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SPRING 2009 COLLOQUIUM SERIES

"Tough Love" in the Urban Boxing Gym: Hegemonic or Counter Hegemonic Discursive Practice?

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Thursday, April 30, 2009

3:00pm

Sociology Department, Suite 520.14T

This talk examines how a group of men understand and negotiate the social problems of postindustrial racial, class, and gender hierarchies. In a Brooklyn boxing gym, trainers coach amateur fighters both inside and outside the ring. In the ring trainers prepare amateurs for pugilistic competition and help them develop masculine identities. Outside the ring, trainers provide forms of social, psychological, and material support. As trainers engage these physical and social practices, they negotiate a discursive tension. When they work with amateur boxers, trainers draw upon discourses espousing individualism, equality of opportunity, and personal responsibility. And yet, when talking about their worldviews and motivations for their work, trainers utilize a different discourse, one that often critiques structural inequality and systematic anti-black racism. On the one hand, discourses advocating personal responsibility and self-sufficiency have been the backbone of a neoliberal politics that assumes equality of opportunity and that casts racial inequality as a consequence of personal failure. On the other hand, discourses critiquing social structural inequality manifest an opposite argument, namely that asymmetrical power relations, which dramatically shape the life chances of men of color by distancing them from the wage and consigning them to prison, are the consequence of flawed and pernicious social and economic policies. In this talk I ask: how can trainers' discursive practices articulate both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic claims?