Reflecting on Practices

New Directions for Spatial Theories

Edited by Friederike Landau-Donnelly,
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agenda
publishing

First published in 2024 by Agenda Publishing

Agenda Publishing Limited
PO Box 185
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE20 2DH
www.agendapub.com

ISBN 978-1-78821-574-9

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK
Printed and bound in the UK by 4edge

CHAPTER 2

SPORTS AND SPACE INVADERS: PRACTICE-THEORETICAL TOOLS TO UNDERSTAND CHANGE TOWARDS INCLUSION

Hanna Carlsson

> I always liked the fact that I changed minds when I was in the ring boxing. I remember there was a coach when I boxed when I was younger and he would say: "I would never have females in my gym." Then he saw me boxing, and he was like, "Wow, you'd beat some of my lads; I am going to let girls train in the gym now", and it was just so, so nice to hear.
>
> Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams,
> BBC *Extra Time*, 28 April 2015

Women are now able to participate in spaces they used to be excluded from. The world of professional sports is one such example, where women are measuring their power against each other on football fields and rugby pitches and in boxing rings. Only a couple of decades ago female competition in these spaces was unthinkable, and in some cases even forbidden. In her seminal book titled *Space Invaders: Bodies, Gender and Race out of Place*, Nirmal Puwar argues that "the arrival of women and racialized minorities in spaces from which they have been historically or conceptually excluded is an illuminating paradox. It is illuminating because it sheds light on how spaces have been formed through what has been constructed out. And it is intriguing because it is a moment of change" (Puwar 2004: 1).

Puwar and other scholars with an interest in the dynamics of exclusion have shown that simply being *allowed* into a place does not mean that the place has become more inclusive in meaningful ways. Drawing on Massey (1994), Puwar makes the point that social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy (Puwar 2004: 8). Both bodies and spaces are socially and politically constructed, and have histories that influence what meaning is

attached to a particular body in a particular space. Even though the rules of a space change, the norms about which bodies fit into it may stay the same. As a result, those that do not fit the somatic norm are seen by others as "space invaders" and excluded, for example through both deliberate and unconscious acts of racism and sexism (Ahmed 2012; Puwar 2004; Tjønndal 2019).

In light of such evidence, the reader may ask themselves to what extent space invaders can be agents of change. As the aforementioned quote from the interview with boxer and Olympic gold medallist Nicola Adams suggests, they certainly can be. Adams, and many other boxers, have reported that seeing women box and/or spar with other women has "changed minds" by challenging stereotypes that boxing is a men's sport (see, for example, Carlsson 2017 and Channon 2012). This has, in turn, opened gym spaces and arenas to women[1] as well as spaces they were traditionally unable to compete in, such as the Olympic Games.

The aim of this chapter is to present a theoretical framework that helps scholars to analyse how, and under which conditions, space invaders can become agents of change towards inclusion within a global "landscape of practices" (Carlsson 2022). In setting out this theoretical framework, I draw together insights from critical diversity scholars and relational geographers investigating the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in spaces (see, for example, Simonsen 2016 and Massey 2005) and practice theorists focused on inclusion (Janssens & Steyaert 2020; van Eck 2022) and social change (Schatzki 2019; Nicolini 2010; Watson 2017). I apply this framework to women's boxing.

The reason I have chosen women's boxing to develop this theory of social change is as personal as it is scholarly: I was a competitive boxer from 2010 to 2015, and thereafter engaged in the sport recreationally in three different countries (Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands). This engagement means that I have built up a familiarity with the boxing world as an athlete, a fan and a friend of coaches and other athletes. As a scholar, I have also conducted a study on gender construction in the boxing gym using the auto-ethnographic method of apprenticeship (Carlsson 2017). Together with examples from newspaper articles and scholarly literature published between 2002 and 2022, these experiences underpin the analysis.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First I review the geographical and practice-theoretical literature on places and practices of inclusion and exclusion. In particular, I bring together insights from Doreen Massey's (2005) relational approach to space, Theodore Schatzki's (2001, 2019) site ontology, Maddy Janssens's and Chris Steyart's (2020) "sites of diversalizing" and Matt

1. Exhibition bouts between elite women amateur boxers for the Olympic Committee was an integral part of the campaign to include women's boxing in the 2012 Olympics.

Watson's (2017) practice-theoretical take on the sociology of translation to understand the spatial dynamics of practices of exclusion. Thereafter I briefly sketch how the sport of boxing has evolved in the twenty-first century relative to the inclusion of women. Having set the scene, I then apply a practice-theoretical lens to concrete events in boxing such as the Olympic Games.

I first describe how boxing gyms become "sites of diversalizing" (as defined by Janssens & Steyaert 2020). Then I show how women's acquirement of "pugilistic capital" (Wacquant 1995), the embodied abilities and tendencies to win boxing competitions, transforms socio-spatial relationships in the gym. Having analysed events in the gym, I move the focus to sites of competition and highlight how participation in such events allows women to become intermediaries of a new "somatic" norm (Puwar 2021). Using the notion of "centres of legitimization and distribution" and "bandwagons of change" (Nicolini 2010), I make the case that we best understand transformations towards equality, such as the ones in boxing, as an accumulative and circulatory process, which can begin in peripheries of a nexus of practices and become accelerated when it reaches its centre. Last, I highlight that, because of the horizontal nature of such transformation, the process of change is likely to be spatially and temporally uneven. The chapter concludes that the practice-theoretical framework presented can help us to take seriously the hard-won achievements of "space invaders", without resorting to the naivety of "happy diversity talk"[2] (Ahmed 2007; see also Lagendijk and Wiering, Chapter 3 in this volume).

SITE ONTOLOGIES OF IN/EXCLUSION

Within the discipline of human geography, feminist geographers have theorized that places are not neutral but sites in which unequal gendered and racialized social orders are reproduced (Massey 1994). Through studies of hardcore body-building gyms (Johnston 1996), rugby clubs (van Campenhout & van Hoven 2014), karate clubs (Maclean 2019) and public spaces in general (Simonsen 2016; see also Schapendonk, Chapter 6 in this volume), geographers have uncovered the everyday practices through which places exclude some individuals while including others. This can occur through Othering in everyday practices such as eating in school cafeterias (Simonsen 2016), feminine and masculine coding of the material assemblage of the gym (Johnston

2. The term "happy diversity talk" was coined by Ahmed (2007) and refers to instances when institutions choose to celebrate diversity as a way to avoid discussing differences in power, opportunity and social well-being between those who belong to the somatic norm and those who do not.

1996) and through men taking up space at the expense of women in the karate hall (Maclean 2019).

Inspired by the work of some of these feminist geographers, Puwar (2021) extends the argument of places being gendered and racialized by showing that places have "somatic norms". Drawing on her research in the British parliament, Puwar (2004) finds that somatic norms stipulated which bodies were readily recognized as practitioners and therefore as belonging to the parliament. For example, although new white male parliamentarians were recognized as such, women and racialized minorities were often mistaken for secretaries or cleaners. Puwar posits that somatic norms that inform who is "in" or "out of place" become established over time and are derived from representations of historically well-respected practitioners, real and imagined, in statues, paintings, media and literature. These representations create "a historically constituted centrifugal figure" by which new practitioners are measured (Puwar 2021: 263). In the case of British parliamentary politics, the embodiment of that figure is white, male and upper/middle class (Puwar 2021). Drawing on insights from relational geography, Puwar (2021) further shows how the dynamics of exclusion in a place can be enforced through its socio-spatial relationships to other, different, kinds of places. In the case of the British parliament, such places include single-sex public schools and male member-only clubs, which, traditionally are the remit of affluent white men and boys. When current and potential parliamentarians pass through these sites they build connections with each other, further entrenching somatic norms in the parliament.

Puwar's use of relational geography paints a somewhat bleak picture of the possibilities of achieving more inclusionary places. Yet relational geography also offers radical hope. If we assume that space is produced through interrelations, things can always be done differently (Massey 2005; see also Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, Chapter 5 in this volume). Like Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (this volume) and Lagendijk and Wiering (this volume), I argue that practice theory is a useful way to further theorize exactly how such processes of change might occur. The work of Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and Dide van Eck (2022), and my work on landscapes of care (Carlsson 2022), support this proposition.

Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and van Eck (2022) studied processes of inclusion in the organizational spaces of a dance company and an airport security line, respectively. They shed light on how the material arrangement and doing of work can unsettle unequal relations between the sexes and among generations. According to Janssens and Steyaert (2020), inclusion can happen through three types of practices: mixing, inverting and affirming. Mixing refers to the "active combining of individuals with a different background through which routine and habitual norms and roles are left behind"

(Janssens & Steyaert 2020: 1150). Inverting is defined as "reversing stereotypical roles and assumptions as well as enlarging and valuing the differences through which multiple contrasting positions were accomplished" (1158). Affirming, lastly, is described as "constantly experimenting with and repeating the new different, unusual and contrasting positions" (1161). Altogether, the authors argue that the dance company becomes a "site of diversalising", in which multiplicity is the norm through the intertwining of the aforementioned practices.

Van Eck (2022) zooms in further and highlights how elements of practices serve an important function in facilitating inclusion. She finds that the rule that stipulated that women were to be searched by women meant that hiring practices changed, leading to greater staff diversity in terms of gender. The material arrangements of the security line and the rules about how long one is allowed to do one task meant that the entire team were expected to do all tasks, leading to greater mixing of men and women. The teleo-affective ends of airport security work, which involves the shared responsibility of identifying security threats, creates a mutual vulnerability within the team and helps workers to create affective and egalitarian relationships across gender and racial differences. Van Eck thus shows how the rules, teleo-affective ends and material arrangements of a practice bundle can foster inclusion in itself even when inclusion is not the intended outcome of the practice.

If Janssens and Steyaert (2020) and van Eck (2022) analyse the conditions under which sites of practice can create inclusionary effects, Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022) focus on how practitioners can use their bounded creativity to adapt a practice to make it more inclusive. The term "bounded creativity" refers to the fact that, although practitioners rely on shared meanings, materials and competences to perform a certain practice, their performances are not necessarily identical. Rather, the performance of practices are acts "of poiesis, creation, intervention, and improvisation … Practices are literally reproduced on each novel occasion" (Nicolini 2012: 226). Because practices are always performed anew, in a specific situation, and therefore leave room for improvisation, there is space for practitioners to alter the practice by varying how it is performed.

In the study by Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022), the authors find that care workers added religious activities and rituals to activities taking place at a daycare centre. These workers also brought in other types of furniture and adapted the meals and the music played to create an affective atmosphere, which aligned with the life world of the older people they sought to reach. These material changes in specific sites made the practice of daycare, which was foreign to many older migrants, more attractive to enrol in. Although the bounded creativity of managers and care workers created a more inclusionary site of practice, the transformation also led to tensions

within the wider practice bundle of municipal aged care provision. The choice to serve warm meals, for example, was contested by the municipal policy officers who contracted daycare, who asked for such choices to be legitimized within "Dutch care norms", in which simple and cheaper meals, such as a cold sandwich, are standard lunch food. Transformation towards inclusion at one site triggered conflict and the need for negotiation and translation within the wider "practice arrangement bundle" (Schatzki 2011). Despite these issues, this example highlights that individual practitioners can create more inclusive spaces by enacting bounded creativity.

Insights from relational geography and practice theory are useful for understanding how places exclude certain people and how the very same places can become inclusionary. The examples put forward thus far limit their analysis to what occurs in a particular city or an organization. However, I argue that the combination of site ontology and relational geography may explain how change towards inclusion spreads beyond specific places and through a national, or even global, nexus of practice.

A basic assumption of both practice theories and relational geography is that of a flat ontology. From a practice theory perspective, complex phenomena such as gender inequality transpire through a "nexus" of practices. Nexuses are defined as wider complexes and constellations of a large number of practices (Hui, Schatzki & Shove 2017). From the assumption of a flat ontology it follows that large-scale social changes are theorized as a "series of connected changes that happen to the practices of the more extensive practice-arrangement bundles of which they are part" (Lamers & Spaargaren 2016: 236). This suggests that a change in one site always has the potential to drive change through its linkages to other sites of practice.

A critique of practice theory has been that the aforementioned conceptualization of change fails to account for power differences between and within groups of people and places. Whether or not all practices are ontologically the same, the practices in the boardroom of an energy supplier arguably have greater effects on the nexus of energy consumption than the practices of energy saving performed by climate activists in a co-housing community. To account for the fact that practices differ in their capacity to influence other practices, Watson (2017: 175) suggests that we consider certain practices to be "distinctively capable of orchestrating, disciplining and shaping practices conducted elsewhere". If we assume, like Schatzki and Massey, that practices are emplaced, this means that certain *sites of practice* have such capacities. In the words of Bruno Latour (1987), some sites come to act like "centres of calculation".

How do we locate such sites of practice? Centres of calculation have been described as "venues in which knowledge production builds upon the accumulation of resources through circulatory movements through

other places" (Heike 2011: 158). By the logic of Latour's centres of calculation, we can assume that the practices in such sites distinguish themselves by a high degree of connectedness to other sites/bundles, through shared teleo-affective regimes and/or linked practitioners, activities or materials. Furthermore, the practices of such sites are probably focused on "aligning and disciplining key practices" in the nexus (Watson 2017). This may occur through "metrics" (de Haan, Chapter 8 in this volume) and through practices of management, incentivizing and rule-making (Watson 2017). As practices and their intermediaries travel in a circulatory and accumulatory manner from the centre of calculation to sites that are more peripheral (in the sense that they have fewer connections), certain orders are sedimented (see also Landau-Donnelly and Pohl, this volume). In this way, a nexus that is far-flung and long-lasting is formed.

If some sites of practice can act at a distance while others remain in the periphery of a given nexus, what does this mean for the assumption in relational geography that all sites have transformational capacities (see Introduction, by Carlsson, Lagendijk and Landau-Donnelly, Chapter 1 in this volume)? Carlsson, Pijpers and Van Melik (2022) and Janssens and Steyaert (2020) hint at the possibility of inclusion spreading from "sites of diversalizing" through processes of translation and negotiation. However, in these cases, transformation does not travel further geographically than the municipality and cultural houses in the area. To investigate how intermediaries of inclusion can travel through a nexus to create what Davide Nicolini (2010) terms a "bandwagon" of transformation, I have chosen to consider the example of women in boxing.

The reader should note that my analysis remains focused on positive developments towards female inclusion in the sport, primarily in terms of equal opportunities to participate and compete, and the role that women boxers have played in those developments. In foregrounding these aspects, other dimensions of the process have been relegated to the background. More precisely, I do not discuss the many examples of sexism that women in boxing experience, even though these have been part and parcel of the fight for inclusion. I also do not discuss the position of trans and non-binary athletes, a group that, by and large, remains excluded from the sport. Furthermore, I do not consider the influence that developments towards gender equality in other sports and professions may have had on boxing. This is not because such developments do not matter from a practice-theoretical perspective. Indeed, applying a relational ontology means that "no phenomenon can be taken to be independent of other phenomena" (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011: 1242). However, investigating the relationships between social change towards gender equality in different nexuses lies outside the scope of this chapter.

A HISTORY OF WOMEN AND BOXING

The boxing gym has often been described as a space where hegemonic masculinity is not only celebrated but actively reproduced (Hargreaves 1997; Wacquant 1995). To be able to box, despite the norms and rules that forbade or actively discouraged it, women had to be "space invaders", sometimes even disguising themselves as men to get inside the ring. A notable example of this is Katie Taylor. Today she is a famous Irish professional boxer and Olympic gold medallist, who, in 2022, was ranked the best female pound-for-pound boxer[3] in the world by BoxRec.[4] However, in the late 1990s, when she first started to train and spar in the gym, women were not allowed to compete as boxers in Ireland. To gain competition experience, Taylor, therefore, had to disguise herself to progress in the sport. With her long hair hidden in her headguard, she competed as a boy called Kay Taylor (Morse & Anderson 2019). Although Katie Taylor and many other famous boxers have told of their struggles to access boxing gyms and to find coaches who were willing to train them, the times when women were forbidden from entering many boxing gyms now seem to belong to the past. In 2001 a 15-year-old Taylor competed in the first sanctioned women's boxing fight in Ireland. Eleven years later, in 2012, she would be one of the first female boxers to earn an Olympic gold medal. In the 2012 Olympics women could compete only in three weight categories, compared to ten categories for men. In the 2024 Olympics, both men and women will have access to a similar number of weight categories: seven categories for men and six for women.

The inclusion of women's boxing in the Olympics has led to more opportunities and investment in elite women's boxing, as well as increased attention in the media and public discourse (Woodward 2014; Godoy-Pressland 2015). For example, female professional boxers are now headlining televised fights in main venues such as Madison Square Garden. In May 2022 Katie Taylor and Amanda Serrano fought each other for the World Championship belts and each made $1 million. Writing for *Sports Illustrated*, journalist Chris Mannix concludes, "This wasn't a significant women's fight. This was a significant fight" (Mannix 2022). Alongside an increase in income, exposure and opportunities for top athletes, a growing number of women are boxing recreationally and competitively, including in countries known to have highly traditional gender norms (Schneider 2021).

Looking at recent progress in the sport, it is tempting to narrate the inclusion of women in boxing as a linear journey. However, a closer look at the

3. Retrieved 1 December 2022 from BoxRec: https://boxrec.com/en/ratings.
4. BoxRec is a website dedicated to holding updated records of professional and amateur boxers, both male and female.

history of women's boxing reveals that the transformation towards inclusion has been slow, and with stops and starts. In the 1980s and 1990s athletes such as Christy Martin and Laila Ali fought for World Championship belts in professional competitions in the United States. At the time, they were described as the athletes who legitimized women's boxing, somewhat similar to how Olympic stars such as Katie Taylor and Nicola Adams are described in the 2010s and 2020s. That said, although women are formally allowed to train and compete, they still experience exclusion in ways that are similar to the parliamentarians in Puwar's (2004) study, and the female bodybuilders discussed by Johnston (1996). Studies in Norway and the United Kingdom reveal that women frequently lack support from elite coaches and officials, financial sponsorships and backing from family, friends and (potential) partners (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020; Tjønndal 2019). Women volunteers report having to repeatedly prove their knowledge and competence as coaches and judges just because of their sex. They are also found to carry out tasks such as cleaning and providing emotional support to boxers more often than their male counterparts (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury 2022).

Although the change towards inclusion is slow, and there are still signs of sex-based discrimination, the global sport of boxing has changed. From being barred from even entering boxing gyms, women are now placed centre stage in the Olympics and at iconic boxing sites such as Madison Square Garden. Women increasingly occupy roles on national boxing committees and work as judges, referees and boxing promoters. The space invasion, to borrow Puwar's (2004) term, of women has no doubt been a key driver of this transformation. It has allowed them to freely participate in individual boxing gyms to competitions, board rooms and boxing-related sites across the entire world. In the remainder of this chapter, I use the conceptual tools presented in the literature review to theorize how that transformation has occurred.

BOXING AS A GLOBAL LANDSCAPE OF PRACTICE

Boxing can be considered a global landscape of practice: a nexus including constellations of practice bundles dispersed across many different countries. When thinking of boxing, the images that come to most people's minds are those of athletes training or competing. Boxers exchanging punches in the ring under the limelight or sweat while skipping, as in the iconic Rocky Balboa film series. The boxing gym is indeed the core "practice-arrangement bundle" (Schatzki 2011: 4) of the sport: it is the most numerous site of practice in the wider landscape.

Commonly, a boxing gym contains a roped square ring for practice contests, also called sparring. In addition, there are open spaces for warming up, doing

bodyweight exercises to increase one's fitness and for practising footwork and punch combinations, either individually in an exercise called shadow boxing or in pairs with other gym goers. Lastly, there are so-called heavy bags: sacks hanging from the ceiling on which to practise punches. In many boxing gyms, novices and more advanced boxers train together across age groups. Although ladies-only sessions are popular in many countries, general training tends to be mixed-sex. Training sessions are held by coaches who show the exercises and give participants feedback on their execution. The teleo-affective end in the boxing gym is to acquire pugilistic capital, defined as a "set of abilities and tendencies liable to produce value in the field of professional boxing in the form of recognition, titles and income streams" (Wacquant 1995: 65–7). Although "looking the part" is certainly of value (Paradis 2012), the primary capital remains the ability to box well and to "pay one's dues" (Wacquant 1995; Dortants & Knoppers 2016; Carlsson 2017). To valorize and gain pugilistic capital, one must spar and participate in boxing competitions.

Boxing competitions, like boxing gyms, are a common type of site in the landscape. All practices of boxing competitions have similarities. Boxing contests consist of rounds that are two or three minutes long, interspersed with one-minute-long breaks. During the break the opponents return to their corners to receive water and advice from their coaches and care from the "cut man", a person responsible for preventing and treating physical damage to their fighter. The contests are overseen by a referee, who can end the fight if they deem a contestant incapable of safely continuing or if a contestant chooses to resign or is disqualified. If the fight reaches the final round with both contestants still standing, the winner is decided by the judge's scorecards. Although the practices of competing are similar, there are two types of boxing competitions: amateur boxing and professional boxing. Amateur boxing has shorter and fewer rounds and competitors wear more protective gear. Amateur boxers can represent their countries in competitions such as the Olympics and the World Championships. Professional boxers compete for prize money and titles. This branch of the sport is less cohesively organized; boxers fight for titles given by different boxing associations and there are several World Championship belts. When one becomes a professional boxer, it is common and often beneficial for one's ranking to have had a (successful) amateur career. Although the competition sites differ in kind, they are thus connected through the athletes, through the audience and through the experience in one site enabling participation in another.

To become a legitimate boxer who is allowed to compete, one must have a boxing licence. Gaining a boxing licence requires a medical examination by a doctor. In the case of professional boxing, a heart scan and various neurological tests and blood work are often required. Boxing licences, as well as venue

licences to host competitions, are awarded and regulated by national boxing associations. The latter are also responsible for holding national competitions and for selecting and training the national team. In the case of professional boxing, competitions are set up by boxing promoters. These are agencies that identify and contract talented boxers, negotiate contests on their behalf and then promote the fight, including the selling of pay-per-view licences and tickets to attend the live event.

In addition to gyms, sports halls and arenas, boxing practices take place in board rooms, managers' offices, doctors' practices and television studios. In these respective sites practices such as officiating, medical examinations, reporting, managing and rule-making are performed. How do all these associated practices hang together? If we apply the concepts of Schatzki's (2001) site ontology and the associated theory of social change (Schatzki 2019), we can identify two key elements. The first element consists of shared rules and regulations regarding the competition. Despite some internal variations, these rules regulate training, judging and competing, including who is allowed to compete (sex and weight categories, licensure) and under which conditions (rules of the game). The second element is a shared teleo-affective end. As already pointed out, the main such end in a boxing gym is to acquire "pugilistic capital" (Wacquant 1995: 66–7). This teleo-affective end connects all sites and practices, because, to amass pugilistic capital, one must travel from the gym to sites of competition – or, in practice terms, circulate through the nexus. In the case of more famous boxers, the circulation of text and audiovisuals also adds to the pugilistic capital; fame is often instrumental in gaining access to title fights and their associated income streams. Although this description of boxing is not exhaustive, it serves to sketch the global "landscape of practices" (Carlsson 2022; see also Lagendijk and Wiering, this volume) that constitutes the sport.

BOXING GYMS AS "SITES OF DIVERSALIZING"

To tell the story of how women managed to "invade" the landscape of boxing, we must begin in the most numerous of its sites: the boxing gym. Looking at boxing gyms through the lens of practice theories on inclusion shows that boxing gyms lend themselves well to becoming "sites of diversalizing". According to Janssens and Steyaert (2020), *diversalizing* occurs through the practices of mixing and inverting. In boxing gyms, people from different backgrounds, sexes and abilities are not only co-present in space but actively involved in embodied activities such as sparring and practising punch combinations. These are activities that require the entanglement of practitioners' bodies with each other. Because women have been, and in many cases still

are, the minority in boxing gyms, there is thus no way for women to participate in boxing training without "mixing" occurring. As shown by both Channon (2012) and Carlsson (2017), these interactions between men and women boxers often lead to "inversion" (Janssens & Steyaert 2020). In his doctoral thesis, Alex Channon describes how his first experience sparring with a woman forced him to reconsider his prior assumptions about women's capabilities as fighters:

> I remember the trepidation well: I was stepping into the unknown as I squared up to what suddenly felt like my first "real" fight with a girl. Without wanting to embellish all the details of what happened next, our sparring session ended following a hit to my head which sent me to the floor. She had caught me on the ear with a roundhouse kick, which had snapped my head to the side, causing my brain to bounce against the inside of my skull, dazing me. The hit to the ear had also momentarily affected my ability to balance and to hear. I remember feeling stunned as she checked me, knowing that I would be unable to continue. I had just been knocked out by a girl. The effects of this event are difficult to overstate. While it would be some time before I understood enough about feminist theory to adequately theorize my own situation, this forceful, direct, undeniable demonstration of female power had rocked my assumptions about the sexes and would remain with me for the rest of my training career.
>
> (Channon 2012: 7–8)

Not all encounters are as forceful as the one described. Sometimes an inversion occurs over time, as explained by Sara, a participant in my research on gender construction in boxing (see Carlsson 2017): "Over time, they realize that you can take, you know, a punch like a guy can, so then you put them out of their comfort zone and they put you out of your comfort zone and then it's quite good, competitive sparring."

Although mixing and inversion occur in the gym, such practices are, in contrast to an intergenerational dance company in Janssens' and Steyaert's (2020) study, not intentional. Like van Eck's study (2022), much of the inclusionary potential from the gym's practice site stems from the unifying nature of the teleo-affective end there: acquiring pugilistic capital. The cooperation and vulnerability required to fulfil this end has the potential to forge alliances between men and women through the formation of affective bonds (see also van Eck 2022).

Doing boxing training is engaging in a form of controlled violence. Those training must trust each other to hold back force that would result in injury,

while still applying sufficient force to create opportunities to acquire and test strength and skill. In boxing gyms, older and experienced gym members who are no longer competing are often asked to spar with younger athletes to help them develop specific skills and a boxer's attitude. After sparring for a while, the more experienced athlete will give a cue, such as remembering to return the right hand to the chin. During subsequent sparring the less experienced athlete will receive correction when forgetting to do so, generally through a punch marking the mistake. In my time as an athlete, I can recount many times when I was matched with a man twice my age for sparring. What stands out to me from these encounters is not the hard corrective punches I got when forgetting his advice – though many of these were given – but, rather, the mutual affection that occurred afterwards: sweaty hugs, a sense of shared experience, a feeling of belonging, a brief chat about a recent professional fight or stories about personal fight records. Considering the age of these men, their first experiences in the sport most likely occurred when women were not allowed to compete. Sparring together nevertheless meant that I was able to "pay my dues" and that we could form affective and egalitarian bonds through our shared pursuit of pugilistic capital.

According to Dortants and Knoppers (2016: 247), such egalitarian bonds can be formed because the "mechanisms for regulating diversity" are "embedded within the historical-cultural routines" of boxing. Wacquant (2005), who studied boxing gyms in the segregated and deprived areas of Chicago in the 1980s, testifies to such routines when describing how interpersonal interactions were more important than class, race or nationality in the gym. To explain why this was and continues to be the case, Dortants and Knoppers (2016) speak of an egalitarian ethos in which dedication to the practice of boxing training is what matters for one's acceptance in the gym. However, it is important to stress that the presence of such an egalitarian ethos has not automatically led to equal opportunities for women. Although the teleo-affective ends of the nexus may lend themselves to the creation of a "pugilistic melting pot" with the power "to 'deracialize' bodies and relations" (Wacquant 2005: 454), the "somatic norm" (Puwar 2021) of boxing gyms and its practices was, and in many places still is, that of a "lean, muscular, dark, fierce-looking" *male* body (Paradis 2012: 93). In entering the boxing gym, women have defied the maleness of this somatic norm as well as the rules banning women from competing. Mixing, inverting and the formation of affective and egalitarian bonds are all premised on women first enacting bounded creativity regarding the somatic norms of the practice. Although alliances are important, these are premised on women space invaders; space invaders thus remain agents behind making the gym a site of diversalizing.

ALLIANCES AND INTERMEDIARIES: HOW WOMEN BOXERS AND THEIR COACHES SPREAD INCLUSION VIA COMPETITION SITES

Women's bounded creativity is the agent of change towards inclusion, but innovation must travel to transform a nexus. Nicolini, who investigated the uptake of telecare in the practice of care for cardiac patients, argues that the success of any innovation depends on "the circulation of suitable intermediaries who/that can enrol new powerful allies and build a network of relationships and dependencies. When such a network grows big enough, it cannot be ignored and automatically becomes an object of imitation and later a source of conformist pressure" (Nicolini 2010: 1014).

The status of boxing coaches is intimately tied to the success of their athletes (Dortants & Knoppers 2016). As a result, there has been a strong incentive for coaches to ally themselves with talented women to amass pugilistic capital at competitions. In some cases these alliances may have been based on a common struggle to have women's pugilistic capital recognized. Katie Taylor and her father and coach Pete Taylor, for example, fought for the right for women to compete in Ireland. In other cases coaches have been motivated to team up with women upon recognizing their earning potential as boxers (van Ingen 2021).

If boxing gyms are a site on the periphery of the landscape (in the sense that they have limited connections to other sites and little influence on the rules of the game or the distribution of fame, recognition and resources), competitions can be considered more central. This is because competitions are sites in which more practices come together and in which practitioners from many different locations meet. Some competition sites are highly prestigious, such as the World Championships, the Olympics or boxing galas in Madison Square Garden. Others are less prestigious, such as club shows and regional events.

In travelling to competition sites, we can consider women as intermediaries of innovation. In the early days of women's boxing the only competition sites that women were able to access were less prestigious and thus less "central" to the nexus. Nevertheless, by travelling to these *sites* women boxers had the opportunity to gain pugilistic capital for themselves and their coaches. The presence of women in sites of competition has an accumulative effect because increased visibility can lead to the recruitment of new women boxers. This effect goes beyond the mere "inspiration" often referred to in newspapers. When there are more women boxers in the gyms, there are more potential competitors and training partners. Since competitions are so important for amassing pugilistic capital, and boxing competitions are segregated by sex, such recruitment is crucial. The increased visibility and possibilities for gaining pugilistic capital, both for athletes and coaches, spread and enforce change in the gyms.

CENTRES OF LEGITIMIZATION AND REDISTRIBUTION: THE ROLE OF SITES SUCH AS THE OLYMPIC GAMES

An overview of the history of women's boxing highlights that inclusion in major sport events has propelled the popularity and the legitimacy of the sport forward: female participation in the Olympics, in particular, can be considered a groundbreaking moment (Channon & Matthews 2015; Woodward 2014). Building on Watson (2017), I suggest that framing the Olympics as a centre of legitimization and redistribution helps us understand what occurred when women boxers competed in the Olympics for the first time.

The Olympic Games function as a centre of (re)distribution because they (re)arrange material resources in the landscape of practice. Before the 2012 Olympics, elite women boxers reported receiving very little support from national associations (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020). In contrast, in the build-up to the 2012 Olympic Games, women boxers received similar support to that of the male boxers in state-of-the-art facilities in London (Ingle 2012). In Sweden, the inclusion of women boxers in the Olympics similarly led to a restructuring of the national team (*Dagens Nyheter* 2005).

The site of the Olympics also functions as a centre of legitimization. Since the Olympics is heavily covered by media, participating in the Games infers pugilistic capital through prestige and public attention. These elements can, in turn, be mobilized into greater ticket sales during a professional career and/or in the securing of sponsorship and support between events. In an article on the coverage of women's professional events by pay-per-view channels, boxer Mikaela Mayer points to this effect: "This is the first time in history that women have been able to approach promoters and say 'Hi, I am a five-time national champion, World medallist, an Olympian, an Olympic *gold* medallist.' Our skills and talent simply cannot be denied anymore" (Doerer 2018, emphasis added).

The effect of women's inclusion in the Olympics can indeed be observed in the related practice of professional boxing. Even though women were able to compete for the World Championship belts in the 1990s, their bouts have been televised by pay-per-view channels only since the 2012 Olympics. This has both increased the visibility of women's boxing and created more financial opportunities for female athletes.

A BANDWAGON OF TRANSFORMATION

As the rules and norms have gradually changed in more central sites within the landscape of practice, supporting women boxers has become more attractive. Over time the increased circulation of women boxers, news about

them and alliances they form with, for example, coaches and managers has created a "bandwagon of transformation". Discussing the uptake of remote technology in care for heart patients, Nicolini argues that, when a network of intermediaries and allies grows big enough that it can no longer be ignored, it "automatically becomes an object of imitation and later a source of conformist pressure" (Nicolini 2010: 1014). In newspaper articles about women's boxing, there are indications that such conformist pressure has been reached. Swedish elite boxing coach Walter Mohr was a well-known opponent of female participation in the sport. However, in 2010 he began to coach athlete Natalie Lungo. He describes this change of perspective as one that was inevitable. In an interview with a national newspaper, he told the reporter that he could not "walk around and say that I will not work with women boxers forever" (Nordström 2010). In light of how well established the sport had become, he decided to change his mind and begin to coach women.

Boxing promoter Frank Warren is often quoted as having had to change his mind too, or, as he expresses it, having "to eat humble pie" (Warren 2017). In a blog post in 2014, Warren writes: "I make no bones about it. I don't like women's boxing. Never have and never will" (Boxing Scene 2014). However, he later changed his mind – a shift that he explains in the following way in a 2017 *Good Morning Britain* interview:

> [I changed my mind] I think because of the standard; you had outstanding female boxers, like Nicola, but their opponents just were not so good, in some cases. And I think the standard has dramatically improved. And my kids – my daughter, especially, has been banging my head, saying: "Get with the times; you are supposed to be here today. Why are you treating women differently?" I think it is because of how I grew up: chauvinistic and a bit ignorant. Women are in the army, they are fighter pilots, they are doing jobs men do, and that is the way the world is now.[5]

In this interview excerpt, Warren is highlighting how the accumulation of pugilistic capital by women came to eventually convince him despite his prior reservations, which seem to have been tied mainly to strong somatic norms (i.e. women boxers did not "float his boat", as he puts it). It is also clear that the change felt inevitable; women's inclusion is "the way the world is now". Although there is no doubt that many men will continue to oppose women's boxing, many others have gone on to readdress their position. This indicates that women's boxing has undergone a bandwagon effect.

5. Available on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlxM7OI7VU0.

NOT A HAPPY DIVERSITY STORY

As referred to in the introduction, Puwar (2004) argues that the arrival of space invaders often presents researchers with a paradox. The presence of women in a traditionally male space highlights how that site of practice is premised on exclusion through the somatic norm. At the same time, the entry of those who do not fit the somatic norm indicates that the space is changing. In this chapter, I have used the case of boxing to argue that space invaders, at least in some cases, do more than signify a change. They become agents and intermediaries of the change that they signify, not just in the site they invade but also in the wider landscape in which that site is embedded.

In discussing how women have become agents of inclusionary change in boxing, I have foregrounded the positive developments that we have seen in the sport during the last three decades. However, it is important to emphasize that the inclusion of women in boxing by no means is a "happy diversity" story (Bell & Hartmann 2007). In the boxing gym, women have been beaten up when sparring with men, sometimes as a means to block the potential for inversion and mixing (van Ingen 2021). There is also continued evidence of sexism and, in some cases, racism against women boxers, coaches, judges and officials (Oftadeh-Moghadam *et al.* 2020; Tjønndal 2019; Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury 2022; McCree 2015). Looking back at their careers, many elite women boxers recount experiences of discrimination and missed opportunities – pain that, for some, has been compounded by the fact that they never got to enjoy the advancement they brought about in the sport themselves. In an interview, Jane Couch, who fought to make women's boxing in the United Kingdom legal, explains to a journalist how she looks back on her career with sadness: "It was actually cruel what [the boxing authorities and promoters] did to me. The more I look at it the more I think: 'Why couldn't I have got the right manager or trainer to look after me like they're looking after the girls now?'" (MacRae 2022).

The circular accumulation of positive change has thus occurred through and alongside violent conflict. In addition, there are corners of the landscape where transformation towards inclusion is yet to occur. For example, some countries do not send their women boxers to the Olympics. Similarly, there are gyms where women are not allowed to spar with men, even in countries with many famous women boxers (Dortants & Knoppers 2016). In light of the evidence of continued discrimination, boxing scholars such as Anne Tjønndal (2019) argue that the sport has not seen meaningful change. Although I agree that we cannot speak of a happy diversity story, I argue that a practice-theoretical lens allows us to speak of a hopeful one.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM HOPEFUL DIVERSITY STORIES

Using practice theory and relational geography, this chapter has shed new light on the debate in the literature on women in boxing about whether female boxers have made a meaningful impact on the sport. Those who argue that meaningful change has not yet occurred tend to take a structuralist approach, which assumes that "bottom-up" social change occurs through a unidirectional and vertical trajectory. From such a perspective, evidence of sexism indicates that women's agency has not yet shifted the structures of the sport. In applying practice theory, I have instead proposed a horizontal and circulatory way of understanding emancipatory change.

From a practice perspective, transformation happens in multiple peripheral sites of diversalizing – in this case, boxing gyms. It then travels through discrete, but connected, sites, with each circulation leading to the accumulation of more pugilistic capital. As women have increased opportunities to gain boxing skills (and, as a result, possibilities to earn money and prestige for themselves), they have been able to build alliances with coaches, managers and promoters, all of whom have reinforced the circulation of change. When women eventually enter centres of legitimization and distribution, such as prestigious competitions, the shift towards inclusion becomes even more sedimented. Eventually, the change towards equal opportunity becomes a bandwagon: even the staunchest opponents of women's boxing report feeling that they have since changed their minds and, in turn, their practices to include women.

Thinking of change as an accumulative and circulatory horizontal process provides researchers with a lens that is both hopeful and critical. As such, it allows scholars to take more seriously the hard-won achievements of space invaders without retorting to the naivety of "happy diversity" narratives. In acknowledging the multiplicity of practices and sites within a nexus, it is possible to explain the unevenness of change and its inherent conflicts and violence. It also sheds light on how such battles have the potential to lead to change.

The case of boxing practices has domain-specific qualities, such as its highly embodied and gendered nature. Nevertheless, I believe that the framework presented has the potential to produce new insights outside the world of boxing. Thus far, the emerging literature on inclusion and practice theory has primarily considered dynamics within specific organizational spaces, such as the airport security line or an intergenerational dance company (Janssens & Steyaert 2020; van Eck 2022). In investigating how inclusion travels through the global landscape of boxing practices, this chapter responds to the call (Janssens & Steyaert 2020) for new conceptual tools to investigate processes constraining or enabling inclusion beyond specific sites.

Applying a new theoretical framework to a case study of global proportions has limitations. The first limitation is that, although I use specific events, interviews and experiences to underpin my argument, the theory is yet to be empirically tested. Possibilities to do so include an ethnographic study of centres of legitimization and distribution. Research on the global risk insurance industry (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Cabantous 2015) has proved that multi-sited ethnographic analysis of such locations is an effective way to understand global phenomena from a practice perspective, even though such studies are resource- and time-intensive. Another possibility is conducting narrative interviews with women boxers and their allies to learn more about how affective bonds and pugilistic capital have been mobilized to shift somatic norms outside peripheral sites, such as the gym. Lastly, the spatial unevenness of transformation towards inclusion is evident but remains underexplored. Here, geographers have an important role to play, as social and spatial conditions have been found to shape how "transgressive capabilities might be acquired, deployed, and facilitate social change" (Brown & Ali 2022: 2453). Although we should be careful not to produce "happy diversity" narratives, much can be learned from hopeful diversity stories and the sites in which they unfold.

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