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Sport and Self-love: Reflections on Boxing and the Construction of Selfhood

ABSTRACT

This article examines whether boxing, despite – or perhaps because – its destructive potential can be an arena for the formation of selfhood. Based on Honneth's theory of recognition (1995), I suggest that boxing can be an arena for recognition in the form of love and therefore essential for the construction of selfhood. My central thesis is that boxing can cultivate love, trust and knowledge in and of oneself- elements crucial to the formation of selfhood. By taking a closer look at the three forms of boxing – basic conditioning, sparring and the boxing match (competition) - I suggest that these different ways of practice have different potential for cultivating these elements. I conclude that due to contextual and internal factors, the boxing match does not fulfil its potential. However, sparring can provide relationships of care that results in regimes of self-care; trust in oneself and others, as well as self-knowledge; all building stones in the construction of selfhood. I round off with a suggestion to modify the boxing match in order to realize its potential for realizing both play and selfhood.

KEYWORDS Boxing; selfhood; self-love; recognition

Boxing is ambiguous. It can provide great personal gain, both physically and mentally, as well as social network and support, but it also has an equally destructive potential. While such a claim can be said to hold for all sports, boxing is faced with particular issues to address. In the last decades, new knowledge have been gained on the problems of repeated blows to the head causing injuries in boxing and other contact sports, as well as soccer (Jordan 2000, Kubilus et al. 2009, Neselius et al. 2012; 2013). In boxing and other combat sports, athletes get competitive advantage from inflicting pain and sometimes injury on their opponents. Injuring another person in a minor or major way is, in fact, a means to win the boxing match. Davis (1993, 61) sees boxing as 'non-simulated viciousness' and contends that boxing is an 'intentional infliction of harm' without the conditions required to make such infliction 'morally intelligible'.

The argument in this paper builds on a view of boxing as having other forms of meaning and value than hurting another human being; it rests on an assumption that boxing can be morally intelligible by having an especially strong potential for positive (and negative) influence on the athlete. In "Athletics, embodiment and the appropriation of the self", Howe (2003) discusses sports' role in establishing authentic identity or selfhood. This approach seems fitting for my paper as well. As Howe, I will not focus on the openly ethical sides of sport, but rather on the overlap between ontology and ethics. I seek to probe into boxing's (potential) role in the formation of selfhood.

Previously, I have been involved in analyses of whether sport can facilitate recognition in the form of solidarity (Andersen & Loland 2015) and rights (Andersen & Loland 2016). The theoretical foundation for these papers has been Honneth's theory of recognition, where he finds that a stable identity depends on establishing and maintaining three "practical relations-to-self": self-respect, self-esteem and self-confidence (Honneth 1995, 129). The formation of these relations-to-self again depend on receiving reciprocal recognition in the form of rights, solidarity and love; what he calls "patterns of intersubjective recognition" (Honneth 1995, 92). In this paper, I suggest that boxing can be an arena for recognition in the form of love. Not as reciprocal love, but as a form of self-love. My central thesis is that boxing can cultivate self-care and a basic form of self-respect, trust and knowledge in and of oneself, as well as others– elements crucial to the formation of selfhood.

If Davis (1993) is right, boxing is an arena for disrespect rather than recognition. However, boxing has often been interpreted as 'deep play"[1] (Boddy, 2008) – a game with so high stakes that it makes no sense to play it, but this irrationality elevates it rather than make it unplayable, because it becomes a symbol of the uncertainty of life itself. Moreover, I suggest

that the high stakes is what makes boxing such a potent source for establishing selfhood. However, in order to realize recognition, sport has to be at its best– that is have an element of play (Andersen & Loland 2015; 2016).

First, I will lay the groundwork for my arguments by giving a brief outline of the philosophical underpinnings where Honneth's notion of love (1995) forms the theoretical outset, supplemented and adjusted by Howe's insights on selfhood in sport (2003). These theories will form the basis for an analysis of boxing and its elements, drawing on historical, philosophical, and sociological theories of boxing (Boddy 2008; Lewandowski 2007; 2015; 209; 2020; Wacquant 1992) before discussion and conclusion.

Philosophical underpinnings

Honneth's concept of love

Developing a stable identity is a precondition for individual self-realization and autonomy (Honneth 1995). It depends on the formation of three practical relations to self: To be recognized as a person deserving of rights and obligations (respect) develops self-respect; being recognized as a person who contributes to a shared project (solidarity) develops self-esteem; and being valued and cared for as a special someone (love) develops self-confidence (Honneth 1995)[2]. Honneth is also concerned with how disrespect or violation of the expectation of mutual recognition or already established bonds of recognition, can motivate a struggle for recognition. The potential of recognition therefore also entails a potential for disrespect.

Love is the foundational form of intersubjective recognition and a condition for developing basic self-confidence (Honneth 1995). Basic self-confidence is "…conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition. This fundamental level of

emotional confidence….constitutes the psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect" (Honneth 1995, 107).

Love is crucial for developing trusting relationships to other persons. Love-relationships are defined by close bonding and are therefore restricted to a limited number of persons, such as family and close friends. Disrespect is manifested as abuse or violation, and the fundamental violation is when a person is deprived the power over her own body. This may lead to permanent damage on his or her self-confidence and rob them of their sense of reality as well as control over and connection to their own body (Honneth 1995).

Seeking an empirical foundation for this phenomenology of love, Honneth draws on psychoanalytic object-relations theory and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971; 2003). The ability to establish affectional attachment to another person is a process starting in infancy, where a successful attachment is a fragile balance between symbiosis and self-assertion. The earliest stage of life is a phase of symbiosis where the infant is dependent upon its primary care-givers and their ability to recognize and fulfil its needs. If these are fulfilled, the child will gain trust in that its needs and desires are worth expressing. As the child grows older, a gradual detachment takes place, where not all the child's needs are instantly gratified. If the process of detachment is to be successful, the child has to gain trust in that its needs will be met, but it also has to develop an ability to be on its own: It has to develop a trust in itself, as well as in its carers.

In addition to the emotional bonds established through love, physical contact between child and parent is essential for the child's development. In experiencing closeness as well as secession, the child learns to recognize its own bodily and motoric skills. These skills are the

foundation for later awareness of him- or herself as an independent individual. However, this bodily awareness and autonomy as an independent, physical being depends on a successful secession (Winnicott 1971).

Summing up, we see that love is a provider of a *basic self-confidence* enabling trust in others, and trust in voicing and having care for one's own needs and desires. Basic self-confidence is embodied, in that the secession results in the child's awareness of its bodily integrity. In addition, basic self-confidence is a precondition for future self-respect (as a mature person).

Howe on selfhood in sport

Howe's concept of optimal selfhood (Howe 2003) embraces bodily movement, as manifested in sport, as a vital element in the development of the self. Optimal selfhood is a fully integrated self, in the sense that all bodily and mental states are accepted and acknowledged by the self (Howe 2003). Although Howe sees sport as an important arena for the development of selfhood, her argument does not rest on competition in sport, but the self-knowledge that sport can provide:

> «Thus, the core of my explication is not competition per se…but the experience of reaching the self out beyond its apparent boundaries that sport provides…»(Howe 2003, 93)

This view of optimal selfhood opposes traditional western dualism, and contends that our self is only available to us through our bodily existence. Selfhood requires a long-term perspective of one's own life: it demands reflection, planning and self-control – not only as a rational process, but also as an embodied. This process can be interpreted as a form of "taking stock of

oneself" (ref). Part of this "taking stock" involves accepting the fact of one's own, particular and concrete physical existence: Not only having a body, but also having exactly this body, with its specific limitations and possibilities, a given set of perceptions and a particular history. Becoming a fully integrated self – optimal selfhood – also involves awareness of who one is (up to now), because it also can involve having to adjust one's future identity. A reflexive integration of the body in the self is necessary in order to own or inhabit one's body. In the same way as incorporating psychological states in a larger or lesser degree results in more or less of an integrated self, owning or inhabiting one's body, depends on how well one's bodily states are incorporated in the self. A person with a lack of knowledge of or sense of his own body, its needs and capacities, inhabits that body to a lesser degree than possible.

Owning one's body is to accept responsibility of one's own body, by, in part, acknowledging bodily needs and desires and accepting them as a part of oneself. Therefore, the answer to the question "Who or what am I?" is not objectively given but subjectively dynamic, because it is through my actions that my self is explored and discovered. Moreover, sport is a (relatively) safe arena for the exploration of these boundaries. (Howe 2003, 101)

However, while sport can be such an arena for establishing selfhood, Howe views athletic activity as a necessary, but not sufficient element development of the self and self-knowledge (2003, 103). Sport can sometimes stand in the way of a fully integrated self by hindering development of other elements in one's personality or realizing one's potential on other arenas. In commercialized elite sport, the subjectivity of the athlete can be overridden by the subjectivity of the fan or the owner.

The concept of identity vs. selfhood

Selfhood is defined as "the quality that gives a person or thing an individual identity and makes them different from others" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2020). Honneth's notion of a stable identity seems to equal Howe's notion of optimal selfhood in that both notions strive towards full integration of self; that is, the different states a person consists of. Honneth's description of identity-formation is fundamentally social; our self relies on receiving the necessary recognition from the outer world. For a philosopher of sport, what seems to be lacking in Honneth's description of the formation of selfhood (or identity), is the role of our own bodies in defining who we are. Moreover, not only defining, but also having the potential of expanding the notion of who we are or can be; that is adding an element of reflexivity, which is present in Howe's notion of selfhood. Although Honneth bases his conception of how we develop basic self-confidence in the bodily and non-verbal experiences described by Winnicott, as well as viewing these as necessary conditions for self-realization, he does not seem to leave enough room for us to inhabit our bodies; they seem mere receptors of love. Through love, we acquire basic self-confidence: trust in others and ourselves, knowledge of and care for our needs and desires, and bodily autonomy/integrity. Basic self-confidence is the foundation for our identity building, but Honneth's notion of bodily integrity does seem to be a very minimalistic – and perhaps lacking – one. It seems a general explanation of something very personal: It does not explain how I become me (a self) in my specific body.

Howe's notion of selfhood captures what I think is lacking in Honneth's notion of identity, namely the importance of our embodied existence for identity-formation and -maintenance. By supplementing– or perhaps expanding – Honneth's theory of bodily integrity and basic self-consciousness with Howe's insights into selfhood in sport, I hope to provide a more

embodied understanding of identity-formation. Selfhood therefore seems a more appropriate term for this task.

Boxing and selfhood

> Richard Kiwanuka cried and cried after winning the boxing match. He cried of joy to be the Norwegian Junior Champion. He cried because his mother would have been so proud to experience this (Stokke 2013).[3]

Growing up in the north of Uganda, Richard Kiwanuka and his family lived in an area terrorized by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Richard's village was attacked and his little sister killed by rebels. His mother died of a heart attack as a result (Stokke 2013). Richard was abducted by rebels, but managed to escape, and came to Norway as an UN-refugee, 15 years old (Sunnanå 2013). Seriously traumatized by the loss of his family, and struggling to adapt to a new country, he joined a local boxing club, Bergen Atletklubb (Stokke 2013). After he started boxing, he experienced improved mental and physical health; he got his appetite, sleep and *joie de vivre* back. Years later, Kiwanuka described how boxing built his self-confidence and made him more focused, and in interviews, he has credited boxing with the recovery from his traumas (Stokke 2013; Sunnanå 2013). It is striking that through participation in a violent sport, Richard Kiwanuka with his experiences of violence and atrocities, was able to rebuild a damaged self. Kiwanuka is perhaps not the only one. In his analysis of boxing and urban culture, Lewandowski (2015) describes how boxing becomes a gateway to (relative) autonomy and recognition for gym members that live lives in a context of structural violence. This raises the question of how boxing can have such an effect.

As stated earlier, my thesis is that boxing can cultivate self-care and a basic form of self-respect, trust and knowledge in and of oneself, as well as others: elements crucial to the formation of selfhood. Boxing can be divided into basic conditioning, sparring and the boxing match (competition). Analysis from scholars such as Lewandowski (2007, 2020) and Wacquant (1992) show that the different ways of practising the sport of boxing have different potential for cultivating these elements. In what follows, I will take a closer look at these forms of boxing and their potential for contributing to the formation of self.

Basic conditioning

In his study on professional boxers in a ghetto gym in Chicago, Wacquant points to the misrepresentation of boxing as a sport of '…punching each other silly on end' (Wacquant 1992, 237). Much of the preparation and training is done outside the ring and all basic conditioning consist of the same five practices: shadowboxing, hitting the bags, speed bag, jumping rope and stomach exercises.

Boxing in all its forms is hard, physical training. Therefore, a boxer, as all athletes, needs to eat and sleep properly. However, awareness of healthy living is not enough, in addition to training, many boxing cultures have a strict regime of a certain diet (preferably white meats and steamed vegetables), and boxers are experienced to abstain from alcohol (and at times sex) and to get enough sleep (Wacquant 1992; Lewandowski 2015). Lewandowski (2015) also point out that street fighting is taboo. This last point might seem obvious to an outsider, but both Wacquant and Lewandowski describe boxing milieus situated in contexts of structural violence, and as such, restrictions against street fighting might not be easy to live by.

The restrictions seem harsh but can also be viewed as a regime of care; of providing the nourishment and restitution needed in order to live life as a boxer. Sustaining and assisting the concrete practicalities of diet and restitution regimes (as well as avoiding unnecessary harm, such as street fights) may contain a significant emotional element. This is not emotional care as in love between two individuals, but it does entail care for the bodily needs of a boxer. The aim of most trainers is that the boxer internalizes these norms so that he or she develops a form of self-care based on the knowledge of one's own basic needs as a boxer.

Regimes can of course be corrupted, for example by resorting to unhealthy diets in order to lose weight, by using prohibited substances, or by being treated by others (or treating oneself) as an instrument towards prestige or profit. Thus, any regime of care can be perverted to a regime of control and manipulation. However, for many adolescents as well as adults, a healthy regime can be a reminder of what is needed to sustain us. Often, and especially in affluent societies, there is an unlimited access to many objects of desire – food, sweets, alcohol, diversions. A healthy approach to sport involves knowledge of and care for basic needs, and teaches us that these can be best taken care of by not indulging all desires. This can form knowledge of which desires one should fulfil and which have to be controlled. The training regime teaches the boxers or boxers-to-be that they can, and sometimes must, refrain from food or drink they would normally indulge in:

> …layin' off the junk-food-the-hamburger-the-French-fries, *no sex* you know. I like drinkin' beer: no beer, you know no light beer, you know *dedication* when you gotta really dig deep down inside of you and go for what you want – you gotta say like "well no women this month", you know, an' no hamburgers (Anonymous boxer, cited in Wacquant 1992, 238)

Lewandowski (2015) underlines the autonomy that lies in the adoption of the restrictions (or in Lewandowski's words: constraints). Through submitting to the restrictions and the training, the boxer gains recognition both from himself and others as *a boxer*, "a form of agency and identity all too scarcely realized in "the hood" (Lewandowski 2015, 12-13). The quote above indicates not only acknowledgement of the values of an ascetic lifestyle – at least in periods, but also what dedication can entail. As such, the boxer learns that some things cost more to achieve, but might be worth it, nevertheless. While showing how dedication can be learned, the quote also seems to indicate how easily the coin can be flipped: to abstain from sex for performance-enhancing reasons seems to be built on a myth rather than scientific facts and may also include disrespect both for the needs of the boxer and his or her partner.

In addition to the health regime of everyday boxing, Wacquant describes boxing conditioning as a '…genuine reshaping of one's kinetic coordination and even a psychic conversion' (Wacquant 1992, 239). By repetitive practice, a boxer is able to reshape his motion pattern. The basic punches are '…far from being natural and self-evident', and it requires extensive practice to do them right (Wacquant 1992, 239). The physical drills result in an expanded response-and movement pattern as opposed to a 'non-boxer' and as such, they can be viewed as forms of reflexive embodied knowledge. This reshaping of coordination and psychic 'layout' represents not just realization of athletic potential, but self-realization: it enables the athlete to exercise bodily autonomy and expands the knowledge of what this autonomy entails.

Basic conditioning seem to provide both a form of self-care as well as a specific notion of bodily integrity: the identification of what the body really needs – getting enough sleep and

the right food, can be viewed as a regime of self-care. By "fine-tuning" oneself as athletes does, they will feel the effect of right nourishment and proper sleep. This "fine-tuning" is not only the athletes expressing needs and desires, but a deeper knowledge of what these needs and desires consists of. The knowledge of one's own needs and desires, and trust and care for that they deserve to be met, can, as Honneth notes, be a form of basic self-respect. The expanding – and reflexive- embodied knowledge illustrates how boxing, and perhaps other sports as well, has the potential not only to establish and maintain bodily integrity, but also to expand the notion of what it is.

Sparring

Sparring is the regular practice in the ring against an adversary. The goal is to gain experience and enhance skills and not to win a fight (Lewandowski 2007; Wacquant 1992). Lewandowski (2007) stresses the rich potential for optimizing constraints in sparring and views three elements to contributing to this optimization: 1) a governed choice of partner, 2) flexibility, and 3) mutual self-binding.

Governed choice of partner shows the trainer's vital influence on the learning curve of a boxer. Both Lewandowski and Wacquant underline the role of the trainer in the process of finding the right match for sparring. Wacquant describes the choosing of partners as similar to the choice of a lover; weight, skill and style are essential for a proper match. The aim is that both should benefit from the sparring and that the risk level is acceptable. Sparring partners are chosen – the choice assisted by a trainer – in order to 'fit' the dedicated purpose of the day, whether it is to 'hold back the punches' or concentrate on 'footwork' or defence (Wacquant 1992, 242) . Flexibility in the sparring matches means that the rules can be adjusted in order to achieve the training goal of that particular day. For example can only

body shots be allowed, or the length of the practice can be adjusted to '…minimize the 'wear and tear' on the boxer's body' (Wacquant 1992, 78). The first two factors, governed choice of partner and flexibility in rules, makes it possible to pair seemingly unequal and 'unmatchable' boxers in sparring: it is possible to pair pros with amateurs, women with men, and heavyweights with middleweights in order to 'further enable the creativity and skill among individual boxers' (Lewandowski 2007, 34).

The third element of sparring is that it is a form of 'shared cooperative action' aimed at realization of each boxer's potential skills and abilities (Lewandowski 2007, 34). Lewandowski discusses what Elster (1984) calls 'mutual self-binding':

> '…a form of shared cooperative action and practical improvisation designed to instruct one another in mutually beneficial ways, such as when boxers reflexively "correct" one another's mistakes with controlled well-placed blows. In sparring, mutual self-binding fosters a distinct kind of reflexive social cooperation and creativity in which attempts at constrained maximization are often optimized (Lewandowski 2007, 34)

As Lewandowski indicates, it seems that sparring can be a good way to assess not only skills and abilities, but also to be confronted with one's weaknesses. While the possibility of physical injury is underlying every sparring session, the purpose is not fighting but cooperation: the partners are there to learn from each other and help each other to learn (Wacquant 1992). Sparring is viewed as a 'working consensus' where the trainer is monitoring the 'fistic conversation' (Wacquant 1992, 243). Despite the fact that sparring sessions can sometimes be as brutal as boxing matches can, Wacquant (1992, 244) stresses the 'tacit norms of cooperation' and the 'antagonistic cooperation' demonstrated by

experienced boxers. In order to realize the purpose of the sparring the boxer needs to cooperate and trust his counterpart.

Wacquant (1992) describes the difference between sparring and the boxing match as facing a partner instead of an opponent, but also underlines the danger. Sparring always poses a risk of injury, and can even be a challenge to the boxer's status and reputation. Confronting fear and possible humiliation or injury makes the sparring match an arena for an emotional learning process. Harnessing and controlling emotions is a vital part of a match. Hurt must not show, nor fear or anger. Sparring teaches the boxer to identify and master his emotions. This mastery does not seem to consist of suppression only; the boxer learns to recognize own emotions and master them in order to use his talents to the best of his ability. Since this is done under risk of physical injury – albeit a controlled risk - boxers can learn how to do their best despite fear.

In addition to recognizing and mastering emotions, a boxer has to build up stamina to endure pain. Wacquant (1992) describes how routinization of pain helps the boxer to master the first impulses of self-protection that might undo rational tactics and self-control, and leaves room for creativity. Infliction of pain can be a violation of bodily integrity, but in opposition to circumstances where the violation deprives the person of control over his body, the intention of the 'economy of pain' is to gain control over one's body – even when it hurts.

The pain involved in both sparring and boxing matches seems to develop a form of ultimate bodily autonomy. The boxer willingly submits to a situation having all the characteristics of violation in a 'rational' perspective. Willingly submitting to pain seems to be an instance of expanding one's autonomy by learning and mastering new skills *despite* pain.

Sparring forces the boxer to develop his perceptual, emotional and physical talents. It 'reorganizes' the boxer's perceptual abilities and habits in that he learns to filter out unnecessary information while concentration on what is important in the ring (Wacquant 1992, 244) As such, sparring leads to an expansion of the boxer's knowledge of what he or she can do. Lewandowski finds the greatest potential for maximization of creativity and skill development in sparring (2007). This exploration in sparring can be viewed as a continuous process of discovering what it entails to be a boxer, and, more generally, of what it entails to be 'me': to self-knowledge.

The boxing match

In line with Wacquant (1992) and interpretations of boxing as *deep play* (Boddy, 2008) I am interested in the existential dimension of boxing. My initial suggestion is that the high stakes in boxing is what makes boxing such a potent source for establishing selfhood. This should make the boxing match the best source among the forms of boxing. Although I do think the boxing match does have the highest potential for being a source to the cultivation of a person's love, trust and knowledge; I suggest there are both contextual reasons and internal/structural reasons that boxing matches today does not realize this potential.

Professional boxing matches are both big business and an industry (Lewandowski 2015; 2019; 2020). Professional boxers are just parts in a commercial system rigged to entertain an audience and generate money, and the athletes have little or no influence on neither their own health (risk adjustment in matches) nor their earnings (Lewandowski 2019). Lewandowski (2019) points out that compared to other professional athletes, professional boxers lack

collective bargaining power because they have no union or fighters' association. From a honnethian perspective, these instances of disrespect (lack of rights and lack of solidarity) calls for a struggle for recognition (Andersen & Loland 2015, 2016). However, this is not the theme for this paper, although, as I will show, this context inhibits the boxing match realizing its potential for building selfhood. The business and industry of professional boxing means that boxers are being used in a commercial system rigged to entertain an audience and generate money, not really for the athletes, but for promoters and venues. In addition, athletes are often portrayed by media or promotors as representatives or characters in a storyline that can be about social class, ethnicity, nationality, ideals of masculinity etc. (Boddy 2008; Lewandowski 2020). This represents what Howe (2003) warns of regarding selfhood: When the focus shifts from the self's experience in sport (the athlete) to external objectives like the audience's experience of the sport, this lessens or removes the potential for development of selfhood.

The above-mentioned contextual challenges are specific for professional boxing matches. However, both amateur and professional boxing matches suffer from structural challenges that reduces the potential for building selfhood: According to Lewandowski (2007, 31), both amateur and professional boxing matches suffer from 'suboptimal soft constraints' indicating that boxing fights do not provide optimal conditions for play. Competitive sport is an undertaking that seeks to restrict choice 'in ways that enable creativity and skill maximization' (Lewandowski 2007, 26). In boxing fights, both amateur and professional, the length of the rounds and the scoring system in which the infliction of pain and ultimately the knock out gives competitive advantage, provide constraints that do not realize the goal of maximizing skill and enabling creativity. In amateur boxing matches the short duration of the rounds as well as the rules on wearing headgear force the boxers to throw as many punches as

possible in order to score points. This prevents development of both creative and complex punch combinations, as most of the punches are directed towards the head. It prevents 'ringmanship', too, in the sense of ability to move around in the ring in a fluent fashion (Lewandowski 2007). In professional boxing matches, the longer rounds and absence of headgear makes the boxers adopt a style where the aim is the knockout punch (Lewandowski 2007). This aim of just landing one big blow, leads to the same loss of creative and complex punch combinations as in amateur boxing. Moreover, Lewandowski (2007) points out that uneven matching of competitors in both amateur and professional matches gives much the same result: where amateur matches can result in a great difference in skill because very experienced boxers can be matched with newcomers, this sometimes seems to be the aim in professional boxing matches. Both amateur and professional boxing matches therefore produce suboptimal athletic performances because the rules of the match constrain the creativity and range of the boxers (Lewandowski 2007). If Lewandowski is right, the fight does not fully realize the potential of boxing cultivating care, trust and (self) knowledge.

Nevertheless, Wacquant describes a state available through both sparring and the boxing match where 'body and mind function in total symbiosis' (Wacquant 1992, 246). This state seems to be descriptive of pugilistic excellence (Wacquant 1992). Therefore, there seems to be a potential for play also in boxing fights, even if they might not be optimal (Lewandowski 2007). Moreover, despite the apparent strains on boxing matches potential to realize play, this does not hinder that some features important to the formation of self is present in today's fighting arena. There has to be an element of trust in the opponent's respect for the rules; that he is not using illegal equipment or will ignore the judge's decisions. Although trust seem more important in sparring sessions, it still has to be present – at least to a degree – in a boxing match.

Can boxing cultivate selfhood?

I started with stating that in order to realize recognition, play has to be an element of sport (Andersen and Loland 2015; 2016). I find that Lewandowski's argument on suboptimal soft constraints in amateur and professional boxing (2007) support the claim that sports are at their best with an element of play (Meier, 1980). Based on this, it seems that boxing can, under certain conditions (i.e. an element of play), be viewed as an arena for self-care and a basic form of self-respect, trust and knowledge in and of oneself, as well as others— elements vital in the construction of selfhood. In the following section these tree elements will be discussed: 1) providing relationships of trust, 2) providing self-care and self-respect, and (2) reflexive knowledge.

Both Lewandowski (2007) and Wacquant (1992) see trust as an essential element in sparring. In order to realize the purpose of sparring (awareness of one's own weak points and development and enhancement of skills), the partners in action need to trust each other – literally with their lives. The issue of trust is probably even more important when the partners differ in weight and strength, such as middleweight vs heavyweight, or men vs women. In addition, where pain is such an intrinsic part of the sport, one has to trust one's partner not to inflict more pain than necessary. Trust does not seem to be a significant feature in conditioning; neither does it seem to be a part of the boxing match where the other boxer is seen as an adversary.

The care element in boxing is displayed through the need to take care of oneself in order to maximize skills and abilities. While care in a loving relationship is part of the recognition displayed between two persons with strong emotional bonds, care in sport can be displayed by

a trainer or internalized by the athlete himself. However, a trainer's display of care does not have to be contingent on the trainer being friendly or fatherly/motherly towards the athlete. A trainer's care is – or can be – professional care, personalized in that it seeks to enhance the specific athlete's skills and abilities. Often, the goal of any trainer's regime of care is the athlete's internalization of this regime; the athlete is educated to take care of himself in order to better himself. Any regime of care can be perverted, boxing has weight classes, and focus on healthy eating can of course deteriorate to weight control and/or eating disorders. However, in such cases, I will argue that the potential for recognition within sport – the arena of play – is lost. According to Honneth, recognition will form subjects; it provides a sound identity and individual autonomy. Perverted care regimes are symptoms of a lack of recognition or recognition gone wrong.

Love is a provider of bodily autonomy. Through receiving love during the secession, the child learns to trust itself to exist independently and to recognize its own bodily and motor skills. This bodily autonomy is the foundation for awareness of oneself as an independent individual. Boxing is the exercise of bodily autonomy in that the challenges of sparring enhance and develop the boxer's bodily and motor skills. In addition, sparring also expand the boxer's notion of his own skills: The condition is meant to develop a repertoire of moves that reshapes the boxer's motion pattern, and since these patterns are unique to boxing, it defines the person with such skills as a boxer.

These traits are not unique to boxing. Most sports have motion patterns that are particular to them and the mastery of these patterns reflects on the person's identity. Mastering double poling and diagonal glide is necessary to define oneself as a cross-country skier, mastering overhand pass and forearm pass is necessary to define oneself as a volleyball player, and

mastering the backhand and the forehand stroke is necessary in order to be viewed as and view oneself as a tennis player. Lewandowski (2015) show that the identity as a boxer also has a bearing beyond the world of sport, in that being recognized and view oneself as a boxer, can serve as emancipation – a struggle for recognition, in Honnethian terms – in a context of structural violence. However, I will argue that boxing and other combat sports, have an element that is unique in regard to bodily autonomy, and that is that the athlete willingly and knowingly submits to the intentional infliction of pain by and to another human being. Lewandowski (2015) the boxer's adjustment and control of own responses to pain, fear and threat of harm as an exertion of autonomy: "…about establishing freely chosen limits on one's own agency" (Lewandowski 2015, 12). To Honneth, the worst violations of recognition in the form of love are those that deprive the person of control over and connection to his own body. While boxing viewed from 'the outside' might seem like a violation of love, Wacquant (1992) shows that at its best it is the ultimate display of bodily autonomy.

Another feature of recognition as love is that it leads to the formation of a practical-relation-to-self that enable us to express needs and desires. In order to express these, it seems a requirement that we can identify them. Self-knowledge (being true to ourselves), seem to precede basic self-confidence (trusting ourselves when facing others). Boxing in the form of sparring can provide a deep self-knowledge, not only of the boxer's skills and abilities, but also of his weaknesses or shortcomings. This is the whole purpose of sparring. In addition, the continuous infliction of pain adds knowledge of how one reacts when in pain. Being 'at the borderline between nature and culture' (Wacquant 1992), boxing provides a knowledge of oneself not available to most of us. Fundamental self-knowledge, understood as knowledge of both strengths and weaknesses as well as needs and desires, is awareness, and hopefully,

acceptance, of oneself. This awareness is a prerequisite for the ability to improve skills and become a better boxer.

Conclusion

With a basis in Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) and his notion of basic self-confidence being available through receiving recognition in the form of love, I claimed that if these cornerstones of his notion of "basic self-confidence" are available through boxing, then boxing can be an arena for (self-) love. My central thesis is that boxing can cultivate providing self-care and self-respect, trust and knowledge in and of oneself – elements crucial to the formation of selfhood. Boxing was chosen as case study because of its existential nature. By being a dangerous sport that entails facing another person whose task is to make one suffer or physically put one out of play, boxing seems to put a strain on the intersubjective relationships we are a part of and where recognition is sought. Viewed from the outside, it has the potential of being a case of violation of bodily integrity without being 'morally intelligible' (Davis 1993).

I view self-love as the *first* moral emotion: The first seed that can realize our full potential in existing as moral and social beings. Intersubjective love is contingent on another person's reciprocal emotion, while sport can be an arena for a form of elementary self-love, providing reflexive self-knowledge, care and trust. If sport can be an arena for self-love, it can explain the effect Kiwanuka credited it: contributing to restoring his physical and mental health as well as regaining his self-confidence. Sport therefore offers a form of recognition vital and attainable form many of us and at many different levels of achievement.

The examination of the three parts of boxing -basic conditioning, sparring and the boxing match - reveals that the different ways of practicing the sport have different potential in meeting these criteria. Based on Lewandowski (2007) and Wacquant (1992), it seems that sparring stands out in this regard. Sparring can provide relationships of care that result in regimes of self-care and trust in oneself and others, as well as self-knowledge, a relationship to self that seems to precede basic self-confidence. Self-knowledge does not just provide, but also expands, bodily autonomy. It seems moreover a prerequisite to have a fundamental knowledge of needs and desires (self-knowledge) in order to express them (basic self-confidence).. While boxing may have an especially strong potential for such a positive contribution, some core features of boxing providing this relation-to-self are shared features of all sport.

The boxing match presents a challenge in that it does not present optimal conditions for play due to both external and internal factors (Lewandowski 2007; 2019; 2020), and as stated in the introduction, we have earlier found that in order to release sports potential for recognition, play has to be an element (Andersen & Loland 2015; 2016). Lewandowski has both pointed the problem out and called for changes. It seems that a struggle for recognition might be called for within the field of boxing in order for the boxers to emancipate themselves and gain some control over their sport. However, historically, sparring rules have been introduced to boxing before, in order to modify the match (The Queensberry Rules in 1866 (Boddy 2007)). There seems no reasons that modifications in boxing should not be introduced again.

Notes

1. "Deep play" is a term Glifford Geertz uses in his essay Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight. Daedalus 2005 134:4, 56-86. Geertz adopted the term from Jeremy Bentham (Boddy 2008, 9)

2. Honneth's theory of recognition therefore entails three dimensions: one for a person's relation to self, one for intersubjective relationships (other persons) and one to the social spheres of society (Lysaker 2011). The social spheres of society (primary relationships, communities of value and nation state) contain the three forms of recognition (love, solidarity and respect/rights) (Honneth 1995). As such,, recognition is an intersubjective and mutual relation, and a condition for persons' and groups identity-formation and participation in society.
3. Quote translated by author

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