

How to Punch Someone and Stay Friends: An Inductive Theory of Simulation*

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One way to study ontology is to assess how people differentiate real activities from others, and a good case is how groups organize simulation. However, social scientists have tended to discuss simulation in more limited ways, either as a symptom of postmodernism or as an instrumental artifact. Missing is how groups organize simulations to prepare for the future. First, I formulate a definition of simulation as a group-level technique, which includes the qualities of everyday ontology, playfulness, risk and consequence reduction, constrained innovation, and transportability. Next, I use ethnographic data collected at an amateur boxing gym to argue that simulations simplify the most risky, unpredictable, and interpersonal aspects of a consequential performance. The problem is that a simulation can rarely proceed exactly like the reality it is derived from. For example, boxers hold back in sparring but should not in competition. The effectiveness of a simulation therefore depends on how robust the model is and how well members translate the imperfect fit between the contextual norms of the simulation and its reality.

Harlien's Gym,¹ Part 1: “Coach, I’m next. Watch this! I whack this kid! I knock him oooooout!” calls out Reginald, a 13-year-old amateur boxer at Harlien’s Gym in Chicago, Illinois. I, his assistant coach, accommodate the request. Reginald has gathered a modest crowd of gymmates to view a videotape of his first boxing match.

Chicago Park District Citywide Boxing Tournament, Part 1: A grainy video recording revisits a wide-eyed Reginald bouncing on his toes in a raised ring. The boy’s head coach, middle-aged Al Levin, stands in front of him, left hand on the boy’s shoulder. The coach gives some last-minute, inaudible instructions, and then makes a nervous adjustment to the boy’s headgear. Al ducks between the ropes, out of the ring.

Harlien's Gym, Part 2: Reginald simulates what is about to occur in the video by punching an apparition of his former foe. He alternates between portraying himself and the phantom. “I went, BOOM!, and then he goes like this!” Reginald falls to the ground, body convulsing.

*Address correspondence to: Steve G. Hoffman, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Ave., Evanston, IL 60208. E-mail: s-hoffman1@northwestern.edu. Primary thanks go to the head coach and athletes of Harlien’s Gym. Thanks also to the Chicago Park District, especially Mary Hopkins and James Ray. Jeff Usher was a big help with the diagram. Carol Heimer, Arthur Stinchcombe, Mary Pattillo, Gary Alan Fine, Ellen Berrey, Daniel Chambliss, Barry Cohen, Alan Czaplicki, Jack Katz, members of the Northwestern Sociology Writing Seminar and Ethnography Workshop, attendees at the 2004 Terra I Zing Conference, and three anonymous reviewers all left an indelible imprint on this article, improving it for the better. Although I would be thrilled if the article’s shortcomings were blamed on the aforementioned, I suspect I will be held accountable.

¹This is a pseudonym for the gym. All names are altered to ensure confidentiality.

Chicago Park District Citywide Boxing Tournament, Part 2: Just before the match begins, black Reginald and his thin white opponent face each other from opposite corners. Aside from the referee, they are alone. The crowd quiets. Time seems to freeze in a strange reflective pause that Sugden calls “the loneliest moment” of boxing (1996:72). The loud clang of the timekeeper’s hammer interrupts. The two boys circle each other in a pensive ballet as the now bellicose crowd exhorts them. Thirty seconds expire before either boy throws a punch. Abruptly, a wild, arcing left hand from Reginald lands flush. His dazed opponent falls into a sitting position with a thud.

Harlien’s Gym, Part 3: “Ooh!” “Damn!” Reginald and his gym buddies explode in a cacophony of laughter and mocking commentary. Reginald offers a summary: “Did you see that! Bam! Ah man, I nailed that boy!” In the excitement, the boys pay little attention to the rest of the match, which chronicles a close contest. Instead, they take turns pummeling a punching bag. Reginald’s phantom foe is taking a serious beating. Al, sounding a little mad, stops the spectral beat down. “Okay guys, that’s enough. Let’s get to work. Stop messin’ around!” Each boy finds his way to a piece of workout equipment and the staccato rhythms that consume the auditory ether of Harlien’s Gym resume.

Both these scenes occurred, thanks to video technology, simultaneously. The first transpired in “real time” at a gym that prepares young athletes (aged 9 to 17) for amateur boxing. The second replays a competitive match involving a gym member. Their juxtaposition provides a window into how the lines separating simulation and reality are drawn, blurred, and reconstructed in daily practice. Members of Harlien’s enforce a sharp distinction between gym routines and a competitive event (which I, like the members of Harlien’s, refer to as reality or a “real fight”). The passage of time and a recorded interface compromised enough of the match’s realness that it could be incorporated into gym simulations. Nonetheless, Coach Al’s reprimand hints that the merger is ephemeral. He especially admonishes simulations that suggest parody.

Since people engaged in everyday activities take the boundary between simulation and reality seriously, so, too, should sociological theory. Simulation emphasizes those situated activities that frame how people think about and prepare for the future. For a different example, consider the symphony described by Kaplan (1955). Although the vast majority of their interactions transpire in practice, a grouping of musicians is not a symphony until there is an audience to witness a formal performance. During the performance, conductor and musicians conspire to conceal the simulations used to fine-tune the show. Performance, in this sense, is just the tip of the sociological iceberg.

This analysis is both inspired by and parts ways with poststructuralist formulations of simulation. Although Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) calls attention to the importance of simulation in the symbolic economy of late capitalism (see also Hayles 1996, 1999), he radically underspecifies its everyday forms. In contrast, this article is grounded in an interpretative sensibility that interrogates how people understand the meaning of mundane and extraordinary events (Geertz 1973) and make sense of their everyday milieu (Garfinkel 1967). Rather than Baudrillard as a theoretical touchstone, I prefer to begin with the Thomas Theorem that states “when men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). Despite the tautology of the theorem, it provides a useful methodological cursor. As Fine (1999) argues, interpretive categories maintain an obdurate quality with cultural and material consequences, even if we concede the poststructuralist point that ontological essentialism has broken down.

This article introduces an inductive theory of simulation as a group-level technique. I argue that in preparations that require a high degree of interdependence among participants, the greater the risk and consequence of a performance, the more likely one is to find an elaborate range of simulations. Simulations abstract from and constrain the most risky and unpredictable aspects of that event or performance. At Harlien's, incrementally organized simulations temporarily bracket off and constrain reality in a way that is distinct yet symbiotic with a competitive performance. The effectiveness of a simulation thus depends on the degree of robustness of the simplification and how well participants translate the imperfect fit between contextual norms of the simulation and the reality it is based on.

While I present detailed ethnographic data on one field site, I formulate abstractions that go beyond a single case. The analysis is applicable to a variety of high-risk sports, along with educational institutions, vocational schools, military instruction, women's self-defense courses, and a host of activities organized around other sorts of interdependent preparation. By abstracting a few features out of a more complex reality, simulations create a kind of liminal zone that exists betwixt and between the real and the imaginary (van Gennepp [1909] 1960; Turner [1969] 1977). Like Turner's discussion of rites of transition among the Zambian Ndembu, participants engaged in simulation do things they otherwise could not. However, Turner implies that liminal rituals are not readily understood as mundane. In contrast, simulations maintain the transgressive and fluid properties of the liminal yet can be fully routinized.

There are at least four good reasons to use field observations at a boxing program to formulate an inductive theory of simulation. First, a carefully chosen, detailed case study can not only test theory, it can generate it, especially on social processes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In this case, a boxing gym is a good place to study what I call *everyday ontology*, or the distinctions people draw between what is real and not real, existence and nonexistence, in everyday contexts. Members of Harlien's regularly attend to the differences between a "real" punch thrown in a competitive match and those thrown in practice. Though the two physical acts would look identical to the uninitiated, they are very different to regular members.

Second, the logic and social organization of boxing involves high physical and emotional risk (see Plimpton [1977] 1993; Wacquant 2004:234–56 for first-person accounts; see Hoffman and Fine 2005; Sugden 1996; Wacquant 1992, 1995; Weinberg and Arond 1952 for organizational accounts). Just as an architect uses models to plan a bridge, a boxer does not enter a boxing match without much practice and forethought. As Joyce Carol Oates gracefully opines, "there is nothing fundamentally playful about [boxing]; nothing that seems to belong to daylight, to pleasure... One plays football, one doesn't play boxing" (1987:18–19). Oates is mostly right. Boxers do not talk about playing one another. Rather, they get matched. Boxing is a contest and a battle, but rarely a game. The specter of physical injury and death haunts the sport. These are stakes too forbidding for it to be pure game, casually picked up by the novice. In contrast, hierarchically organized, strictly monitored, painstakingly mundane, and tightly sequenced simulations mark a boxer's quotidian routines. Oates's ascetic romanticism is only partially correct, however. As I will demonstrate, simulations offer numerous opportunities for playfulness.

Third, Harlien's provides an occasion for a heuristic revisit (Burawoy 2003) to Chambliss's compelling "mundanity of excellence" theory (1989). In a study of Olympic-class swimmers, Chambliss argued that excellence is the result of making

mundane all the actions that produce those results. A gold medal performance cannot be attributed to either luck or talent, or from practicing more or harder. Rather, excellence becomes second nature when all the “little things” that separate good swimmers from great ones are made absolutely routine—distinct strokes, kicks, kinetic balance, advice, and so forth. In other words, Chambliss suggests that effective practice nullifies the difference between simulation and competition. However, just as soldiers are circumscribed in their use of lethal ammunition in battle simulations, boxers can only approximate, not reproduce, competitive reality in training. A core principle of Chambliss’s theory is insufficiently portable to high-risk, interdependent group contexts.

Finally, an amateur boxing club provides an instructive new case for an old theoretical problem—how groups manage conflicts between the interests of the individual and the collective (Coleman 1990; Olson 1971; Smith and Berg 1987). The objective criteria for success in boxing are organized entirely around dyadic combat and individual achievement—materially reified in a win-loss match book. Despite this, boxers generally carry out practice cooperatively and without seriously jeopardizing one another physically or emotionally. In fact, despite routinely punching each other, members of Harlien’s generally remain buddies. How do groups reconcile group-level and individual-level goals when a natural affinity is lacking? Under what framework can people punch each other on a regular basis yet stay friends?

Following Katz’s suggestion that a theoretical ethnography can assess why a social pattern exists with a detailed analysis of how it is organized (2001), this article proceeds from abstraction to particular and then back to abstraction. The first section comments on Baudrillard’s analysis of simulation and reviews research on simulation and preparation. Then I draw on two loosely bound literatures with much overlap but little dialog: (1) studies of preparation for future events and (2) instrumental uses of simulation in social science theory and pedagogy. These literatures help me formulate a definition of simulation as a group technique that includes five general qualities: *everyday ontology*, *playfulness*, *risk and consequence reduction*, *constrained innovation*, and *transportability*. Next, I discuss the empirical setting and methods before moving into an analysis of how simulation is kept interpretatively and situationally distinct from competitive reality at Harlien’s Gym. First, I describe how hierarchically sequenced simulations organize spatial, temporal, and procedural “determinants of attention regulation” (Stinchcombe 1968:236). Next, I explain the role of alternative norms of cooperative negotiation and holding back that govern sparring. Somewhat paradoxically, highly skilled boxers demonstrate their superiority less by routinely beating up their partner (as Chambliss might predict) and more by purposely performing below peak ability to work with an inferior. This leaves just how good they really are to the imagination, as imagination proves more pregnant for the perception of excellence than do regular demonstrations. I also show how members of Harlien’s manage a public-good problem by using simulation to enforce this norm of holding back. The conclusion summarizes the primary functions of group simulation and comments on a methodological approach to ontological inquiry.

SIMULATION AND SOCIAL THEORY

The famously ex-sociologist Jean Baudrillard has argued that the lines between simulation and reality have become impossibly blurred in contemporary postmodern culture. Part of a tradition in Continental philosophy that seeks to open the interpretive space between tacit semantic oppositions (simulation vs. reality; social vs. natural; physical vs. nonphysical), he famously states, “the territory no longer

precedes the map" ([1981] 1994: 1). Los Angeles is no more real than is Disneyland, and perhaps less so. The copy has become more perfect, and perceived as more real, than the reality it was based on. In contrast to his earlier Marxist critiques of consumption, Baudrillard argues that the line between simulation and reality is a temporal issue of sign value in a purely symbolic economy.

Social research requires a sturdier epistemology than postmodernism provides (Stinchcombe and Heimer 2000). Although Baudrillard advances the constructivist approach to the sociology of knowledge, he does not provide an operational theory. He is not concerned with how people understand and deploy simulation in everyday situations. There are, however, two bodies of literature in sociology that help shed light on how people construct obdurate interpretations and consequential routines around simulation: studies of group preparation and instrumental uses of simulated artifacts.

Preparation for Future Events

A loosely bound literature focuses on group preparation for future events. The most programmatic is work on anticipatory socialization, or how individuals prepare for future social roles (Merton and Rossi 1968). Case studies have explored the process of preparation in a wide swath of activities: life course and gender transitions (Hoffman Steffensmeier 1982; Rossi 1983, 1985); student careers in medical schools (Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961), police academies (Fielding 1984), the military (Dornbusch 1955), and trade unions (Pinner 1964); the relationship between rules, attitudes, and class background among adolescents (O'Kane, Barenblatt, Jensen, and Cochran 1977; Stinchcombe [1964] 1969); and even casual dating (McDaniel 1969). A key finding is that novices calibrate behavior toward a referent group, typically superiors such as parents, teachers, more experienced peers, or coaches. However, these studies largely black box the mundane routines that habitualize an institutional order and engender a sense of shared belonging (Bourdieu 1977).

Recent research on children's peer culture and development, deeply influenced by Vitgostkian developmental psychology that stresses children's interpretive rather than passive social agency (Vygotsky 1978), helps open this black box. Corsaro (1996) and colleagues develop the concept of priming events, which refers to the routines children use to creatively appropriate the demands of adult culture into their own peer networks. Corsaro and Molinari, for example, focused on how classroom assignments, school plays, reflective stories, and schoolyard play "serve as a rite of passage signaling the coming separation from the preschool community" (2000:21) among Italian children. Priming events serve as opportunities to try out future social roles without making an enduring commitment to any particular one.

The concept of priming events does not cover activities that explicitly approximate future performance, but it does point toward routines that organize children's understanding of and preparation for the future. Like priming events, simulations enable practitioners to try out different techniques, behaviors, and social roles that may or may not be adopted later. In addition, both tend to bracket long-term evaluative metrics of performance and thus help dampen the fear of failure. As play, they can dynamically ramp up in difficulty, increasing the possibility of flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Both priming events and simulations can introduce pleasure to learning experiences, buttressing the default cooperative incentive to "keep a situation going" (Goffman 1967).

Despite its heterogeneity, research on group preparation demonstrates how groups generate meaning for a set of current activities in relation to some imagined future set of activities, roles, or events. This leads me to a general definition and key interpretive quality of simulation at the group level.

1. *Everyday Ontology*: Simulations are those repeatable activities that are defined by members of a task group as an approximation of some other scenario or activity that is more real.

The notions of priming events and rites of passage demonstrate how mundane, repeatable activities structure behavioral possibilities. They have relatively lax future consequences, and thus create routine opportunities to play with future roles while still reinforcing group membership. Similarly, group simulations allow practitioners to experiment with technical skills and social rank more freely than if their performance was of high consequence. This suggests the following two qualities of simulation.

2. *Playfulness*: Simulations enable practitioners to experiment with skills and social roles that may or may not prove valuable in the future.
3. *Risk and Consequence Reduction*: Simulations significantly reduce the physical, psychological, and social risks of an activity by limiting or suspending formal metrics and long-term consequences of failure.

The second and third qualities of simulation are closely connected to everyday ontology, as they both depend on a general consensus that the simulated routines are both distinct from and derivative of some reality.

How groups understand their activities continually reshapes how those activities play out. Even when physically identical, group-level simulations are not the same as reality. As such, they enable people to creatively challenge themselves and others with new and difficult skill sets, more safely develop and reinforce social bonds and mutual obligations, maintain an enjoyable flow state that benefits learning, and explore future social roles.

Simulation as Instrument

To further elaborate on the qualities of simulation, I turn to literature that focuses almost exclusively on simulation as an instrument for creating better pedagogy, research design, and theory. The concept of simulation is most frequently discussed in sociology by scholars interested in improving pedagogy with the instrumental benefits of simulation and gaming techniques (for reviews, see Dorn 1989; Dukes 2001; Brent et al., 1989). For example, Brent et al. (1989) developed a computer program called ERVING that simulates a singles' bar. An instructor can use the software simulation as an empirical context to explore Goffman's dramaturgical theories. Similarly, Bainsbridge et al. (1994) and Brent (1988) have argued that there is a role for such simulation and artificial intelligence techniques in formal theory construction.

Simulation and gaming techniques point toward two additional aspects of simulation as a group technique. First, if you take ERVING at its most physical, it is merely a corpus of computer code. However, the program sets up a voyeuristic scenario that is bounded by the programmer's reifications of an imagined singles' bar and a

particular interpretation of Goffman. Similarly, an instructor chooses the simulation based on a particular pedagogical intent. Therefore, while simulations are certainly innovative, their degree of innovation is necessarily bounded.

4. *Constrained Innovation*: Simulations are constrained by the reality they approximate, reflected in the range of simplified affordances built into their design. Likewise, this design constrains the range of behavior possible within it.

Simulations are simplified subsets of a more complicated reality and as such *orient* people to a particular set of experiences. Absent this boundedness, we would have Baudrillard's semiotic stew at the experiential level, simulation and reality impossibly blurred. The idea behind ERVING is that students will learn about Goffman precisely because the program is a distinctly simpler, more flexible version of the reality it attempts to translate.

Finally, ERVING can be run almost anywhere—classroom, home, or wherever. Since simulations abstract a reified set of simplifications, they tend to be relatively location independent.

5. *Transportability*: Simulations are less dependent on particular physical spaces and locations than the reality they approximate.

This is not only the case for a software simulation. For example, later I elaborate on how Al “warms up” his fighters just before a match by simulating the target areas of an opponent's body on punch mitts just outside the ring, in locker rooms, in hotel rooms, and even in parking lots.

Five abstract qualities roughly capture the characteristics of group-level simulations. First, simulations require an interpretive consensus, what I call everyday ontology, in which group members index one set of activities as an approximation of some more real one. Second, simulations can make preparations more playful, which is a good way to learn progressively harder techniques and more complex responses to difficult situations. Third, simulations reduce risk and consequence. Fourth, they are highly innovative and flexible within a double set of constraints. Similar to an architect's model, simulations are both constrained by the reality they derive from and, in turn, constrain the interactions that occur within them. Finally, simulations are highly transportable relative to the reality they approximate.

All these qualities converge in practice. Simulations would not be playful if they did not simultaneously reduce risk, for example. However, it is analytically useful to distinguish each. Although they crop up in numerous case studies of task-group training (see, e.g., Dornbusch 1955; Kaplan 1955; McPhail and Wohlstein 1983; Murnighan and Conlon 1991; Weick and Roberts 1993), scholars have not theorized them as key components of simulation.

COACHING AND OBSERVING AT HARLIEN'S GYM

Harlien's Gym is a city-funded park district boxing program in Chicago, Illinois, located in a neighborhood well known for its ethnic, religious, and economic diversity (Berrey 2005). Boxing is offered alongside many after-school programs that cater to the interests of inner-city youth and families. The gym has existed for more than 20 years, with several top amateurs and a few professionals having been members at some point in their fistic careers. While I was in the field, several boxers won and lost

at city, state, and regional competitions. A few boxed in national tournaments, but none won at that level (Harlien's is therefore not an elite program, but rather a well-known, respected club at the regional level). The frequency of competitions followed a fairly predictable pattern, summer and fall being the most intensive with about one invitational per week from June to October.

The most visible and verbal member is certainly Coach Al Levin. A 38-year-old Jewish man, Al works full time for the Department of Streets and Sanitation. He also coaches about 35 hours per week in the late afternoons and weekends. The boxers are overwhelmingly African-American boys aged 9 to 17, with the majority between 10 and 14. Twelve boys consistently attended the gym three days per week during my data collection. All but one of these was an African-American male with poor to working-class parents. The gym gets a seasonal inflow of youth who try out the program. During the winter, especially, the gym can overflow with over 40 boxers. Periodically, white, Hispanic, and Middle-Eastern boys join, but only a single white boy and two Hispanics stayed for more than a few months.

Before data collection, I obtained a volunteer license, full approval from the city, including a criminal record check, and university review board backing. Early on, Al asked me to assist him in his training duties, and soon after I obtained an official coaching license. The boxers thus knew me in two capacities—researcher and assistant coach. The coaching role certainly made more sense within the variety of traditional roles available (coach, boxer, parent), and I occasionally reminded them why I was taking notes and making recordings. Access, in this sense, was an ongoing negotiation rather than just a singular event (Venkatesh 2002). I openly took notes during and after regular workouts for 18 months, attended numerous amateur competitions, and took three extended trips to national tournaments in Detroit, Las Vegas, and Kansas. Once coaching duties compromised my ability to keep notes, I openly used a digital recorder during training sessions.

I was not a fly-on-the-wall observer capturing my subject's unmediated behavior. Rather, I brought in an extensive background in boxing as a life-long fan and athlete, and after completing my observations was hired as the head coach of Harlien's adult boxing program. My background and subsequent participation surely informs this analysis. In addition, ethnography involves consequential decisions and, in becoming Al's assistant, I implicitly agreed to help him maintain order. My data collection was thus skewed toward interactions involving Al, and my analysis is deeply imbued with the sensibility of a coach. I do not attempt to capture the inner workings of a peer culture in the spirit of Fine (1987), Corsaro (1994), or Corsaro and Eder (1990). In addition to my role as a coach, my race (white American) and class (middle/academic/professional) no doubt impacted my relations with the boys. For a more complete discussion of these issues, please contact me for a methodological appendix. Suffice to say that I do not think my demographic profile or my dual roles in the field cloud this analysis, nor were they an acute source of tension between Al, myself, and the boys.

DATA ANALYSIS I: THREE PHASES OF SIMULATION

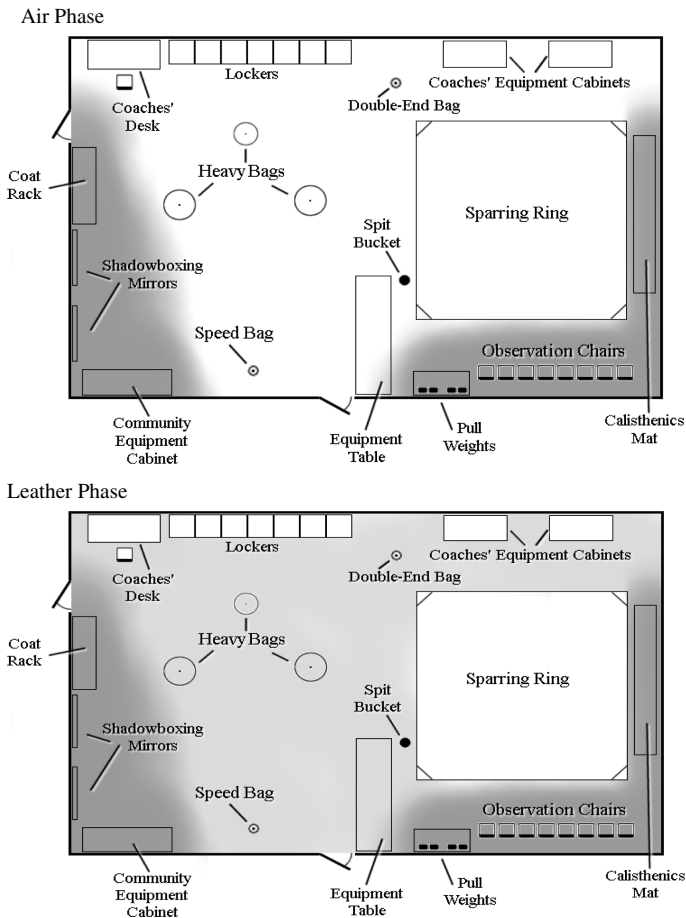
In the following two sections, I present ethnographic data not only to illustrate the five general qualities of simulation presented above, but also to generate additional generalizations on the qualities and purpose of simulation in regulating group behavior. I begin with a description of the sequential hierarchy of simulations at Harlien's. This mapping is purely conceptual and rarely described outloud. Nonetheless,

members use it to tacitly regulate access and attention according to specific spatial, temporal, and procedural logics.

Tours

Newcomers were first introduced to the simulated order when they were given a tour on their first day. Al or I introduced newcomers to other members and noted the purpose of equipment. These tours presented the gym's layout as if it were arranged to optimize the small, confined space. Rope skipping and shadowboxing occur on the southeast side of the room because there is enough space. Two leather heavy bags are hung in the middle of the room so that boxers can rotate a full 360 degrees while hitting them. The sparring ring takes up half of the north, west, and east walls of the room because this is the largest three-wall junction.

A veneer of instrumental practicality can veil a hierarchy of space, substance, and time (for a parallel discussions on the hierarchical distribution of space and objects, see Mukerji 1978; Traweek 1988:18–45). Figure 1 provides a three-part diagram of this conceptual map, chronicling the successive phases of air, leather, and flesh. In each phase, new spaces, substances, and simulations are progressively available to a boxer without losing access to the previous phase's space, substances, and simulations.



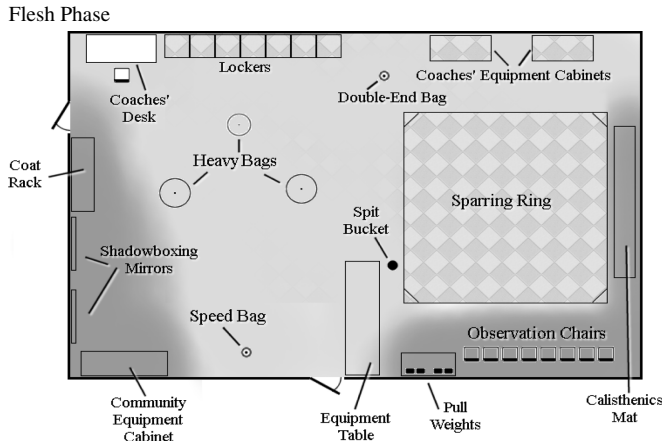


Figure 1. The sequential phases of simulation at Harlien’s Gym. Shaded areas signify the areas and equipment that initiates can access without permission or supervision. Access to nonshaded areas is restricted.

This map is confirmed by the manner in which Al focused his attention. He spent the majority of his time in the sparring ring (usually working the punch mitts) or just outside it directing a sparring session. For one month, I timed where Al positioned himself in the middle/leather and peripheral/air areas of the gym (excluding times he was in this area for less than two seconds, initial tours, and momentary visits to his desk). He entered the middle area, on average, just over two times per day. He walked into the peripheral areas even less, on average 0.5 times per day. Al’s behavior was not idiosyncratic. I have informally observed similar patterns among coaching staff at other gyms for the past five years.

The Air Phase

For the first few workouts, boxers could practice only in the peripheral areas of the gym and could punch only air. When outside these areas, newcomers had little autonomy. They entered the ring only under the supervision of Al or myself. During the Air Phase, they learned how to distribute their weight when they punched, hold a guard, and harmonize offense with defense. They also learned basic stretching, callisthenic, and strength-training exercises. After receiving lessons in the ring, initiates spent most of their time shoulder-to-shoulder shadowboxing in front of mirrors, calibrating their moves among themselves. Shadowboxing was their first routine, self-referential simulation. Echoing in practice the sport’s moral imperative that the toughest opponent is one’s self, their initial opponent was their own reflection.

As Garfinkel (1967) points out, rule transgressions can be an occasion for the explicit rearticulation of a normative order. A good example occurred when I was coaching Mark, who I thought was making rapid progress. Near the end of his second day, he excitedly asked if he could hit a leather heavy bag. I agreed, and the following transpired.

About 1 minute into the round, Al notices that Mark is punching the heavy bag and walks over to us. He sternly says “Mark, I don’t want you working on the

bag. You're not ready yet! You have to earn the right to hit the bags. You haven't been here long enough yet, ok. You gotta show me you're ready." Mark raised his eyebrows, looking surprised, but stopped immediately. With a nod he said, "Ok, uh huh [affirmative]." I told Al, "Sorry man, I told him he could hit the bag." Al was congenial but firm. "Ok, ok, but he needs more practice."

I had unintentionally committed a breaching experiment, prompting what is usually a background expectancy to be made problematic (Garfinkel 1967:37–38). Al responded by articulating the purpose of the hierarchy of simulations, arguing that Mark was not ready to graduate from the Air Phase. This sanction did not last long. In less than a week, Mark was delivering hard blows to the same heavy bag he had been reprimanded for hitting.

Despite the brevity of its consequences, the reprimand signaled much about life at Harlien's. First, a restrictive norm helped Al control the flow of activities. The normatively regulated sequence of simulations helped him control the location of particular procedures and who engaged in them. Yet aside from the social control function, why, exactly, did Mark need more practice on air before hitting a defenseless bag? He was no danger to himself or others. Al's dictum that "you gotta show me you're ready" did not imply that Mark was in physical danger. Rather, it delivered a moral message. Boxing is a serious undertaking! The boy needed to learn better techniques incrementally, and regardless of present danger, lest he adopt habits that would prove costly to his person later.

Al's reprimand is also an example of everyday ontology. It marked an ontological distinction between simply hitting a leather bag and hitting a leather bag as a simulation of an actual boxing match. His reproach ramped up the significance of the act, signifying that hitting a bag must be done in devotion to an imagined reality that is more difficult, more risky, and more unpredictable. Similarly, Al frequently motivated his boxers with slogans like "a real fight is a lot harder than hitting a heavy bag!" Practicing boxers had to pay sufficient respect to the reality they were approximating before being allowed to progress. They had to "learn the fundamentals" and not "learn bad habits" before moving on to the next phase. The more closely the simulation approximated reality, the greater the degree of reverence demanded.

The Leather Phase

Once initiates satisfied Al with their exhibition of devotion and skill in the Air Phase, they were granted access to the middle region. The Leather Phase of simulation generally lasted three to four months, although for some well over a year. It involved significant advances in a boxer's status and autonomy, and numerous exercises and techniques were added to the regimen. A boxer could begin to feel what it is like to block, parry, and bob underneath punches, and to punch something with weight similar to a human body. He could shadowbox in front of the mirror and did not need to ask permission to hit a punching bag. He could recast himself "where the action is" (Goffman 1967) by exploring a fuller array of the spaces where his fellows work out and socialize.

It is both an advantage and a problem that the leather punching bags do not hit back. On one hand, the punching bags become a fighter's primary workout companion precisely because they can endure more physical punishment than any other object, animate or inanimate, in the gym. Boxers can try all manner of difficult techniques on them. The problem, however, is that boxers tended to forget about

defending themselves. As Al once said, the heavy bag “can’t keep you honest.” As an imperfect response, we regularly reminded our pupils to worry about potential retaliation. Al would say “keep your chin tucked,” “stop pawing with the jab,” or “you are dropping your left, get it back to guard.” This advice acknowledged the imperfection of the simplified simulated model. Boxers were urged to reconcile the imperfections with a fruitful imagination.

In addition to increased spatial and equipment access, a very important addition to a boxer’s workout regimen is practicing offense and defense on small leather punch mitts worn by a coach. Boxers received their first sustained, one-on-one attention of a coach on the mitts. Given the uneven boxer-to-coach ratio, this sort of coaching attention was a highly valued commodity within the gym’s symbolic exchange market. Time on the punch mitts enabled a boxer and coach to develop a particularized relationship, the boxer to demonstrate skill level, and the coach to deliver tailored advice.

The characteristic routines of the Leather Phase nicely foreground the playful, innovative, and transportable functions of simulation. Here, I focus on holding and hitting punch mitts, a highly stylized practice that is most coaches’ preferred method for simulating a match. Al was a virtuoso at calling for complicated combinations of punches while engaging an individual’s balance, movement, and coordination. The mitts enabled the boxer to playfully work on defensive and counterpunching skills as the coach simulated the target areas and retaliatory tactics of an imagined opponent. “Working the mitts” is as close a boxer gets to exchanging punches without actually sparring. Like the architect’s miniature model, the model enacted by coach and boxer is both constrained by the reality it mimics and constrains the lessons a boxer learns from it. However, holding the mitts is more dynamic and fluid than a model bridge. We could add to and subtract from it on-the-fly, based on a particular boxer’s response and ability. Standard techniques, passed down through physical demonstration and exchanged on mass-marketed training videos and DVDs, are enhanced with local traditions and particular needs. The effectiveness of the simulation depended on the robustness of the working model, the imagination of the architect and pupil, and how effectively the boxer could translate the lessons learned on the mitts into an actual match.

Punch mitts are highly transportable, easily stuffed into a gym bag and pulled out to “loosen up” before a match. Al, like most coaches, typically “warmed up” his boxers on the mitts before sparring and always before a match. In contrast, I have never witnessed a boxer warm up before a match with a full-contact sparring session (the very idea would strike most coaches as ridiculous, although Chambliss’s excellence theory would predict it).

The Flesh Phase

Boxers at the Air and Leather Phases were still normatively confined to the peripheral and middle regions of the gym. They could not enter the sparring ring unless instructed to “move around a little bit, get the feel of the ring” or to practice on the punch mitts. The sparring ring remained a sanctioned space where a neophyte was required to undergo a rite of initiation before achieving full rights of access.

The rite of initiation followed a consistent pattern. It began with Al’s decision that a boxer was ready to spar, based on his evaluation of a boxer’s technical mastery, display of dedication, and, sometimes, sheer pluck and persistence. (The quickest I witnessed a newcomer spar was two months, which was very fast. On average it took between four to six months. A few never sparred at all. Members who do not spar do not compete either.) The next step in the rite involved a simple question that Al almost surely knew

the answer to: "Have you sparred yet?" When the boxer said "No" or "Not at this gym," Al would say "[I was] thinking of putting you in with Lamar," or some other tutor who had sparred several times before and whose age and weight were roughly similar.

Initial sparring sessions were highly structured. Al gave instructions to the initiate before the first round, typically words of caution such as "he's got more experience than you, so keep your guard up" or "watch out for his power." When the timing bell sounded, Al would yell "Box!" For the first round or two the tutor would cover up and work on defense by allowing the initiate to hit him with a few soft blows and avoid the wilder swings. Al would provide a steady stream of technical advice to the neophyte: "Double-up your jab now! Don't move straight back!" This would go on for a few rounds. Often between the second and third rounds, Al would cue the tutor to "Turn it up a little bit" or "Let your hands go." After this signal, the more experienced boxer would come out in a much more offensive posture, throwing and landing more punches, and in general trying to impose his greater skill set. Although I never witnessed a newcomer get seriously injured, they were certainly pushed beyond their level of competence. Most took a relatively brief beating. A few turned their backs. Several cried. Usually after a round of this Al would insist "That's enough, come out [Name]. You did a great job for your first time! That guy is tough, man!"

The coach's praise and consolation ended the rite of initiation. The neophyte had endured enough punishment and proven worthy, and had now paid the membership dues of full citizenship. If he chose, he could spar again. Sometimes, the first session turned out to be the last, but only if the boxer did not return. Those who came back were now full, if still relatively lowly, members of Harlien's team. Turner points out that a rite of initiation often involves this sort of public humiliation.

The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group. . . . The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character . . . represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence . . . They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society. ([1969] 1977:103. italics in original)

The initial sparring ritual at Harlien's was not a meritocratic trial in which success was evaluated on performance. Nobody ever failed unless they did not come back. Rather, it was an occasion to impress on the neophyte the gravity of his transformation. The end of the rite demonstrated the stakes and risks of their undertaking, and was something that all members had to face if they wanted to continue toward a "real fight." Although some sessions might last longer than others, and some boys ended up sparring more than others, never again would they be sanctioned for entering the ring or any other spatial locale.

A significant marker of full membership at Harlien's was the ability to engage in simulations in all three regions of the gym—the periphery, the middle domain, and the sparring ring—in the course of a daily workout. As expectations states theory suggests, an initiate's ability to achieve higher status depended on his capacity to create a positive expectation of future performance among the group members with the power to allocate future tasks (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Berger, Connor, and Fisek 1974). The amount of time each boxer spent in the different phases varied according to Al's assessments of three factors: (1) how consistently the boxer showed up and made it known that he wanted to progress, (2) the boxer's observance of gym norms, and (3) the boxer's display of physical and emotional skill.

The sequential phases of simulation serve several purposes. First, they interpretatively bracket simulation from reality by making it clear that boxing in the gym is related but not exactly the same thing as fighting in a real match. Second, each phase involves a number of different techniques, simplified subsets of the techniques necessary to engage in competitive boxing, that allow boxers to experiment with new and difficult physical coordinations. Third, the simulations reduce risk by forcing each boxer to demonstrate competence in one set of procedures before he can gain access to the next. Each phase organized training into obtainable, marked steps. A boxer, like the soldier simulating a battle without live ammunition, must trust that the techniques he learns at each stage will adequately prepare him for the reality that awaits. Simulations enable a coach to ramp up the difficulty of lessons in a dynamic, interactive fashion. Fourth, boxers learn several simulations that are highly transportable away from the gym. In particular, they learn how to properly shadowbox and hit the mitts, two simulations they are encouraged to practice at home and almost always minutes before a competitive match.

The sequential phases also provide a social control function by enabling the coaching staff to abstract out a series of simplified and repeatable routines from a more difficult, unpredictable, risky, and complex reality. Group members can organize attention according to well-known and understood spatial, temporal, and procedural determinants. These streamline gym procedures by socially quarantining newcomers from the more experienced boxers. Different stations can be more easily monitored because particular activities are engaged in by a specific set of people at a similar level of skill, in predictable places, and in roughly predictable ways.

DATA ANALYSIS II: SPARRING, HOLDING BACK, AND THE PUBLIC-GOOD PROBLEM

This section focuses on the simulation, sparring, that most closely approximates a competitive match. Although a rite of initiation confers full citizenship at Harlien's, that citizenship still requires ongoing duty. Sparring partners have to learn to consider the welfare of their counterpart in a sparring session while disregarding the welfare of their counterpart in a competitive match.

A boxing journalist, commenting on an upcoming professional fight between two top heavyweight contenders, suggested that the underdog's style had given the favorite a tough time in sparring sessions (Fischer 2004). The journalist was quick to point out, however, "[t]hat's just sparring. This Saturday is a real fight." Fischer's point underlines that even at elite-level professional boxing, what happens in practice is not neatly commensurate with what happens in competition. In fact, a widely held cultural figure typifies this suspicion: the "gym fighter." A gym fighter performs exceedingly well in practice, but struggles to translate that performance in real matches. The existence of the gym fighter, a tragic figure, underscores both the moral importance and practical difficulty of the ontological boundary between simulation and reality in boxing.

This is not to say that this boundary never blurs. At Harlien's, a fight deemed real at one time is readily transformed into an instructional moment at another. For example, Al and I frequently reviewed videotapes of our boxers' past fights to debrief them on problems that could be rectified in the gym. Real fights were thus reincorporated as data for fine-tuning simulated techniques. Further blurring the boundary, Al would frequently discuss past fights (especially losses) in a manner that de-emphasized their realness and cast them as activities geared toward training and simulation.

Shortly after Michael lost a difficult match, for example, Al told his sobbing charge: "That was good for experience, man. You learn a lot in fights like that." Nor was Al above lying about disagreeable results to naïve outsiders.

Nonetheless, regular maintenance of the boundary remained extremely important. This was particularly so during sparring sessions, which could forge lasting friendship but could also lead to rivalry. Al and I arbitrated by carefully selecting who would make good sparring partners or stopping sessions where the fighters were getting too frustrated, angry, or competitive. For example, Reginald and Lamar began boxing at the same time, were about the same size, and had been regular sparring mates and friends for over a year. In short, they made ideal partners. Nonetheless, Al barred them from sparring with each other the entire month before the City Championships because Reginald had boasted "I whupped him" after one of their sessions. Al scolded his charge, "In sparring you ain't trying to win or lose." Al told me on the phone later the same evening that "they're starting to take it too seriously . . . I'm gonna cool those two out." The two boys did not spar again until after the tournament. The following scene is also suggestive of the effort put into maintaining the boundary.

Lamar and Keshawn are sparring. Al and several boxers watch from a close distance just outside the ropes. The two boys are starting to hit each other pretty hard. Keshawn is breathing heavy and puts his full weight behind his punches. Lamar responds with a fast flurry of rights and lefts, grunting loudly. Reginald, relishing in the combative moment, tells Roy "Hey, hey, it's a real fight now! They're really fighting!" A few moments later the bell ends the round. Al yells "STOP!" and tells them to take their gloves off. "That's enough!"

Reginald's voyeuristic excitement hints that the session started to ramp past a competitive fight, pushing toward a disorderly, no-holds-barred street fight. Al could not condone this, and tried to normalize the situation by having the boys shake hands. Lamar refused and instead raised his glove over his head in disgust. Keshawn shrugged and started removing his gear at his locker. He left soon after. That evening, Al called both boys to tell them they could not spar for another two weeks.

Sparring sessions offer an acute and condensed case of a public-good problem, in which the interests of a group and its individual members do not coincide neatly (Olson 1971; Coleman 1990). On one hand, the formal reward system of competitive boxing is measured entirely around individual-level achievement, personal glory, and masculine hubris. It is not obviously rational for an aspiring boxer to tone down his sparring in a sport whose objective criteria for success is individual-level achievement. On the other hand, Harlien's is a public program with the mission of teaching pugilism and personal discipline to all who enter. Although athletes' skill and experience may vary, they depend on one another in their preparations.

This problem provides an opportunity to both revisit Chambliss's theory of excellence (1989) and add a neglected variable to Coleman's discussion of public goods. Recall that Chambliss argued that swimmers achieve competitive distinction not through more practice, extraordinary behavior, or idiosyncratic talent, but by routinely replicating those behaviors that yield excellent results. The "mundanity of excellence" is here reframed in terms of group simulation as a series of three relational propositions.

Proposition 1: Practiced simulation is directly related to outcomes in a competitive performance.

Proposition 2: *The greater the continuity of behavior in practiced simulation and competitive reality, the more predictable the competitive result.*

Proposition 3: *Effective simulations nullify their difference from reality.*

Each proposition is elegant and illuminating. They suggest that the tighter the correspondence between a simulation and reality, the more predictable the performance.

Herein lays the problem. Simulations that regularly replicate competitive reality are neither possible nor advisable in a boxing gym. Similar to a military academy that cannot risk using real bullets when simulating a battle scenario, Harlien's maintains distinct boundaries between practice and competition. In short, Proposition 3 leads to an underappreciation of social context. Chambliss's theory works well for swimming because (1) success is evaluated with a highly codified, quantitative technology (a timer), (2) a swimmer is not dependent on a partner, and (3) a swimmer does not need to come into physical contact with a competitor in practice or in competition. In contrast, boxing requires interpersonal, violent, and potentially harmful physical exchange between participants who each have a high emotional, social, and physical stake. Physical and emotional danger, coupled with the need for interdependent interaction, hedge against a boxer's ability and willingness to routinely practice all out, all the time. Boxers at Harlien's selectively deployed or withheld their most excellent techniques depending on situational context.

In a somewhat odd paradox, the best boxers frequently demonstrated how good they were by purposely practicing badly, or at least in ways that would not be advised in competition. Al typically primed each fighter before a sparring session, often telling the boxer of greater skill to "take it easy." He once told Harold the day before a session: "You gotta remember that your sparring partner is your friend. You're a little bit better than he is. Let him hit you in the body sometimes . . . and don't hit him back too hard." Al explicitly told Harold not to fight to the best of his ability, to allow himself to be hit. He reiterated one of his most frequent mantras, that sparring should be filial rather than competitive. Sessions should hone technical skill, not ego. The coach both defined and harnessed the situation (Goffman 1963) by apprising Harold how he wanted the session to go. Yet in doing so, the superior boxer is still implicitly acknowledged.

Another illustrative example was Nate's first sparring session. Following the general pattern of a rite of initiation, Al asked Nate to spar for the first time with Keshawn. The following transpired.

Al has the two boys stand in opposite corners of the ring and whispers to Keshawn to "Go easy . . . If he starts to hit you hard, turn it up. But let's see how he does for a round or two." Then Al approaches Nate, who paces in the corner and is having some trouble breathing. "Nate, this is just practice, okay? Look, breathe through your nose and out your mouth. Now just do what we worked on already. Use your jab. Keep your hands up. Work your way in behind the jab. Relax. You'll be alright." The boy listens to his coach and nods obediently, staring directly into Al's eyes.

Al harnessed Keshawn while trying to calm Nate by minimizing the risk and consequences of the situation. He tells Nate to do what he did in his previous phases of simulation, cueing the boy of their links.

Al or I, sometimes with the help of experienced boxers, monitored sparring sessions very carefully. We commanded fighters when to “Fight,” when to “Stop,” and called out technical instructions. For example:

After three rounds, Armando is getting tired and is having trouble landing a clean punch. Roy looks fresh and calmly circles his larger opponent and lands a lot of jabs and right hands. Al calls out numbers that correspond to particular punches and Roy responds. “Give me a 1-2-2-4 Roy. Come on, let’s see it.” Roy attempts the difficult combination several times unsuccessfully.

The coach acted as a third-party participant, calling for difficult combinations that force Roy to hold back on Armando. Implicitly, these practices helped maintain the tense everyday ontology between sparring and competitive fighting. Al and I had countless conversations that reinforced in us the importance of carefully monitored sparring sessions. Al’s reflection is indicative.

We get so many kinds in here, you know, at totally different levels. Some come in and have boxed since they were five, you know, and others get picked on at the playground and want to learn to fight. They are different ages, different sizes. I gotta make sure nobody gets hurt, you know, nobody goes overboard. One time, while I looked away, Desmond whacked this young kid he was sparring. He hurt him man, knocked him through the ropes. I should have been watching but he saw that I wasn’t and hit him hard.

Al tried to instill cooperative order during sparring, but he was continually concerned that it could break down, to the detriment of the team’s morale and cohesion.

Rasheem is prototypic of the consequences of not abiding by the simulated order. The 16-year-old had recently moved to the neighborhood, had been boxing competitively for two years, and was one of the most accomplished boxers in Al’s roster after having won several city- and state-level tournaments. In his first month, Rasheem did not cooperate well with boxers who were smaller, younger, and less experienced. He became openly frustrated when Al told him to “take it easy” or execute difficult combinations when he was punishing an overmatched partner. By his second month, there was only one other boxer (Roy) with whom Al allowed Rasheem to spar. Rasheem sparred much less than most of his teammates, and steadily received less focused attention from Al. The promising teenager stopped coming to the gym regularly after one year. Unlike several other regulars who might occasionally waver and then return after Al’s persistent phone calls, the coach never put much effort into convincing Rasheem to come back. In fact, he once commented openly as we drove to a tournament, “Roy was always better than Rasheem . . . I’m glad he’s not on the team anymore, he was no good for us.”

This pattern cannot be adequately explained as an idiosyncratic case of an over-protective coach. In fact, one should expect the same in a wide array of environments geared toward interdependent practice in high-risk, high-consequence activities. Wacquant describes a similar pattern at an adult boxing gym, which he terms the “social logic in sparring” (2004:77–87). Boxers and coaches at the Woodlawn Gym were judicious in whom they chose as sparring partners, the coach arbitrated partnerships, and boxers developed a “working consensus” in which partners learned to hold back. A less dramatic parallel can be made with competitive jump roping, in which turners become jumpers in the course of a single game. Turners share an

interdependence with jumpers that requires them to take the welfare of the current jumper into consideration (Goodwin 1985:318). The relation between simulation and reality is trickier in boxing than in jump rope, however, in the sense that the interdependence by and large drops out during the competitive fight. There is no feature built into the logic of competitive boxing that requires a concern for a fellow competitor. Boxers are therefore charged with understanding how to move smoothly from one normative order to another lest they lose the interest of the coach and respect of their teammates, as in Rasheem's case.

Coleman argues that groups invoke norms that help assuage a disjuncture between collective and individual logics of action: "A prescriptive norm that constitutes an especially important form of social capital within a collectivity is the norm that one should forgo self-interests to act in the interests of the collectivity" (1990:311). Research on trust has discussed this in terms of fiduciary responsibility (Barber 1983) and theorists of organizations talk about the reconciliation of organizational objectives with personal goals (Simon [1945] 1997:144–45; Smith and Berg 1987). Coleman's formulation of the public-good problem hinges on the concepts of trust and social capital. As the number and extent of network ties between group members expands, the possibility for developing social obligations within that network also increases. As mutual obligations are fulfilled, greater trust develops among members, which in turn increases social capital. The more social capital, the more group members can accomplish things that they could not as isolated individuals (1990:315–21). Coleman's formulation leaves unspecified both how group networks expand and what sorts of exchanges increase social obligation. Simulation, conceived as a group-level technique, adds theoretical precision to this problem. By focusing on the highly rarified social world of Olympic-level athletes, Chambliss's theory can steer clear of the public-good problem altogether—no such luck in a municipal boxing program geared toward both individual competitive success and collective-level enrichment!

Simulations can be mobilized as a group-level technique for creating trust and mutual obligation by indexing a set of interactions as not fully "real" in import or consequence. As long as the simulated situation is understood as such, there is little shame in not performing at peak level every time out. In fact, purposely withholding one's best level of skill and technique implicitly demonstrates individual prowess. Simulation alleviates the need for members to constantly prove how good they are, as a boxer's full level of competence is better left to the imagination of others. Competitive results vouch for a reputation more than showing off in practice. Boxers build up trust and rapport between themselves by working with each other. Simultaneously, they increase the admiration of their coaches when they forego self-interests and demonstrate their willingness to work with others for the team's benefit. Displays of respect for the normative order of simulation bought boxers more sparring, coaching, and peer attention. Quite literally, members reap the rewards of self-sacrifice through group solidarity.

REALITY LOOMS

The scope and seriousness of gym simulations increased significantly in the month leading up to major competitions. Al incessantly telephoned his boxers to come to practice. We stayed later, and added workout time on the weekends. We typed up dietary lists and reviewed dietary taboos. In addition, Al showed greater tolerance for aggressive sparring. He enforced gym etiquette more strictly, frequently reprimanding

boxers who he decided were just “messin’ around.” Boxers not using a piece of equipment tended to direct their attention toward the sparring sessions. This created a kind of focused zone of attention, in part simulating the directed lighting and audience gaze that typically accompanies a competitive match.

Similar to the conductor of Kaplan’s symphony shortly before a performance (1955), Al increasingly allowed boxers to spar free form. We focused on well-defined techniques specifically tailored toward the boxers scheduled to fight. Those who were not scheduled were largely neglected unless they were a sparring partner, and non-competing newcomers were almost always segregated from the competitors. Analysis of video recordings became a more integral part of the training routine. Especially prized were recordings of future opponents, whose style could be dissected for exploitable flaws. Gym conversations changed in tone just before a tournament, becoming much more focused and directed than the otherwise varied conversational topics like friends, cute girls, fights at school or on the street, hip hop stars, recent professional boxing matches, or school work. Boxers asked many questions. How big was the tournament? How many people would be watching? How good was the competition? Would it be televised? Would their picture be in the paper? Questions mostly focused on two issues: the level of competition and the kudos they could expect from victory. Both types aimed to clarify the scope of the reality they were about to face.

Despite this ramping up before competition, gym simulations remained remarkably distinct from competitive reality. The entire sequence of events the day of a match is different (see also Wacquant 2004:151–232). A relatively somber mood characterized our trips to tournament locales. Once we arrived, a series of official protocols structured initial interactions. Boxers and coaches register with official representatives of USA Boxing and the hosting venue. Athletes are told to strip down to underwear and “weigh in.” Officials register each boxer’s weight and examine their record books to determine which bracket they will compete in. A licensed medical doctor conducts a brief evaluation of each boxer. It is important to note that while Al or I might mention these procedures in the gym, none were ever simulated. Only particular aspects of a “real fight” are deemed risky and unpredictable enough to warrant simulation.

Once these formal procedures concluded, Al initiated a series of informal rituals that structure the fighter’s experience and attention before his match begins. They “suit up” in a groin protector, boxing shoes, trunks, and jersey (most members of Harlien’s just wore sweat shorts and T-shirts in the gym). After getting dressed, Al would tell them to “relax” or “rest your legs.” At the more prestigious competitions, Al wrapped each boxer’s hands with soft cotton medical gauze secured with tape (in the gym, boxers wrapped their own hands with reusable cloth wraps). These personal hand-wrapping rituals, in addition to protecting hands, were an occasion for Al to go over strategy, provide motivation, and assess the boxer’s level of focus. Once wrapped, a boxer visited the “glove table,” where handwraps are inspected and each competitor is adorned with a set of competition gloves. These gloves usually have several ounces less padding than a sparring glove, significantly raising physical risk. Next we adorned a boxer with a regulation headgear, also a bit smaller than those used in the gym, and mouth guard. A few minutes before match time, we would “warm up” a boxer on the mitts to raise his heart rate and make sure his was reacting appropriately. Mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, and former and present gymmates come by to wish the fighter luck. Coaches and boxers from neighboring gyms give brief words of counsel. Complete strangers come over to wish luck or give advice.

A list of situational differences between sparring and an actual match is too long to catalog exhaustively, but a few are particularly important. Coaches, for one, are reduced to a residual rather than central role in the proceedings. A referee, not a coach, enforces rules and mediates the flow of action. Amateur coaches cannot talk to their boxer during the round, although many are admonished for trying. A match is scored round by round by official judges and the result is usually logged into a fighter's permanent record. The action occurs in a raised and well-lit ring that directs an audience's attention. The audience can exhort the boxers as loudly as it likes, snap pictures, and make video recordings. An opponent's skill and strength, and what he will do with them, is far more unpredictable than in sparring. Most importantly, while a strong code of ethics around sportsmanship is prevalent before and after a match, a boxer is not supposed to have any regard for his opponent during it. There is no coach to tell any of the boxers to "take it easy" or "your partner is your friend." In contrast, Al exhorts his boxers before a fight and between rounds to "take it to him!" and "be first!" Several times I heard Al motivate his boxers by suggesting: "That kid just stole your wallet, go kick his ass!" Coaches, a boxer's teammates, friends, and family congratulate a winner, and console a loser. Unlike gym simulations, the primary goal is to win, not to stay friends.

CONCLUSION

To fully grasp the sociology of events or performances, one needs to look at how people prepare for them. Simulations are a means by which groups index and simplify what aspects of the future they should worry about. *The greater the risk and consequence attached to an event or performance, the more likely one is to find an elaborate range of simulations used to prepare for it.*

The simulated routines that teach novice boxers the art of hitting and not being hit are distributed and sequenced according to local spatial, temporal, and procedural logics. This logic can be generalized as follows: *simulations can be sequenced and bound to rights of access to a hierarchy of material, space, and directed attention in a group setting.* Full membership involves the ability to practice a variety of boxing simulations on air, leather, and human flesh in all the spaces of the gym. With access comes the focused attention of coaches and peers, and the depth, stakes, and quality of a boxer's training regimen steadily increases. A tightly ordered and monitored sequence of simulations helps maintain predictability and control in an environment of high-stakes interaction.

In the final flesh phase of simulation, boxers know they are getting better when they are asked to tutor lesser skilled teammates. Somewhat paradoxically, this involves learning to "hold back" in practice but not in competition. My observations suggest that "Proposition 3" of the mundanity of excellence theory (that effective practice nullifies the difference between simulation and reality) can be more portably formulated as follows: *In preparation that requires interdependence between group members, the effectiveness of simulation depends upon the robustness of the model and how effectively the participant can transition from the distinct contextual norms that govern simulation and those that govern the performative event.* This transition is not at all easy, and as the tragic figure of the "gym fighter" attests, many fail. Nonetheless, group simulations remain a relatively effective way to resolve local public-good problems, in that a willingness to hold back in the gym gets connected to a member's ability to receive public goods in relatively short supply—in this case, access to peer and coach attention. The development of mutual obligations, conducted in a context

of strictly monitored simulations, helps members manage a fairly intractable contradiction between the group goals of a public program and the individual goals of practitioners in an activity characterized by both high-risk interdependence and individual-level evaluative metrics for success.

Simulations serve a wide variety of purposes. The following summarizes the most prominent group-level functions: (1) simulations simplify relatively complex or unpredictable interactions by abstracting out a simpler, more manageable subset; (2) they heighten safety by reducing physical, emotional, and performative risk and uncertainty; (3) they suspend or alleviate long-term consequences of action; (4) they are relatively transportable; (5) they can be designed flexibly and dynamically; (6) they involve play, and thereby create the conditions for intrinsically enjoyable flow experiences; (7) they provide an impetus to keep a situation going by sustaining a norm of interdependent cooperation; (8) they engender the learning of difficult techniques and skills; (9) they help streamline access to space and substance in a given environment, and thereby (10) heighten social control; (11) they reduce the need to constantly prove one's competence; (12) they help manage discontinuities between individual- and group-level goals; and (13) they streamline the distribution of valuable public goods. These functions and characteristics crop up in computer-based simulations, "virtual worlds," video games, and war reenactments, as well as in more everyday environments like gyms, symphonies, rope-skipping competitions, self-defense courses, military preparations, and college classrooms.

There remains a lingering question: Does a "real fight" ever happen? As I have demonstrated at Harlien's, wins and losses are frequently reconfigured as learning experience, retrospectively compromising their realness. Furthermore, many trainers and commentators conceive of the amateur ranks as mere preparation for professional boxing. In this sense, even an Olympic title match is not a "real fight." Early professional matches are a training ground for championship-caliber competition. Professional champions hope to be considered "one of the greats" by looking for those rare fights that can cement their historical reputation. Only the exceptional retired "great" fighter can resist the temptation for that one last march to glory. For many, perhaps most, that illusive "real fight" never materializes.

Whether or not reality happens is answerable if assessed empirically rather than speculatively. This article demonstrates that some events are more real than others in the minds and practices of those who engage in and witness them. People articulate consequential ontological boundaries in their everyday lives. One empirical measure of realness, therefore, is the range and complexity of the simulations that lead up to an event, scenario, or performance. Group-level simulations, or those repeatable activities that are defined as an approximation of some more real activity, provide a methodological anchor for the study of everyday ontology.

This analysis points toward a few other fruitful arenas for further research. There are environments where simulation cannot be strictly construed as a means to an end but also an end in itself. For example, laboratory groups that design computer-based simulations of ecosystems, mind, and intelligence construct simulation as both technique and artifact, or means and end (Helmreich 1998; Hoffman 2004). Similarly, the massive consumption of video games, especially massive online role-playing games, begs for an empirical analysis of simulation and fantasy. In addition, simulation could be an important consideration in studies of deviance and social control. Although sociologists have long studied socialization practices as a diffuse means of training individuals for appropriate situational conduct, little research discusses how simulations are mobilized to ensure compliance to formal and informal rules.

This article has attempted to balance the general and particular in generating theory on how simulations are mobilized at the group level. I hope the reader finds that the general formulations are roughly portable to groups beyond Harlien's Gym. Nonetheless, simulations are no doubt organized differently, and for different purposes, in local environments. Particular realities are always more complex and messy than their abstractions. A theory, like simulation, is never fully real, although its realness can be assessed by the variety of social practices it illuminates. As for the perfect recipe of success for Harlien's boxers, that search continues as well.

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