Journal of Youth Studies

ISSN: 1367-6261 (Print) 1469-9680 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjys20

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To cite this article: Ross Deuchar, Thomas Friis Søgaard, Torsten Kolind, Birgitte Thylstrup & Liam Wells (2015): 'When you're boxing you don't think so much': pugilism, transitional masculinities and criminal desistance among young Danish gang members, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1098770

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1098770

JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES, 2015
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2015.1098770

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'When you're boxing you don't think so much': pugilism, transitional masculinities and criminal desistance among young Danish gang members

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon international research evidence that suggests a relationship between protest masculinity and the manifestation of violent crime among young males, and that criminal desistance may be linked to (inter-) subjective processes such as the reconstruction of masculine identity. The paper considers the potential that pugilism (the art and practice of boxing) may have on enabling young, disadvantaged minority male gang members to find avenues for alternative identity construction and to gain transitional experiences which trigger self-confessed desistance actions. Drawing upon an ethnographic study conducted in a boxing rehabilitation centre on the outskirts of Copenhagen, Denmark, the paper reports on data gleaned from participant observation and qualitative interviews with 22 ethnic minority young men. Findings suggest that the masculine context within the rehabilitation programme provided the young men with a safe space to perform broader versions of locally dominated views on masculinity and to reflect on their current situations and dilemmas. The young men were clearly in transition and their desistance journeys were characterized by hope and ambition but also disappointment and despair. In some cases it appeared that the young men's dogged attempts to desist from crime became a new way for them to 'do masculinity'. The authors draw upon the findings to make recommendations for policy, practice and research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 December 2014
Accepted 18 September 2015

KEYWORDS
Masculinity; gangs; transitions; desistance; pugilism; boxing

Introduction

Research on criminal desistance has traditionally been dominated by life-course perspectives and an interest in how changes in life stages and entry into marriage, employment and parenthood can function as drivers in desistance processes (Sampson and Laub 1993). However, more recently criminologists have convincingly argued that desistance is not just about transformations in offenders' circumstances, but also involves (inter-)subjective

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processes such as desisters' reconstructions of identities (Maruna 2001). Mindful of the fact that desistance is often best viewed as a work-in-progress, and drawing upon the recognition that 'criminal desistance' refers to the underlying causal processes that lead to the termination of crime (Laub and Sampson 2001), this article explores how marginalized minority men from a socially deprived neighbourhood on the fringes of Copenhagen (Denmark) attempted to desist from gang-related street violence and offending.

More specifically the article explores the experiences of young reforming ethnic minority male gang members who had become stigmatized by the criminal justice system and the State but who had enrolled to participate in a boxing rehabilitation programme which we will refer to under the fictitious name of *New Start*. Our ethnographic research sought to explore whether participation in the rehabilitation programme enabled the young men to find avenues for alternative masculine identity construction and to gain transitional experiences which may or may not trigger self-confessed desistance actions (see also Carlsson 2012; McNeill 2012).

In considering how best to support young men to desist from violence, it is important to recognize the complex nature of this change process. Carlsson (2012) highlights the salient nature of 'turning points' in the criminal desistance process. That is, changes in the life course of an offender, which in turn stimulate the motivation to make a change in his/her offending behaviour. However, it is also important to acknowledge the 'zig-zag path' of offending (Carlsson 2012, 4); offenders may oscillate between periods of offending and long gaps between them (Haigh 2009; Soothill and Francis 2009), thus reflecting Matza's (1964) concept of 'drift'. A central element in the process of desistance is the 'knifing off' of offenders from their immediate environment through introducing them to new social contexts that bring increased structure and routine (Laub and Sampson 2003, 145). Some have also argued that desistance is best understood within the context of human relationships, and that social bonds can generate social capital which leads to increased participation and inclusion in wider society (McNeill 2009; McNeill and Maruna 2008).

Furthermore, in recent years, scholars have become increasingly attentive to how juvenile justice systems and reformatory institutions hold the potential to help young offenders and gang members change their behaviours and life courses. Surprisingly, however, only few studies have focused on the gendered aspects of reformatory interventions targeting male criminal offenders and gang members (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). One notable exception to this is the study of Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar (2008) suggesting that a focus on the gendered aspects of reformatory interventions raises a number of important questions, relevant to desistance processes, such as: how can institutions help young men develop new resources for expressing wider and more 'pro-social' masculine identities? How are masculinities shaped within institutional settings? And to what extent do reformatory programmes work to disrupt or reinforce notions of masculinity that contribute to sustained criminal behaviour? (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008, 23–24).

In recent years, there has been an increasing political focus on the potential for sport to provide the transformative transition experiences that may trigger desistance actions, particularly among young men (Deuchar 2009, 2013; Nichols 2007). Some scholarship has highlighted the way in which traditionally masculine-oriented sports like boxing can provide young men with means of channelling aggression and maintaining status

amongst peers without having to fight out on the streets (Jones 2001; Nichols 2007; Wacquant 2004); especially so, within the backdrop of deindustrialization where opportunities for traditionally male-oriented working-class occupations have diminished (Rhodes 2011).

In his research conducted in a boxing gym located in one of the most socially deprived black neighbourhoods in Chicago's South Side, Wacquant (2004, 15) found that the gym fostered a 'spirit of discipline, group attachment, respect for others as for self, and autonomy of will' among young males who had a history of violence. Fighting in the club, Wacquant argues, was strictly policed and tightly disciplined and controlled, which stood in contrast to the unregulated, normless violence that infested the local neighbourhood (Wacquant 2004, 56). However, other insights suggest a more negative relationship between masculine-oriented sports such as boxing and criminal or violent behaviour (Kreager 2007; Nichols 2007). This includes studies describing how boxing sanctions a traditional and narrow sense of masculinity and that the amplification of gender as difference and opposition may prevent the emerging narrative changes in personal and social identities that help to stimulate criminal desistance (McNeill 2012).

Based upon this literature, we sought (somewhat humbly) to further extend the earlier insights of Wacquant (1995, 1998, 2004). We believed that boxing would provide a particularly well-suited context to study the entanglement of 'transitional masculinity' and criminal desistance among ethnic minority young males in Denmark. In our analysis of how the boxing-oriented intervention programme at *New Start* might shape the young street gang members' desistance process against the backdrop of social exclusion[1] and construction of masculinity we apply a conception of masculinity as a situational and interactional accomplishment (see also Messerschmidt 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). This contextual understanding of masculinity rejects any essential masculine identity. Rather, throughout the course of their lives (Carlsson 2013), and in different (institutional) settings, men apply a range of gendered responses to their social environment. Furthermore, inspired by Connell's notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' (2005) we understand masculinity in the plural, and different ways of doing masculinity as hierarchically ordered. The advantage of this approach is that it enables us to explore how reformatory interventions engage with or problematize gang members' subcultural construction of idealized 'protest masculinity' (Connell 2005), but also how reformatory programmes may help male gang members redefine their masculine identities in ways that might help them succeed in their desistance efforts.

First, we examine the international literature on the psychosocial links between masculinity and violence and the stimuli for youth gang culture. Second, we outline the ethnographic methods and data collection. Third, we present our insights from field notes and interview data and – in so doing – illustrate the extent to and ways in which the young men's participation in *New Start* coincided with reconstructions of masculinities and journeys towards desistance. Fourth and finally, we draw conclusions and implications for future policy, practice and research.

Violence, gangs and masculinity

It has long been recognized that violent crime is a phenomenon predominantly associated with masculinity (Honkatukia, Nyqvist, and Tarja 2007). As it has been stated: to 'do crime' is to 'do masculinity' (Carlsson 2013, 662; see also Messerschmidt 1993). Evidence,

however, also suggests that masculinities are multiple and are mediated by a complex array of social, cultural and historical factors (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010; Connell 2005; Scott-Samuel, Stanistreet, and Crawshaw 2009). In contemporary Western, working-class communities cherished masculine characteristics typically include physical strength, competitiveness, assertiveness and overt heterosexual behaviour combined with the rejection of femininity and weakness (Keddie 2003).

Jimenez (2014) furthermore draws attention to the way in which issues of shame and embarrassment related to the lack of access to what is perceived as 'proper masculine' work in deindustrialized and/or stigmatized communities can lead to perceptions of demasculinization. Under such circumstances, violence might become 'a marker of standing' (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010, 408; see also Honkatukia, Nyqvist, and Tarja 2007). Where oppositional expressions of masculinity are valorized, violence may furthermore become normalized and may at times include a tendency towards membership of male gang culture as a context for such violence (Baird 2012; Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010; Deuchar 2009; Joe-Laidler and Hunt 2012; White 2013).

There are strong associations between social constructions of masculinity and the carrying of weapons, as a signifier of power among some young men in socially deprived communities (Deuchar 2009, 2013; Palasinski and Riggs 2012; White 2013). Moreover, as criminal behaviour is often learned within the context of intimate personal groups of peers (Sutherland and Cressey 1970), gang membership can encourage some young men to amplify dominant behaviours which are characterized by bravado and the display of an abundance of testosterone (White 2013). Further, where issues of 'protest masculinity', ethnicity and class intersect against the backdrop of marginalization, an imperative towards gang-related offending may emerge, as in Collins et al.'s (2000) study of Arabic-speaking young males in Sydney, Australia. This study found that young gang members asserted a form of 'symbolic power or aggression' in order to compensate for their experience of marginalization and powerlessness (166).

In Denmark, evidence suggests that 'street gang' membership and violence among angry young men (White 2013) has become a growing phenomenon. From the mid-1990s and onwards the Danish police was among the first to use the concept of 'street gangs' (*gadebander*) (Rigspolitiet 1998). Although the police use of the term 'street gangs' was initially criticized as sloppy and as serving to criminalize young delinquents (Bay 2000; Koch 1999), commentators agree that in recent years, a growing number of street communities in Copenhagen have militarized significantly and demonstrate a new territoriality due to violent conflicts over local drugs markets (Jacobsen 2012; Mørck 2014; Mørck et al. 2013). Also, it has been argued that violence is part of building up a 'street capital' among young marginalized ethnic minority men as a response to experiences of stigmatization and a lack of feelings of belonging in mainstream Danish society (Bengtsson 2012; Jensen 2010; see also Sandberg 2008).

As critical criminologists, we acknowledged the contested nature of the term 'gang' from the beginning of our research. We were conscious of the presence of moral panics stimulated by 'gang talk' and 'gang talkers' (Hallsworth and Young 2008) and the fiercely disputed views about the way in which the phenomenon of the 'gang' should be applied to inner-city youth culture across Europe (for review, see Deuchar 2013). In this study, we drew upon an operational definition of the word 'gang' based upon accumulated insights gathered from the first author's previous work, those accrued from earlier studies (Deuchar

2009; Jacobsen 2012; Mørck 2014; Mørck et al. 2013; Thrasher 1927; White 2013) as well as our own early insights from discussions with youth participants from our current study. Thus, a 'gang' was conceptualized as a group of young people who engage in 'conflict' associated with 'attachment to local territories' or cultures and characterized by violence.

While gang conflicts, particularly in the Copenhagen area, have become a key issue of local and national governmental concern, Denmark is still a relative newcomer to the process of organizing inter-professional collaborations related to gang intervention and 'exit' programmes. As a consequence, there is a paucity of research on the type of strategies which may help to support young males, caught in the 'double binds related to territoriality and gang conflicts', to transition towards criminal desistance (Mørck et al. 2013, 82).

The research study: context and methods

Context

The location of our research was a deprived neighbourhood characterized by high unemployment rates, high crime rates and a large number of people of ethnic minority background on the fringes of Copenhagen, Denmark. For almost a decade, the neighbourhood had been the scene of a violent 'gang conflict' between *The Wizards* and the *Eagles* (pseudonyms), two street gangs composed of mainly ethnic minority men. As a consequence of the conflict and territorial feuds, local friendship groups had militarized and local youth at times felt forced to choose sides, making boundaries between youth formations more clear-cut. At *New Start* many of the young men self-identified as belonging to or being loosely affiliated to the gang called *The Wizards,* all of whom were either first or second generation immigrants, descending from such diverse settings as Bosnia, Turkey, Somalia, Iraq, Morocco, Palestine, Albania and Pakistan.

In Denmark, gang members are highly stigmatized by the criminal justice system and the State. If they pick up offences, their names are entered onto the national gang offenders list. They are segregated in prison and, upon release, their names stay on the offenders' list for up to 10 years unless they enter a gang 'exit' programme run by the Municipalities and the police (Mørck et al. 2013). Since the early part of the twenty-first century, the Danish police has also adopted a 'stress strategy' for dealing with registered and suspected gang members (Volquartzen 2009). As part of this strategy, the police collaborate with local bar owners to ensure that gang members are denied the possibility of frequenting bars and night clubs (Søgaard 2013). In addition, the police has also strengthened its collaboration with tax agencies and social welfare institutions in order to ensure that registered gang members receive no welfare benefits unless they are actively seeking work or taking part in 'exit', social enterprise or rehabilitation programmes. Accordingly, the young men that we worked with were highly stigmatized due to the intersecting issues associated with their ethnic minority origins, living in socially deprived communities and being labelled as gang members and subjected to the national 'stress strategy' described above.

New Start, a non-government organization, was founded in 2010, and implemented a rehabilitation programme set within the context of a large boxing gym. *New Start* provides an alternative to the mainstream 'exit' programmes run by official Danish authorities

(Pedersen 2014). Enrolment and participation in the programme prevents young gang members from having their welfare benefits cut, and successful completion of the programme can enable them to have their names removed from the national gang offenders' list.

Method

In our research, we wanted to talk to the young men who had been involved in gang culture and street violence as part of *The Wizards*, as well as those responsible for supporting and mentoring them within the context of both the boxing gym and the rehabilitation programme attached to it. Our approach drew upon ethnographic research methods (Hammersley 2006); by adopting the 'participant as observer' role, we were transparent about communicating our research intentions to the young men, coaches and mentors within *New Start* but also participated actively alongside them in their daily activities and explored their views and insights through qualitative interviews (Gold 1958).

Early in 2014 we visited *New Start* for the first time and met with the youth participants to seek informed consent to conduct participant observation within the gym environment, which would include informal observation as well as the implementation of semi-structured interviews. In so doing, we presented the young men with a participant information sheet, which explained the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation. Signed consent forms were gathered from the young men who were willing to participate, and it was made clear to them that they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. As it turned out, none of the participants did so. Across a period of six months during the first half of 2014, we (i.e. two of the male researchers and, to a minor extent, the female researcher) spent 35 full days in *New Start*, engaging with the young men in the informal setting of the boxing gym on a sporadic basis as a means of establishing trust and gaining an insight into their lives and their experiences in the programme. The first two authors actively participated in the daily weightlifting and boxing training sessions alongside the young men, while also observing their participation in the training and rehabilitation sessions, their interactions with each other and the coaches, mentors and staff as well as discussing with them their insights and views about their personal lives and transitional journeys.

During this process, we[2] routinely recorded 'jottings' of 'fragments of action and talk' to serve as focus points for later, more detailed written accounts of key events. We also recorded our own personal 'impressions and feelings' (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 31–32) and later drew upon these jottings to create full field notes. In so doing, during the six-month period of the ethnographic research, we aspired – within the limited context of our small-scale and intermittent periods of participant observation – to emulate Wacquant's path-breaking approaches to 'carnal sociology' by actively positioning ourselves within the context of deep immersion within the boxing gym (Hancock 2009, 94). On a daily basis, we actively engaged in the practices *in situ* (boxing training, weightlifting, sharing food and social camaraderie) utilizing the body as a 'vector of knowledge' (Hancock 2009, 94) while also reconverting our practical insights into analytic language. By drawing upon 'epistemic reflexivity' we adopted and ensured a constant 'blending of reflection and observation', recognizing that our own subjectivity as

researchers was a central component to the creation of insights via the emerging data (Hancock 2009, 96, and see also Pink 2001; Wacquant 2004, 2008).

In collaboration, we also conducted semi-structured and (in some cases) life history interviews with the young men. Within the context of these interviews, we explored in more depth their life experiences, their reactions to social, cultural and transitional experiences, their views on the boxing/rehabilitation programme and their thoughts about the future. In total, 22 young men (who were mostly aged 18–28) were interviewed, with eight participating in life history interviews and the remainder in shorter, semi-structured interviews. While some were at the early stages of engaging in the programme and were still very much seen to be on the periphery of gang culture, others had been enrolled in *New Start* for much longer, and in some cases were now acting as informal or (in some cases) paid coaches and mentors to others.

The interviews with young men were either conducted in English, or, where English language was seen as a barrier to the young men, the second author conducted the interview in Danish and subsequently translated the interview transcriptions into English. In addition, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with six staff members within *New Start,* as a means of gaining additional insight into the focus of the training sessions and support programmes and the challenges that the young men faced in their lives. Once transcribed, field notes and interviews provided a rich data set that was analysed to detect salient patterns and themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In the following three thematic sections, we outline our findings and relate them to our theoretical framework focused on criminal desistance among gang members and its relationship with transitional masculinity and the reformatory potential of traditionally male-oriented sport. The first section illustrates the transitional experiences that some of the young men were experiencing while enrolled in *New Start* and which were triggering early desistance actions. Subsequent sections provide a finer grain analysis of the ethos and culture within *New Start* and the therapeutic programmes attached to the initiative, and the relationship with masculinity constructs and changes. In each section, we present salient extracts from individual interviews and field notes and accommodate our insights with the existing literature. Pseudonyms are used to describe the research participants throughout.

Insights from participant observation and interviews

Theme 1: progress, relapse and the 'zig-zag' nature of desistance journeys

All of the young men who participated in the study described the way in which they felt marginalized as a result of growing up in neighbourhoods characterized by social deprivation and perceived racist attitudes. Most had drifted into gang membership from a young age, and had ultimately been convicted for serious gang-related criminality, including drug dealing, serious assault and manslaughter. Many of them described the way in which they became stigmatized as a result of their exposure to the police 'stress strategy' described above. In this section, we draw upon extracts from our interviews with three of the young men to illustrate the attempts they were making to move towards criminal desistance while engaged in the *New Start* programme as well as the obstacles and challenges they came across along the way. The insights from these three young men are fairly

typical of the transitional journeys that the participants in *New Start* were experiencing during the period of our research and thus represent the insights gained from the wider sample.

Mirsad was one of the few young men in the programme who participated actively in the daily boxing training within *New Start* (see further details on this in the next section). Mirsad clearly believed that boxing helped to clear his mind, and that the club gave him a sense of routine:

> When you're boxing you don't think so much, … like playing casino or like playing poker … you don't think on everything else. (Mirsad)
> I get up at nine o'clock and I wait for Mesut or somebody come to pick me up to come here and train, eat. After that, I go home and take my shower, take clothes on … it's helping a lot in the mind. (Mirsad)

According to Mirsad, being part of the programme was increasing his motivation towards taking fledgling steps towards desistance, as he was beginning to see a possible alternative to a criminal lifestyle (McNeil 2012). Mirsad had begun to aspire towards more conventional modes of masculinity and he was desperate to have a 'normal life' which he described with reference to the standard bearers of adult masculinity such as gaining employment, owning his own home and car:

> (but) I don't have a normal life, I don't have work, a home, I don't have a car, I don't have any of these things. (Mirsad)

Mirsad, however, was still very much in transition, struggling against the temptation towards reoffending. Due to stigmatization, the continuing experience of social exclusion and inability to achieve the trappings of perceived 'traditional' manhood presented Mirsad with continuing feelings of status frustration which threatened to lull him back into crime (Deuchar 2013; Haigh 2009; Soothill and Francis 2009). In line with this Saaib and Aafa reported how they wanted to stop smoking cannabis and to leave the gang life behind, but also how they felt a pressure exerted upon them by their former peer group when they returned to their community in the evening and how this threatened to pull them back into offending lifestyles:

> (we are not happy) coming home … when not in the club … we smoke weed … it's hard to stop, we are not happy, because the gang we was in, *Wizards,* come to us, 'why you go out [of the gang], why you go out' and 'da, da' … We go to the good side and it's not happy for them. (Saaib and Aafa)

While recent studies have suggested that individuals leaving the gang are less often harassed by former gang peers as suggested by popular myths (see Pyrooz and Decker 2011), former gang members might feel a pressure to re-join the street gang as indicated in the above. Against this background Saaib and Aafa explained that *New Start* and particularly the gym was a place where they felt safe and positive. Furthermore, they recognized the health benefits of physical training. Indeed, 'working out' with weights in the gym perhaps denoted a desire in Saaib and Aafa to retake the masculine power removed by histories of exclusion (Connell 2005; Flannigan 1994):

> It's good (to lift weights), it's good for you … it's for health … we feel happy. (Saaib and Aafa)

It was clear from the insights gained from Mirsad, Saaib and Aafa (above) that the boxing gym provided the young men with an opportunity to escape from some of the pressures associated with stigmatization and social exclusion (as we have defined it, above). For them the boxing gym provided 'an island of order and virtue' (Wacquant 2004, 17), that is a much-needed level of structure and routine that could be therapeutic in nature. In the following sections, we draw upon wider data to deconstruct the particular features of the *New Start* programmes, and the complex relationship between reconstructions of masculine identities, desistance and the reformatory potential of boxing.

Theme 2: the dilemmas of boxing: re-constructing masculinity and peer groups

Since street gangs are often dominated by highly masculine values and symbolism, the *New Start* programme made strategic use of masculinity, mediated though boxing, in its attempt to attract and retain (ex-)gang members in the programme. In line with this many of the young men we encountered explained how their attraction to *New Start* programme was related to their attraction to boxing, which initially had come about because they viewed boxing as a 'man's sport'. In a similar way, Wacquant (2004, 14) describes boxing as the 'manly art', a term he uses to emphasize that boxing – more than any other sport – is intimately linked to traditional notions of (working class) masculinity. Within *New Start,* symbolism, of an overtly masculine nature, was embedded within the boxing gym, as our field notes illustrate:

> As I look along the long rack of dumbells, my eyes drift up to focus on the large photographs on the wall above the weights area, which depict the muscular physique of Mikkel Kessler, the most famous boxer in Denmark. The muscles on his back are ornately decorated with a large tattoo which stretches from his neck down to his lower back, and in the middle depicts the image of a Viking warrior. Glaring out of the photo, the warrior has five sharp spikes growing out of his head, one eye socket completely ripped out with battle scars to indicate the violent nature of its demise, a large ring decorating his nose and sharp, menacing teeth. On his outstretched hand is a boxing glove, poised in the position of attack. (Field notes)

At *New Start*, the walls are decorated with posters of Danish and international boxing champions as well as with images of famous fictional characters such as Rocky Balboa (see also Søgaard et al. 2015). The images and iconography appeared to us to be important factors that made it acceptable for the young men to become enrolled in the rehabilitation programme. Most of the young men and coaches within the programme agreed that participating in physical training created an important outlet to channel aggression and supported the young men in managing their anger and stress. However, one of the first observations we made when we participated in the daily routines within the club was that the boxing ring largely remained empty on a daily basis and the young men appeared reluctant to go 'between the ropes'.

> Sander takes the lead as Adhir and I weave our way around the outside of the boxing ring, running slowly to begin with and then stretching our legs up behind us to touch our outstretched hands. I notice as we begin to pick up speed that the other young lads are either lifting weights on the other side of the gym, shadow boxing in front of the mirror or heading towards the open space at the back where they can smoke. (Field notes)

Based on the interviews we conducted, it appeared to us that one key reason why many of the young hesitated to go 'between the ropes' was that this involved the risk of failure and

becoming demasculinized in front of their peers. While boxing is at times presented as having a 'natural' appeal to working-class men, our observations showed that it often took skilful social management from coaches and counsellors to get many of the young men to go 'between the ropes'. Jens, a *New Start* counsellor, for instance explained how he engaged in strategic 'face-saving' practices (Goffman 1969), by making sure that he was the most incompetent boxer during the training and sparring sessions led by the coach Mesut:

> The guys here like boxing. It's a guy thing … but when we train I am always the worst, right. Puhh it's so hard, I have to catch my breath, aahh it hurts, right. The only thing these guys have is their masculinity. If you take that away from them they have nothing … Some of these guys, they have so much at stake here. (Jens, New Start counsellor)

Indeed, several of the staff within the gym and some of the young men who had now progressed to being coaches commented about the way in which boxing in the ring played a secondary role to the other aspects that were attractive to the young men:

> There's a lot of gang members here but they're scared to go into the ring. 'Cos when you're in the gangs, it's with 20–30 friends, you have your knife, you have your gun, whatever but when you're in the ring, you got this feeling, 'I am alone.' (Naail, reformed offender and male coach) … they won't come over to the boxing, they will go to the weights and do weights. Because they are in their comfort zone there. (Jens, New Start counsellor)

At *New Start* the young men tended to gravitate towards activities that still enabled them to express the key markers of a hegemonic male identity (physicality, strength and power through weightlifting and/or bravado in front of other males during social interactions in adjacent smoking areas) without the fear of failure and de-masculinization (Keddie 2003, 290). In line with this the young men indicated that the therapeutic nature of the gym came from the confidence that emerged from beginning to feel stronger and fitter and cultivating an aesthetically attractive physique from weightlifting. While gang activities and street violence for many years had been central to the young men's construction of masculinity, the gym – more than the ring – had become an alternative arena where the young men could construct a self-image as strong men while abstaining from street violence.

A further constructive element of the gym was that it served as a platform for the formation of alternative male peer group relationships. In interviews, many of the young men we met explained how different local street gangs had for many years been the primary locus of their social relationships (see also Collins et al. 2000; Deuchar 2009; Pitts 2011; White 2013). For many, the street gang had been the place where they had looked for help, fun, protection and not least friendship and male bonding. In line with this Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb (2014) suggest that leaving the gang can implicate losing lifelong friends. Importantly, at New Start the gym served as masculine space where men, eager to change their lives and leave local street gangs, could engage in male bonding and try to build new and more pro-social forms of male relationships – at times with their former gang peers. In interviews, the young men explained how they enjoyed the camaraderie gained from hanging around in a safe space with groups of guys who they had grown up with and trusted, and many admitted that introducing women participants into the gym would simply not be an option they would welcome. Our own observations reinforced the importance of the overtly masculine camaraderie, and sense of 'brotherhood' that prevailed:

> In the midst of the sweat, suddenly I become aware of commotion – one young shaven-headed ethnic minority male who looks around 19 years of age has arrived and all of the lads are greeting him animatedly – high fives, bear hugs and boxers' handshakes greet him and I gather that another former programme participant has arrived. At that moment, it strikes me that this place is much more than a boxing gym or even a social reintegration programme – it is the home to a brotherhood, where young men can bond, move on but continue to come back – in the certainty of knowing that a large band of brothers will always be there to welcome them home. (Field notes)

This sense of brotherhood is also clearly expressed in this quote from an interview with Nabeel:

> It's a brotherhood … no handshakes and all that stuff, but it's a brotherhood … if somebody needs anything we help him out or if there's trouble, or there's something else we will help out. (Nabeel)

Accordingly, it was evident that the young men were attracted to *New Start* because the culture and symbolism in evidence there prioritized physical strength, power, aggression and male camaraderie (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010; Paradis 2012). This was also very much how the manager saw it:

> It's a working class temple. It smells of dirty underwear, there's blood on the carpets … and then the tone in the boxing gym, there's discipline but there's a lot of fun as well. They'll be taking the piss out of each other … building up of manhood or roughness. (Patrik, New Start manager and counsellor)

At *New Start*, visual images, heavy weightlifting equipment, the male 'locker room' culture and the strong focus on building and celebrating muscularity while also rejecting femininity reinforced the working-class masculine identities they most closely identified with (Chaudhuri 2012; Keddie 2003; Woodward 2004). The amplification of gender as difference through repeated references to the presence of a 'brotherhood', characterized by exclusively male social camaraderie and reciprocity, was ultimately more important than the sport of boxing itself. Crafting the body as a form of physical capital through weightlifting was seen to be therapeutic and a source of increasing male status (Wacquant 1995; Woodward 2004).

Theme 3: metaphors, therapy and transitional masculinity

The coaches and staff members all agreed that *New Start* was not simply about encouraging young men to become boxers, or even to build strength and fitness. Rather, the boxing, weightlifting and the visual appeals to traditional notions of masculinity were seen as providing a context that made it more acceptable for the young men to participate in the rehabilitation programme. More specifically, the institutional use of boxing seemed to function as a context where it became more acceptable for the former gang members to engage in therapeutic counselling, to experiment with the performance of broader versions of local, hegemonic masculinity and to learn to express emotions and vulnerabilities.

Throughout our observations, we noted that boxing metaphors were regularly drawn upon in therapeutic counselling sessions. They were used to provide a framework and vocabulary for the coaches and wider staff to encourage the young men to discuss and

think through their situations and dilemmas, and to reflect upon how best to avoid trouble and succeed in the welfare system or the labour market:

> As we move from the boxing gym into the holistic, treatment room, the contrasts are really stark in every way. We have now left behind the 'masculine' space associated with boxing, weight lifting, physical strength and toughness and have entered a 'feminine' space: the room is carpeted, with aroma therapy oils emitting a strong, pleasant smell from the round table in the middle of the room and flowers and soft lighting add to the ambience. Patrik ('New Start' manager and counsellor) introduces Mirsad (client) to a part of the personal development manual called 'State of Mind'. 'Phase one is all about meeting resistance in life … we need to think about how you will meet challenges – and we can use the boxing ring as a metaphor to think about that … as long as you have a clear goal, it is easy to do the preparation,' Patrik explains, 'but sometimes the system gets in the way, just like in the boxing gym where you get blows … If you can't find a job – and if your goals are too specific … so when you meet shit getting thrown in your face, which way do you go?' 'I would tend to go into the green zone and smoke weed,' Mirsad admits seriously. 'Ok, what you need to work on is to go in that direction – into the red zone … (Mohammed) Ali said you should "float like a butterfly" but he also said you need to "sting like a bee". If you just float, nothing will change – but you can think while you are fighting,' Patrik adds thoughtfully. (Field notes)

In the literature on desistance and masculinity, it has often been noted that a key obstacle to reformation of male offenders is their performance of hyper-masculinity and their unwillingness to discuss inner feelings and emotional hardships (see Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008). Against this background, the extract above illustrates the way in which the therapeutic space within *New Start* functioned to support the young men to open up in conversation about problems, emotions and feelings. While the young men and the staff occasionally commented on what they saw as the feminine outlook of the therapy room, conversations with coaching staff within *New Start* revealed that the staff and some of the young men had begun to refer to the therapy room as the 'Sparring Room'. This emerged as a result of the cynical humour that arose among the young men and the coaches about what they saw as the overtly feminized nature of the room combined with the fact that there was a window inside the room which overlooked the boxing gym – as a reminder to everyone of the overtly masculine culture that dominated the wider club.

The use of the term 'Sparring Room' and the presence of the window thereby made it a safe space for the young men to be in, and it was a space where boxing metaphors (a masculinized vocabulary) were regularly used in conversation and sessions. These were drawn upon as a means of enabling the staff to encourage the young men to think about how to seek a balance between the use of defence, passivity and strategic attack mechanisms as a means of dealing with life's challenges. The 'feminized' nature of the therapy room (although framed within the safe context of having a distinctly masculine name and physical overlook) was complimented by the presence of female counsellors and mentors:

> They can talk to Patrik about stuff but not about the emotional stuff … it would be more difficult if it was a man to open up and to be vulnerable in front of a man. (Monika, 'New Start' psychologist)

Our observations and insights from interviews led us to believe that the subtle introduction of feminine spaces and roles thus created crucial opportunities for the young men to perform broader versions of the locally dominated enactment of masculinity – and were

used to encourage them to open up and discuss their emotions during therapeutic counselling sessions. But while the young men seemed more likely to reveal their worries and emotions to the female staff than to the male staff or the other young men, their expressions of emotional hardship did not seem to fundamentally challenge their masculine self-understanding. This was mainly because the counselling sessions were most often conducted in a context defined by unquestionable expressions of masculinity – encapsulated both in the materiality of the boxing gym, the masculine name given to the therapy room and in the metaphors which were used which related to the boxer fighting and struggling in the ring (Keddie 2003; Kreager 2007; Wacquant 2004).

At *New Start*, boxing metaphors are not only used as mediums enabling the young men to think through their problems, they are also used to make the young men see their recovery process as a struggle and to encourage them to become active in their own process of reformation. As a result, the young men often referred to ideals and values such as fight, agency, self-control, independence and determinedness when describing how they saw their own process of desistance from crime and excess. In Haadi's case, desistance was described as a road full of obstacles, trials and temptations. He recognized that desistance from crime was not easy, and not something everybody could do. On the contrary, he believed it took determination and will – both key symbols of masculinity (Connell 2005):

> It is sometimes difficult. Of course it is, because you have to change your entire lifestyle … but the way I see it if you adjust your head to it and you say that's what I want … well then you will do anything to reach your goal. It's not something that will happen in a week, but eventually … if you fight for it, if that is what you want, then there is a new way. (Haadi)

While for many years Haadi had constructed his masculine identity through crime, during our interview he indicated that he was beginning to build new and alternative masculine identity centred on the demonstration of his ability and will to desist from crime and problematic drug consumption. Thus, for some of the young men at *New Start* desistance was becoming a new way for them to 'do masculinity' (Carlsson 2013). (For a more elaborate account of the relationship between boxing metaphors, agency and reconstructions of reformed masculinities, see Søgaard et al. 2015).

Importantly however, while the centrality of boxing at *New Start* seemed to enable the young men to develop alternative strategies for the construction of reformed masculinities, the young men also rejected certain forms of non-hegemonic masculinity. This was made evident one afternoon when a group of young men discussed a Danish Reality-TV star (Gustav) and defiantly rejected homosexuality as acceptable:

> It's so fucked up, all the time you are told that homos are totally normal. Everybody think that gays are all right. Oh little Gustav is just so cute … little faggot. You are told: 'Faggots are totally all right, completely normal.' What kind of sick society is that? I am gonna fucking puke. It's not ok, it's poor upbringing that's what it is. If a boy is sitting with a doll, you say, 'hey stop that, go play some football'. (Hassan)

The above is interesting because it brings forth the dilemma that, while boxing might provide a context where tough men momentarily feel safe enough to give voice to feelings of emotional hardship and develop more legitimate masculine identities, it might unintentionally also reinforce narrow notions of masculinity, homophobia and sexism (see also Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008). As a therapeutic instrument,

boxing may also contribute to the construction of rehabilitation programmes that exclude men who are unable or unwilling to live up to the image of the 'hard man'.

Concluding discussion

The main focus of our work was to conduct an ethnographic exploration of how the marginalized minority men we worked with in Denmark attempted to desist from violence and crime and create life trajectory changes, and how such processes intersected with transitional masculinity. Mindful of the fact that desistance is often best viewed as a work-in-progress and of the salient nature of turning points in the desistance process, we were interested in the role that sport, and particularly boxing, might play in stimulating change (Carlsson 2012; McNeill 2012).

Since boxing has been described as the 'manly art' and some evidence suggests that it provides working-class young men with a highly respected means of crafting the body into physical capital while also providing a socially accepted context for channelling aggression and re-building social status, it provided us with the ideal context for exploring the links between transitional masculinity and desistance. We were keen to explore how stigmatized and socially excluded young ethnic minority Danes might draw upon boxing to reposition themselves and construct reformed masculine positions in relation to multiple overlapping social domains (Wacquant 1995, 1998, 2004; Wright 2006).

The young men were clearly attracted to *New Start* because of the hegemonic values it embraced, reinforced and actively promoted. They still placed most value on spending time with other reformed/reforming criminals and were ultimately reluctant to have their traditional masculine self-understandings challenged. However, while none of our participants aspired to be boxers, the boxing gym and the use of boxing metaphors provided them with a safe context to perform broader versions of masculinity in feminine spaces and (on occasions) with female staff. In so doing, they revealed their transitional identities in the sense that they yearned for the 'good life' – characterized by work, family and mainstream possessions. However, some of our insights also suggest that the therapeutic counselling sessions in *New Start*, framed as they were within the boxing context, ultimately did not enable the young men to fundamentally challenge their deeply entrenched valorization of 'protest masculinity' (Connell 2005).

The young men's desistance journeys were clearly characterized by ambition on the one hand and disappointment, desperation and despair on the other (Deuchar 2013). Increased structure and routine, social bonds and generative activities among their peer group combined to foster optimism and happiness while the young men were in *New Start* – only to be followed by further stigmatism, renewed peer pressure and continuing frustrations when they returned to their communities at night. However, the insights from the young men illustrated to us that the resilience and perseverance needed to overcome social stigma and to find a route through the 'zigzig' path between onset and desistance can be made more available to disadvantaged young men where it is framed within a hegemonic masculine narrative (Carlsson 2012). In this sense, the use of boxing metaphors as part of a holistic, integrated rehabilitative approach for young male offenders takes on real significance (Wright 2006). That said, our findings also illustrate the way in which the boxing gym environment can also run the risk of excluding those young men who are

deemed to be less 'masculine' (in the most limited and stereotypical sense of the word) and of reinforcing homophobia.

We must be cautious about over-generalizing the insights from our small-scale research study, but the findings have the potential to provide added value to future policy debates about how best to tackle violence among young minority gang involved males who live their lives against the backdrop of social and structural disadvantage in northern Europe. Early and effective intervention programmes need to be targeted at young males who are at risk of entering into offending lifestyles due to the multiplicity of strains they are exposed to. Such intervention programmes need to be given priority and to have a focus on challenging commonly held views on what it means to be a man. But the discussions that take place within them also need to be wrapped around a safe context which will enable some aspects of local versions of reformed hegemonic masculinity to be promoted and upheld, and will encourage young men to keep engaging and keep talking (Flores 2009).

Most importantly, our paper adds to the existing body of evidence which suggests that desistance attempts are often jeopardized by social and structural barriers, including poverty, deprivation and the continuing dominance of punitive, criminalizing approaches to youth crime and violence (Barry 2011; Deuchar 2013). McNeill (2004) argues that we must avoid sending out the message that offenders are fundamentally 'bad' or beyond redemption, since messages such as these may become self-fulfilling. Rather, we need intervention programmes that are embedded within an understanding of the desistance process, and that enable young offenders to give something back to other people and communities. In many ways, the coaches and mentors involved in *New Start* managed to assist young men in achieving these goals. But wider public sector organizations, employers, penal institutions and society in general need to do likewise (Deuchar 2013).

Additional research is needed into the links between social constructions of masculinity, violent offending and the impact of intervention programmes set within the context of recreational activities such as boxing or other sports that may to stimulate transitional masculinities and criminal desistance against the continuing backdrop of social disadvantage. We hope that the insights in this paper will stimulate such research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

Notes

1. We drew upon Levitas et al.'s (2007, 9) definition of social exclusion as 'a complex and multi-dimensional process … (which) involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society'.
2. The first author's research was funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.

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