven (Hsu and Elliot, 2015). Sport is an important site for the theorisation of time (Dunning, 1994; Woodward, 2013, 2017), and an important site for the study of embodiment (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007). There is little scholarship, however, that analyses acceleration in corporeal terms (Williams, 2014). This article therefore contributes to addressing ‘the dearth in empirical research’ (Wacjman, 2008: 73) informing theoretical debate of

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acceleration, and extends discussion of acceleration into the sociology of embodiment and sport. It does so by representing findings from an ethnography of a boxing club in The Midlands of England. This boxing club provides courses in a relatively recent¹ development in the sport, which operate according to a purposefully clipped temporality. This format is, misleadingly, referred to as white-collar boxing. The classed connotations that white-collar often implies are not evident in this context – though it is nonetheless how those involved in the sport refer to it.

This research is the first on this form of white-collar boxing and seeks to account for the phenomenon through ethnographic analysis. The temporality of white-collar boxing is an entry point into this exploration. Accordingly, it is necessary to discuss how time is approached here. The sociology of time is often concerned with how social life is temporally ordered, and how this order is experienced, embodied, (re)produced and changed through action (Adam, 1995; Luckmann, 1991). This article works within this remit: it discusses how white-collar boxing is temporally ordered, what this means in terms of embodiment and how this temporal ordering and embodiment differ from other forms of boxing. Additionally, following Mills's (2000) understanding of the intersection of biography and history, this article works on the assumption that changes in temporality at the micro level can be a signal of wider social change. Acceleration is an example of this: through analyses of the increasing pace of social life it is posited that we have surpassed modernity (e.g. Rosa, 2010). Building on all of the above, this article serves two purposes: the first is to explain that white-collar boxing is a practice, in part, defined by its time, and to elaborate on how the term white-collar is to be productively understood in this context as a temporal signifier, rather than as a class signifier. The second is to theorise the temporality of white-collar boxing in order to better understand the sport and, recursively, to contribute to broader debates on time and acceleration.

Boxing and modernity

Boxing is arguably the oldest of all sports, dating to at least 3000 BC (Boddy, 2008; Sugden, 1996). Equally, boxing as it is widely conducted today does not resemble boxing of antiquity, wherein pugilists fought bareknuckle or with weaponry attached to their hands (Boddy, 2008). Boxing, as we know it, is *modern*. Modernity is a contested category (e.g. Bhabra, 2007), but can be understood as a historical period, starting in the 19th century (Held, 1992) characterised by break from tradition, future-orientation and order-building according to scientific rationality. 'Stratified bodies with hierarchical chains of command, and generalized, abstract rules of action' (Wagner, 1994: 64) emerged in and through this mode, according to which social life became organised. Institutionalised sport can be understood in this way, and is an important feature of modernity (Gruneau, 2017). Most sports developed in modernity and (re)produced the principle of rationalised organisation (Malcolm et al., 2009), including the creation of abstract rules for conduct, and the establishment of administrative bodies (Dunning and Sheard, 2005). Boxing was the first sport to undergo this process (Dunning, 1994), of which the 1865 Queensberry Rules are a product. As Sugden (1996: 28) notes: 'regulations, governing bodies, structures of competition, weight classifications, rules governing equipment and so forth' were all established with the Queensberry Rules.

Crucially, modern organisational forms were facilitated by the invention of the mechanical clock, which, as Giddens (1990: 20) argues, provided ‘the gearing mechanisms for... modern social life’, and importantly in this respect, in addition to Sugden’s list, time limits were also introduced to boxing under these rules, in terms of round duration and number (Boddy, 2008). Boxing contributed to the production of modernity as it was produced by it, partly through re-producing clock time as a principle of social organisation.

Whilst boxing competition involves two people fist-fighting, training in the gym encompasses a range of activities. Sparring approximately reproduces the conditions of a boxing match, though with power and competitive streak usually reduced. This is, however, only one aspect of training, and much boxing training does not involve physical contact with others (Trimbur, 2013). Training with punchbags, shadowboxing and skipping, form key components of boxing training, all of which are conducted according to the clock (cf Beauchez, 2018a). Ethnographic accounts of boxing clubs are littered with extracts of coaches shouting ‘Time!’ (e.g. Lennox, 2012; Sugden, 1985) indicating to those training when to start and stop their exercises in relation to the clock. The individual, temporally-strict training session can be situated within a wider routinised and repetitive training regime (Woodward, 2014). Through such action, one develops a pugilistic habitus: a set of acquired dispositions that corporeally render one capable of fighting proficiently (Wacquant, 2004). Through repeated training, day in day out, knowledge is engrained in the body and one becomes a boxer.

Boxing can therefore be profitably understood in terms of career. Career implies development over time (Goffman, 1959), and as Wacquant (1995: 504) notes, it takes

years of arduous and intensive training... to acquire proper command of the game. Most trainers estimate that a minimum of three to four years are necessary to produce a proficient amateur fighter and an additional three years to mold a competent pro.

Whilst this statement is initially useful for the understanding that boxing is a long-term career, it is also perhaps overly-simplistic. Sugden, for instance, does not provide such a definite time-frame in which a boxing career can be forged, and implies that it can take longer than six years to become a professional boxer, as is Wacquant’s suggestion: ‘the age range of the juniors who frequent the [boxing gym] is somewhere between ten and sixteen, the point at which a boxer must either become an amateur or give up the sport’ (Sugden, 1985: 201). Nonetheless, between Sugden and Wacquant, it can be understood that long-term engagement in the sport is required to become a pugilist.

Boxers are renowned for being monastic in their training, this monasticism being underpinned by an acceptance and understanding of delayed gratification (Wacquant, 1995, 2004; Woodward, 2007). Equally, whilst boxing ‘promises’ (Wacquant, 2004: 40) success, there is only ‘a small minority of champions who share the limelight’ (Beauchez, 2018b: 308). However, pervading the sport is the idea that through boxing, biography can be constructed as successful through regimented training, over the course of many years, according to a strict temporal pattern. For its various related temporalities, all of which derive from the time-structure of modernity, boxing is the example of modern sport *par excellence*.

The forms of white-collar boxing and their time

Through the above, I have argued that time is highly significant to the theorisation of boxing. Boxing and modernisation have a symbiotic relationship: boxing promulgated modernity as it was produced by it. Whilst time is durable, it is nonetheless socially constructed (Luckmann, 1991), and 'life, it seems, is speeding up' (Williams, 2011: 2), to the extent that it is variously argued that modernity has been surpassed (e.g. Bauman, 2003; Nowotny, 1994; Rosa et al., 2017). There are, of course, many debates surrounding the exactitudes of this claim, though within such debates there is little disagreement over acceleration per se (Wacjman, 2008). One consequence of this acceleration is a demand for instantaneousness (Adam, 2004; Agger, 2004): 'delay of gratification' is now 'out of fashion' (Bauman, 2003: 23). What, then, might this accelerative mode mean for boxing, which requires delay of gratification and years of training in order to develop skills enough to count as competent? Currently, there is little understanding of what accelerated environments mean in terms of embodiment through which to approach this question. Where sport sociologists have discussed changes in temporality in sport (e.g. Baerg, 2017; English, 2011; Woodward, 2013), what these changes might mean in embodied terms is unaddressed. Moreover, in a recent collection on the *Sociology of Speed* (Wacjman and Dodd, 2017), to which many esteemed thinkers have contributed (e.g. Sassen, Urry, Du Gay), there are only passing references to the body. In other words, whilst it is thoroughly rehearsed that time is reproduced through bodily action, and temporality becomes embodied (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Christensen et al., 2001; Narvaez, 2006; Williams, 2011), there is little understanding of what changes in temporal mode mean in terms of embodied knowledge acquisition and performance.

Change in economic mode – the shift from production to consumption, resulting in the construction of a post-industrial society – is an important way in which acceleration is narrated (e.g. Bauman, 2017; Rosa et al., 2017). There are certainly post-industrial developments in boxing, the emergence of white-collar boxing being a prime example of this (Trimbur, 2013). Trimbur's account centres on the birthplace of white-collar boxing, a well-known boxing gym (Gleason's) in the City of New York (NYC). There, white-collar boxing is undertaken by, for instance, bankers, celebrities and lawyers, and is deliberately named in order to differentiate its clientele from other boxers at the gym, who tend to be working class.² For Trimbur (2013: 1) 'the decline in manufacturing and the acceleration of the FIRE economy – finance, insurance, real estate – in urban centres' meant that many boxing gyms in NYC closed down, being unable 'to keep up with the pace of inflation, meet insurance premiums, accommodate rising real estate prices and survive processes of gentrification' (Trimbur, 2013: 7–8). Effectively, Gleason's 'was able to survive' (Trimbur, 2013: 11) through producing a form of the sport catering for the primary benefactors of post-industrial FIRE economy.

Trimbur does not devote much attention to temporality in this context, though does note that white-collar boxers may attend three-day 'fantasy boxing camps' in remote, rural retreats wherein they receive an indoctrination to the sweet science 'from ex-world champions' (Trimbur, 2013: 125). That these short-term camps occur within a post-industrial context, does go some way to suggest that the acceleration has led to developments in boxing time. That white-collar boxing is described by Trimbur (2013: 133) as

‘brutal and bloody’ and that white-collar boxers possess ‘little skill’ (Trimbur, 2013: 134) can be taken as an initial suggestion that being ordered according to post-industrial time impacts upon the ability to develop a pugilistic habitus.

Beyond Trimbur’s account, however, there is little scholarship upon which to draw in order to understand this version of the sport and its temporality, which this research sought to address. Crucially, based on this research, it can be noted that in the UK, unlike Trimbur’s context, white-collar boxing does not necessarily accurately signify the social class of practitioners. A central finding of the research is therefore that there are two different forms of white-collar boxing, which are qualitatively different, particularly in terms of social class, whilst sharing the same name. To provide initial evidence of this, whereas the white-collar boxing in Trimbur’s (2013) research is exclusionary on class lines, and costs upwards of US\$100 per training session (approximately £75) which ensures this exclusion, the white-collar boxing researched here is free at the point of participation and paid for through ticket sales to fights, meaning that there is no immediately exclusionary economic cost. Moreover, most participants did not understand the term white-collar to be a signifier of social class, and those who did rejected this meaning, finding it to be inapplicable to their white-collar boxing experience.

Importantly, through the research, white-collar boxing is identified entailing cohorts of beginners undertaking a crash course in the sport, lasting for a total of eight weeks and culminating in a public boxing match in a glamorous venue. As I have argued in this section, boxing is important to consider in terms of time and we know little about white-collar boxing in scholarly terms. Following this, in the subsequent sections, based on thematic analysis of qualitative data, I will argue that a temporal analysis significantly contributes to understanding this version of boxing. Henceforth, this article explores white-collar boxing in terms of time, and in doing so makes a contribution to both knowledge on boxing and knowledge on time.

Methodology

The remainder of this article is based on an ethnography of a boxing gym in the Midlands: Shadcote Boxing Club (a pseudonym, as per all other names in this article). Shadcote Boxing Club specifically caters for white-collar boxing. As described above, white-collar boxing is conducted according to eight-week cycles. Two cohorts were observed for the duration of their eight-week courses, and there were two one-month periods between courses in which there were no courses running. The ethnography commenced as an eight-week course was ending and there was therefore a gap of one month prior to the first course observed. Overall, the ethnography lasted six months, and mainly comprised observation in the gym. Further field visits were made to four public fight nights, two of which corresponded to the two courses observed.

Given the temporal form of white-collar boxing, participants’ presence at the boxing club was limited to two months and, accordingly, participants were opportunistically selected. Similarly, participants were interviewed at different stages in the eight-week courses. Of the 32 participants interviewed, there were 27 men and five women. As per the majority of boxing environments, Shadcote was mostly populated by men (cf Matthews, 2016). Participants were overwhelmingly English and white. Englishness

– rather than the broader category of Britishness – was important facet of identity within the gym, hence this description. All participants were adults, with most participants being in their 20s and 30s. Crucially, no participants occupied class positions equivalent to those occupied by white-collar boxers in Trimbur's (2013) research. Indeed, were one to adopt a recent model for class analysis (Savage et al., 2015), some participants would be locatable within 'the precariat' (Savage et al., 2015: 333). As per most boxing environments (Woodward, 2014), Shadcote is a working-class space.

Life history interviews were conducted, allowing for participants to recount their understanding of their own being in the world with reference to the past, experience of the present and anticipations for the future (Atkinson, 1998). Similarly, the ethnography was undertaken with sensitivity for the temporality of the sport. To this extent, the ethnographic dataset was collected in and represents the 'real time' (Woodward, 2013: 6) of white-collar boxing: the final entry in my field diary, which signals the end of data collection, pertains to the fight night which doubled as the end of the second white-collar boxing cycle observed. Data were thematically analysed and situated in relation to existing scholarship on boxing and time, and through this process an inductive theory of white-collar boxing, which speaks to wider theory on the sociology of time, was produced. More generally, my concern was with 'grasping the point or meaning of what is being done or said' (Winch, 1990: 115) in this context. As counter-intuitive as this might first sound, when the term 'white-collar boxing' is used at Shadcote, it is not meant to signify social class. One of the principles of ethnography is that 'You do not assume that you know everything in advance' (Shweder, 1997: 153), and I would invite readers to remember this: scholarly pre-conceptualisations of the meaning of the term white-collar itself must not be assumed to have purchase in this context.

There are many ways of being involved in boxing clubs as research settings (Matthews, 2018). During this research, I occupied positions which could be characterised as ranging between pure observer and pure participant (Gold, 1958). Had I not previously been a member of the club, and a young, physically fit man, full participation and the liberty to switch between these positions would arguably not have been possible. Moreover, as most participants had been present at the club for under eight weeks, and I had been a club member for over two years at the start of the research, I was deemed by most an 'insider', which certainly assisted with access on an ongoing basis. This does not mean, however, that I always felt like an insider: whilst I do not abhor boxing, and I often actively enjoy training, I can never be entirely at ease with the sport, largely for the inequalities it reproduces (cf Sugden, 1996: chapter six). This ambivalence can be understood as transcending the dualism of insider and outsider (Woodward, 2008). Experiential knowledge of the research site, in conjunction with scholarly knowledge of boxing, however, does facilitate sociology, in terms of examining the micro as it intersects with the macro. An account such as this one could not be produced with lived experience or scholarly knowledge alone.

As it is for all qualitative research (Hammersley, 2008) the generalisability of this ethnography is questionable. However, it can be noted that the temporally-clipped format for boxing discussed here is not limited to Shadcote Boxing Club. Shadcote is sedimented within a network of boxing clubs that exists beyond it, spanning the UK, which promotes this boxing format. To this extent, two fieldwork visits were made to fight nights run by boxing clubs other than Shadcote, and the fighters at these events had

undertaken an eight-week training programme. These fight nights served the same purpose as those organised by Shadcote, discussed further at a later point in this article. In other words, the eight-week format discussed in this article is an emergent temporal form beyond the ethnographic research context.

White-collar boxing as a temporal signifier

Though this article is primarily concerned with time, it is important to elaborate upon how white-collar boxing has a misleading name. The term white-collar is used by participants to refer to the form of boxing in which they participate and, similarly, they refer to themselves and each other as white-collar boxers. However, white-collar boxers do not understand this term to be bestowed with meaning in terms of social class. When white-collar boxers do understand white-collar to have class connotations beyond the context of boxing, this meaning is rejected and understood as inapplicable to the context of white-collar boxing at Shadcote. The following interview extract from one white-collar boxer, Jez, can be taken as initial evidence of this:

Interviewer: So, white-collar, in every day kind of speak, outside of boxing, do you know what that means?

Jez: People who work in an office, int it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jez: Yeah, I'm more of a blue-collar [...] Like manual trade.

Jez was one of eight interviewees to recognise the wider meaning of the term white-collar but reject this as being applicable to the Shadcote context. All other participants, when asked in interview about the meaning of the term white-collar boxing did not answer in terms of social class at all. None of the 32 interview participants found the term white-collar boxing to accurately describe their sport in terms of social class.

Whilst language requires shared understanding, and in sociological contexts white-collar typically refers to a classed form of employment, in specific contexts words can become meaningful in different ways. When white-collar boxers at Shadcote use the term white-collar, they mean to make a signification in terms of time. That is, when the term white-collar is used by those participating in white-collar boxing at Shadcote, what is being referred to is a form of boxing for beginners, in which participation is limited to eight weeks. The eight-week programme provides a key referent through which participants discuss the sport, as the following quotations attest:

Anthony: I see it [white-collar boxing] as an introduction to boxing, so like, people that do their eight weeks.

Lucy: I'd had three months PT [personal training] purely focused on strength training and I thought 'well, it's eight weeks' training, um, let's see if I can convert all that previous fitness into the, more of the endurance side of things the um being able to last three rounds [of boxing]'.

Gary: For me, it [white-collar boxing] is what it states, so it's for people that haven't boxed before with limited experience to go through an eight-week training programme and then to have a boxing bout at the end of it.

The eight-week timeframe emerged as a theme not only in relation to how participants define and characterise the sport when actively asked to do so, but as a way in which participants discuss and understand their experience of the sport more generally. For instance, below, Ash discusses his eagerness to win his forthcoming fight, Craig discusses why he values sparring as an aspect of training, and Jack discusses his experience of being exhausted in the ring during fight night, and all of these make reference to the eight-week model.

Ash: I wanna win. I'm here to win. I don't wanna come in all not really bothered. I'm here to win, I want to win. I wanna win my fight, definitely. I wanna win.

Interviewer: Yeah? Why is that something that's important to you?

Ash: I'll be disappointed if I don't. I've put hard effort, *hard effort in for these eight weeks*. I don't wanna lose. I'll be very disappointed in myself. Very.

Interviewer: and why is it that you think you like sparring, sparring in particular?

Craig: ... I dunno, cos it is what you are training to do, I know the pads and the classes are for the fitness, but, you are trainin' to fight. Really, it is a little bit more than fitness, so to get in there, have a practice, but it's necessity as well, when you sign up to these white collars. *Can't just hit a pad for eight weeks*.

Jack: I remember going back into the corner at the end of the second round and my cornerman [...] was telling me that I was working off my jab too much and to start throwing some combinations [he said to me:] *'you've trained eight weeks for this, you've got nothing to lose now, now you're in your last round, so go out and give it some'*.

Rather than being defined by its participation in terms of social class, as its name might initially seem to imply, white-collar boxing can be productively understood as being understood by its temporality. Whilst in the above extracts different facets of white-collar boxing are being discussed, all of these participants anchor their experiences in relation to the eight-week period. That is, centring on time provides an entry point through which to understand the sport, which is important to establish, given its name is initially misleading.

There are other themes, such as white-collar boxing being for beginners (which can be understood in relation to the temporality discussed here, in that it implies a career stage, and is present, for instance, in the above extract from Anthony) and being perceived as a way to get fit whilst punching people (present, for instance, in the extracts from Lucy and Craig) which could also be useful in terms of understanding white-collar boxing. Equally, these themes emerge in relation to the eight-week model, which I argue provides a frame through which the sport should be understood. Simply put, most, if not

all boxing entails getting fit and punching people, whereas a particularity of white-collar boxing is its strictly-defined period for engagement. Whereas 'anti-immediate gratification' (Wacquant, 2004: 143) is required in amateur and professional boxing, white-collar boxing does not include or require such an understanding, as will now be further discussed.

Beginner to winner?

Through analysis of ethnographic data, the eight-week white-collar boxing process can be reconstructed. Doing so allows entry into dialogue with wider theory on time, acceleration and embodiment. Overall, it is argued that white-collar boxing equates to the idealised career of the professional boxer being reproduced and 'condensed' (Rosa, 2015: 223) into a two-month timeframe. However, it is not per se an accelerated project, even if initially it might be understood as presenting in this way. Indeed, through its analysis, theory on the bodily limits of accelerated knowledge acquisition can be produced, and a conceptual split between condensed time and acceleration is accordingly proffered.

For eight weeks, three times per week, the neophyte boxers train at Shadcote Boxing Club. Each training session lasts 90 minutes. For the duration of the course, most training sessions take the following approximate form: a 10-minute warm-up comprising calisthenic exercises, an hour of pad work, followed by a 15-minute circuit of various different exercises (e.g. press-ups, medicine ball training, step-ups) and finally, five minutes of sit-ups. Pad work entails a person wearing a pair of mitts that act as targets for another to punch. At Shadcote, pad work is undertaken in rounds, which reflects the format of the fight that white-collars at Shadcote are due to undertake: a three-round fight, with each round being two minutes long, with a minute in between each round. Though the exact length of time spent on each activity described above differs from session to session this is the general pattern of training, and pad work always forms the majority of the session. Boxing matches tend to be physically intense and tiring, and this training format equates to a bid to produce bodies capable of inflicting and sustaining damaging blows over three, two-minute rounds in the limited time of eight weeks.

Though differing drastically in terms of the social class of participants, white-collar boxing at Shadcote in this respect resembles white-collar boxing at Gleason's: 'the more aggressive and enchanting practices of boxing' (Trimbur, 2013: 134) are undertaken, and an intensive workout is provided, without much development of the finer craft of the sport. There is less emphasis on the 'boring components' (Trimbur, 2013: 134) of training (such as shadowboxing and skipping), which enable those who undertake them to embody pugilistic knowledge, providing the practitioner with the bodily means to sustain a boxing career. White-collar boxers, engaged in a process wherein transit from beginner to winner is offered via eight weeks of participation in a limited repertoire of training techniques, cannot come to embody the skills required to become proficient in the sport.

From the fourth week onward, pairs of white-collars are pulled out of the main training session in order to spar. Sparring exists for the purpose of training for the fight, but here is also directly implicated in the match-making process. Whereas in amateur and

professional boxing, matches are made between fighters from different gyms, and this match-making occurs based on fight record and weight, this is not the case in white-collar boxing. Matches are not made according to weight but on ability, and potential matchups are assessed by coaching staff. That this is the purpose of sparring is not explicated to the white-collars, and who will be fighting who remains a secret until the advent of fight night, at the weigh-in.

The final week of training ends with a weigh-in. Whereas weigh-ins are a necessary component of amateur and professional boxing, undertaken to ensure that matches are made between fighters of the same weight category, this is not the case for white-collar boxing. Fighters are rather matched according to ability through observations of sparring. When asked about the purpose of the weigh-in, despite white-collar boxing matches not being made on weight, one of the coaches noted in interview:

it's [the weigh-in is] purely for the overall window-dressing of the event. Give them the feeling that they're doing, they've done the training, they've had the weigh-in, they're having a fight.

The white-collar weigh-ins are a reproduction of a high-end professional boxing weigh-in, usually the reserve of those professional boxers at the peak of their long-term careers, but here undertaken by those who have participated in the sport for all of eight-weeks.

Fight night is the pinnacle of the white-collar boxing experience and is designed to resemble high-level professional boxing events. All of the fight nights attended as part of this research were at conference facilities. Two of these facilities were within professional-level soccer stadia, and two were in upmarket hotels. The audience at fight night are required to wear black tie, and at the events attended during fieldwork, the audience were between 1000 and 3000 in number. Professional photographers are present, in order to capture the white-collars as they enter the ring. As one white-collar, Robert, noted, in anticipation of fight night:

It's like the real thing innit really? Um, it's not like a school playground fight where everyone's just screaming and shouting, it's organised, and there's lights flashing and there's music, people chanting, and it's good. You got your own kit on as well, your own colours [...] the gloves and stuff [...] It's gonna be good. It's gonna be explosive. [...] This is a one-time thing for me, like I said, so I'm gonna go out with a bang.

The inclusion of, music, flashing lights, and a large, smartly-dressed crowd, reproduces what Woodward (2007: 112) has termed the 'razzamatazz' of professional boxing. Indeed, were you to walk into a white-collar boxing fight night by mistake, you could be forgiven for thinking that you were at a high-level professional boxing match: they are designed to appear as if it were the case.

The fights themselves are, however, of a low level in terms of skill: having trained for only eight weeks, the white-collar boxers, despite being surrounded by an infrastructure that is designed to provide the appearance of being otherwise, are beginners. Reflecting on their experiences of the boxing matches at fight night, participants referred to the presence of fighting, but the absence of boxing:

James: it was like a pub fight to be honest, it was just arms, everywhere, d'you know what I mean? There wasn't any really boxing about it, it was just a fight.

Nev: The fight itself, it felt like a bloody street fight.

Having trained for only eight weeks, the limited pugilistic knowledge of white-collar boxers shows in action. A commitment to training in the sport, according to a strict regimen, and over the long term is required in order to allow for the embodiment of pugilistic knowledge sufficient enough to count as a competent boxer, let alone a champion (Sugden, 1985; Wacquant, 1995), and such training is not undertaken by the white-collar boxers. Nonetheless, after stating that his boxing match was like a street fight Nev noted that he 'felt like Rocky' (Nev, interview). Whereas the promise of professional boxing is often unkept, though 'every boxer clings to the self-serving notion that he will be the individual exception to the collective rule' (Wacquant, 2001: 189), white-collar boxers *always* finish their eight-week boxing career with participation in a boxing match in a glamorous location, in front of a large, paying crowd, thereby participating in an event that is beyond the reach of many professionals (cf Beauchez, 2018b). With the end of fight night, the white-collar boxing process is complete. Following this, there is a gap of approximately one month and the process described above is repeated with a new intake of white-collar boxers. In other words, white-collar boxing entails consuming the experience of a professional boxing career, from start to finish, despite not having embodied through practice the knowledge to be a professional.

For the vast majority of the history of boxing, eight-week episodes for participation did not exist, and in this way white-collar boxing can be understood as emblematic of a wider change in terms of the social construction of time. White-collar boxing initially appears to be, and is designed to be experienced as, an accelerative process. Ethnographic analysis, however, raises broader questions on acceleration and corporeality, hitherto unexplored by scholars working in either field (e.g. Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007; Wacjman and Dodd, 2017). Principally, whilst white-collar boxing is a condensed, short-term experience, designed to facilitate the feeling of transit to professional boxing star in eight weeks, with this condensation, the possibility to accumulate and embody knowledge enough to box proficiently is diminished. In this way, condensation of time and acceleration are decoupled as concepts, and this decoupling is achieved through focusing on the body.

Though this version of boxing is different from amateur and professional boxing, particularly in terms of length of participation, it can nonetheless be understood in relation to amateur and professional boxing, and through doing so the separation of condensed time and acceleration can be further understood. To this end, one of the coaches, Rick, noted:

Rick: Whereas I think the ABA [Amateur Boxing Association] thing has got a long feel to it, a long progression, that progresses them through the ranks from a young person, into a big world of professional boxing later on, where the white-collar will access it, I'd like to say fast-track it. It's not, is it. It's a different essence. It's a different everything.

Rick could not quite articulate the 'different essence' of white-collar boxing in comparison to amateur boxing, though he notes the different time-scale is of importance here. Amateur boxing, the first sport to undergo the process of modernisation (Dunning, 1994),

has ‘a long feel to it’ for Rick. Indeed, amateur and professional boxing can be understood on a continuum (Woodward, 2014), and boxing can be understood as a career developed through years of engagement (Sugden, 1985; Wacquant, 2004). By contrast it can be noted that white-collar boxing has a short feel to it. Rick’s immediate choice of words to describe white-collar boxing was ‘fast-track’ but he changed his mind. Rick was not contesting whether white-collar boxing is undertaken for a different duration than other forms of boxing. Rather, the above can be read in the following way: the quantitative time difference in terms of engagement in white-collar boxing compared to amateur and professional boxing entails qualitative ontological difference. White-collar boxing draws upon and aims to reproduce the career of the boxer in idealised terms in a short-time frame, it does amount to the compression of time, but does not fast-track *per se*, that is accelerate, participants into the professional ranks.

Conclusion

Whereas research and scholarship to date presents white-collar boxing as necessarily the preserve of an elite class (Trimbur, 2013), this research suggests that this arrangement is not universal. White-collar boxing should be understood as an umbrella term for disparate boxing practices, which do not always reflect the meaning of the wider meaning term as regards social class. White-collar boxers at Shadcode are not locatable in the same class positions as those boxing in NYC, and whilst referring to themselves as white-collar boxers actively reject the classed meaning of the term white-collar. Whereas white-collar tends to refer to a classed form of employment (Mills, 2002), within the lifeworld of white-collar boxing, the term has become a temporal signifier. The boxers in this research use the term white-collar to refer to the sport in which they participate, but when they do so, they do not mean to make a signification in terms of their social class. At Shadcode, white-collar boxing means boxing for beginners, undertaken according to a strict, eight-week schedule.

Situated in relation to the boxing of modernity (cf Boddy, 2008; Sugden, 1996), this temporality is highly unusual. Whereas boxing has been understood as a long-term project and career (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 2004; Woodward, 2007), white-collar boxing has a deliberately clipped temporal limit for engagement which stands in distinction to this understanding. This temporality can be located within wider changes in the social construction of time (e.g. Rosa, 2010). White-collar boxing is the condensed reproduction of the long-term career of the professional boxer, undertaken with an eight-week timeframe. To this extent, whilst the temporality of white-collar boxing is different from professional boxing, it is related to it: it reproduces the idealised professional boxing career for short-term consumption. Broadening scope here, further research might be conducted on what this arrangement means in terms of commodification and professional boxing. Professional boxers’ bodies are commodified (Wacquant, 2001; Woodward, 2014), and this arguably presents a new form of commodification of the professional boxer, via the sale of the experience of their career in a quickly consumable – though effectively, as I have argued, *ersatz* – form.

In being a short-term experience, white-collar boxing is ontologically distinct from other forms of boxing, and this differing ontology rests upon the lack of pugilistic knowledge that

white-collar boxers are able to embody. Through the example of white-collar boxing, there is a theoretical point to be made, namely, the corporeal limits to acceleration. In requiring knowledge to be engrained to the point of it becoming second nature, the development of a pugilistic habitus cannot be accelerated. White-collar boxing time, however, can still be understood as condensed. Conceptually separating condensed time and acceleration allows for a greater understanding of the sport, and this is achieved through focusing on embodied practice. Discussions of time in the sociology of sport have not considered the ramifications of accelerated time in terms of embodiment (e.g. Woodward, 2013), nor is the separation of condensed and accelerated time considered in major literature on time and acceleration (e.g. Wacjman and Dodd, 2017). Whilst the embodied practice in focus here has been white-collar boxing, this notion is applicable to many areas of social life, in which skilled practice is a requirement: it might be, as it is in white-collar boxing, that condensing time is not accelerative at all once the body is brought into the frame.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lisa Warwick, John Holmwood, and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this article. All faults, however, are solely my responsibility.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant Number ES/J500100/1]

Notes

1. The research site – Shadcote Boxing Club – has engaged in white-collar boxing since approximately 2005 and can be considered ahead of the curve in terms of clubs in the UK providing this form for engagement. Crucially, as this article argues, whilst practices referred to as white-collar boxing have existed since the 1980s and emerged in New York City (cf Trimbур, 2013), there is more than one form practice referred to by the term. The white-collar boxing in this research is a different phenomenon and has not existed for as long as the white-collar boxing in NYC.
2. The relationship between class and boxing has been discussed at length elsewhere (e.g. Woodward, 2014). Notably, whilst boxing has overwhelmingly been understood as a ‘sport of the poor’ (Woodward, 2014: 61), this arrangement is not universal: amateur boxing was established as a practice by the Marquis of Queensberry – an Etonian – and undertaken by upper and middle-class men. To clarify, however, amateur boxers of the aristocracy are not conceptualised here as white-collar boxers, nor is public school boxing to be understood as white-collar boxing. Neither white-collar nor white-collar boxing were used as terms at the ‘first order’ level in these contexts (cf Schutz, 1953), principally as the term white-collar did not exist during the 1850s: it entered language in order to refer to a form of work emergent in the mid-20th century (Mills, 2002). When white-collar boxing is referred to in this article, it reflects practices that are referred to in this way in the first order. However, this is not to say that all uses of the term white-collar boxing at first order level, between contexts, necessarily signify the same phenomena.

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