

# Elicitation using kit bag methods: Exploring embodied practice with female boxers

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## Abstract

In this paper, we present a novel qualitative research method that uses a boxer's kit bag and the items contained within, to explore the relationship that participants have with activity-specific material items. These immersive sensory encounters explore the participants' experiences of interacting with their kit and how their kit contributes to identity formation and their sense of belonging in the boxing gym. This method contributes to the field of material methods and elicitation by using everyday objects to stimulate the expression of embodied experiences. By observing participants interacting with their boxing kit and encouraging reflective attention to how the body responds to each item, we can examine how objects can both promote a sense of belonging in the boxing gym and support the narration of transitions in and out of character. This method could be used to explore other sports, occupations or activities which require activity-specific objects.

## Keywords

female boxing, sensory, elicitation, qualitative, embodiment, object methods, material methods, mobility, portability

## Introduction

This paper introduces a novel qualitative research approach – the kit bag method – that examines situated and sensorial experiences of participants who engage in embodied activities. It employs an elicitation approach centred upon the participants' kit bag and

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its contents – the clothing and other materials brought into a research setting – and how these are put on, used, stored and made portable. The participant performs their kitting-up process in dialogue with the researcher, while being filmed, and responding to researcher prompts, to detail their experiences and reflections on the process. We also collect images and accounts of how the kit bag is stored, packed and transported between key sites such as the home, work, gym and competition space. The method was developed as part of a larger research project exploring issues of health and well-being specifically related to the development of identity and well-being of women in boxing. We show how the method is particularly valuable for studying the relationships between objects and identity, sensory experience, framings of portability and mobility and transitions in and out of character. It records and analyses an immersive encounter with participants' boxing kit – as an elicitation tool – to narrate the embodied experience of dressing in their kit and their experiences as a boxer. The method, we argue, can be employed in other settings beyond boxing and as a standalone method or as part of a larger ethnographic project. In this paper, we detail the context of the development of the kit bag method, situate it within the literature on embodiment and elicitation, detail how it was implemented and discuss its value and areas for development.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first introduces key issues related to gender, sport and bodies, particularly in the context of boxing. The second focuses on sensory, embodied and elicitation-orientated methods to articulate the framing that has shaped our thinking on the kit bag method. The third section outlines our research context, to describe the broader project and the genesis of the kit bag method in practice. This is followed by the fourth section in which we provide a detailed explanation of the kit bag methods and underlying methodology, including an account of our methods of analysis. Section five builds further upon our analytical discussion to identify a set of themes that arose in our analysis that, we argue, can operate to sensitise any subsequent analysis deploying the kit bag approach, which we report by working through some illustrative examples from our own data. Finally, the conclusion closes our articulation of the method by stressing its value and summarising its key principles.

## **Gender, bodies and boxing**

Women's boxing is gendered and embodied. There is extensive literature within the field of sports analysing dominant narratives of male physical superiority, accompanied by an idealised version of physical capital, muscular superiority and the prioritisation of heterosexual desire and competitive athletic prowess (Francombe-Webb and Toffoletti, 2018; Hargreaves, 2002). (Hetero)sexualised images of female sporting bodies and associated assumptions about females, femininity and sport, reinforce suggestions that muscular strength and athletic skill are unfeminine (Cooky et al., 2013 ; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009). However, sport and the embodied experiences of gendered bodies are complex and often contested making the continued exploration of the relational and competing nature of femininities and masculinities important. Continued research into what gendered bodies are capable of, and if and how they access sporting spaces suggests that established principles about gendered bodies can be both reinforced and resisted, negotiated and transformed (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995).

In this context, women's boxing is inherently a site of historical struggle around gender identity and equality. While there is a long history of women's boxing in the UK, with records dating back to the 1720s (Smith, 2014), competitive boxing was banned until 1996 and was not included as an Olympic sport until 2012. Boxing has historically been a highly gendered practice with the raw aggression required often, although not exclusively being seen as contrary to the nurturing stereotype usually attributed to women (Gammel, 2012; Hargreaves, 1997; Oates, 1987). Policies to encourage increased participation in physical activities by women and girls have been developed specifically to address their under-representation. However, historical exclusions based on 19th century medical discourses which defined female bodies as weak, fragile and in need of protection, still prevail (Velija and Mansfield, 2017). Gendered assumptions concerning 'appropriate' sports for women and girls, coupled with class-based associations, may contribute to barriers to female participation in certain sports that are deemed to be an inappropriate match to established ideas about femininity. Patterns of participation and inclusion can be attributed to inequitable treatment that women have experienced historically and there is a continued assumption due to perceived gendered differences in physiological characteristics, that the experiences of sporting women and men will always be distinct (Hargreaves, 2002; Wellard, 2016).

The history of women's boxing frames the experiences of females in clubs and competitions at all levels of the sport. With changes in policy in the 1990s in both the USA and the UK to allow women to box competitively and the inclusion of the sport as an Olympic event for women in 2012, there has been a steady rise in participation (Woodward, 2014). This can be seen from the Sports England Active Lives survey which shows an increase of female participation in traditional boxing of more than seventy-three thousand between 2015 and 2020<sup>1</sup> (Sportengland, 2022). The rise in female participation in combat sports has often been attributed as being in response to a rise in male violence and harassment (Sugden, 1996), however, the health and well-being benefits of sports participation and a broadening of the societal acceptance of the complexities of gender roles and sporting femininities (Hargreaves, 1997) has made the previously masculine spaces of the boxing gym more accessible to women. The Olympics boosted the visibility of the amateur sport, the professional sport received a similar increase in audience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a mark of this progress, in April 2022, Katie Taylor, along with Amanda Serrano, became the first woman to headline Madison Square Gardens – a key global site in the sport – to a sell-out crowd. As we will show, the kit bag method enables the exploration of the meaning and making of women's bodies in these spaces, by centring the kit as an important tool in eliciting sensorial and situated, embodied experiences of female identities against this history of gender inequality.

## **Sensory, embodied and elicitation-orientated methods**

The sensory has become a recurrent feature of qualitative methods (Mason and Davies 2009; Orr and Phoenix 2015; Pink 2015). It recognises the multifaceted ways in which we engage with the world and make sense of ourselves and the situations we inhabit. Experience is multi-dimensional, and sensory experiences are often hard to engage through methods that reduce all knowledge to spoken language (Eisner, 2008).

Aligned with this, the body too has become increasingly central to sociological thinking, although it was, for a long time, subordinate to the study of social structures which affected them, such as racism and social inequality (Adelman and Ruggi, 2016; Shilling, 1991; Turner, 2008). Restrictive discourses of difference which focus on the gendered aspects of bodies and embodiment are prevalent due in part to an increase in feminist approaches which encouraged women to 'reclaim' their bodies (Shilling, 1991: 30). Such narrow dialogue can be avoided by employing a more flexible starting point for researching embodiment which acknowledges the subjective, corporeal, lived experiences of activities in which the body is central, taking into account other social factors such as age, class, race, religion and (dis)ability (Wellard, 2016). Embodied research encompasses 'the physiological, the psychological, the sociological, and the temporal and spatial elements' (Wellard, 2016: 2), signalling how the researcher should accommodate a range of disciplinary perspectives. For Woodward (2008), not only are our bodies crucial to our understanding of selfhood, but also to the processes through which people position themselves within the social world. This intertwining of not only the body but also the things that we use within our social worlds makes such things inseparable from and interconnected to our social world. The kit bag method has been designed to capture this, with elicitation through, and narration of, embodied practice.

Elicitation techniques also have a long history in qualitative methods, as a set of approaches that provoke encounters and reflections beyond the standard interview. MacLean (2018) argued that asking participants to discuss what is meaningful to them without prompts can leave them feeling blank or vulnerable to judgement. For Rose (2007), incorporating photographs and objects into the interview process may facilitate conversation and a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. They 'can show us details in a moment that it would take pages of writing to describe' (Rose, 2007: 247). Research has shown that using photographs to elicit conversation may result in a more participatory project that establishes a comfortable research setting for participants, offering them an alternative method for communicating (Mills and Hoeber, 2013). By giving participants the power to determine what deserves consideration and creatively represent their experiences using photography (MacLean, 2018), a participants' ability to articulate experiences when 'words were not enough' can be enhanced (Warren, 2002). However, as Ingold (2010: 3) stated, 'the road to understanding and empathy lies in what people do with objects'.

Lived experience is multi-dimensional and multi-sensory, yet research into lived experience often makes only limited attempts to recreate this multi-sensory experience to elicit authentic responses. Gore et al. (2020) used 'explicitation interviews' and self-confrontation using video trace to 'delve further into the "granularity" of the [embodied] experience[s]' (154) of participants. However, their interviews reflect upon practice rather than examining embodiment in practice. By using objects during interviews, it becomes possible to explore the sensory, embodied experiences that such items elicit and to explore the role that objects play in the negotiation of identity. Woodward (2020) identified key differences between object interviews and object elicitations, primarily focusing upon the difference found in the active role that the objects take in an object interview. In this way, an object interview may be considered 'interactive and co-constructed' (Woodward, 2020: 37), moving beyond theoretical discussions about

the objects. By combining Gore et al.'s (2020) explicitation techniques with an extension of Woodward's object interview concept, a more authentic representation of lived experience can be achieved and insight into objects 'in action' can be explored.

A recurring principle of ethnography is to de-emphasise the verbal and focus on non-verbal cultural practices and in doing so allow things and artefacts to be centred. The materiality of objects engages participants beyond the visual. By exploring the touching, smelling, tasting, seeing and/or hearing sensorial responses we gain a deeper understanding of both the object in terms of its design and the practices of use and wearing, and also our participants, by way of their multi-sensory engagement. Connecting with objects in their usual environment of use can help participants explain practices that are taken for granted by the study population (Woodward, 2020: 37). Engaging physically and sensorially with objects and 'noticing' characteristics such as textures, colour, stains, marks and smells may help to evoke certain memories of connections to people or places and enhance the sense of entanglement that people have with their everyday objects. This also helps us understand how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with objects, to further engage with unspoken dimensions of lived experience. The kit bag method looks to connect these elements – embodiment, elicitation and the material – to provide distinct and valuable insights into the lived experience of daily activities, in our case, women's boxing.

## **Research context: ethnography of women's boxing**

The overarching project analyses the culture and experiences of women who take part in boxing to explore the impact of participation on their well-being. By examining the lived experience of female participants, the research aims to establish how gendered expectations and female identities are negotiated and interconnected with wellbeing. The project conducted observations in two gyms in the Midlands region of England during 2019–2021. The first phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted with 28 participants – 26 women and two men – between the ages of 12 and 53, remotely online due to the COVID-19 restrictions on physical proximity. This paper focuses on the second phase, when a novel methodological approach – the kit bag method – was developed, in part as a response to the continued restriction on observations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research project was originally envisioned to be a classic ethnography – conducted by the first author – in which immersive techniques of protracted observations at field sites, participant interviews and analysis of documentary sources and other artefacts would have been employed. This, however, was curtailed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed the training facilities. When the uncertainty about facilities reopening was extended by the UK Government indefinitely, the project team conducted a series of creative workshop sessions to explore ways in which the project could continue without the face-to-face immersive methods usually employed during traditional ethnographic research. As 'being there' is one of the most significant aspects of the ethnographers' methodological orientation, proximity through mediated interaction was explored (Hine, 2015). The initial experiments using the kit bag involved asking participants to share a photograph of their bag as an elicitation technique during online interviews. Photographs elicit a different type of information than verbal interviews alone, as images

evoke deeper elements of human consciousness (Harper, 2002). The photo-elicitation approach yielded promising results, so a strategy was developed to use the physical kit bag and enclosed kit to explore the entanglement between the material items of a participant's kit bag and their experiences of feeling and wearing their kit, aiming to bring the participant closer to their experiences of 'being there' as a boxer without the availability of training facilities. At this stage, this was still intended as a response to COVID-19 restrictions. By asking participants to interact with the clothing and equipment contained within their kit bag, we intended to explore the sensory, embodied experiences that women boxers have with their kit and the role objects play in the negotiation of identity. By studying how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with the boxing kit bag items, we envisaged we could create a novel opportunity to engage with embodied and lived experience. The ethical, logistical and practical constraints of recruiting participants remotely led us to focus on a subset of participants from the earlier interview phase of the project for this new approach. However, COVID-19 restrictions had relaxed by the time the method had been fully developed and ethical approval had been received. We did not want to jettison what we believed could be a valuable method so we continued with the approach, but with the immersive encounters with the kit bags taking place primarily in the boxers' usual training facility – the gym or competition space – as this would enhance the contextual aspects of 'kitting-up'.

In practice, eight women between the ages of 17 and 49 participated in the immersive kit bag study, all in person. These eight encounters were conducted by the first author, between September and November 2021. The total recorded data was 537 min with the average length of encounter being 67 min. All but one took place in a boxing gym, with the remaining encounter conducted in the participants' home at their request. Six of the participants had already been interviewed during phase one of the project and two were recruited from existing ethnographic field sites. Two were recreational boxers, three competed at the national level and two competed internationally for England, with one winning several national titles. One participant was prevented from competing due to religious and cultural dress limitations.<sup>2</sup> Three of the participants were from London and the remainder were from across the Midlands region of the UK. All participants were from different boxing clubs and all were trained in mixed-gender environments. Four were also qualified England Boxing coaches. Having participants with a diverse range of involvement in the sport helped to identify whether the meanings attached to the kit are common across all levels or if they are distinct to either particular levels of involvement or particular individuals. In what follows we detailed the procedure followed, before discussing key practical and ethical issues and reflecting upon the types of data and understandings we were able to gain through its use.

## **Conducting kit bag method research: the procedure in practice**

Our eight participants had all previously participated in the project and were known to the researcher. Each was provided with an instruction sheet in advance of the encounter which detailed the process in full. Participants were asked to pack their bag or bags as they would if they were preparing for a typical event, including all kit items required for that event. Any additional items that they would usually pack, including food, medicines, toiletries, supplements or lucky mascots, were also to be included. This was not an exhaustive list provided to participants, but rather a list of things to stimulate the deeper

consideration of what would usually be in their bag for the selected event. They were given the choice of exactly what type of event to pack for – either training or competition – to give them agency over the context, rather than being told what to bring. They were advised that the research encounter would work best in person at the usual facility where the activity takes place, as previous research shows that the context in which research is conducted is as important as the items discussed during the encounter (Woodward, 2020). Participants were given the option to conduct the meeting remotely or to use an alternative location if this was more convenient. It was suggested that the participants meet with the researcher at the chosen facility an hour before their regular planned activity was due to begin if possible, as this would be the most practical and convenient for participants, although again this was at their discretion.

Before meeting for the kit bag encounter, participants were asked to provide a photograph of their kit bag as it is stored at home and a second photograph of where it is usually stored at the usual location of the activity, both in advance of the arranged meeting. A reminder was sent a week before the planned meeting if photographs had not been received and again, closer to the meeting if required. If photographs were received, they were printed in hardcopy before the meeting. These photographs were used to stimulate a general conversation about the kit, the bag it was kept in and where the bag was stored at both locations. This served as a valuable icebreaker at the beginning of the encounter and opened further discussion about the various spaces the participants and their kit bags journey through in their routine activities. In practice, on all but three occasions, the requested photographs were not received prior to the encounter, despite several reminders. This given, the same sensitising questions were asked of participants regardless of whether photographs had been provided, but it was noted that this aspect of the encounter was much more interactive with photographs, as participants did not need to describe in as much detail. For completeness of data, participants were contacted again after the encounter to provide a photograph and all subsequently did so.

Participants were prompted when discussing where their bag was stored at home to consider which items stayed in the bag and which were removed and why. If items were removed, we discussed established routines around repacking the bag. Then the participants were asked about what they were wearing and why they chose those items. Next, they were asked to remove each item from their bag, as if they were preparing for their chosen event. Prompts were prepared to stimulate discussion of the sensory aspects – how items felt on the body or in the hand, if there were any memories or emotions associated with each item, how they had chosen the particular brand they used and how they decided when items needed to be washed, replaced or upgraded. In practice, there was little need for these prompts as the participants quickly took on the role of narrator and embellished their physical actions with an explanation of what they were doing and why. The order of items was removed from the bag and then later the body, was dictated entirely by the participant. An embodied discourse guidance technique (Vermersch, 2009) was employed, with the extent of the questioning being mostly limited to prompts such as ‘What’s next?’ or ‘How does it feel?’ to avoid inducing answers (Gore et al., 2020). Participants discussed clothing and kit in terms of sensory experiences including temperature, support, comfort and protection, but also related their experiences of kit to their sense of belonging in the boxing gym and their identity as a boxer. Detailed explanations of particular occasions that required deviation from the routine use of the kit, such as training activities that

required a gum shield and/or head guard and at what point in the session this would be appropriate came forth. Additionally, items in the bag but not used for training such as skull caps used to contain the hair for competition were discussed.

A dynamic dialogue was cocreated between participant and researcher with the researcher acting as a prompt but the participant leading the agenda in terms of eliciting knowledge. A narrative storytelling element which prioritised the voice of the participant was embedded into the work and reflected the ethnographic principles which were central to the collection of data. Through this, the dialogue was led by the participants as they engaged in the dynamics of storytelling to narrate the self into the process, providing an account that is always 'moving', through the process, in relation to the unpacking and reorganisation of the kitbag materials. Subsequently, the progression of the encounters was different for each participant, preventing any generic linear structuring imposed by the method, as instead, the patterns of discussion reflected their own situated ordering of their items and their thoughts. Once the participant was fully kitted up, they were asked to talk through how they felt and if they felt different to when they first arrived before they put on their kit. They were then asked how they would repack their bag at the end of a session.

The encounters were video recorded to capture and retain the narrative, physical gestures and embodied process of dressing and preparing. As the kit bag encounters had been designed in part to replace the long-term observations of embodied aspects of being a female boxer which had been disrupted, being able to look back at video recordings would in some way replicate the iterative nature of observations. Matthews (2021: 89) noted that the more you develop as an immersive researcher, the more you will see. This iterative approach to observation applies not only to the field site participant observation but also to the repetitive watching of the same recorded encounter. Being able to attend to different elements of the 'kitting-up' process with each iteration, focussing at times on what was being done rather than what was being said, ensured the embodied practices and communicative forms were captured for sustained analysis.

Separate audio recordings were also made to prevent the need for participants to wear microphones. Participants were required to take off and put on items of clothing and kit, so a personal microphone may have inhibited movement and the audio could be compromised. Boxing gyms are also frequently exceptionally noisy places, generating potential for further disruption and interruption to the recording. To mitigate such events, a separate Dictaphone was placed much closer to the participant than the video recording equipment would allow, resulting in less interference and background noise from other gym users. There were also occasions when the video recording equipment either distracted the participant or interfered with the participant's desire to fully kit up. As such, we remained aware that what was captured by the video may only be a partial representation of normal processes (Knoblauch et al., 2014: 444).

Filming in spaces that are not private, and filming people getting dressed or undressed, raises distinct ethical issues. Prior written consent regarding the use of recording equipment was obtained from all participants. It was not possible to obtain such consent from all potential users of the facility, so there was therefore potential for other gym users to be present in the recording without their having provided consent. This was of particular concern due to the potential for there to be members present who were under eighteen. As a result, careful consideration was made with each participant as to where the



recording should take place to minimise the risk of gym users being filmed inadvertently, and further mitigating this by conducting most encounters before other gym users were present. None of the kit bag encounters took place in the changing rooms, in part because the boxing gyms, being male-dominant spaces, did not have female changing rooms at all. However, ethical considerations must be addressed if there is any potential for non-consenting bodies to be in the locality of the encounter (Fine et al., 2000). Permissions were gained from gatekeepers at each facility in advance and stringent protocols of the university ethics process were also adhered to, as social responsibility toward participants and their wider social environment is important to ensure integrity in research practice (Fusco, 2008). Finally, in terms of the core respondents, even though express consent was given for the video and audio transcripts to be used in further research, including subsidiary presentations and printed materials, participants were contacted before any such use to ensure that they were happy with the specific image and where it would be used. In this method, then, the ethical practice remained an ongoing and sustained negotiation between the researcher and research participants (Miller, 2012).

It was also necessary to consider and address the process of asking participants to discuss all the contents of their bags in a public space in the knowledge that there may be personal items in their bags, such as feminine hygiene products, that they may not be comfortable discussing where they may be overheard. It is also important to provide the opportunity for participants to unpack their bags themselves, allowing them the possibility to choose which items are removed and discussed. Accommodations should also be made for participants who may be uncomfortable removing layers of clothing or certain aspects of their kit, such as, in this project, protective items like breast protectors. In these cases, participants were given the opportunity to talk through issues associated with these kit items without actually putting them on. Even under these circumstances, this method retains the benefit of the participant interacting with the item in a material way which will still elicit valuable emotive responses.

The analysis process for kit bag encounters has both necessary elements and elements that are considered flexible. We suggest the kit bag method can operate in a range of contexts, as a standalone project, or as part of a broader methodological programme, be that ethnographic, interview-based, or other approach. The flexibility within the analysis process is necessary to allow the approach to integrate into a range of research designs. This given, in our case, the process adopted a defined but iterative approach. In practice, our kit bag analysis involved the careful familiarisation with and organisation of the data. This involved the familiar tasks of producing transcripts of what was said, but also required annotating video recordings, and ensuring the inclusion of reference to smells, textures and the use of space. An important skill is developing an approach to effectively capture the non-textual data in a form appropriate for a more traditional text-based coding, for example, considering a writing format that embraces the pertinent information relating to the slapping sound of a boxing glove as it makes contact, or the clenching of a body part to articulate an experience that frames decisions about kit and its usage. In our case, this was achieved by watching the videos multiple times to analyse the physical signatures which accompanied the participants interacting with their kit and making notes, which could be developed into analytical memos. While this supported more traditional forms of text-based coding and analysis, the original video recordings could be

returned at any time to iteratively re-anchor the accounts in the sonic and visual context of their production. This work was discussed across the research team as analysis was conducted, allowing collective reflection upon the preliminary nature of early codes, as they were developed into broader themes, which were constructed, reviewed and defined in relation to the data. Some of these analytical themes – those most relevant to researchers looking to apply the kit bag method in other contexts – are further articulated in later following section.

While we stress that the analytical approach of kit bag methods can be flexible for different research designs, there remains a set of sensitising mandates that we consider core to the use of this method. First, the analysis should be inductive and interpretative, building out of the narratives and embodied practices of the respondents' dialogue in concert with their own materials. Although the kit bag method endeavours to expose the embodied experiences of the participants, it must be acknowledged that by its very nature as qualitative research it is interpretative (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Analysis must also remain multisensory, retaining a focus on smells, sounds, textures and tastes, any sensory articulation or experience that enlivens the encounter. Applications of kit bag methods that retreat into the analysis of the spoken interactions alone will miss the richness that makes the approach valuable. Finally, analysis should also remain focused on the encounter as a process, not a snapshot in time. The kit bag encounter is an activity, a practice, with its own temporality. Photos of kit bags at home provide a pre- and post-anchoring of the encounter, but the unpacking and dressing are themselves chronological and processual. The analysis process needs to be attentive to this ordering, while also recognising that this need not be linear. The encounter itself is a site of reflection and deviation, that can introduce a circuitousness or circulatory, so the analyst must continue to deal with the tension of a potential linearity to the unpacking and dressing, against a free-flowing and reflexive narrative.

We continue our explication of the analytical approach for the kit bag method in our next section, which uses illustrative extracts from our data to articulate key themes that can both shape applications of the approach in other settings and are valuable insights within our own context, as a way of detailing an appropriate analytical sensibility for working the data into findings and stretching our understandings of embodied and material practices in new directions.

## **Key themes and an analytical sensibility for the kit bag method**

Our use of the kit bag method proved useful and distinctive for multiple reasons. These include exposing the importance of clothing and equipment in negotiating identity, how clothing and equipment help participants narrate into and out of character and how including the material items within the encounter helped to elicit participants' sensory experiences within their narrative. The mobility and portability of these items and the bag in which they were contained highlighted how such items can facilitate instrumental social exchanges when moving between social spaces and can also represent an enactment of performance of character both inside and outside the gym. Incorporating the material items into the process and examining how they are used in situ also enabled the exploration of entanglements between the material items of a boxer's kit bag and the gendered culture of boxing. This centring of clothing and equipment that are essential

to the practices of participants furthered our understanding of how the body acts and is acted upon when interacting with the items. We now discuss four key themes arising from our analysis.

### *Objects and identity*

The first defining aspect of the kit bag method is that direct engagement with the kit enabled participants to articulate the importance of the material items to their cultural identity and how these feature in their process of achieving a sense of cultural belonging (Delamont and Stephens, 2021; Gill, 2007). Such cultural identities are not an intrinsic property of individuals but instead are relational and both develop and are maintained in relation to cultural groups and the artefacts that represent them (Heersmink, 2023). When interacting with their existing kit items, participants commented on their experiences as a novice boxer – with cheap, readily available high street items of kit that they initially thought represented how a boxer should look – to a more accomplished boxer with a functional kit that provided the physical support and protection that was not provided by the entry-level kit. Mia, a 30-year-old competitive boxer and qualified coach, commented:

I had the same [boots] that most boxers have when they start, which is the short Lonsdale ones. The black ones. I had them when I first started and I literally burned a hole in the bottoms from pivoting and so then I went to the Nike, Hyper K.O.s and they were blue and red. Which I liked, because it's like no matter what corner you were in, you'd fit.

Here Mia articulates her sense of progression within boxing culture through the use of familiar material items. As confidence builds in her own capabilities and knowledge of the sport, identified by the reference to the red and blue corners of the competitive arena, she adapts the equipment used to suit their participation level and associated material needs. These boots, then, acted as both a marker of status and experience and a practical adaption to the physical setting.

A sense of belonging also developed as participants became more confident in how to use the kit which resulted in an increase in social capital (Ahn and Davis, 2020). Hand protection in particular represented a transition from novice to experienced boxer. Participants described initially feeling intimidated by seeing others in the gym using hand wraps or bandages when they themselves were using high street gel inner gloves or the shorter hand wraps, which offer little or no support to the hand joints or wrist. Whilst putting on her hand wraps, Seema, a 31-year-old amateur boxer, commented:

[I] remember the first time I saw people tying their hands thinking that I did feel a little bit intimidated by it, and it felt a little bit overwhelming, especially the 4.5 metre wraps, they're so long you just think 'Where do I start...'.

Exploring lived experience using everyday items of kit invokes conversations about fitness, about how the people and the objects they bring are aligned or misaligned with the expectations of the space and how the kit is used to mediate this. Participants had a strong sense of identity linked to their training clothes outside of the specific objects, such as the hand wraps, gloves and boots required for boxing training. Their lack of

respect for other women who they considered had dressed inappropriately – ‘as sexily as possible’ or ‘dolled up’ – was clearly articulated as they spoke disparagingly about ‘bougie boxing gyms...where...everyone’s in LuLu’s’, referring to Lululemon Athletica, a premium athleisure wear brand. This was presented in contrast, firstly, with their own training facilities where ‘we just wear whatever’ and ‘feel comfortable being androgynous’ and secondly, with their own alternate identity as presented outside of the boxing gym. Rosa, a 20-year-old elite boxer who was attending a boxing show later on the day of the kit-bag encounter stated, ‘I’m going to have hair curled, lashes, that’s going to be me later’. This display of traditional feminine standards was not considered problematic, but it did not belong in the boxing gym (Krane and Symons, 2014).

Identity performances are bound to the objects used in their display and negotiation. These objects – such as the long hand wraps – can set standards by which users are judged, mark status within a group (Ahn and Davis, 2020) and intensify the experience for those using, or watching others use them in practice. Kit bag methods provide insights into these very processes, though, as we discuss in the next section, analysing transitions in and out of the kit, and in and out of character.

### *Narrating transitions in and out of character*

Another distinctive feature of the kit bag method is the direct narration of moments of transition – in and out of character – as articulated through the connections between the body, space and the material adornments of clothing, chemicals and equipment. In these moments of transition, we can analyse the situated assembly of new performances as they are being entered into, or as Goffman (1959) would say, in movements between front and back regions. The kit bag method allows this to be both narrated, and embodied, as participants talk through these transformative moments. Here we study language-in-use – narrative accounts that accomplish social actions – in relation to the material affordances of the kitbag, to enact and transition through identities (Atkinson, 2015). In our boxing case, the encounters elicited responses indicating that there were physiological changes taking place as they transitioned towards their boxer identity. When items usually only worn for sparring and competing, such as the gum shield and headguard were put on, many participants described surprise at feeling a change in their heart rate, breathing and body temperature as the final pieces were worn, even though they were not about to spar or fight. Rosa exclaimed, ‘if you had a heart rate monitor right now, I can feel like my heart’s faster... your bodies like, “I recognize this, I think someone’s gonna punch me in the face now”’. Attributing these physiological changes to the application of the kit, not the proximity to the fight, exemplifies the value of this elicitation method for demonstrating how kitting up is not only an echo of a previous boxing identity but is actively bringing that identity and the associated embodied practices into being.

During the encounters, participants described how the kit became experienced less as a material object and more as an extension of their embodied selves. Mia, as she transitioned towards her boxer identity and talking about the headguard, said:

I feel it when I put it on, and then I don’t feel it. It’s like, it becomes a part of me. So it’s like, there’s this awareness of it. And then it’s like, right now this is like basically an extension of your head.

These experiences occur in real time during the kit bag encounter. Mia exclaimed, once fully kitted up, 'Now I feel like a boxer, whereas before, it's almost like you're kind of in Clark Kent mode or something'. Sammy, a 23-year-old retired competitive boxer and qualified coach, when asked how this fully kitted up version of themselves felt different to the one at the start of the encounter, said 'you're ready, you're switched on, it's dead serious'. These participants are describing a real-time change in their mental state, asserting that they felt motivated, intentional, purposeful and powerful once they were fully kitted up. They were also adorning themselves with the props to support their transition into a particular type of identity performance, as a boxer, as competitive, as skilled, but also as a learner, as someone committed to the moral codes of the boxing gym and as someone who was there to work hard. The kit bag could then also be central to transitioning back to a non-boxing performance of feminine identity. However, in our study, the lack of physical space to change within this male-dominant environment meant participants typically carried elements of their boxing persona into other spaces, with only limited mitigation. Rosa told us, 'I have gone to [supermarket chain] Tesco before in my chest guard, with sweaty hair in a bun', Seema explained, 'as soon as I've finished, I'll put the hat on... because I'm all sweaty and if it's a little bit cold outside, I want to just keep my head warm'. These processes of transitioning out of character are highly mediated by the space itself, and are subsequently spatially layered with the removal of some adornments – gloves and wraps – in the gym, but others – boxing vests and shorts, sometimes even protective gear – remaining in place until the privacy of the home. The kit bag, then, facilitates transition across multiple spaces.

During this transition in and out of being a boxer, participants were encouraged to narrate how each item of kit felt, how and why they chose it and matters of hygiene. This naturally led to sensorial descriptions, as we discuss in the next section.

### *Sensory and embodied experiences*

The kit bag method is inherently multi-sensory. It engages the relationship between the body and the kit, in how it looks and how it is talked about, but also how it feels, how it smells, how it sounds and how it sits on the body. Boxing gyms are deeply sensorial spaces, from the clash of pads, the whirl of the skipping rope and the intense smell of sweat and leather as you enter the room (Wacquant, 2004). Kit bag methods capture these experiences through active engagement with the material items and their role in producing or protecting boxers from these dense sensorial settings. Conducting kit bag encounters in these sensorial spaces and actively engaging the participants in 'noticing' everyday objects that are never usually considered in a sensory way offers an opportunity to connect to the materiality of the object. Our approach builds upon Pink's (2015) work on sensory ethnography by focusing the participants' attention, as well as the researchers', on more sensory aspects of their interactions with their everyday items, and to be attentive to stains, marks and smells that may evoke memories of connections to people, places or events (Woodward, 2020).

Many of the sensory aspects of these interactions may have been lost without this material interaction during the encounter. There were comments regarding the hygiene or lack thereof of the hand wraps which were described as they were being put on as 'still moist' from a previous training session. Utterances like this are examples of the

noticing of the senses that the kit bag method invokes, which leads to articulations of the participants' embodied experience in the setting. Similar conversations about how and when the items were washed or replaced often led to confessions regarding the wraps only being washed when it was 'not socially acceptable to stink this bad'. Rosa pointed out that the cracks in her white sparring gloves had 'blood and stuff' in them as she never wiped them. This embodied detail was elicited by the physical interaction with the sparring glove towards the end of the encounter whilst discussing her relationship with bodily fluids, both her own and those of others. She recalled intentionally blowing her nose on a sparring partner's white t-shirt as she was angry that 'they'd punched me after a bell and that was what made my nose bleed'. This was in contrast to her relationship with the same bodily fluids outside the gym, explaining 'I've got nieces and nephews, and if they've got like snot, or a bogey or something I'm like, can't do it, no'. Rosa acknowledged that the performance of her boxer self required a different level of tolerance for the sharing of bodily fluids than that of her non-boxer persona.

Rosa also detailed how the sound of the gloves changes when they are warm. The interactive nature of the kit bag encounter facilitated a shared experience between Rosa and the researcher which focussed our auditory attention on the embodied action of hitting an object with cold, hard gloves versus warm, soft gloves.

I need to warm them up for them to sound nice...when you first put them on, if I hit a bag [Rosa walks over to bag and throws a big right hook], they sound alright whereas when you've got them warmed up a bit, and the leathers gone warm, and they've gone a bit softer, when you do pads, they sound a lot better.

The benefits of being in the boxing gym interacting materially with the kit during the encounter allowed Rosa to demonstrate the difference in sound when the glove was cold, versus when it was warm, by hitting a bag, inviting the researcher to listen to the sensorial experience being described. Conducting the kit bag encounters in the same physical space that the material items usually interact with allows for conversations to emerge that are relevant to that environment. However, Seema, whose encounter took place in her own home, away from the usual environment of active engagement with her kit, reported awareness of an internal mechanism linked to the adornment of her head-guard and gumshield, by saying 'I'm surprised by what I'm feeling right now. I've got this sort of energy in me, where I feel ready to go and spar'. Although the context may contribute to the participants' account of their lived experience, evidently the connections and physical responses were the same regardless of the context in this instance. This internal mechanism of senses, stimulated by the kit itself rather than the environment, highlighted the usefulness of this method of examining the mobility of items and their relevance to identity and meaning outside of the usual environment of active use. Moving the kit from its natural place of purposeful use did not diminish the embodied experience. Using a method which examines not just the material items contained within the bag in use, but also how these items are transported and stored, allows mobilities and portability to be examined, enriching the material exploration beyond the research setting.

## *Mobility and portability*

Space can be conceptualised as constructed out of social relations and as such should be considered as inseparable from them. The dynamic nature of social relations impacts the dynamic nature of space, which is tightly bound to time (Massey, 2007). The research field has often been perceived as a bounded space with the concept of mobility expressing a metaphoric bursting out of such bounded spaces (Coleman and Collins, 2020). By exploring the spaces that the participants' kit bag inhabits both at the participants' homes, in the gym and during the journey to and from these places, we can analyse beyond these bounded field sites and see how the bag, its contents and the journey it takes can serve as an original and unique site for social analysis with rich analytic potential.

There was a strong sense among many of the participants that the visibility of their kit at home served as a daily reminder of the centrality of boxing to their identity. Amy, a 49-year-old recreational boxer and qualified coach when talking about her wraps said:

(I) just hang them up, in my bedroom. And that's a nice reminder actually, that they're next to my bed...it's just nice to wake up and see wraps and my bag...boxing is what just gives me the most joy in life at the moment.

This visual stimulus in the participants' bedroom gave her meaning and purpose and connected her to the activity while away from the gym.

The bag in transit also became a literal vehicle for the expression of identity and a non-verbal communication tool which challenged gendered assumptions. Lisa, a 38-year-old competitive boxer explained, 'you carry your head guard strapped on your bag...so people will know that that's why I've got a black eye'. This symbolic gesture pointed to the fact that a female with a black eye would usually be considered a victim of domestic violence and the headguard deflected any questions that might be otherwise be asked of a woman in such circumstances. Ruby, a 39-year-old coach and retired boxer mentioned the visible headguard being used by way of explanation for leaving work:

my head guard is here attached to my bag...and at five o'clock I'm going. I used to say to people, 'boxing is my kids'...you'd let people leave the office if they said I have to pick my kids up from school...they'd understand that that's your boundary...boxing is my children. I don't have children, but I do have boxing. I felt that that wasn't really understood or respected.

The material object was used here both as an expression of identity and as justification for a need to move from one space to the next – transition from workspace to gym. The gendered boundary work that was being performed requires attention. The flexibility of the work/home boundary was seen by the participant as established for women with children but had to be negotiated and demarcated by her through the visibility of her boxing kit. Challenging current conceptualisations of space and place, such as the historically masculine space of the boxing gym requires us to challenge dominant forms of gender definitions and gender relations (Massey, 2007: 2).

Physical settings come into being with idealised users in mind. In boxing, this has historically been men, to the marginalisation of women. Precisely where the kit bag was kept

at the gym highlighted key aspects of gendered disparity in space availability, with Rosa explaining ‘everyone kind of had a space at the gym, so the boys had lockers, but I could never have a locker because all the boys kind of got changed where the lockers were’. The kit bag here, as a portal container, reveals how participants prepared for and adjusted to the expectations of the space. The boxing gym, as a traditionally male coded space, is not as easily aligned with the needs and preferences of female boxers as it is for men. The kit bag formed part of our participants’ strategy for managing this, to allow them to bring with them the tools and props to engage in the repair work that modified the space and the practices it affords to their own needs and preferences, but also move their preparation spaces around the gym in response to the male dominance of space and lockers. Female boxers would need to bring with them the items that allowed them to adapt to any inadequate changing facilities, unsuitable training or protective equipment designed for men, or other aspects of the masculinised space, and these items would be transported within the kit bag. Additional training kits, female hygiene products, medicines and female safety gear were all brought to the gym and taken back home afterwards. To invoke Mary Douglas (1966 [2003]), the kit bag supported moving matter in and out of place, in an attempt to reframe the gender scripting of the boxing environment for the duration of their training session. The kitbag then, as a portable container, can be understood as a sorting device, that is active in drawing and disrupting boundaries and categorisations, here of gender and sport (Bauer, 2020), as the very mobility of the kit bag supported identity performances in spaces developed around other – here masculine – performances of identity. This given, the kit bag encounters showed that these strategies do not fully compensate for the gendering of space. As Rosa – who had to change away from the lockers – explained, despite being one of the most decorated boxers participating in the research, she never felt like her needs as a female were catered for at her gym. The mobility of the kitbag and its contents in this instance could challenge boundaries, but not irradicate them.

## Conclusion

The kit bag method described in this article examines how employing material objects as tools of elicitation can encourage a more sensory exploration of participants’ entanglements with their everyday items (Rose, 2007). By providing an opportunity for individuals to notice the sensory aspects of their interactions with clothing and equipment and narrate their experiences, a deeper understanding of the importance of material items to identity and belonging can be explored (Atkinson, 2017). By focusing on what participants bring in and out of spaces, how they bring them and why, we can gain an understanding of what participants value, what they feel challenged by and how they work to align the practices and performances with the expectations they anticipate within a specific space (Bauer, 2020). By using data from the research on women boxers we explore how clothing and equipment act as active agents in the negotiation of identity and how they help participants narrate their transitions in and out of character (Delamont and Stephens, 2021). We also use data examples from our project to explore the sensory experiences of participants in concert with their everyday objects and consider how these objects can expose gender disparities in shared spaces (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998). We would encourage the use of everyday material



items as elicitation tools both as a standalone method and as an addition to ethnographic field observations. By encouraging a focus on our participants' sensory experiences, a richer exploration of and further insight into lived experiences can be developed.

We suggest this method can be used as a framework for research in any field where there are material items moved in and out of recurrent spaces. This study was focussed on the kit of female boxers in a training environment, but it could equally be extended to examine the kit and associated items in the competitive field or in other sports due to the frequent need for specific kit items for many sports and the embodied entanglement with the kit and the body. There are many occupations which require very specific items which are central to the role or the environment where the job takes place, be it paramedic, vet, construction worker, chef, teacher or lab technician. The kit bag method could be effectively employed to explicate the relationship between the individual and their work-specific items to develop an understanding of identity and belonging associated with their role through the material items that they use. As with this research project, witnessing participants as they interact with their job-specific kit, in the environment where it is used, could help to explore space and mobility, how the kit helps participants narrate into and out of character and further expand on the sensory experiences of sight, sound and smell.

This method has limitations, particularly with regard to the need for detailed ethical consideration. It is highly likely that other individuals will be in the vicinity when participants are actively engaging with their 'kit' in the natural environment for that activity. If recording equipment is being used to allow for iterative analysis of the data, as is recommended, the potential for unauthorised recordings of non-participants is evident. Certain environments will remain inaccessible due to safety issues or access constraints so kit bag encounters may have to take place away from the natural environment of engagement, limiting elicitation due to environmental-specific factors and necessitating a negotiated ethics approach.

To conclude, the kit bag method is a novel embodied sensorial elicitation method. It takes seriously the kit bag as a portable container used to support the adornment and preparation of the body and aligned practices for specific settings. What is put in, and taken out, of the kitbag is formative of social relations and their contestation. By conducting real-time observations of the use and application of the clothing and equipment contained within a boxer's kit bag we explored how these material objects contribute to the formation of identity and a sense of belonging, and made apparent underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted aspects of social experience. It connected our research to the embodied and sensorial nature of boxing through a different pathway to traditional ethnography, that, we suggest, provided additional value through the broadly structured and comparative encounters with multiple participants, and the demands of the method to elicit certain types of narrative articulation about the body, the objects and the associated sense-making practices. The method facilitated analysis of the narration in and out of character, the use and movement through spaces enabled by the kitbag and the affordances it offered in terms of negotiating social relations. The method demands a considered and iterative interpretative analytical strategy, but one that is sufficiently flexible to be applied in different settings and under different research designs. The kit bag method proved its value to us in better understanding women's gendered experiences of boxing and will, we hope, prove its value to others seeking deeper understandings of embodied experience across a range of social settings and empirical contexts.


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## Notes

1. Figures before 2015 were collected using a different metric so have not been included and post-2020 show a drop due to the COVID-19 pandemic so have been excluded.
2. England Boxing changed the dress code in 2020 to allow women to wear full skin covering including a Hijab. Until then, female boxers were bound by the same dress code as males which did not allow for shorts beyond the knee, or arm coverings.

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