

# The Tranvieri Gym Young Immigrant Boxers in the Neighborhood Bolognina

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*Received: 12 December 2015 Accepted: 2 January 2016 Published: 15 January 2016*

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## Abstract

The paper describes the social organization of boxing gym "Tranvieri", located in Bolognina, a working class neighbourhood in the city of Bologna which has been rapidly changing over the last twenty years due to the closing of factories and the arrival of immigrants, especially from Maghreb. The gym population has changed accordingly: currently about two thirds of those attending the gym as a leisure centre are children of immigrants. I studied the practices of everyday life by these young boxers born in Italy but without citizenship who daily frequent this gym once finished vocational school, work, family responsibilities. Boxing is for them not a solution to the frustration inflicted by a social world they perceive as indifferent if not hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented in it as excluded people.

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*Index terms*— urban space; boxing; young immigrants; neighborhood; ethnography.

## 1 Introduction

his paper aims at inquiring the practices of everyday life by a group of young men who spend a significant part of their week, once they have finished school and family commitments and work, at the "Tranvieri", a gym in Bolognina, a district of the first outskirts of Bologna.

Along with fellow anthropologist Fulvia Antonelli I stepped in this gym for the first time in February 2007 (Antonelli & Scandurra, 2008, 2010) after having conducted from January 2006 to January 2007, along with a group of colleagues, a social investigation on the territory Bolognina (Piano B, 2008) in order to describe the profound changes that have affected this area after the closure of the metalworking factories at the end of the eighties and the arrival of numerous immigrants. This gym represents fifty years of boxing history in Bologna -it was opened in 1950 -as well as a major place of the culture of leisure in one of the territories most popular in the city. (Circolo Dozza ATC, 2005).

Tranvieri was set up shortly after the end of the Second World War. Since it started its activity it has not changed much: despite having moved from the basement of a local circle of tram drivers to just a few hundred meters far away, the boxing society Bolognina maintains the characteristics of a working men's club. The gym is not very big and, when active and crowded, it barely manages to host the group of training boxers. The entrance is in a side alley of the road connecting the Author: University of Ferrara. e-mail: giuseppe.scandurra@unife.it main square of Bolognina to the fairground and is scarcely visible, if not for a sign that indicates its presence.

## 2 a) Young immigrants

The overall objective of this paper is to investigate the transformations of Bologna through the analysis of games, sports and physical recreation for children of foreign origin. Focusing on a specific place, a boxing gym, my goal is to inquire the practices of a group of boys who, on a non-professional basis and, in the majority of cases, just to pass their free time, share the physical space of a boxing gym. Most of the Tranvieri's boxers today are young men of foreign origin, mostly Moroccans. Studying their practices of everyday life, between February 2007

### 3 C) THE YOUNG BOXERS

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42 and February 2010, we were able to investigate problems, needs, hopes of a "second generation" of immigrants:  
43 almost all of them arrived in Italy as children and attended school here. .

44 The physical education they receive by learning how to box translates into practices and embedded knowledge  
45 that give relevance to their daily lives through a continuous production and reproduction of meaning and meanings  
46 that have value outside of that sport space. Knowledge that affects the way in which they build their identity as  
47 citizens and that is relevant to their citizenship.

48 While in the last thirty years in Italy there has been a growing interest, even in the context of research in  
49 social sciences, for the younger generation and their relationship with the urban space, especially with regard to  
50 the "young foreigners" (Zoletto, 2010), however this interest is mostly related to cultural identity and migration  
51 legacy, social inclusion or exclusion in the sphere of education and/or employment or some fundamental aspects  
52 of formal citizenship. Minor importance has been given to the analysis of their spare time and of the formal  
53 and informal places devoted to play seen as environments where a corporeality is built and consequently the  
54 boundaries of a multicultural citizenship are defined.

55 Sport seen as a way to spend their leisure time by a group of young people of foreign origin, is commonly  
56 regarded as a minor issue, a "safety valve" for a society such as Italian society, more and more flattened on a  
57 hyper-productive conception of life. Still, the sense that the "inhabitants" of these local gyms give to sport is  
58 not reducible to a simple physical activity. How do you become a boxer or, more simply, a gymgoer? How is  
59 produced and reproduced a body knowledge in this physical space? Is it mere knowledge of the body or is it a  
60 knowledge that through the body becomes a means of belonging to a "community"?

61 A boxing gym, designed as an area for recreation, physical and mental wellbeing and socialization through  
62 the exercise of a sport, must be placed within a broader reflection on the relationship between body and space  
63 and on the role that should be given to corporeality in the urban space. There are such bodies indeed which are  
64 considered the "natural" occupants of specific urban spaces and others that are considered "out of place" as soon  
65 as they become visible in places that were not meant for them. ??Satta & Scandurra, 2104) In an innovative cross  
66 between urban studies, immigration, social studies of youth and childhood, this paper aims to focus attention on  
67 the link between sport and urban areas, between bodies and cities, between differences and socio-spatial order in  
68 Italian cities, within the specific literature of leisure studies. (Huizinga 1938;Holloway & Valentine, 2000; ??ick,  
69 2003;Coleman & Kohn, 2007;Stevens, 2007; ??ugden, 2007;Rojek, 2009) b) The old boxers

70 We did in Bologna two meetings a week, on Monday and Friday at the Paladozza, the sport palace of boxing...  
71 and the audience was huge.

72 When have you ever seen at the port palace eight thousand people who go to see a boxing match? Let's say  
73 that memories are beautiful because it was another life, another sport. (Albano) 1 With this words Albano, who  
74 directed the gym for years, remembers the 50s, the 60s and the 70s, the "golden years" of boxing when Bologna  
75 was the capital of boxing in Italy. Almost all the people I interviewed and who have lived these matches as direct  
76 protagonists or as mere spectators described me this period as unrepeatable because boxers were "brave" and  
77 "heroic". It is no coincidence that in the gym the boxers of the past continue to train at the same place where  
78 they started their careers. This place for the "veterans" Today other boxers fight in the gym, almost all of foreign  
79 origin, who did not experience that period, the golden years. The stories of the boxers of today bring out the  
80 problems and the real difficulties that a career in this sport involves and deconstruct the myth of boxing lasted  
81 until the end of the Seventies. ??Oates, 1987;Philonenko, 1991;Quercioli, 1994).

82 of Tranvieri, located precisely between the ring and the benches, is an institutional strategic place because  
83 from this angle you can have a full view of everything that goes in the gym. That is the place where stories are  
84 told, where the memory of the gym is passed on to new members. (Figure ??)

85 Ernesto, a former amateur boxer, is one of the most respected members of the gym by virtue of his daily  
86 presence there since more than forty years. He is the one who can afford to represent the world of boxing in  
87 other ways than the "official" one, because his loyalty to the history of boxing and gym is indisputable. Like  
88 him, other former boxers of the golden age as Dante were willing to tell us even the dark side of boxing and the  
89 difficulties they encountered in their professional careers: the unfair defeats, the combined meetings, the power of  
90 the sponsors (De Franco, 2006). Often emerges in these stories the "hunger" of men, who, in those glorious years,  
91 practiced boxing to gain something: buy a motorcycle, hanging out with the girls on Saturday night, purchase  
92 fashionable clothes.

93 I The gym has helped many boxers as Dante to leave the street, as many former boxers often have said to me:  
94 that is fights, thefts and clashes between gangs.

95 The gym... I started in the '60. I was nineteen years old. The gym gave you a certain discipline and kept  
96 you from street fights. In the gym I vented with the others! I wasn't a bully, only 70% of the young boys of  
97 Bolognina spent their time fighting in the street. (Ernesto).

### 98 3 c) The young boxers

99 If we compare the words of Albano, Dante and Ernesto with those of the protagonists of our study, the reasons  
100 that prompted them to train in the gym are not dissimilar. The boxers of today are young people from twelve  
101 to twenty-five who partly are attending vocational schools and partly are struggling with their first experiences  
102 in working world. Many of them live in the neighborhood and here spend much of their free time.

103 In their stories the entrance to Tranvieri emerges as random choice, but when we questioned about their deepest

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104 motivations they always responded they needed to vent, to self-discipline or to socialize. I'm just nineteen years  
105 old; I started about one year and a half ago. I started because I had some problems at home and the only place  
106 where I was at ease was the gym [?]. I made this choice because instead of going around to bully I decided to  
107 come to the gym with initially no intention of fighting. (Anuar) That's why I started going to the gym. The  
108 main reason was the discussions between my mother and my father... I went out and I vented outside, on the  
109 street... I hated smoking, drinking, dancing outside on Saturday and Sunday and so... (Kalhed)

110 The stories of young boxers as Anuar and Kalhed, both sons of Moroccans citizens come to Italy more than  
111 ten years ago, are full of references to tensions in the family, in the school environment, in the work place, all  
112 places where most of them had to learn the meaning of the word "failure". The practices of everyday life by  
113 Anuar and Kalhed are the same of their other gym mates born in Italy but without citizenship. (Figure 2)

114 This guys went to the gym because it allows them to feel respected, to prove their worth, to prove strong  
115 without the burden of self-destruction that the affirmation of itself in aggressive forms produce in other contexts,  
116 as it emerges clearly from an interview with another boxer of Moroccan origin, Samir: Once a guy told me "fuck  
117 off" and I threw a table on him, and I broke his back. I did not something like that. This guy always told me:  
118 "You're a Moroccan, go back to your country." They wanted to suspend me from school but I had never done  
119 anything and I was not punished. (Samir) Vocational schools of Bolognina frequented by Samir, Kalhed, Anuar  
120 represent places of humiliation. Most of these young boxers regard the schools of the district as total institutions  
121 where, more than acquire knowledge, they learn only the awareness of their subalternity. ??Sayad, 1999 The  
122 gym for these guys is not different from other places of spatial segregation that characterizes certain areas of this  
123 suburb. What distinguishes these guys from their mates, vocational schools mates for example, almost all born  
124 in Italy but children of North Africans people, is the pursuit of self-control, of discipline, expressed doing boxing.  
125 Boxing gym for these kids is not a solution to the frustration from a social world they perceive indifferent if not  
126 hostile towards them, rather the possibility of not being represented in it as excluded people. (Grillo & Pratt,  
127 2002; Queirolo Palmas, 2006)

#### 128 **4 d) Saturday and Sunday**

129 The gym includes two rooms. The first, intended for training, contains a twelve-string ring positioned in front of  
130 the entry: tools -bags, speedball, punching bag, headboards, benches, scales, racks for storing weights, exercise  
131 bikes -are distributed all along the walls of this first room. In the middle of the room lies a space that ends  
132 with a large mirror on the wall, where boxers are trained on the blow technique, interrupted by two sacks and a  
133 suspended pear. The second room is much smaller and is used as a men's locker room. For women there are no  
134 lockers. (Fox, 2001; D'Aguanno & Montesi, 2006)

135 The gym is open from Monday to Friday from 17:30 until 20:30, but, in fact, opens its doors also outside  
136 official hours. The very young gym-goers, for example, arrive at the gym at 17:30 earlier than the masters  
137 themselves: Ernesto opens the Tranvieri before the training hours in order to put the weights and all the tools,  
138 repair damaged cords, place the unpaired gloves. The young boxers demonstrate, by helping Ernesto in these  
139 maintenance work, the relationship of trust that binds the "old" members and the new one, which is independent  
140 from the relationship they have with the two coaches of the gym, Tito and Sante. Boxers who go to the gym  
141 straight from work, which have a longer boxing experience behind them, arrive later instead and stay well beyond  
142 the official closing time: the long, hot shower after training, the gossip and jokes in the locker room are a way to  
143 ease the tension after the fatigue of school, work, the gloves and the ring.

144 The Tranvieri is always open over the year: apart from a short summer break in August and some holidays,  
145 the courses have a duration that goes well beyond that of traditional gyms. Even in these times of formal closure,  
146 however, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays, when the coaches do not work if not during periods of intensive  
147 training, the gym continues to be a gathering place daily.

#### 148 **5 Oh my God, but do you have in your mind what an**

149 African mother is? They're crazy, completely off their head!... go at your friends to ring the bell and the third  
150 degree starts: she starts screaming that her son is never at home... no, no, we prefer give us an appointment at  
151 the gym or somewhere else! (Marcel, boxer minor of Cameroonian origin) Ernesto, who holds the keys, opens on  
152 Saturday afternoon a little before and allows children who live in the district to train. Often, in these situations,  
153 younger brothers and friends who have never entered the gym join young boxers. On Sunday morning, also, the  
154 gym becomes an "illegal" soccer field.

155 We play but please don't go and tell it around. Samir, for example, plays soccer, Anuar plays soccer and so  
156 his brother Kalhed, they are very good. Look at how many Moroccans play in A Series, there are many. Rather  
157 they should play more in our teams, they are good. But be careful, if someone gets hurt while playing here, it is  
158 a mess; on Sunday you're not insured, of course. However, come if you like (Ernesto when I asked him if I could  
159 go to play soccer with the other boxers in the gym on Sundays)

160 In these occasions, when Italian coaches are not there and the boys led by Ernesto are in charge of management,  
161 the prevalence of guys of North African origin becomes blatant. (Valeri, 2006) On Saturday afternoons and  
162 Sunday mornings a hybrid language, between Arabic and Bolognese dialect is spoken in the gym, while the  
163 repeated cohabitation in this narrow space of veterans, young boxers and the boys of Bolognina allows them to

164 insult and banter often resorting to stereotypes that in another context, such as the weekly training, would be  
165 considered racist.

166 There's no way, you're just an Arab? do you really have to bugger around for a penalty up to this point?  
167 (Ernesto, in one of his verbal exchanges during a play)

168 The weekend games are also opportunities for new boxers recruitment, because most of these guys around  
169 sixteen then join the Tranvieri: when they join the gym many of them have already entered into this space, used  
170 the showers, learned how to use the tools, only they have never seen a coach (Turner, 1967; Roets, Vandenebeele  
171 & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). Tito and Sante are aware that the gym it is open on Saturday and Sunday, but turn a  
172 blind eye, being also aware that the Tranvieri is also an agency of socialization for the kids in the neighbourhood.

### 173 6 e) Cultural Intimacy

174 The Tranvieri can be described as a group of heterogeneous people who share, on a daily basis and for several  
175 hours in the afternoon and evening, rules, bans, standards of behaviour, a way of perceiving time and space. By  
176 studying the social organization of the gym it is legitimate to speak of «cultural intimacy» (Herzfeld, 1997).

177 If you stay in the gym for one day, three months, one year, you know that he also wants to get what you want  
178 to get and then you seek to help him. Help him on how to pull the blow, on how to behave in the ring. There are  
179 no different nationalities in the gym, most of people are foreigners and there have never been trouble, we always  
180 help each other.

181 (Anuar) Estimation and encouragement by the gym fellows, as well as the fact of training in a group, are  
182 elements that strongly influence a boxer's performance, because the individual psychological factor -consisting of  
183 perseverance, determination, selfconfidence, coldness in the ring -is strengthened or weakened by the group that  
184 on a daily basis attends the gym: if his teammates do not consider him "a good one", it is unlikely that a boxer  
185 will be able to step into the ring, even holding sufficient physical qualities. (Beattie 1996;Heiskanen 2006).

186 The exercise of sparring, or the combat simulation that takes place between boxers in the gym, is a decisive  
187 moment for the boxer who aspires to enter the ring in regular competition. Sparring plays at the same time  
188 a role of socialization since it often is followed by moments of confession and confidence in order to defuse  
189 the aggression exhibited on the square (Wacquant, 2000). The relations between boxers sometimes are formed  
190 through this sport. (Figure ??)

191 Each boxer has his own ideal sparring partner. On the ring, with Sante and Tito giving advice at the opposite  
192 corners of the square, sparring for the guys of Tranvieri is a baptism, a «rite of passage» (Wacquant, 2000;Crossley  
193 2001;Faure, 2004; ??oberts, 2006). When Tito calls two boxers sparring means to do that he is focusing on them,  
194 he's going to make them fight. Or, if it is their first sparring, it means that the two boxers are destined to enter  
195 the main group of Tranvieri's athlete, and will prepare to fight.

196 Obviously the "pairs" are formed mainly on the basis of practical reasons. This is because not all guys the same  
197 hours of training, and if you do not take at least some boxer to do sparring, a gym can be a great environment  
198 in which to train, but do not form a context where boxers will become champions. Tito and Sante, for example,  
199 in their constant search for a great boxer, know they must focus on a novice boxer selecting new members every  
200 day, continuing to put the mirror in front of those who make less progress and gradually approaching the square  
201 of the most promising.

202 The ideal sparring partner when there is not much difference in weight is often a person who knows the boxer,  
203 one he trusts even outside the gym. Studying how the boxers find their partners within the Tranvieri made me  
204 realize also the relationships between the guys out of the gym involved in research. Obviously, leaving the gym,  
205 observing the practices of everyday life of these boxers once they stopped wearing the clothes of the streetcar,  
206 I could, reciprocally, understand how and why they formed pairs inside the gym. (Figure ??) Some friends and  
207 acquaintances who then determine the formation of subgroups in the locker room, can be explained however by  
208 virtue of living in the same territory, as in the case of Samir, Anuar and Kalhed, neighbours and close for a  
209 period of time even roommates.

210 The road and the ring are interdependent in shaping the group of athletes who fights for boxing company  
211 Bolognina. Sharing the space of the gym, do sparring as we have seen, means building a relationship with each  
212 other (Mauss, 1936), the street often has the role to strengthen, or completely reverse these connection so that  
213 there is still more affinity in the gym between boxers or, conversely, a revision of the couples chosen by the two  
214 coaches.

215 One of the most interesting explanations of the link between street culture and the gym was provided to  
216 us by one of the coaches of Tranvieri, Sante. At the end of a meeting organized by Tranvieri during the final  
217 stages of the research, a sport reporter nostalgic of the great local boxers of the '50s and '60s asked the coach  
218 to organize collective vision in the gym of the most significant matches of old boxers of Bologna. I think it is  
219 wrong to consider Anuar or Yassine as Benvenuti [great boxing champion Italian, n.d.a.] because I think that  
220 every boxer needs to be himself, to find his way to boxing. For example, Anuar's blows are natural, they can  
221 from his experience on the road. This way of boxing will never be taken away from him and we can slowly teach  
222 him how to transform that blow in a proper hook. You can force him to shoot straight at a distance, but as soon  
223 as he will hit the ring, and be provoked, he will fight to defend himself in his peculiar manner. I believe my task  
224 as a coach is to adapt box to the natural qualities and personality of a kid, because if you take his features from  
225 him, he is not the same boxer anymore. They are not all the same; there is not a unique way of boxing that

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226 fits everybody. A good coach is like a tailor, who sews a dress suitable for every guy, enhancing their features. I  
227 want Anuar to become a good boxer remaining himself. If you take that from him you've taken everything. If  
228 you teach them to employ strength as well as their character they will know how to behave on the ring and in  
229 life as well, as boxers and as men.

## 230 7 f) Generation gap

231 Once established certain relationships of trust with a group of young boxers I began to get out of the gym with  
232 them. The relation ring/street is decisive for the gym. Tito is aware of how his gym draws the top boxers,  
233 such as Erzan, Khaled, Anuar or Samir, from the street. If once Tito could count on many workers, almost all  
234 Italians, who worked in the factories of Bolognina today the gym depends more and more, in terms of athletic  
235 achievements, on a group of young people of foreign origin who live a few hundred meters away from the gym.

236 When I asked Ernesto to describe his old gym mates, their life stories were not dissimilar to those of the  
237 current boxers of Tranvieri. Words such as "street", "punches", family issues and difficulties to integrate into the  
238 territory often return in the speeches of Ernesto as in those as Khaled, Anuar, Samir or Erzan.

239 Bolognina, in the early years after the Second World War, was, for a twenty-somethings like Dante, Ernesto  
240 and Albano a territory to explore. Their parents, like those of Anuar, could not control them after school. Many  
241 old boxers, in a similar way as Khaled told me, formed in these years "bands" of young boys which spent their  
242 time playing in backyards, parks, public squares of the quarter.

243 Artemio, for example, recalls how after the Second World War he often heard his mother called "Sicilian" or  
244 "Moroccan". Once the former boxer confessed to me how he felt compelled to engage in fight with some bolognese  
245 guy who joked about his southern origin. At the base of the only violent reaction he has had in his young life  
246 outside the ring, Samir, as we saw earlier, there was precisely the accusation of being a "Moroccan shit". Despite  
247 all these similarities, so deep in the practices of everyday life, in the relationship with the territory, in the way  
248 they invest on boxing career, in the difficult relationship with school and family, the boxers of the old Tranvieri  
249 don't identify with the new generation of boxers who train at the gym now.

250 I feel nostalgic of the times when I lived in Bolognina. I remember that at midnight we went to take newspapers  
251 at the central station, now everything has changed. I've never been afraid of being robbed.

## 252 8 Conclusions

253 In recent years, municipal authority has decided to rebuild on the ashes of the old factories engineering centres  
254 and business activities related to the tertiary sector. All typical jobs in the manufacturing sector deteriorated  
255 in the new service economy, where, how often Anuar told me, "You have to tolerate racist acts by the boss if  
256 you want to keep your work place". All the jobs accessible to immigrants do not warrant economic security or  
257 opportunities to rise. (Kats, 1990; Farmer, 2003) (Figures ?? e 6)

258 The gym, for some boxers as Erzan, often appears as the only hope because it is still a place where to build  
259 social capital and make friends, when, despite working for many years, they have never been able to make friends  
260 with their work colleagues. Scholar Asher Colombo, for example, in studying the career paths of a group of  
261 Algerian immigrants comparing the current working reality in Milan to the French industrial one lasted until the  
262 end of the Seventies, bringing in his text reflections on the working world of French historians such as Dubet and  
263 Lapeyronnie:

264 In a society organized around industry, immigrants found slowly their place in working world. Gradually, they  
265 were inscribed in the trade union struggles, shared the class-consciousness of their fellow workers and abandoned  
266 the status of immigrants. Their integration was the integration into the French republican. Working class and  
267 socialist suburbs were a powerful tool for integration of immigrants, internal migrants and foreigners. Thanks to  
268 workers, trade unions and the working-class community, the socialist suburbs could absorb the new populations.  
269 Their decline was the decline of this integration tool. The immigration problem is the consequence of this  
270 decomposition. ??Colombo, 1998, p. 92) Bolognina is not a ghetto or a suburb, but today is characterized by  
271 the growth of the industry based on information technology, the fragmentation of the labour, the transformation  
272 of public welfare at all municipal levels, all processes that have hit the African-American ghettos as well as  
273 French banlieues. With the closure of the factories the local labour market is increasingly marginalizing young  
274 immigrants who, in some areas of the country, are up to 25% of the total resident population, relegating people  
275 like Anuar on the edge of the service economy. (Wirth, 1928; Holston & Appadurai, 1999; Fava, 2008).

276 From the stories of Khaled and Erzan emerges the existence of niches of unskilled service sector where they  
277 are hired without a contract. Samir told me more than once about vocational schools of the territory where he  
278 studied in differential classes for immigrants the same schools that, years before, Artemio and others old boxers  
279 had attended successfully becoming specialized workers. (Figures ?? and 8)

280 If we assume as an imperative of ethnographic research to «reconstruct the meaning» that certain social  
281 practices play from the point of view of those who are involved (Bourgois, 1996) it is evident that every guy  
282 react differently to these objective transformations that more and more are narrowing the range of possibilities  
283 that the protagonists of research have in front of them. The gym itself is perceived by some of them as only  
284 refuge, by others as a place where to find "revenge". (Wacquant, 2004) If Artemio and Dante found in the factory  
285 economic opportunity along with the chance to gain respect and dignity through work, Khaled, Anuar and the

286 big part of the protagonists of this research are aware that if they want to survive they have to suffer every day  
287 the injustices inflicted by their Italian colleagues. ??Foot White, 1943) Meanwhile, Bolognina is more and more  
288 undergoing of a radical process of gentrification. Years ago we asked the current mayor of Bologna the following  
289 question: "How do you regard the development of this suburb?" He answered: "It will be the world of the service  
290 industry". But what is the "world of service industry"? Which is the future of Bolognina and of our former  
industrial peripheries? <sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: .

or an electrician [?]. I wanted to be a lawyer?

(Kalhed)

; Giacalone, 2002; Guerzoni &

Riccio, 2009)

I liked to go at school. My father ruined me because he said I wasn't good enough to go to proper school. He sent me to vocational school and I really hated this school. I hated mechanics; I hated becoming an electrician [...]. I wondered why you must always be compelled to become a carpenter

Figure 2:

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<sup>1</sup>For privacy reasons all the names listed in this paper do not correspond to the real ones.<sup>2</sup> Almost all the old boxers of the gym emigrated from South Italy to North after the Second World War to find a job in the local factories.

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## 8 CONCLUSIONS

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