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‘HARD’ WOMEN AND ‘SOFT’ WOMEN

The Social Construction of Identities among Female Boxers

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Abstract This article uses a combination of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus theory and an interactionist perspective to examine women’s participation in the traditionally ‘man’s world’ of boxing. The two major aims of the study were to identify how women entered and stayed involved in boxing and the types of identities that they forged in the process. The data were collected via participant-observation and in-depth interviews with a sample of women boxers and their coaches. It was found that the women’s entry into and continued involvement in boxing depends on both *disposition* and *situation*. It was also concluded that women boxers occupied an ambivalent position: on the one hand, by definition, they challenged the existing gender order; on the other hand, they also reinforced the status quo by displaying traditional modes of femininity. This tension was related to the modalities of boxers’ practice (‘hard’ or ‘soft’) and their social histories. In short, the process of identity-formation among women boxers was inseparably social *and* sexual.

Key words • boxing • femininity • gender • identity

Studying the processes of social and sexual differentiation that shape sport enables us to understand behaviours that produce, reproduce or oppose established social relationships. For example, the (relatively recent and partial) ‘feminization’ of sport has created new modes of identity, while simultaneously perpetuating traditional patterns of sexual differentiation, since the female sporting body is still primarily valued for its aesthetic and expressive activities. Moreover, the participation of men in ‘feminine’ activities and of women in ‘masculine’ activities, however limited it may be, complicates the situation. Several kinds of masculinity and femininity can thus express themselves in these ‘unnatural’ practices, without disturbing hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Thus male ‘cheerleaders’ build a masculine image of their activity, employing acrobatics, lifting and physically demanding movements (Davis, 1990), and in a similar way female football players present their sport as being more tactical than the male game, since it is based on technical mastery rather than on physical strength — though this has still to be objectively proven (Mennesson, 1995).

These processes of sexual differentiation persist even though the boundaries of the masculine/feminine dualism have become hazier and are constantly being

redefined. The experiences of women in masculine sports prove in fact to be contradictory, as for example is the case with female bodybuilders who present an image of muscular girls who nonetheless continue to meet the classical standards of femininity (Guthrie and Castelnuovo, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994). In the same way, female rugby players simultaneously reproduce and transform the masculine sport (Wheatley, 1994). While carving out feminine identities (Theberge, 1995), women participating in men's sports still face the logic of binary gender opposition (Kane, 1995) and the ethos of male superiority. Thus, although females continue to make inroads into traditionally male-only activities, it is debatable how much impact these 'encroachments' have actually had on the hegemonic gendered representations, identities and relations of sport (Henry and Comeaux, 1999; Pirinen, 1997; Scraton et al., 1999; Theberge, 1997; Wright and Clarke, 1999; Young, 1997). This article examines some of these complex and contradictory issues via a case study of French women boxers. Thus, the article also represents a step toward addressing the dearth of sociological research on female participation in French sport (Louveau and DAVISSE, 1991).

Theoretical Framework

As Messner (1996) stresses, the categories of sexual identity in sport are structured according to a binary logic of athleticism = masculinity = heterosexuality for males and athleticism? femininity? heterosexuality? for females. Female boxers threaten this dualistic gender regime, because they display strength, violence and control — characteristics that have usually epitomized hegemonic masculinity (Halbert, 1997; McCaughey, 1997). A key question in investigating this 'transgressive' form of femininity is understanding how the organizational culture of French boxing, especially the features of the clubs and interactions with coaches and male boxers, influences females to take up boxing and shapes the attendant identities and counter-identities.

The identity-formation process is viewed here from a social constructionist perspective. It is assumed that identities are shaped by how significant others confirm similarities and differences (Tap, 1998). This viewpoint is consonant with a culturalist approach that takes into account both structural and contextual determinations (Clément et al., 1994; Miller et al., 1998). Following Bourdieu (1987, 1992), this perspective implies that the habitus is not defined as a system of necessarily homogeneous tendencies that are definitively acquired, but rather as a constellation of 'torn', or 'fragmented' predispositions that are subject to modification. Thus, this complex has a 'generative (or even creative) capacity' and allows for the development of 'makeshift identities' (Camilleri, 1998: 256). Furthermore, this identity process develops simultaneously from social, cultural and sexual differences that are inseparable (Bourdieu, 1980). From this point of view, this article is an extension of the work of MacCall (1992) and Laberge (1994), who suggest merging gender with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Genders are partially created and regulated both in and by the body and can be analysed in terms of *dispositions*. Thus, this article tries to ascertain the way in which female boxers define their identities as women, while at the same time

studying the plurality of feminine models which they refer to, create, reproduce and question.

This identity process occurs through relatively varied experiences of practising boxing. Boxing or rather various types of boxing appear to be a group of combative and grip-orientated sports that are organized according to the extent to which they are 'hard' or 'soft' (Clément, 1981). Boxing in France can be divided into two main categories. There is French boxing, which contains two variations: the 'assault' mode, which emphasizes technical mastery, grace and balance, penalizes the use of powerful blows, and forbids KOs; and the 'combat' style which, as the nomenclature implies, entails the use of full blows. In 1995, nearly 25,000 participants, most of them males, were registered with the national federation of French boxing. Although these numbers are small in comparison to judo (543,000) and karate (205,000), French boxing attracts the highest percentage (12 percent) of all 'combat' sports (Augustini and Trabal, 1999). The other main category consists of 'rougher' styles such as English boxing, Thai boxing and kickboxing (American boxing).

Methods

In order to obtain in-depth information about the processes associated with identity construction, two methods of data collection were used. First, I conducted two years of participant-observation in several 'hard' and 'soft' boxing centres. As a boxer, I was able to become totally integrated into the clubs and to observe the everyday social interactions. My status as a boxer facilitated the establishment of close links both with female boxers and their male coaches. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 12 female boxers and their coaches. The women boxers were selected according to the level of competition and the type of boxing in which they participated. Seven of the boxers practised a contact style of French boxing, although only two of them had faced each other in a fight. The other five participated in 'harder' styles, such as kickboxing, English or Thai boxing.

Findings

Becoming a Female Boxer

Social Backgrounds — Only one of the boxers, whose parents both had degrees and were professionals, could be described as having a middle class background. Ten respondents came from families with little cultural capital (i.e. parents whose educational level was less than a baccalauréat) and four came from low social class immigrant families of Italian or North African origin. Half of the respondents' mothers were in the labour force and all of them performed the major household tasks. Thus, we can say that the original social milieu of most of the boxers was predominantly 'working class', with the accompanying values of physical work and a fairly rigid differentiation between feminine and masculine roles.

Table 1 Social Backgrounds of Women Boxers

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Parents' Social Class</i>	<i>Current Social Class</i>	<i>Social Trajectory</i>	<i>Marital Status and Living Arrangements</i>	<i>Siblings</i>
Sandrine	35	Teacher	Lower	Upper	Ascending	Married to a boxer; 2 children	1 sister
Corinne	30	Employee & part-time university student	Lower	Lower	Ascending	Single, lives alone	1 brother
Lucie	30	Unemployed	Lower	Lower	Ascending	Divorced, lives alone	None
Sophie	28	Employee	Lower	Lower	Stationary	Married to a boxer	1 brother
Leïla	20	University student	Lower	Socially mobile	Ascending	Single, lives with parents	1 sister, 3 brothers (all boxers)
Fatima	24	University student	Lower	Socially mobile	Ascending	Single, lives alone	3 sisters, 3 brothers
Julie	30	Senior executive	Lower	Upper	Ascending	Single, lives alone	None
Régine	26	Employee & semi-pro boxer	Upper	Lower	Descending	Single, lives alone after a relationship with her coach	1 brother
Aude	38	Employed	Lower	Lower	Stationary	Married to a boxer; 2 children	3 sisters, 4 brothers
Marie	18	University student	Lower	Lower	Stationary	Lives with father	1 brother
Anna	20	University student	Middle	Lower/Middle	Descending	Lives with boyfriend (a boxer)	
Sylvia	30	Unemployed	Lower	Lower	Stationary	Lives with father (a boxer) of their 3 children	1 brother

Four respondents have jobs that require little education, three have passed the baccalauréat and have undertaken short-term courses in higher education, while five have completed or are about to attain higher education qualifications. Thus, despite their relatively similar 'familial configurations' (Lahire, 1995: 60), which has facilitated the sharing of certain values (particularly with regard to their relationships to their bodies), the women were somewhat heterogeneous in terms of their current educational (and cultural) capital (see Table 1).

The diversity in the women's cultural capital was a contrast to the relatively greater homogeneity in the male boxers who belonged to the various clubs (generally speaking, there are more working class boxers and coaches in hard boxing than in soft boxing). From this point of view, the women tended to have social standing superior to that of their (usually) male training partners. Sexual differentiation thus combines with social differentiation.

Although the histories and social situations of the boxers are vital when dealing with identity-creation, modes of socialization in the family also proved to be very important, especially with respect to sexual and corporeal identities. In childhood, the process of sexual differentiation centres around the use of the body and physical activity, with the most physical games undertaken almost exclusively by boys (Hasbrook, 1993). By contrast, girls' relationships to their bodies are often developed outside of the sporting arena. Thus, McRobbie (1991) refers to a 'bedroom culture' for adolescent girls who spend their time at home working on their physical appearance in order to make themselves attractive to boys. The female boxers reported having adolescent experiences that differed from this traditional pattern. For instance, all had taken part in several sports at a very young age. Although not all of the respondents had parents who were very sports-minded, they received encouragement, especially from their fathers, to participate in competitive and physical activities (gymnastics, tennis, judo and karate were the sports most frequently mentioned).

Thus, it is possible to refer to the inculcation of a competitive sports habitus. However this habitus took a decidedly gendered pattern, with eight of the boxers describing themselves as having been 'tomboys', 'dressed like boys', played football, climbed trees and preferred the company of boys. During a relatively lengthy period, beginning around seven to eight years of age and continuing until as late as 14–15, they enacted a 'counter-identity' model that avoided traditional feminine behaviour including relationships with girls they considered boring and fragile. Two boxers did not see themselves as tomboys, stating that they simply had motor patterns that were essentially uncommon in girls (one 'moved about a lot', the other liked fights). In almost all cases the girls created for themselves an essentially 'masculine-type capital'.

Although the structure of the presence or absence of older brothers did not seem to influence the 'counter-identification' process directly (when they did not have brothers, the girls followed their cousins or friends), the nature of interactions within the family did. Thus, the girls defined themselves in opposition to other members of the family (most often sisters or brothers) and presented themselves as 'the most dynamic' or the 'the most sporty'. Early participation in competitive sports seemed to contribute to this identity-building: 'I have tried all sports since I was very young, I'm the tough one in the family, my sister has

never done intense sport, she learnt to dance, horse-ride, she was different' (Sandrine, French boxing).

Extra-familial features also helped to explain the 'counter-identification' process. As Suaud (1991) shows, girls who have educational difficulties and who come from working class backgrounds are more likely to participate in combative or team sports than are girls who are successful in school. Entry into boxing occurs at a time when females encounter difficulties at school or in university. Six of the boxers indicated that they had educational problems; of the six who obtained a general baccalauréat, four went on to fail their first year at university. Those who started boxing earliest (12–16 years old) experienced educational difficulties in high school (in five out of six cases), while those who participated after the age of 20 faced problems during their degree (five out of six instances).

Although it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations, it seems that the educational difficulties the respondents experienced were accompanied by the confirmation of a 'counter-identity'. Thus, perhaps through their sports-specific socialization experiences, their working class origins and the specific features of their gender capital, the respondents were predisposed to engage in a rough physical activity such as boxing. This proclivity was expressed in the phrases that they used to describe their 'discovery' of the sport — 'flash of lightning', 'revelation', 'passion' — all of which suggest a successful encounter between their sociophysical tendencies and the technical and symbolic characteristics of boxing.

Learning to Become a Boxer — Although all the participants considered their first encounter with the sport as a revelation, this experience differed from boxer to boxer. Overall, two different contexts in which the activity was discovered can be specified. Some respondents were first exposed to boxing in a relatively happenstance way via being invited to a competition or demonstration by friends or family, or when the activity was taught as part of the sports science curriculum at university. Although these women disliked the use of fists and the combative style, they admired the aesthetic and technical characteristics, particularly the upward movement of the legs, which they compare to dancing. These women's participation in boxing occurred gradually within clubs that offered a single type of practice, French boxing, and involved lengthy preparatory work regarding mastery of the fists and learning how to take blows. Their commitment to a 'career' as a boxer (which they do not consider as a lucrative option) thus depends on a set of situational conditions which if not met, will cause them to abandon the practice. The most important circumstance seems to be the club's 'philosophy' (mainly that of the coach) concerning the practice of beginners in general and of girls in particular. Women boxers almost always find themselves in an unfamiliar and lonely situation that they generally adapt to by stressing the educational aspect of the sport:

In the beginning I didn't want to punch, I found it ugly . . . I couldn't manage to throw punches, I told myself in my head, it's because you're a girl. I regard myself as someone who was intellectual, I was not a mean fighter in the ring. (Julie, French boxing)

In short, for these fighters to persevere with and take pleasure in the sport, they must achieve the technical proficiency that only occurs after a long process of socialization into the boxing subculture (Sugden, 1996; Wacquant, 1989).

For the second group, participation in the sport was the result of personal initiative. These respondents stated they had a predisposition toward combative sports (e.g. 'I always liked it') that led them to try activities like judo and karate, which they criticized for having too little contact. These respondents were more likely than the first group to declare that they had been 'tomboys', and displayed a greater interest in kickboxing, English boxing and Thai boxing. Often penalized in assault boxing, because they had difficulty controlling the force of their blows, these women opted for a combative activity as soon as they could. They did not fear incurring blows, enjoyed using their fists, and valued efficacy and aggression over aesthetics. Their activities often took place in 'multi-boxing' clubs that sometimes were privately run by ex-high-level boxers.

In both cases, there was a match between the boxers' expectations and the organizational cultures of the clubs: the women who discovered the sport more or less by accident at a relatively later stage of the lifecycle wound up in clubs that favoured a 'soft' style, while those who participated at an earlier age were more likely to gravitate toward a club that featured a 'hard' form. The women in the latter group, who started out in 'soft' clubs, tended to modify their style of boxing, because they had trouble regulating the strength of their blows and associated restraining themselves with being 'weaklings'. Thus, despite her predilection for a combat style of boxing, Fatima learned to control her blows and emphasized technical aspects, because her coach enforced the club's emphasis on respect for the adversary and pursuing educational outcomes. Similarly, Lucie altered her way of boxing by changing coaches:

The previous coach reinforced her attacking side, so she had difficulty controlling herself. She has been training with me and has made a lot of progress; technically, she no longer rushes in with her head down. (Jean, Lucie's kickboxing coach)

In summary, girls who take part in boxing in adolescence and have a 'natural' taste for combat are more likely to seek out a 'hard' multi-practice club, whereas those who take up the sport later on are less aware of the key differences among clubs, so usually end up in a club that offers only French boxing by chance. Embarking upon a boxing 'career' depends on a combination of individual predispositions and situational conditions, and is accompanied by different relationships towards ethics (respect for opponents versus winning the match) and technique (importance of aesthetics versus efficiency). However, all the boxers are faced with reassessing their identities.

Building Identities

Patterns of Conformity and Differentiation

Most of the boxers indicated that they had identified with masculine role models during childhood. Entering adolescence and adulthood invoked the (re)adoption

behaviour that is socially coded as 'feminine'. All of the respondents were keen to confirm their feminine identities both in and out of the ring. This affirmation involved choosing appropriate attire for the ring ('something sexy'), wearing mini-skirts after a competition, and having long hair. Participating in a 'soft' form of boxing was perceived as signifying that a boxer was still a 'real woman': 'I'm keen to give a feminine image of boxing, so I avoid using fists; I look for kicks to the head or a series of moves' (Corinne, French boxing). Projecting a conventional feminine identity was more difficult for Thai or English boxers, as their sport does not correspond to the behaviour socially expected of a woman.

In some cases, these athletes reported experiences of alienation:

I have to say that in the ring you must not be too feminine. The ring is war, to be efficient I'd almost say that you have to be a man, have a man's psychology . . . It feels strange for me to say that. (Anna, Thai boxing)

In the ring, I let go, I'm no longer myself. It's a strange sensation, sometimes I wonder if I'm normal, if it's normal to fight like this. (Sylvia, kickboxing)

For a few boxers, generally those least likely to have identified with masculine role models during childhood, the task of self-presentation seems natural. For them, being a woman means wearing skirts and make-up and requires no real effort. However, for those who defined themselves as having been 'tomboys', this process of self-management requires considerable effort regarding how to walk and talk appropriately. Their undertakings are reminiscent of the case of 'Agnes, a transsexual who created himself as a woman by constantly monitoring the ways in which the "normal" woman was being modified' (Garfinkel, 1967). This reflexive process occurs as a response to other people's opinions, particularly those of the men with whom they mix daily in the course of training.

In the beginning they disapproved of my masculine walk and swearing. Now I watch myself, I play at taking care of my appearance. I'm glad to be identified as a woman. (Anna, Thai boxing)

You have to be a bit feminine so for evenings out I dress up as a woman — my (male boxing) friends appreciate it. (Lucie, French boxing)

Thus, the particularly rigid regime of sexual differentiation in the boxing milieu elicits attempts by the women to act in conventionally feminine ways, which, of course, are predicated on heterosexist assumptions, even though homosexual practices are commonplace (Mennesson, 1994).

Having entered what is a masculine domain par excellence, female boxers are tolerated as long as they demonstrate that they do not have the same fighting ability as men. This can be a difficult situation when females face males of a similar or inferior level who try at all costs to 'save face' (Goffman, 1974). I witnessed this circumstance on several occasions with adolescents. The violence of their reactions depended on the attitude of the coach (ready to penalize the slightest 'forced' blow versus letting the exchange continue under his control) and the nature of the spectators (other boxers, local supporters, girlfriends, etc.).

The most difficult situation I faced was a fight with Hamid in a kickboxing club that was popular with adolescents and young male adults in a working class district of Toulouse. The club's coach added to the pressure put on Hamid by his female supporters by urging him to 'defend his honour'.

The women boxers agreed that a masculine way of approaching fights was important, especially with respect to possessing certain psychological attributes (e.g. 'not being afraid of blows', 'getting in there', 'finishing the fight as quickly as possible'). However, not all of them adopted this masculine behaviour in the ring: a KO was rarely sought after (and was excluded in certain clubs). All of the women acknowledged that moving from an assault to a combat form of boxing was extremely difficult, and the few who succeeded in taking this step recounted the intense psychological pressure they had experienced, especially with respect to learning how both to inflict and to endure physical punishment.

The female boxers affirm their femininity by a process of differentiation through which they distance themselves from any passive or fragile images of womanhood. All of the respondents considered it important to have a job and totally rejected the homemaker role that most of their mothers had. Through practising sport at a high level, which often entailed moving place of residence and changing clubs, setting goals and spending more time training than at home, these women had constructed an 'active' mode of femininity. Although all of them hoped to have one or two children, they were in no hurry to become mothers (three of the respondents already had children), and did not intend to stop working to have children. Some of the women had made a commitment to boxing an exceptionally high priority. Corinne and Sophie, both 30 years old, have repeatedly postponed the decision to have children in order to be able to continue their sport, and Sylvia and Lucie, both of whom are mothers, organize their family life around their commitments to the club. Thus, these girls of working class origin and with minimal education (for three of them) have demonstrated the capacity to challenge dominant working class and sexual roles. Similarly, they reject the 'Barbie Doll' model of a hyper-femininity that is so prevalent in the social milieu in which they grew up.

In summary, the experience of the female boxers illustrated a dual process of the reproduction of masculine domination and a distancing from traditional ideas of womanhood. The female boxers confirm themselves as women, but also as 'women unlike other women'. Yet, this identity-building process was not monolithic, so it is important to examine some of the specific identities that were evident.

Plural Identities and the Evolution of Gender Relations

Involvement in both the sporting and extra-curricular dimensions of clubs was a central life interest among all the boxers. However, there were discernible differences regarding their degree of commitment to club activities, their gendered predispositions, their social histories and the type of club they attended. Six of the seven French boxers had experienced upward social mobility, and despite being passionate about boxing (all taught the sport to youngsters), they also viewed it as a leisure activity that competed with their studies or work. These

respondents often used the term 'liberated woman' to describe themselves, and claimed that they had egalitarian relationships with their husbands or brothers (when still living with their parents). For example, Sandrine has achieved a relatively egalitarian domestic situation after 10 years of 'training' her husband, a former high-level boxer of working class origins, who was previously unwilling to share unpaid labour in the home. Leïla, a national champion and first-year sports science student, revealed that she used her boxing prowess to get her three boxing brothers to perform household duties, although her mother initially expected her to do this work alone. In this way, she had partially redefined the traditional sex roles in the household:

They don't like doing it, but when I ask them they help me so that I can go to training. They are proud of my success, they like me being 'a hell of a girl' as they say. So at home they accept sharing the work.

These women were able to challenge conventional sex roles in the household, even though the models provided by their mothers did not predispose them to question their status. In building this 'liberated' identity, the process of secondary socialization and biography interact. For instance, the women's coaches held relatively progressive attitudes concerning gender roles (e.g. supporting the women's pursuit of a university education) and were critical of professionalism in their sport. These boxers' social mobility complemented their leisurely relationship to the sport and was consonant with the identity of the 'emancipated woman' that they articulated. Yet these women did not challenge the conventional image of sportswomen in any fundamental way, since they adhered to the classic binary differences between feminine (the 'soft', assault style, upward movements of the legs, an emphasis on aesthetics) and masculine (the 'hard', combat style, full punches, a stress on efficiency) comportment. Paradoxically, then, their identity centres around claiming differentiation in practice (which comes with the maintenance of the masculine/feminine hierarchy) and equality outside the sporting arena.

In the second group of boxers, the two who came from middle and upper class backgrounds had experienced downward social mobility, while three of working class origin had remained in the same social position as their parents. For these women, boxing *is* life, with three of them fighting semi-professionally or running a boxing centre. Régine, a world-champion English boxer, declared that it was currently impossible for her to have a long-term relationship, because:

Boxing . . . takes up all of my time, I think of nothing else: going to bed early, sleeping well, watching my weight, preparing myself mentally . . . sometimes it's madness, but I couldn't live without a goal, without a fight to prepare for, so for the time being no boyfriends . . .

The other four boxers participated in 'hard' boxing and lived or had lived with their coaches (this arrangement pertained to only one of the French boxers). In contrast to the women in the first group, these boxers held traditional views of gender roles:

For me the man has to have a strong position, I'm not demanding equality. Men, due to their physical qualities, are superior to women, we can't do anything about it. As far as I'm

concerned, I can't stand women who 'wear the trousers' in the family. (Aude, French kick-boxing champion)

A key factor in explaining the differences between the two groups of women with respect to male and female roles is the contrasting ambiances of the clubs in which they fight. The 'hard' boxers train in clubs whose coaches subscribe to traditional views of gender roles, whereas the coaches in French boxing clubs tend to have a more progressive outlook. By joining clubs that stress a professional ethos at a relatively young age, the 'hard' women boxers receive little encouragement to advance their education or independence. The example of Régine epitomizes this scenario: she is intelligent but has given up the idea of studying science as her parents did in order to become a professional boxer. This 'choice', that she was unable to explain rationally, must be seen in the light of her daily training programme in a hard boxing gym that has been the same since she was 15, and involves a romantic relationship with her coach, an ex-professional boxer.

Conclusion

The entry of women into the world of boxing depends on two main conditions: the inculcation of a competitive sporting ethos during the primary stage of socialization and involvement in traditionally masculine games and sports during childhood. Thus, involvement in boxing is facilitated by early parental and community experiences that favour the formation of a relationship to the body and to the world that enables girls to construct rough physical pastimes and competing with males as relatively taken-for-granted activities. These conditions are necessary but insufficient, because any potential must be realized through encountering the sport on a voluntary or accidental basis at a particular age, and through learning the specific techniques of 'hard' or 'soft' boxing taught in the corresponding clubs. For women who discover 'soft' boxing after 20 in an incidental way, serious commitment to the sport usually occurs only after a long process of learning how to use their bodies forcefully, while those who start boxing as teenagers generally find it easier to adopt the 'hard' version of sport. In short, biography (primary socialization) interacts with the two styles of boxing practised in the clubs (secondary socialization) to produce various modes of femininity.

As has been emphasized, the incorporation of masculine tendencies during childhood cannot be explained solely by general sociocultural characteristics, as family dynamics are also important. Furthermore, the relationship between an egalitarian model of gender in adulthood, the type of boxing and biography interact differently within the two groups. Thus, although all the boxers took pride in being exemplars of the 'active woman', they also differed with respect to their views of gender roles and how they comported themselves in the boxing arena. For this reason it cannot be said that cultural capital determines gender capital (or vice versa), since their construction occurs simultaneously and is translated into a communal system of tendencies. For example, a girl's predilection for

traditionally masculine activities enhanced the likelihood that she will become a boxer, but by no means determines her identity during adulthood (women who were 'tomboys' were present in both groups of boxers). Thus, the process of identity-formation is complex and results from the interactions of economic, cultural and sexual determinations in particular contexts.

From this viewpoint, the relative permanence or change of identities depends on the relative permanence or change in the social and sexual conditions experienced by the individual. In this study, the identities of the boxers have continually changed, because the decision they made to enter the boxing world was only socially acceptable (and thus viable for them) when it was accompanied by attitudes and behaviour that normalized such potentially deviant action. Nevertheless, the women boxers have contributed to the redefinition of boxing as an exclusively masculine practice.

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