

Behind the T(rope): One Boxer's Story

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Abstract: This research describes aspects of the life story of a professional junior middle-weight boxer. We conducted this inquiry in an urban boxing gym in the United States. Five extensive interviews were collected and analyzed through a life story interview method; the findings we present through dialogic representation.

This work is a partnership between an academic and a sports journalist, a mother and son duo who wanted to explore one boxer's life story: the sometimes glamorous, sometimes mundane reality of life inside the ring. The research began with a familial connection: The first author's father (who is also the second author's grandfather) was a boxer in the U.S. Navy. As an amateur champion welterweight, Bob "The Brick Wall" KETELLE had a 17-0-1 record (17 wins, 0 losses, 1 draw) with 10 knockouts. This familial introduction formed an interest in the sport of boxing and gave rise to learning more about one boxer's life.

The boxing trope has long been the subject of film and literature, most notably documented in American movies such as *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Rocky* (1976). We all know the story: the young unknown boxer with a heart of gold, fighting his way to the top, going from a nobody to a champion in a few short fights. But how does this cliché match up with reality? Through our research we have attempted to go behind the trope, to present some of the life experiences of one professional boxer to better understand how boxing tales from film and literature relate to life lived in an urban boxing gym.

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1. Investigating Subjectivity

Our research captures aspects of the life story of an up-and-coming junior middleweight boxer. This work is an attempt to explore the concept of subjectivity as it relates to human experience. Subjectivity is difficult to define; it is linked to human wants, needs, and desires, and it is also related to the dynamic interpretations we hold of events and the moments we store as memories. In this way, the study of subjectivity is a holistic examination of human experience allowing perspectives on experience and the contexts of those experiences to be

surfaced. Investigating subjectivity can bring researchers close to life stories. A story in this context is created through a flow of sequences, chronology, reasoning, and imagination. For example, ULMER's (1989) conception of *mystory* is one that encourages an author to write from interpretation and memory. Such writing allows the researcher to search for an emotional truth (BLEW, 1999; DENZIN, 2008). [1]

This work focuses on the stories we collected while interviewing one young man. The general approach taken in this research was interpretive as we focused on the story we collected. In this article, we connect our research to narrative ways of knowing and outline our methodological approach. We present our research findings using dialogue, and conclude the article with interpretations of our research experience. [2]

2. Storytelling

The method we used in our research was adapted from life story interview (ATKINSON, 1998), an approach grounded in narrative theory. We merged the life story interview method with ethnographic methods in order to more deeply explore conversations and the aesthetics of storytelling (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 1992; GOODALL, 2000). Narrative theory, after all, investigates the role of stories, both oral and written, in the social world. The importance of the story can be traced back to DEWEY (1938) who claimed the ultimate aim of research is the study of human experience. Through the use of *meaning-making* (BLUMER, 1969), life stories document specific times in a person's life. Meaning is made as a storyteller considers the past in light of their present selves. In this way, stories allow for a close examination of personal experience. In writing a life story, the researcher is not an objective observer, but rather attempts to understand and empathize with the story being shared (ELLIS & FLAHERTY, 1992). The goal of the life story interview is to gain insight into a life in order to learn from it and consider how one life may have relation to another. [3]

In writing up our research, we use dialogue to *show* and narrative description to *tell*, in order to paint a picture. The story we capture is situated in a particular setting for a particular purpose and we use dialogue to capture embodied reciprocity, placing ourselves in the setting (MADISON, 2006). We also use dialogue to designate a time and space in order to evoke imagery. CONQUERGOOD (2002) describes this sort of dialogue as mutually contrasting pulls of energies. In this way, our subject was a co-performer in this research; the use of dialogue helped construct the story. When dialogic principles are applied to research in this way the power of simple conversations can be made evident. Dialogue used in writing up research can also allow feeling, expression, and interpretation to be communicated (PAGET, 1990). [4]

3. Our Research Process

We conducted five interviews with junior middleweight boxer Ricky Hernandez¹ over the course of six months. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The majority of the interviews were undertaken in the Capital Boxing Gym,² although one was conducted at Ricky's apartment. We designed interview protocols for each session that focused on elements of Ricky's family, social, and boxing life. We used prepared questions to get the conversations started, but soon found ourselves allowing the conversation to unfold organically, changing our original questions or abandoning them entirely. Although Ricky was not involved in designing this study, he became a co-performer in certain spaces, at certain times. As we got to know Ricky we felt close to him and engaged him in conversations that had a tone of friendship. Many conversations took unexpected turns and we sometimes lost our identities as researchers as we became absorbed in Ricky's story. We observed Ricky at the gym and also during one boxing match. We hung around the gym and watched Ricky train and spar while making notes in journals about all of these experiences. [5]

Next, drawing from interview transcripts and our notes we depicted Ricky's life pictorially, highlighting key events. We used marker pens and a large piece of paper and through words, symbols, and drawings we created an idea-map to help us get the sequence of events straight before we began writing. Ricky read all the drafts of the story we wrote and made corrections throughout the process. The drawing helped us focus on the stories we wanted to include and also to document specific moments. In writing up our research we used direct dialogue from conversations with Ricky. [6]

4. Finding Ricky Hernandez

On a sunny Saturday afternoon we enter the Capital Boxing Gym, a storefront on a busy street in a large urban city in the United States. The gym consists of a single rectangular room, no larger than 800 square feet (75 square meters) in size. The dingy concrete floor is cold even through our hard-soled shoes. Beyond the door hang large punching bags. An undersized boxing ring dominates the space, with loosely hanging ropes and a worn canvas. Around the ring are a series of wooden benches and folding chairs with an assortment of boxing gear draped over them: gleaming red and black boxing gloves, high-waisted shorts, protective head gear and other defensive equipment for the waistline and a selection of mouth guards, multi-colored boxing vests, jump ropes, hand wraps and several pairs of boots. The wall is covered with photographs, magazine articles and yellowing newsprint featuring the gym's heroes as well as clippings of well-known legendary boxing champions. [7]

Ricky appears in the doorway. In person he is slither than we imagined; a lean 154 pounds (69.9 kilograms) with a labyrinth of tattoos that wind from his

1 All names of individuals and places in this article are pseudonyms. Ricky agreed to participate in this project based on anonymity.

2 We created the name, Capital Boxing Gym, to represent the gym where Ricky trains.

shoulder to elbow. He is shirtless, both hands wrapped tightly in gauze. In regular street clothes Ricky looks thin, almost underweight, but in his boxing trunks he is ripped, all muscle, ready for the ring. He scans the gym, a bemused look on his face. It is a noisy and busy scene. Boxers roam and a few skinny kids are sparring in the ring, nodding to their coaches in the corner. Lucas, the second author of the article, is known around the gym as a local boxing writer. He attends all the local, small promotion fights, and writes about the up-and-coming boxers, so the boxers greet him as "Lukie" as we pass by. Ricky leads us to a group of metal folding chairs in the back of the gym. You can tell he is not accustomed to sitting down, not here, when he should be practicing. He approaches Lucas, playfully swatting the air around him, urging him to get up and swing back. They tussle for a few minutes and then Ricky releases Lucas from his grasp and they both fall back laughing and make their way back to the chairs. Ricky drags his palm across his forehead and then begins to speak. [8]

"Where do we start?" Ricky probes, laughing a little. "What do you want to know about me?" Ricky sits directly across from us, his ankle balanced on top of his knee, in a kind of yoga-stretch. He leans forward as he asks, "Do you want to know my opinion on boxing ... on life?" He pauses, mimicking deep-thought. "Do you want to know the really profound stuff?" We shift in our seats; not sure how to answer him. What *do* we want from him? We want something truthful, some slice of his uncorrupted memory. Most of all, we want him to feel at ease with us, and comfortable enough to share his story. What we want is to disappear; we want him to be able to convey his experiences without gumming them up with his need to please us, or deliver some predetermined idealized narrative. [9]

"I thought we would just have a conversation and allow things to come up you may want to talk about. We want to learn about your life, but your opinion about boxing is a good place to start" Diane says, smiling. [10]

Ricky leans back in his seat and crosses his arms. He delivers the cliché he thinks we want to hear. "Boxing is like life." We let his statement hang there for a minute, waiting for him to explain further.

"How so?" Lucas asks.

"Before I got into boxing, I didn't have a future. I used to go out and somebody would buy some beer and we'd drink. When I got into boxing I stopped all that and felt good about myself and the girls started noticing me ... you know ... I had a cool factor when I started boxing," Ricky says, grinning. Ricky is fun to be around and his approach to the conversation puts us at ease. [11]

"So, that's life?" Diane asks.

"Sure. Boxing is about cool in every sense and the kind of cool I'm talking about is everywhere ... you slow down, you take a breath, don't react just to be a punk, think about your next move. It's a philosophy ... the philosophy of cool." Ricky smiles sardonically, glancing between us. Then, he gets up and demonstrates his

philosophy through movement; shadow boxing, throwing jabs at an imaginary opponent, dancing in front of us. [12]

"Lukie, box with me," Ricky says, laughing. Lucas gets on his feet and the two of them enact a boxing scene. "Where's my hand? Where's my hand?" Ricky says as he jabs at the air around Lucas' head, making funny sounds to create drama. Lucas holds his fists tightly in front of his face and shifts his weight back and forth, moving on the balls of his feet. [13]

Our next interview takes place in Ricky's apartment. It is a tough climb up five flights of stairs. "I usually run these stairs," Ricky shares. We reach Ricky's one bedroom apartment and follow him into the living room which is littered with boxing bric-a-brac: hand wraps, shoes, mitts, gloves, and piles of dirty laundry. At the end of the living room is the kitchen, with a relic of a refrigerator surrounded by a swatch of orange flowered wallpaper. Boxing posters fill the walls along with photos of Ricky with friends and opponents. Ricky apologizes, mostly to Diane, as he tries to clean up, "Sorry, I was going to get up early and clean," he says. [14]

Ricky pushes aside a pile of rumpled jeans and makes a place for us on the couch. This time, the conversation flows easily. Ricky is at ease and seems almost eager to discuss the details of his past, his upbringing, and his parents. [15]

Ricky works as a plumber and is finishing an associate degree in criminal justice at a community college. He learned plumbing from his father and started working after he graduated from high school. His cousin encouraged him to join the boxing gym so they could hang out together. Ricky started boxing late, at 24 years old and he turned professional after only a few amateur fights. [16]

Born in a large urban city, Ricky grew up in the Jackson District, a close-knit community made up of mostly low income and immigrant families. In total, Ricky has six siblings. He lived with his parents and two siblings, while his four step-siblings visited occasionally. There are no single family homes in the Jackson District, only walk-up apartment buildings. His family lived in a third floor apartment in a large, five story building on the corner of a busy street. The ground floor of their building housed a produce market, a small Mexican restaurant and a knick-knack shop that sold umbrellas that fit in your pocket, cheap souvenirs for tourists, *Hello Kitty* pencils and stickers that his sister loved. The street was teeming with people every hour of the day; shopkeepers, tourists, people from the neighborhood, and other kids from the neighboring apartments. With the steady traffic and the variety people moving in and out, it was not always safe for him to play outside, but to Ricky and his siblings, it was home. [17]

"Growing up there was always noise. Noise everywhere. Noise on the street, noise in the other apartments, noise in our apartment. I don't have a problem with noise," Ricky said matter-of-factly. He grinned at us. "Make all the noise you want." [18]

Certain family traditions prevented Ricky from feeling alone, such as eating family meals together. *Gallo pinto* was a dish his mother learned to cook as child in Nicaragua, and she prepared it most days combining red beans with fried rice, onions, and red peppers.

"I love it when my mom serves ripe mangoes and bananas for dessert," Ricky says rubbing his stomach and smacking his lips.

"My parents, they wanted us to be kind, honest, and reliable, work hard, and to not complain." Ricky glances down at his hands, loosely folded together in his lap. "Those were the foundational values in our house." Ricky pauses as the refrigerator hums in the corner. [19]

"And how do those values apply to life now? I mean, how do you take them into the ring?" Lucas asks.

"I mean, I guess it seems kind of weird to be a kind fighter, but I think I am. I don't want to mess anybody up just to mess them up. Being in the ring isn't about violence ... it takes the soul of a gladiator to be a fighter," Ricky says reflectively. [20]

On days off, Ricky's parents stayed around the apartment, cleaning or fixing things. His mother would mend his worn pants and shirts when she had time. Wearing mended clothes got old for Ricky, and he developed a sense of shame about the fact that his parents could not afford anything else.

"Once I ripped out my mother's stitches and wore my jeans with a big hole," Ricky says regretfully. "I liked the look, but now I think I must have hurt her [his mother's] feelings." [21]

Ricky's parents both worked more than one job, so they were busy trying to keep track of their children. Ricky's older brother and step-siblings cared for him when his parents were at work. He eagerly told us about the time when he was three years old and he fell on the corner of a table and split his head open. [22]

"They say I cried like a baby when that happened," Ricky says, laughing and looking a little embarrassed.

"You *were* a baby," Lucas points out.

"I was never a baby—not that kind of baby," Ricky says, a seriousness creeping into his tone.

Lucas notes Ricky's sensitivity, but he pushes him to acknowledge the obvious, "Everybody was a baby before they grew up. Why does that bother you?" Lucas says, laughing under his breath. "I was a baby, you were a baby." [23]

Ricky knits his brow and glares a little at Lucas. "I bet you were a cute baby," Ricky says making a silly face. There is a pause as we let Ricky's comment settle and then Ricky says, "Babies have to be taken care of and I don't want to be a burden on anybody. Babies are a burden." [24]

Unfazed, Lucas asks, "But, I'm sure your parents loved you and didn't think you were a burden. Right?"

Ricky turns away and walks to a large window that looks out onto the noisy city street. "What else do you want to talk about?" he quips. We ask Ricky about school.

"They [the teachers] knew we were poor and Latino—I had two strikes before I ever got started," he joked. "I learned a little English from my older brother before I started school, but the language thing was, well it makes you different, you know, it's hard. I could say anything in Spanish, but nobody really cared too much about that." [25]

Despite his early interpretations of the labels placed on him he did well in elementary school. His mother participated in school activities when she could, volunteering to bake cookies from a recipe she got from the vice principal, but downtime was rare. That meant that Ricky and his siblings were left alone much of the time. [26]

"Folks from the Jackson get shot. I knew that when I was a little kid ... If you get shot around there, it means you are truly part of the neighborhood. If you want street cred you can get shot or rap—yeah, cut a CD." Ricky looks away from us, avoiding eye contact. [27]

"So, did you get into that stuff?" Diane inquires.

"Sure ... I mean the gangs are seductive in a way when you are little ... I didn't understand then what the consequences of my actions would be," Ricky replies breathing out a sigh of acceptance.

"School was always a hassle. When I got into junior high my parents moved me out of the neighborhood school to keep me away from the gang and drug problems that were everywhere in the Jackson," Ricky shares when we ask about his adolescent years. [28]

"So, what did that mean?" Diane asks.

"Long bus rides all the time. But even though my parents made me transfer to a new school nearly every year, I did pretty well. I got As and Bs," Ricky replies with some pride. [29]

By the eighth grade Ricky was old enough to notice his mother trying to save money in plastic containers she hid in the kitchen. She gave Ricky money for school dances and she let him take his sister to the public swimming pool and to afternoon movies. Even though there were occasional luxuries, Ricky felt pressure to get involved with drugs to make money. [30]

"They [the boys in the neighborhood] used to tell me not to be a sucker...suckers get shit jobs ... just sell some drugs and you can help your mom out. By early high school I was selling marijuana, but I held my school life together enough to

earn credits toward graduation. By senior year I got a legit job as a plumber, but kept selling drugs on the side," Ricky shares with a tinge of embarrassment. [31]

Two years after graduating from high school, Ricky "caught a case" for possession of marijuana and spent six months in the county jail. That was a wakeup call.

"I sat there in the cell and told myself that I didn't want to be a loser. Right before I was arrested, I started going the Capital Boxing Gym with my cousin; when I got released I started training at the gym all the time," Ricky shares, staring at the floor with his arms crossed. There was a long pause and then Lucas, avoiding eye contact, asks:

"What was it like in that cell?"

"Oh man, it is lonely. Really lonely and boring. Nobody came to visit me. My mom was mad at me. My dad was pissed and said he would never talk to me again, but he did after a while. The whole time I was sitting there I just kept thinking about how I wanted to get out and never come back, how I wanted to go back to the gym." [32]

"What was it about the gym that made you focus on getting back to it?" Diane asks.

Ricky reflected for a moment and then said, "In the gym we all get along. I spar and work out and help other people. They talk about not getting into gangs and how to stay out of trouble. I actually feel safer in the ring than I do on the street. Once I started boxing, my life changed. I felt good about myself because I was taking care of my body, training, and staying away from people I wanted to avoid." [33]

When Ricky decided to start training more seriously he got a trainer, Juan Cortez, who set some guidelines: Ricky had to enroll in community college classes, he had to hold down a job, and he had to train daily. We met Juan, who, like many trainers, wanted his fighters to take fights that could win (him) money, so he tended to push hard. Ricky agreed to the conditions Juan set and began his training. Ricky earned the moniker "Schoolboy" because of his enrollment in community college. [34]

As an amateur, Ricky established an impressive 9-0 (7 knockouts) record and as a result of his impressive record, Juan Cortez encouraged him to go professional. Today Ricky fights as a junior middleweight with a 10-2-1 record, with six knockouts. As a professional fighter, when he wins a fight, he makes \$4,000-\$6,000 (USD). The prize money gets split three ways: twenty percent goes to his manager, his trainer gets an agreed-upon percentage, and Ricky gets whatever is left over. Mostly, he covers gym fees with his portion. [35]

Daily conditioning is a big part of Ricky's life. He practices for four to six hours each day, hitting the bags, jumping rope, practicing his footwork and hoping all his hard work will help him achieve the big win. Before training each day, Ricky has to wrap his hands with semi-elastic bands to protect his hands under his

gloves. Ricky is superstitious about his boxing rituals: he has a particular way he wraps his hands, laces his boxing shoes, and he uses only a favored pair of gloves. [36]

"A boxer's hand wraps³ are really important, and can make all the difference in a fight. My hands can't be tied too tight or they will get numb, but they can't be too loose or I could break my hand," Ricky tells us as his hands are wrapped by his friend Pete Mendez, who fights as a professional featherweight. "If a boxer breaks his hand or a knuckle, it could mean the end of a career." [37]

Once his hands are wrapped, Ricky stands up and begins a complex exercise kicking his feet forward from the balls of his feet and says, "The ring is the one place I find a little freedom—a place where I can totally let go." Ricky's joy is apparent as he moves around the ring in his colorful trunks with his boxing shoes laced up to his shins. [38]

Ricky is still haunted by a fight he had at the beginning of his professional career. He knocked out a career journeyman⁴ (gym slang for a boxer who travels from town to town, making little to no money or just enough to get by and nearly always losing to their opponents). Ricky was bothered by the way the fight played out. He threw a punch at the end of the fight that knocked out his opponent, but there was some discrepancy as to whether the punch landed after the last bell. In small fights, the bells do not ring loudly, and Ricky was upset by the fact that some people in the audience did not think he won the fight outright. [39]

"Why do you still think about that fight?" Lucas asks, perplexed by how fixated Ricky seems on that early fight.

"I was kind of robbed of a clean win. You know, I told you about it, the issue with the bell made it seem like I didn't win fair and square and I won't lie, that bothers me. I don't cheat. I won, but I don't really get credit for it," Ricky says with a degree of disgust. [40]

Ricky explains that boxers usually fall into one of two categories: there are "technical fighters" and there are "brawlers." Boxers who are technically inclined have good coaching and tend to hold their hands up high and dance around the ring. The goal of a technical boxer is to never get hit. A technical boxer is not going for a knockout; that kind of boxer wants to go the distance. A brawler, on the other hand, is more like a street fighter. Brawlers will do what it takes to win, with a total disregard for technique. Sometimes brawlers fight dirty, for example, head butting on purpose. [41]

3 Hand wraps provide support for the wrists, fingers, knuckles, and the entire hand itself. Most boxers use a semi-elastic wraps for comfort. A good length for a hand wrap is one hundred and eighty inches (4.6 meters), but for small hands, one hundred and twenty inches (3 meters) will do.

4 When a professional trains for a fight it is necessary to go through a training camp. At the camp, journeymen are hired to spar. There are endless tales of journeymen knocking out big name professionals. For some journeymen, who they have knocked out becomes how they define their careers. Journeymen do not get the big fights, they move from gym to gym or camp to camp, helping to train the professional boxers. When journeymen do get fights, they almost always lose.

"Brawlers are insulted if they don't get hit," Ricky says laughing. He laughs so hard he makes us laugh. Diane gets a hold of herself and asks:

"Do you mind fighting brawlers?"

Ricky gets up and begins to walk like Frankenstein with stiff knees and his arms stretched straight in front of him. "Look, I'm a brawler!" he says as he begins to swing his arms aimlessly. Then Ricky says with disgust, "I'm not like those dudes. Those dudes are crazy ... you know ... they just walk forward." [42]

In the gym, Ricky is the expert; he is apt, deft, savvy, clever, qualified, and schooled; his role elevates him and he takes it upon himself to instruct anyone who comes in. Young boxers defer to him, moving away from equipment as he approaches because he is a professional. In the gym he is *somebody*; he matters. His gym role is a big part of his boxing identity. [43]

Ricky, like all boxers, has an ongoing battle with his weight. Boxers who can enter competition in a lower weight class have an advantage; most contenders are constantly trying to drop weight.⁵ Ricky keeps a strict diet; he does not drink or indulge in treats in order to make weight. He eats protein and vegetables, but struggles to maintain his weight. [44]

While we were conducting interviews with Ricky, he was presented with an opportunity to travel to the east coast and box in an elite tournament. Ricky was excited about the chance to travel and fight against a new opponent. He trained heavily for weeks prior to the tournament. The night of the match, we set up our chairs in front of the television and balance plates of chicken and roasted potatoes on our laps. Lucas switches on the television and we sit nervously cutting up our meat. Ricky comes on-screen and we have to squint to make sure it is him. He looks drawn and weak, nearly unrecognizable. [45]

"What's going on with him?" Diane asks, astonished. She turns to Lucas. "He's not even *fighting* like himself." Ricky's jabs and punches are slow and inaccurate. His opponent kept pushing him up against the ropes, hitting Ricky with brutal combinations. [46]

"I don't know ... maybe he cut too much weight ...," Lucas says, a stunned look on his face. We sit in silence, watching Ricky take hit after hit. After a few rounds, Lucas is visibly upset. "He looked so good in the gym," he says. "Maybe he just trained too hard."

Diane nods. It is difficult to watch. Ricky continues to take a beating, struggling just to stand up. [47]

5 "Making weight" is the process a fighter goes through to get to a fighting weight. Boxers make weight in different ways, but the process usually involves starvation, exercise, hot baths and saunas right down to the time of the weigh-in. Weigh-ins are the day before the fight, so after the weigh-in a fighter can eat. This is why a fighter's weight at weigh-in can differ so greatly from his fight night weight.

"Why is he clinching?"⁶ Diane asks in frustration. "Ricky doesn't usually clinch."

Lucas leans forward in his chair and starts yelling at the screen. "Come on man ... Come on Rick!"

Diane collects their dishes and walks to the sink. She calls to Lucas from the kitchen. "Maybe travelling and losing all that weight—it was just too much for him." [48]

After the fight, Lucas gets Ricky on the phone. "Hey," Lucas says. "We watched you on *Friday Night Fights*.⁷ What do you think happened?"

Ricky nobly tries to maintain perspective. "I couldn't get my feet under me. I was weak from dropping so much weight and I had trouble spotting his hands." His voice falters as he continues, "I can't believe I lost ... I went all that way and I lost. Juan wanted me to take the fight for the money. I can't believe it." Ricky pauses. "How did your mom think I did?" he asks.

"She thinks you looked real good, real good," Lucas says hurriedly. [49]

"Dude, the muscle in my chest hurts, you know what I mean?" There is a long pause and then Lucas responds pushing back tears, "your heart." Lucas pauses briefly understanding Ricky's disappointment, then gently asks, "What comes next?"

Ricky waits a minute before responding. His voice has grown quiet. "I guess I'll go back to the gym and work on my technique." [50]

Lucas does not want to push Ricky, but he also wants to know what Ricky was thinking. What made him decide to train so hard? How was he unaware of the toll dropping so much weight took on his body? "Are you going to drop that much weight again or fight at a higher weight class?" Lucas asks.

"Not sure." Ricky says. "Back to being a misfit."

"What do you mean?" Lucas asks

"Boxing is for misfits—right? It's a place we can be safe. I tried to step out of the box and I wasn't ready," Ricky's voice is now barely audible, he is whispering into the phone.

"Have you thought about finding a new trainer?" Lucas asks with some apprehension.

"Why would you ask that? I'm loyal to Juan, you know that," Ricky retorts. [51]

It was clear that the loss took a huge psychological toll on Ricky and that it would be months before he would be ready for another fight. Up until the tournament he

6 The primary goal of clinching is to achieve a slow-down in a fight or to tie up an opponent in order to stop his momentum. Clinching looks like hugging and can change the pace of a fight. A clinch is like a do-over, but sometimes clinching is used when boxers are exhausted. Because of this, boxers are often accused of clinching when they are tired.

7 *Friday Night Fights* is an American boxing program, usually shown on Friday nights. For young boxers, making it onto this show is a rite of passage, since appearing on this televised program gives them national exposure.

had been taking well-picked fights, but his trainer pushed him to go for the money. [52]

We meet Ricky at the gym to conduct our final interview. When he greets us at the door he is more subdued, more nervous than he had been in prior conversations. There is a change in Ricky—in how he holds himself, and in his overall attitude. He is not the same joyful, bouncing fighter, eager to joust with Lucas. He hunches slightly in his chair, taking small sips of water in between our questions. Ricky talks about his uncertain future; he says that although he does not know if he will continue to box professionally, he knows that he will continue to train at the gym. [53]

"I can teach little kids, even if I'm not taking matches ... I think I'd like that," he explains adding, "... maybe I could actually help one of them stay off the street ... I would like to help kids find some direction while they train ... boxing has given me direction." [54]

5. Interpreting Ricky's Story

For the most part, boxing has been a positive force in Ricky's life. His recent loss, as devastating as it was, will be overcome, and he will continue fighting until he is tired of it. Ricky finds meaning in boxing beyond the big cash prize; his training and the time he spends in the gym is important to his development not only as a fighter, but also as a person. Boxing requires Ricky's full attention and it also gives him hope—the hope of the big win, the hope of a different kind of life. Whether he will win big or get enough money to change his life is uncertain, but this hope and belief in himself alters the way he sees himself and the world. [55]

Ricky says when he is done boxing he wants to become a police officer working with kids to keep them out of gangs. He has an eagerness to work with young people and to try and make the community a better place. Ricky views the boxing gym as a space where mutual respect for the sport trumps social hierarchies. [56]

Ricky has cousins with gang ties and he felt the pressure to conform at multiple points throughout his life. But in boxing he found an outlet and a refuge. The sport helped him stay away from crime, drugs, and people who, he believes, would have kept him down. He has built strong relationships with his coaches and mentors and these friendships help him focus on the future and setting goals for his life. [57]

The devastating loss Ricky suffered in the elite tournament was not the first disappointment in his career and probably will not be his last. Ricky joins the ranks of thousands of professional and semi-professional boxers who chase the elusive dream of big money and fame, who dream of the fight that will change it all and transform them into an overnight success. This longing is real and that is why a loss like the one Ricky had can be so traumatic; the pain of it was visible on his face long after he had physically recovered. The loss at the elite tournament reinforced the oppression Ricky has experienced throughout his life:

the feeling of being overpowered and pushed down. Outside the ring, Ricky might let the inequity of it all get the best of him, but in the ring Ricky stands up and keeps trying, pushing through the pain. [58]

Ricky experiences a sense of mastery in the boxing gym that he does not experience anywhere else in his life. In the gym, Ricky is valued for his skill and for his role as a teacher. We do not know how long Ricky's interest in boxing will last, or if the sense of mastery he has experienced will be transferable to other settings, but for now, boxing keeps him on a purposeful path of development that allows him to give back to his community through the gym. All we really do know is that boxing is Ricky's focal point and for now, boxing is like a beacon in a lighthouse for Ricky, guiding him to a better life. [59]

In the end, what seems most interesting about our time with Ricky was that we were paying attention to him and he was paying attention to us and that caused us all to experience *now* moments (MADISON, 2006) together in the gym that helped us enter Ricky's world, and allowed Ricky to engage us in what matters to him, and that is not words, but movement; not philosophical argument, but action. [60]

6. Epilogue

After we finished interviewing Ricky he was offered a huge fight with a boxer who had lost to two of the biggest boxers on the scene now. He was offered one hundred thousand dollars to take the fight, but he turned the offer down. He told Lucas that he thought he was only asked to take the fight because, "Dude needs a win." He had learned from the elite tournament not to jump for the money and he decided to sit tight and wait for a well-made match to come his way. [61]

If JUNG (1989 [1963]) was right and the human race has a collective unconscious, then a feature of that kind of knowing is reflected in the philosophy that we learn best by doing. In such a world, people learn to swim by swimming, farm by farming, drive by driving, and a boxer learns by boxing. By the same token, researchers learn through placing themselves in their research, as we did in our interactions with Ricky. [62]

When we began to study the performance of boxing, we had to listen and learn and also *watch* and *do*. We entered Ricky's world as observers, but we became quasi-participants in his experience, documenting moments both in and outside the ring, reflecting upon his successes and his failures, and sitting, Friday nights, in folding chairs outside the practice ring, watching Ricky rip through another sparring drill. Lucas sparred with Ricky, took boxing tips from him, and Lucas was hit hard by Ricky's transformation following his big loss. Sometimes researchers are just observers, careful not to taint the act or performance they are trying to observe, and sometimes researchers unwittingly (or purposefully) become participants in someone else's life. [63]

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