ABSTRACT

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION AS A SOURCE OF MEANING AND EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF FITNESS BOXING PARTICIPANTS

by Kristen Welker

Research indicates that Americans of all ages are consistently failing to meet national recommendations for regular physical activity (CDC, 2007). Yet, regular participation in physical activity has been found to provide many physical and psychological benefits and to enhance individuals’ overall quality of life. Health promoters are interested in identifying physical activity types that promote physical activity initiation and maintenance. This qualitative study explored the experiences of those who participate in fitness boxing, an increasingly popular type of physical activity. Results indicate that fitness boxing is experienced by those who regularly participate in it as a source of community, physical improvement, uniqueness, emotional release, enjoyment and personal empowerment. Hence, those interested in promoting individuals’ regular physical activity participation may want to consider this physical activity type. Further, results provide insights into the structures and processes of physical activity programs that may facilitate regular participation.
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION AS A SOURCE OF MEANING AND EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF FITNESS BOXING PARTICIPANTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Science
Department of Kinesiology and Health
by
Kristen Welker
Miami University
Oxford, OH
2015

Advisor __________________________
Valeria Freysinger, PhD
Reader __________________________
Karly Geller, PhD
Reader __________________________
Susan Lipnickey, PhD, JD
## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One: Introduction and Review of Literature</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Benefits of Physical Activity Participation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Maintenance: Barriers and Psychological Benefits</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Physical Activity Maintenance</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Benefits of Physical Activity Maintenance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Participation and Quality of Life</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Participation and Empowerment</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitness Boxing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Methods</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Approach</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling and Recruitment of Participants</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring High Quality Qualitative Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Results</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Study Participants</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results: Research Question #1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results: Research Question #1: Theme 1: Fitness boxing is a means of emotional release.</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results: Research Question #1: Theme 2: Non-combat fitness boxing is different.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results: Research Question #1: Theme 3: Non-combat fitness boxing at the [Boxing Gym] is a good, effective form of exercise.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results: Research Question #1: Theme 4: Non-combat fitness boxing is a means of physical improvement.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Research Question #1: Theme 5: Non-combat fitness boxing at the [Boxing Gym] is a supportive and motivating social community.

Results: Research Question #1: Theme 6: Fitness boxing is enjoyable.

Results: Research Question #2

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Fitness boxing is empowering through proactive self-improvement.

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Sub-Theme #1: Mood improvement

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Sub-Theme #2: Enhanced self-confidence

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Sub-Theme #3: Physical weight loss

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Sub-Theme #4: Strength development

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 1: Sub-Theme #5: Improved social interactions

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 2: Fitness boxing is empowering because it challenges age and gender norms.

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 2: Sub-Theme #1: Age-related empowerment.

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 2: Sub-Theme #2: Gender-related empowerment.

Results: Research Question #2: Theme 2: Sub-Theme #3: A call for change in hegemonic notions of gender.

Summary

Chapter Four: Discussion

Implications for Practice

Implications for Future Research

References

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form
Appendix D: Background Information Form 77
Appendix E: Preliminary Sense of Problem 78
Appendix F: Analytic Memo 80
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Description of Study Participants</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1: Conceptual Map</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION AS A SOURCE OF MEANING AND
EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCES OF
FITNESS BOXING PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

Physical activity is seen as a critical component of an individual’s ability to carry on a healthy and active life. Caspersen, Powell and Christenson (1985) defined physical activity as “any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that results in energy expenditure” (p. 126). This implies physical activity is all-encompassing, including daily activities that require an energy expenditure, as well as physical fitness and participation in recreational and competitive sport. Because being active is believed to be an essential part of a healthy life, national recommendations for the amount of physical activity have been developed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2011a). Specifically, the CDC (2011a) recommends that adults participate in 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity every week. Moderate-intensity physical activity is characterized as any activity during which the heart rate is noticeably faster, but generally is performed at a pace in which an individual could still carry on a conversation. This includes walking briskly, mowing the lawn, participating in water aerobics, playing tennis, riding a bike on relatively flat terrain, and similar activities (CDC, 2011b). Vigorous aerobic activity is any activity during which the heart rate is increased substantially and an individual would have a difficult time carrying on a conversation due to fast and heavy breathing (CDC, 2011b). Swimming laps, running or jogging, biking on uneven terrain, playing basketball and comparable activities are considered to be vigorous (CDC, 2011b). The national recommendations also incorporate muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days each week. These activities should focus on all major muscle groups — legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms — and may include lifting weights, using resistance bands, and body-weight resistance activities (e.g., sit-ups, push-ups) (CDC, 2011b).

Research indicates that despite these recommendations, many adults worldwide still live predominantly sedentary lives. In fact, physical inactivity is the world’s fourth leading cause of death (World Health Organization (WHO), 2009). Approximately 31% of adults globally are physically inactive, and inactivity is more prevalent in high-income countries than low-income countries (Hallal et al., 2012). U.S. Americans are no exception to that trend, with less than 30% of adults engaging in the recommended amount of physical activity (United States Department of
Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2001). This high prevalence of physical inactivity in North America has contributed to nearly 17% of children ages 2-19 and 35% of adults being categorized as obese (CDC, 2013). According to data gathered in a 2007 national survey, nearly 25% of adults in the U.S. reported having participated in no leisure time physical activity in the last 30 days (CDC, 2007). This rate of leisure time physical inactivity may be a result of the recent shift to more sedentary occupations in the U.S. and the availability and accessibility of personal vehicles and public transportation. In addition to the increase in sedentary occupations, many leisure time activities require little to no movement, including sitting while driving and watching television at home (Owen, Healy, Howard & Dunstan, 2012). The transition of U.S. citizens to a more sedentary lifestyle is of significant concern when the benefits of physical activity are considered.

**Physical Benefits of Physical Activity Participation**

Physical activity is associated with a multitude of physical benefits. For example, regular participation in physical activity is associated with reported improvements in physical appearance or health (Ryan & Deci, 2007). More specifically, such participation is linked to decreased risk of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, overweight/obesity (Albright et al., 2000; Grundy et al., 1999), coronary heart problems (Manson et al., 2000), and numerous forms of cancer (Lee, 2003). The USDHSS (2001) found physical activity resulting in even a modest weight loss of 5-15% of total body weight in an overweight or obese person reduces the risk factors for some diseases, particularly heart disease. This modest weight loss also can lower blood pressure and blood sugar, as well as improve cholesterol levels. These physical benefits are not exclusive to an overweight/obese population, however, as individuals with chronic pain and illnesses also benefit from regular participation in physical activity, including individuals with arthritis (Gyurcsik, Brawley, Spink & Sessford, 2013), breast cancer (Rogers et al., 2011), and spinal cord injuries (Kawanishi & Greguol, 2013). While these populations demonstrate specific health improvements resulting from physical activity participation, health officials suggest that nearly all members of the global population can realize some of the many benefits associated with physical activity (WHO, 2009).

Given the substantial data supporting the physical benefits of regular participation in physical activity, there is emphasis among those concerned with issues of individual and community health, on promoting a more physically active society. Early theories of and research
on health behavior change, including the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986), the Transtheoretical Model (TTM; Prochaska et al., 1994), Health Belief Model (HBM; Rosenstock, 1974) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), provided insights into factors that should be considered when seeking to modify individuals’ physical activity participation. Similarities exist across these health behavior theories. For example, these theories and the research examining them each suggest the importance of social interaction or social support as a factor in influencing health behavior change/adoption. This is studied as subjective norm in TPB (Ajzen, 1991), environmental social norms in SCT (Bandura, 1986), social liberation within the stages of change under the TTM (Prochaska, et al., 1994), social cues to action in HBM (Rosenstock, 1974), and the basic psychological need of relatedness within SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

However, at the end of the 20th century, Dishman (2001) contended these theories and the research they led to focused predominantly on the initiation of physical activity rather than long-term behavior change and maintenance. While it is important to initiate physical activity, it is also essential to understand both the barriers and benefits associated with sustained physical activity adoption. Research that has explored these topics is presented next.

**Physical Activity Maintenance: Barriers and Psychological Benefits**

**Barriers to Physical Activity Maintenance.** Without proper intervention, nearly 50% of adults (on average) who begin a physical activity program will drop-out within six months (Dishman & Buckworth, 1996). Lack of physical activity maintenance can be a result of a variety of individual and environmental factors (Nigg, Borrelli, Maddock & Dishman, 2008). Environmental factors may include limited social support in the form of an unsupportive partner (Gauvin, Levesque & Richard, 2001), “poor family structure” (Nies, Vollman & Cook, 1998), and lack of access to public fitness facilities or an unsafe neighborhood that limit the ability to be active outdoors (Owen, Leslie, Salmon & Fotheringham, 2000). The time of year in which an individual begins his/her physical activity program also may influence adherence. High-stress times and holidays (Belisle, Roskies & Levesque, 1987), as well as major life events such as weddings, birthdays, or a death in the family (Marcus & Stanton, 1993; Marlatt & Gordon, 1985) may contribute to an individual reducing or discontinuing his/her physical activity. In addition to environmental influences, a variety of individual factors have been found to influence physical activity maintenance. Time constraints and feelings of incompetence are common barriers to
engaging in physical activity (Kim, 2004). Another significant barrier to physical activity maintenance is lack of enjoyment of the activity (Sallis, Prochaska, Taylor, Hill & Geraci, 1999; Stucky-Ropp & DiLorenzo, 1993).

**Psychological Benefits of Physical Activity Maintenance.** Just as it is important to understand the potential barriers to continued regular participation in physical activity, it is also important to be aware of the variety of psychological benefits of habitual physical activity participation as these may be important to the adoption and maintenance of regular physical activity. As previously discussed, substantial evidence exists supporting the numerous physical health benefits of sustained physical activity; however, positive psychological outcomes are also becoming increasingly clear. Some claim the psychological benefits of physical activity maintenance are not as well-understood as the physical benefits (Mackay & Neill, 2010) because psychological benefits of regular participation in physical activity are often excluded from standard measures. Still, more recent literature highlights positive psychological outcomes such as enhanced memory, learning, and concentration (Sattelmair & Ratley, 2009), reduced state anxiety (Mackay & Neill, 2010) and increased achievement, pride, self-esteem and mood (O'Dea, 2003). Habitual physical activity has been found to contribute to high psychological well-being (Fox, 1999), including feelings of self-competence (Mâsse, Nigg, Basen-Engquist & Atienza, 2011), enjoyment (Kimiecik, 2002; Titze, Stonegger & Owen, 2005) and a sense of personal empowerment (Blinde & Taub, 1999).

A specific example of the potential positive influence of regular physical activity participation on individuals’ psychological and physical health is provided by a study that examined the impact of physical activity participation on relieving symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chronic physical pain in refugees (Liedl, Müller, Morina, Karl, Denke & Knaevelsrud, 2011). Thirty-six individuals of refugee status were recruited from the Treatment Center for Torture Victims in Berlin, Germany, the Outpatient Clinic for Victims of Torture and War in Zurich, Switzerland, and through referral by local organizations, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists working with traumatized refugees and torture survivors. These participants were all diagnosed as experiencing PTSD and chronic pain and were put in one of three treatment groups in a study that lasted an average of nearly five months. Leidl and colleagues found daily physical activity of at least 20 minutes resulted not only in a reduction of the pain experienced by participants, but also in reduced feelings of anxiety and improved
developmental controllability and self-efficacy. Leidl et al. concluded that physical activity participation disrupted the common cycle of pain, fear, and expectations of adverse outcomes in an activity, the avoidance of that activity, and the resulting physical pain among those suffering from PTSD. The results of this study indicate physical activity participation as one possible solution for reducing the co-occurring symptoms of pain and anxiety, thus improving the psychological state and quality of life of individuals who are part of an at-risk population for poor health.

**Physical Activity Participation and Quality of Life**

*Quality of life* (QOL) is a holistic concept that refers to more than just physical well-being. QOL is multi-dimensional and typically can include physical well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being, access to housing, money, and transportation and engagement in leisure and education opportunities (Felce & Perry, 1995), among other dimensions of human life. While there is not one, universally agreed-upon definition of QOL, research has found that at least some dimensions of QOL do improve as a result of physical activity (Bize, Johnson & Plotnikoff, 2007). Further, some claim that this is especially true for older adult populations with chronic illness (Rejeski, Brawley & Shumaker, 1996). For example, improved health-related QOL, specifically, has been found among older adults diagnosed with cancer following their participation in physical activity (Courneya & Friedenreich, 1999). Moreover, based on their systematic review of studies examining the relationship between physical activity and health-related quality of life among healthy adults under the age of 65, Bize and colleagues (2007) also found a positive association between physical activity level and health-related quality of life, or individuals’ perceived health.

A study by LaForge and colleagues (LaForge, Prochaska, Velicer, Levesque & McHorney, 1999) used the *Stages of Change Model of health behavior change* (Prochaska et al., 1994) to examine the relationship between physical activity participation and self-perceived QOL. The Stages of Change model proposes health behavior change includes a pre-action stage (pre-contemplation, contemplation, and preparation) and an action stage (action and maintenance). LaForge and colleagues found a positive linear relationship between an individual’s stage of physical activity behavior and self-perceived quality of life, and a direct and positive linear relationship between an individual’s stage of physical activity behavior and his/her physical well-being and mental well-being. While there was no distinguishable evidence
of a mental health improvement for those individuals in the *pre-action stage*, individuals in the *action phase* showed measurable differences in three of the four mental health-related QOL assessments. This supports the literature citing improved quality of life as a benefit of regular physical activity participation and suggests that benefit is greater for those who *maintain* regular physical activity participation.

While evidence indicates strong associations between physical activity adoption/maintenance and quality of life, Marchinko and Clarke (2011) contended that this relationship requires a more in-depth understanding. That is, they advanced a broader approach should be used in which psychological constructs are evaluated for their impact on an individual’s mental, emotional, and social well-being as they pertain to overall quality of life. To address this issue, their study assessed how the use of a Wellness Planner booklet designed to aid mental health services in providing information regarding resource planning, goal setting, and crisis planning, influenced feelings of satisfaction with care, continuity of care, quality of life, and empowerment among individuals seeking mental health services. Forty study participants (95%) reported using all parts of the Wellness Planner and overall these participants viewed the booklet positively. The researchers also found a strong positive correlation between quality of life domains and empowerment. That is, participants who felt more empowered by the booklet also reported feeling more favorably about their psychological well-being, social well-being, and personal environments. While the data were correlational, the findings of this study suggest quality of life *may be* promoted and improved through the development of a sense of empowerment. At the least the data indicate a positive relationship between a sense of empowerment and some dimensions of QOL. The concept of empowerment therefore stands as one concept warranting further attention in relation to individuals’ physical activity participation and QOL.

**Physical Activity Participation and Empowerment**

Research indicates that a sense of personal empowerment occurs when individuals obtain the self-perceptions and skills necessary to gain mastery over their lives and to become proactive in improving their life situation (Blinde & Taub, 1999). Other conceptualizations of empowerment have also been proposed. Rappaport and Zimmerman (1981) referred to a “connection between a sense of personal competence and a willingness to take action” (as cited in Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison & Crean, 1997, p. 1042) and Rappaport (1981) defined
empowerment as “gaining control over one’s life” (p. 15). Staples described empowerment as “a process by which power is developed” (as cited in Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison & Crean, 1997, p. 1042). That is, empowerment has been conceptualized as a psychological phenomenon that involves an individual’s sense of control and command in life, thereby influencing his/her mental and emotional well-being through a sense of increased autonomy and competence. Critical to empowerment are the constructs of self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, community activism, autonomy, optimism, and control of the future (Marchinko & Clarke, 2011).

Empowerment has also been studied frequently within the field of business management. In the work environment, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined empowerment as an intrinsic motivation manifested in the four cognitions of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. Thomas and Velthouse conducted their study in an occupational setting where meaning was the fit between an individual’s work role requirements and his/her personal beliefs, values and behaviors; competence referred to the individual’s self-efficacy to perform the work, that is, his/her belief in the ability to perform the work with ability and skill; self-determination was an individual’s choice in initiating and self-regulating actions; and impact was the degree to which an individual can influence the strategic, administrative, and operating outcomes in their work.

In occupational settings, personal evaluation of the experience of psychological empowerment is recognized as having a direct relationship with employee performance, job satisfaction, and commitment (Spreitzer, 1995). Quinn (2000) found empowered employees are more likely than those who do not feel empowered to take calculated risks. Bhatnagar (2012) demonstrated individuals who feel psychologically empowered are more likely to be engaged in their work and to show loyalty to their organization. Improvement in a sense of personal empowerment among employees within business settings may lead to reduced workplace stress, which influences job satisfaction. Indeed, a decade ago it was found that nearly 70% of corporations had initiated some form of empowerment training for their employees (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005), a tribute to empowerment’s importance for managers as a form of employee motivation. While this research has focused specifically on business work environments, other fields and areas of study also have examined issues of personal empowerment, specifically in the context of physical activity participation.

For example, a study conducted by Grimm (2012) applied information on empowering leadership and psychological empowerment in business to the field of athletics. Specifically,
Grimm examined the perceived empowerment of the coaches' leadership style and its effects on burnout levels in female team-sport college athletes. Results of this study indicated the more athletes rated their coach’s leadership style as empowering, the less burnout they experienced. Additionally, the more the athletes perceived empowerment, the less burnout they experienced. That is, female team sport college athletes whose coach had a more democratic leadership style (i.e., focusing on the development of interpersonal relationships) reported lower burnout while those athletes having coaches with a perceived empowering leadership style reported lower levels of burnout. This study was the first to measure coaches’ leadership style and its effects on burnout levels and psychological empowerment in athletes. Its results provide promise for future interdisciplinary research using constructs from business in the field of health and fitness.

A series of studies by Dionigi (Dionigi, 2002; Dionigi, Baker & Horton, 2011; Dionigi, Horton & Baker, 2013; Dionigi, Horton & Bellamy, 2011; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012) has explored empowerment in the context of leisure time physical activity. This work built on early research on leisure as a context for the empowerment of women (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Henderson, 1991; Shaw 1999; Wearing, 1988). Specifically, Dionigi and colleagues have studied older adults’ participation in and experiences of competitive sport and found that older adults may gain a sense of personal empowerment through participation in elite, competitive sport. This seems to be especially true for generations of older women whose opportunities for competitive sport participation were limited in their childhood and youth (Dionigi, 2002). However, Dionigi also recognized that many in current generations of older women do not have the background, opportunities, abilities, or desire to compete in competitive sport. She noted that competitive sport is only one type of activity that may contribute to a sense of personal empowerment among older women, specifically, and older adults generally. Indeed other research has found a sense of personal empowerment may be developed through a number of forms of leisure activity. For example, Wearing (1984) studied the everyday activities and friendships of new mothers who resided in “suburbia” of a major Australian city. She found that these women’s friendships were engendered in shared leisure time and provided them with a context to both resist dominant ideologies of motherhood as well as gain a sense of personal empowerment. Similarly, Freysinger and Flannery (1992) in a study of midlife women found that leisure was both a practice of affiliation (a way to care for others/fulfill the expectations of being a wife and/or
mother) and agency (a space and way to express an independent, autonomous sense of self) - and thereby a source of personal empowerment.

Shaw (1999; 2006) is one scholar who has written extensively about the empowerment that is engendered through leisure engagements and based on Foucault’s scholarship (1977), argues that empowerment is related to the concept of resistance. According to Shaw, resistance can be viewed as “an act or series of actions that enhance freedom of choice and personal control” (p. 534). Leisure as resistance implies leisure can act as a means for challenging the way power is developed and exercised, making leisure “a form of political practice” (Shaw, 2001, p. 186). One way leisure is resistance is when the leisure in which one engages does not conform to the beliefs of appropriate and acceptable leisure practices as set forth by dominant societal groups based on markers of identity such as age, gender, able-bodiedness, race, sexual orientation, and social class. That is, socially constructed beliefs of appropriate class- or gender-related forms of leisure can be challenged by individuals as they participate in activities which deviate from the perceived social norm. Specific to female athletes, Krane (2001) argued that these women must walk a fine line of femininity and balance the empowering nature of athletic participation and the disempowering nature of conforming to acceptable female behavior and appearance.

One way females have been found to resist hegemonic notions of femininity and gain a sense of empowerment is through Harley motorcycling. Roster (2007) studied a group of female Harley riders’ experiences with motorcycling, the factors that facilitated their participation with motorcycling, and the personal and social consequences that resulted from their participation in a leisure activity steeped in machismo culture. These women felt empowerment through feelings of self-renewal, claiming a right to personal leisure space and space within the leisure community of Harley riders, the development of new skills and knowledge, and resisting what they saw as limiting social stereotypes of women and women bikers. In another context, Berbary (2014) studied sorority life on a Southern U.S. university campus and found that the leisure of this sorority was a context for both accommodation (conformity) and resistance (challenging) to hegemonic notions of gender. That is, various forms of leisure are ways individuals both enact and negotiate, and resist and transform, gender.

A study of female collegiate athletes conducted by Blinde, Taub and Han (1993) also illustrates Shaw’s contention. Blinde and colleagues defined empowerment as “the experience of
feeling personally strengthened, encouraged and inspired to take action through connection in a relationship” (p. 504). These authors found that collegiate female athletes described their development of empowerment through sport as resulting in body competence, a perception of a competent self, and a proactive approach to life. Recent research on the competitive sport participation of girls and women support Blinde et al.’s early findings.

Empowerment also has been studied in women recovering from sexual assault who proactively equipped themselves with the appropriate self-defense skills for such a situation. Women often are provided self-defense training to enhance their feelings of personal security and confidence in their ability to defend themselves in cases of assault - that is, to feel and be more empowered. Self-defense training emphasizes a certain set of skills which enable women to approach specific prospective situations (Weitlauf, Smith & Cervone, 2000). Weitlauf et al. found a significant relationship between self-defense training and task-related self-efficacy. Participants in their study viewed themselves as better able to recognize situations of danger, control their emotions in the event of an attack, and physically defend themselves upon completion of the training than they did prior to self-defense training.

Empowerment is also an increasing topic of interest among those who study individuals with physical disabilities. Blinde and Taub (1999), for example, studied 28 male college students with varying degrees of physical disabilities. These individuals previously believed themselves to be incapable of being physically active, and felt socially incompetent as a result. However, when introduced to physical activity appropriate for their abilities, these men each reported feeling empowered and renewed in their sense of belonging within the larger able-bodied community. Participants indicated change within their perception of self, including an increased sense of self-confidence. The men reported that this increased confidence carried forward to settings outside of physical activity, and provided them with a “better outlook on life” (p. 189).

Pensgaard and Sorensen (2002) also studied sport participation and empowerment for individuals with physical disabilities. Their model of empowerment in the sport context includes three levels of empowerment: individual, group, and societal. Each level of empowerment was moderated by gender, the type of disability the participant had, and the age of disability onset - though each level of empowerment was mediated by separate factors. At the individual level, participants’ feelings of empowerment were mediated by goal orientations, self-identity and self-efficacy. At the group level of empowerment, moderators included motivation climate, group
identity, and collective efficacy. The societal level of empowerment was mediated by political efficacy and cultural context. These results were similar to those of Blinde and Taub (1999) at the individual level and provided new insights into the factors that mediate empowerment at the group and societal levels.

Kleiber and colleagues have also studied the meanings of leisure-time activity, including physical activity for individuals with physically disabilities (Brasile, Kleiber & Harnisch, 1991; Kleiber, Brock, Lee, Dattilo & Caldwell, 1995; Kleiber, Reel & Hutchinson, 2008; Wilhite & Kleiber, 1992). In their study of sport participation among both disabled and able-bodied athletes, for example, Brasile and colleagues (1991) found many similarities in both groups in incentives to participate in sport, with reasons including “I like the particular challenges it provides”, “It gives me a chance to be with friends”, “It offers opportunities to travel” and “It offers me the opportunity to make new acquaintances”, among other reasons. Kleiber also studied leisure as a means for coping with negative life events such as illness or spinal cord injury, and found that leisure helped individuals deal with negative life events by being a way to cope with stress, set new directions, and/or identify with pre-negative life event selves. In other words, leisure was a way to (re-)gain a sense of personal empowerment (Kleiber, Hutchinson & Williams, 2002).

In summary, engagement in physical activity may facilitate the development of a sense of personal empowerment. However, physical activity types vary greatly on their duration, setting, group involvement, commitment level and intensity. Some activities are individual (e.g., running) while others are group-oriented (e.g., fitness classes). There are activities that are relatively low in physical intensity (e.g., walking) and those which require maximal physical effort (e.g. sprinting). For each type of physical activity, there are benefits to be had if participants are able to achieve recommended amounts of participation. However, if there are particular types of leisure time physical activity that are better suited for developing a sense of personal empowerment, and the structure and processes of participation in such activity, is little explored. Hence, different types of such activity warrant examination.

Dionigi (2002), for example, as well as the research just discussed, suggest that a variety of leisure activities (i.e., not just organized team sport) have the potential to provide a context for the development of a sense of empowerment. At the same time, Dolan (2009) maintains that participation in group fitness classes (that is, structured or organized activity) is not only
associated with an increased sense of personal empowerment but also a greater sense of accountability and consistency for participants. That is, individuals who develop a high perception of physical activity empowerment may provide insight into how health educators may help individuals develop and maintain a regular physically active lifestyle.

Blinde and Taub (1999) and Blinde, Taub, and Han (1993) found those activities that provide a sense of belonging within a community developed a sense of empowerment among participants (see also Hutchinson, Yarnal, Sanford-Son, & Kerstetter, 2008; Wearing, 1984). Weitlauf and colleagues’ (2000) study of self-defense training found that being able to physically defend oneself aids in the development of a sense of personal empowerment. Additionally, Shaw (2006) argued that personal empowerment is realized through resistance, that is, through participation in activities that challenge societal norms of gender- (and age, class, race, etc.) appropriate forms of physical activity and fitness. In other words, participating in “non-traditional” forms of physical activity and fitness may provide an opportunity for the development of sense of personal empowerment.

Given that a sense of personal empowerment may be developed through physical activity, sport, and leisure participation, and that a sense of personal empowerment has a positive influence on an individual’s sense of well-being and overall quality of life among a variety of populations, one area for further examination lies in particular types of sport or physical activity participation that may develop psychological empowerment for participants. In this study, the particular type of physical activity of interest is fitness boxing.

**Fitness Boxing**

The research reviewed above suggests that physical activity types that are competitive (e.g., elite sport) but also those that are recreational (i.e., non-competitive sport), occur as a group, resist societal norms for “appropriate” physical activity, and/or are rooted in instilling a sense of security and confidence (e.g., self-defense) may be best suited for promoting the development of empowerment. One such activity that fits these criteria and is relatively unexplored is fitness boxing. Fitness boxing is a type of physical activity that has gained recent popularity. Hence, this type of physical activity should be examined as a context for the development of a sense of personal empowerment, and ultimately as one type of physical activity which may improve participants’ multi-dimensional quality of life.
Fitness boxing is sometimes equated with self-defense training but actually differs from self-defense training in two notable ways. The first is in typical energy expenditure, which is slightly lower in self-defense than in fitness boxing (Bellinger & Gibson, 1997; Glass, Reeg & Bierma, 2002). A second difference lies in fitness boxing maintaining an approach that is focused on pro-actively taking control of one’s life situation versus the reactive nature of self-defense. Self-defense implies preparation for a dangerous situation, whereas fitness boxing is rooted in the sport of boxing and does not place emphasis on such circumstances (McCaughey, 1997). Fitness boxing encourages participants to become empowered to seek opportunities to express their power in a literal and figurative sense, without educating participants on coping with environmental dangers. Empowerment may develop in a manner similar to self-defense training, but there is no evidence to suggest that fitness boxing and self-defense training share similar physical and psychological outcomes for participants.

Fitness boxing, sometimes referred to as “boxercise” (Mackay & Neill, 2010), is organized group fitness including traditional boxing maneuvers (e.g., punches, kicks, defensive moves) on hanging bags, while wearing hand wraps and gloves. Typical classes are 60 minutes in length and incorporate a variety of body-weight exercises in addition to simulated boxing rounds. Kravitz, Greene, Burkett and Wongsathikun (2003) found fitness boxing may be performed at an intensity high enough to improve cardiovascular fitness. Bellinger and Gibson (1997) determined a typical 60 minute non-contact boxing training session had a similar energy expenditure to that of a person running 9 km/hr (approximately 5.6 mph) on the treadmill for the same amount of time. These findings support the belief that fitness boxing is a form of vigorous physical activity that has potential health benefits for participants. Indeed a study by Combs and colleagues (2011) found fitness boxing increased QOL in individuals with Parkinson’s disease following 12 weeks of training. Fitness boxing may also serve as a form of resistance against socially accepted physical activity types and provide both positive physical and psychological outcomes as a result. Given the limited previous research on this activity type, the study reported here was undertaken to explore these issues.

**Research Purpose and Research Questions**

The research purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of individuals’ perceptions of a particular form of leisure time physical activity, non-combat fitness boxing, in relation to the health-related physical and psychological outcomes experienced. That is, this
study explored the meanings of non-combat fitness boxing for regular participants. The aims of this study were both descriptive and interpretive (Schram, 2006). The aim was descriptive because it sought “to document and describe what is happening” (p. 30) in a non-combat fitness boxing setting. This study also had interpretive aims in that it sought to “investigate important categories of meaning and to understand how the particular context in which participants act influences their behavior and actions” (p. 32). That is, this study sought to understand the meanings of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in it as well as how these individuals’ experiences of non-combat fitness boxing related to their adoption and maintenance of this as a physical activity in which they regularly participated. Specifically, two research questions guided this investigation:

**Research Question 1:** What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity?

**Research Question 2:** How do individuals who regularly participate in fitness boxing perceive fitness boxing in relation to a sense of personal empowerment?
Chapter 2

Methods

As noted above, this study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of how individuals come to engage in physical activity (specifically, non-combat fitness boxing) on a regular and sustained basis - and how regular participation in physical activity may contribute to individual health-related physical and psychological outcomes, including a sense of personal empowerment. To explore this issue a qualitative study of individuals who regularly participate in non-combat fitness boxing was conducted. The qualitative methods of this study are described below.

Research Approach

This study borrowed from the phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological researchers seek to investigate “the meaning of the lived experience of a small group of people from the standpoint of a concept of phenomenon” (Schram, 2006, p. 98). Phenomenological studies should provide a better understanding of an individual’s experience(s) and provide the “essence” of a shared experience or phenomenon, and these goals are reflected in the research questions used. There are several assumptions within the phenomenological framework. Schram (2006) states these basic assumptions to be: (1) human behavior occurs and is understandable only in the context of relationships to things, people, events, and situations; (2) perceptions present us with the evidence of the world, not as the world is thought to be but as it is lived; (3) the reality of anything is not “out there” in an objective or detached sense but is tied to one’s consciousness of it; (4) language is the central medium through which meaning is constructed and conveyed; and (5) it is possible to understand and convey the “essence” or central underlying meaning, or a particular concept or phenomenon as experienced by a number of individuals.

Sampling and Recruitment of Study Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit study participants. Purposeful sampling, according to Mason (1997) is a form of strategic sampling in which the sample will help provide data, which is needed to address the research question. The sample must relate in a meaningful way to the universe in which the researcher is interested (Mason, 2002). That is, unlike the representative sampling that is often undertaken in quantitative research to allow for generalization of study results to a larger population, generalizing results to a larger population is
often not the intent of qualitative research. Rather, providing a thick, rich description of a particular social phenomenon from the perspective of those who have first-hand experience of that phenomenon is. Study participants were also to some extent a convenience sample (Mason, 1997) in that they were non-combat fitness boxing participants to whom the researcher had access.

Adult participants (18 years or older) were recruited from Boxing Club, a local fitness boxing gym. Participants were recruited who varied in age, gender, and previous physical activity participation for maximal variation, that is, to ensure a wide range of perspectives. Selection criteria included that each participant for this inquiry was a member of the fitness boxing gym and had participated in this activity for at least four weeks. Four weeks of participation was determined to be an appropriate length of time for participants to begin experiencing any potential outcomes. Also, four weeks aligned with the club’s monthly billing structure, and indicated participants continued their participation for longer than the initial month of membership.

Participants were recruited through flyers displayed at the physical location of the fitness boxing gym in addition to the club’s official Facebook page (see Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer). The recruitment flyer provided information on the researcher’s interest in talking to fitness boxing participants about their fitness boxing experiences and her need for volunteers to be interviewed. Selection criteria were included on the recruitment flyers and confirmed prior to beginning the interview. The recruitment flyer also provided information on how to contact the researcher if someone wanted more information and/or was willing to volunteer. In addition to the use of recruitment flyers, announcements were made at the end of several fitness boxing classes during the beginning weeks of the study. In total, 11 people provided contact information, and nine participated with interviews. Two people did not complete the interview process; one moved away from Ohio and the other had to travel to be with family for an extended period of time.

The recruitment flyer stated that if an individual was willing to participate in an interview, s/he would be reimbursed for her/his participation in the form of a 20% discount at the Boxing Club on-site shop. This benefit was provided to all participants who arrived for their scheduled interview, regardless of completion of or information provided during the interview.
Following the tenets of the constant comparison method of data generation and analysis (Creswell, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), data analysis is an iterative and on-going process that begins with data collection (i.e., conducting the interviews). Hence, participants were recruited and interviewed until when conducting the 9th interview when no new information was provided and it was determined that theoretical saturation had been achieved. Theoretical saturation occurs when the data stop providing new information about the social process under investigation and an explanation can be provided for what is going on (Sandelowski, 1995).

**Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview**

Semi-structured in-person qualitative interviews were conducted to examine this study’s research questions. According to Glesne (1999), semi-structured interviews are those where a set of pre-determined questions exist, however questions may come up during the course of the interview and may enhance or replace pre-established questions. The drafting of questions before the interview allows for some standardization and comparability across interviews, while providing the interviewer with flexibility in the order and/or way in which questions are asked (Shank, 2006). The semi-structured nature of the interview guide helps the interviewer stray from asking any leading questions, or questions that guide the interviewee toward giving the answer the interviewer wants (Shank, 2006, p. 50). It is still possible for leading questions to be asked in a semi-structured interview, but Shank (2006) argues these questions are less likely to occur in unstructured and semi-structured interviews than in structured interviews.

The Interview Guide consisted of seven guiding questions that asked study participants about their previous and current participation in leisure-time physical activity generally; how they came to be involved in fitness boxing, specifically; any positive or negative physical or psychological outcomes experienced through fitness boxing participation, and their experiences of empowerment and physical activity as a source of empowerment (see Appendix B: Interview Guide). Specifically, interviews began with a *grand tour* question (Spradley, 2002) that asked study participants to talk about their experiences with physical activity, both previously and currently. Grand tour questions ask the interviewee to give the interviewer a “tour” through a place, time period, series of events or activities, or group of people or things (Glesne, 1999). Following the grand tour questions, guiding and follow-up/probing questions were asked regarding participation with fitness boxing specifically, and any positive and negative physical and psychological outcomes fitness boxing participants have experienced, and if and how those
outcomes have added meaning and value to their lives. Following a discussion of the physical and psychological outcomes participants experienced through fitness boxing, a definition of empowerment was provided and a discussion exploring whether participants believe their participation in fitness boxing was empowering for them in any way, and if so, how (and if not, why not) it occurred. Interview questions were constructed/worded to minimize opportunity for leading the interviewees’ responses in a particular direction. During the interview process, the researcher attempted to limit the use of leading questions (Mason, 1997). Further, the Interview Guide was piloted in 2 practice interviews and based on this process, a few of the questions were modified for clarity.

**Procedures**

Once a potential study participant was identified, further information on the study was provided. Participants were contacted either in-person or via phone using the phone number provided on the study sign-up sheet at Boxing Gym to schedule a convenient interview time. All interviews were conducted in person in the office at the local fitness boxing gym. Before questioning, participants were instructed that they could waive their decision to participate at any time during or after the interview, without penalty or loss of benefit, and each participant was provided with an informed consent document to be completed and signed (see Appendix C: Informed Consent Form). Study participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential and that their interview data would be grouped and used anonymously. After providing consent to participate with the study, participants were each given a background information sheet (see Appendix D: Background Information Form) and assigned a study ID. This 4-digit ID number corresponded with the last four (4) digits of their 11-digit barcode number located on the back of the fitness boxing gym membership card, or the final four digits of their phone number if the participant did not have their membership card available. The study ID was recorded on the cover sheet of the Informed Consent form and was the only identifier on any printed material.

The background information form asked participants to self-report on their sex, race, age, weight, highest level of education completed, occupation, marital status, current and previous physical activity experience and current and previous fitness boxing experience. Participants were informed that any information they did not wish to include may be excluded without penalty or loss of compensation. Study ID numbers were included on this form.
After gaining informed consent and individual background information, the semi-structured interview began. All interviews were recorded using a portable audio recording device. As described previously, an Interview Guide was used (see Appendix B: Interview Guide). This served as a guide only; that is, each interview was conducted as a “conversation with a purpose” (Mason, 1997), an interactive process where study participants’ insights and responses served to direct the flow of the interview and the researcher’s follow-up and probing questions. Interviews ended when all questions on the Interview Guide were addressed and it appeared that the interviewee had no more to say. At that point, study participants were asked if there was anything else they could tell the researcher about their experiences of participating fitness boxing or empowerment through fitness boxing that they had not had a chance to say that would help the researcher better understand their experiences. Most interviewees had nothing more to add and the interview ended. Recruitment flyers stated that interviews would last approximately 30 minutes; however, the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted did not have a set time limit or length requirement. As recommended by Shank (2006), it is important to allow for interviews to have their own natural length. Interviews ranged from 10 to 26 minutes with most averaging a little under 19 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis by the researcher.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis consists of four common phases: defining the analysis to be used; classifying the data; making connections across classes of data; and presenting the results of the analysis (Shank, 2006). The analysis in this study was aligned with qualitative inquiry, which acknowledges that the researcher matters in the data generating process, embraces new ways of looking at the world and seeks out deeper meaning and understanding beyond generalization of results (Shank, 2006). The researcher in this study shares connections to the phenomenon of interest (i.e., she participates in non-combat fitness boxing at Boxing Club) and therefore was an integral part in the data generation process as participants may have experienced feelings of relatability and heightened comfort levels in discussing their experiences.

In line with recommendations from Glesne (1999), data analysis was done simultaneously with data collection, with each interview transcribed within just days of the interview taking place, allowing the researcher to mold the study as it was happening. The verbatim transcriptions were first then read line by line and then analyzed for any meaningful
quotations and themes through a process of coding. Coding helps immerse the researcher in the data and allow for a discovery of concepts and what each has to offer (Glesne, 1999). The concepts which emerged resulted in a framework of patterns and relationships among the data. After transcriptions are completed, participants were offered the opportunity to view their transcriptions, allowing for verification and insight from the participant.

Quotations which elaborate on a theme were noted. It is the responsibility of the researcher to interpret participant responses for significance within the study and which data should be given attention by the researcher in the analysis process (Shank, 2006). All analysis was checked for validity (i.e., the results are plausible, credible, trustworthy, and defensible; Johnson, 1997) by the researcher’s advisor to ensure trust and credibility in the analysis. This additional check also assists in eliminating researcher bias and ensuring quality of the analysis.

Visual graphics and quotation analysis are used in final data presentation. Common methods of visual representation include matrices, graphs, flowcharts, and other visual graphics which can be used to assist in making meaning of data, each having a variety of benefits in displaying data (Glesne, 1999). The researcher is an integral part of the data generation and analysis process, and it is up to the researcher to select and present the visual representation of the data which best suits the data.

Because of the familiarity of the researcher with the participants and phenomenon of interest of this study, several strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, an effort was made to “make the familiar strange” (Schram, 2006). This was done through critical self-reflection (what Schram, 2006, refers to as a “preliminary sense of problem”; see Appendix E: Preliminary Sense of Problem), analytic memoing (Schram, 2006; see Appendix F: Analytic Memo), and the researcher “bracketing” her beliefs and assumptions about fitness boxing participation throughout the research process. Further, the researcher’s adviser served as a “friendly critic” in the process of conceptualizing this study’s research questions, constructing the Interview Guide, and conducting and analyzing the interviews.

**Ensuring High Quality Qualitative Research**

In conducting high trustworthy qualitative research it is important to practice *reflexivity*. This is a process of acknowledging and critically reflecting on how the researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence one another (Glesne, 1999). Schram (2006) notes that assumptions are invariably present throughout the inquiry process and
these assumptions should be examined proactively before beginning the research process. There are several ways to practice reflexivity that were undertaken in this study. For example, in conceptualizing the research purpose and questions of this study, the beliefs and assumptions the researcher had about the topic of the study were recognized, written about, and shared with the researcher’s thesis advisor (see Appendix E: Preliminary Sense of Problem and Appendix F: Analytic Memo). In the development of the Interview Guide (see Appendix B: Interview Guide), the researcher maintained a heightened awareness of her assumptions and constructed the wording of interview questions with her assumptions in mind and with the feedback of a “peer critic” (her advisor). For example, initially the Interview Guide was drafted to begin with a discussion of empowerment, but after analyzing her assumptions (e.g., the researcher’s assumption that empowerment will occur through fitness boxing participation based on her personal experience of fitness boxing), and getting critical feedback from her thesis advisor, the researcher determined it was more appropriate to begin the interview with exploring interviewees’ experiences and stories - their “meaning-making” - of their fitness boxing participation and end the interview with the topic of empowerment (if needed). Through consciously attending to researcher bias, a potential threat to interpretive validity, or the accuracy of the interpretation of the meaning of participants’ experiences, was addressed (Johnson, 1997). In addition, interviews were conducted as a “conversation with a purpose” (Mason, 2002). That is, the researcher attempted to ask follow-up and probing questions, questions that asked the interviewee to “tell me more” and “what else” (Glesne, 1999). Such questions are used in the interview process to extend the conversation and enable the interviewee to provide additional explanation, clarification, description, and evaluation. It is another strategy used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data generated in qualitative studies. Further, by digitally-recording the interviews, transcribing them verbatim, and providing the words of the study participants as evidence, the interpretive validity was also enhanced (Johnson, 1997).

The selection of participants for this study also followed standard qualitative practice. Through the process of *purposive sampling* (Mason, 1997), the researcher recruited participants who could provide meaningful insight into the social phenomena of interest - the experience of participating in fitness boxing. That said, time constraints did not allow for *negative case sampling*. Negative case sampling is a process in which the researcher “locates and examines cases that disconfirm their expectations and tentative explanations” (Johnson, 1997, p. 161). The
use of negative case sampling helps eliminate researcher bias and provides an alternative viewpoint for consideration. However, another qualitative research strategy, data saturation, was employed. This strategy involves continuing to interview additional participants until there are no longer new responses to add (Schram, 2006).

Finally, as noted, the researcher’s adviser served as a “friendly critic” in the process of conceptualizing this study’s research questions, constructing the Interview Guide, and conducting and analyzing the interviews - that is, the strategy of investigator triangulation was used (Johnson, 1997). Investigator triangulation involves observers outside of the primary investigator reviewing and analyzing the data. This process of cross-checking enhances the credibility and defensibility of the data and data analyses (Johnson, 1997).
Chapter 3
Results

This study asked the questions, “What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity?” and “How do individuals who regularly participate in fitness boxing perceive fitness boxing in relation to a sense of personal empowerment?” Analysis of the two research questions resulted in a number of themes and sub-themes. A conceptual map (see Figure 1) illustrates the relationships among these themes and sub-themes. Before discussing this conceptual map, the themes and sub-themes of each research question are explained and evidence of them provided. However, first, a description of study participants is provided.

Description of Study Participants

As previously noted, individuals recruited to participate in this study were members of Boxing Club, a fitness boxing club in southwestern Ohio. A total of 9 individuals participated in this study. Four were male and five were female. All were Caucasian. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 63 years (x=39.1 years). At the time of the study, each participant had been a member of Boxing Club for over one year, with an average membership of 1.5 years (see Table 1: Description of Study Participants). A further description of each participant is provided after Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Study Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Interviewee #1.** Interviewee #1 self-identified as a Caucasian, married, 63-year old male. He reported currently weighing 215lbs after recently losing 40lbs. He reported having a Master’s degree and currently working as a physical education teacher at a juvenile correctional high school. He viewed himself as previously very active, participating in football, wrestling and track during his time in high school and college. Specific to fitness boxing, he indicated he has been participating in this particular type of physical activity for one year and currently participates in three fitness boxing classes each week at [Boxing Gym].

**Interviewee #2.** Interviewee #2 self-identified as a Caucasian, unmarried, 21-year old female. She reported currently working part-time while studying for her bachelor’s degree. She reported that she was previously very active and had opportunities to play soccer at an NCAA Division 1 university, but had to stop playing due to an injury. She indicated that she continues to exercise at a local gym and has been participating in fitness boxing for at least one year, taking fitness boxing classes at [Boxing Gym] four times per week on average.

**Interviewee #3.** Interviewee #3 self-identified as a Caucasian, married, 56-year old male. He reported currently working as an engineer and having a Master’s degree. He reported a history of being active and participating in recreational sports through high school and college. He described previous experiences with kickboxing through the fitness center at his work, and has been at member at [Boxing Gym] for one year. He reported a variety of health benefits from his participation in fitness boxing, including weight loss and better controlled blood pressure.

**Interviewee #4.** Interviewee #4 self-identified as a Caucasian, unmarried, 30-year old female. She reports working as a school counselor and having a Master’s degree. While she viewed herself as inactive through college, she now participates in a variety of high-intensity physical activity types in addition to fitness boxing. She has been a member at [Boxing Gym] for three years.

**Interviewee #5.** Interviewee #5 self-identified as a Caucasian, unmarried, 20-year old male. He reported currently studying at a 2-year college while working as a manager and trainer at [Boxing Gym]. He reported previously playing baseball in high school until an injury prevented him from continuing to play. Following rehabilitation, he started participating with fitness boxing at [Boxing Gym]. He has been a member for two years and reported losing 60 pounds. He currently participates in class twice weekly in addition to acting as an instructor for 5-6 classes each week.
Interviewee #6. Interviewee #6 self-identified as a Caucasian, married, 52-year old male. He reported having his bachelor’s degree and currently working as an engineer. He indicated his status as an Air Force veteran and has recently lost 40 pounds. He reported being previously active through his military service and through sport participation. He currently participates in fitness boxing classes 5-6 times each week in addition to daily walking on the treadmill and with co-workers at lunch. He and his wife have both been members at [Boxing Gym] for 1 year.

Interviewee #7. Interviewee #7 self-identified a Caucasian, married, 57-year old female. She reported having a Bachelor’s degree and currently working as a medical technologist. She said she has always been physically active and has a history of boxing in her family as her dad and brothers both participated with boxing. She currently participates in a variety of physical activity types, including spinning and tennis, and has been a member at [Boxing Gym] for 2 years.

Interviewee #8. Interviewee #8 self-identified as a Caucasian, unmarried, 18-year old female. She reported currently studying at a 2-year college while working as a server. She reported that she is a long-time soccer player who had to stop due to four knee surgeries to repair injuries. She reported having gone through periods of participating in exercise at a more traditional gym, but said she struggled with the motivation to continue going. She has been a member at [Boxing Gym] for one and a half years and has lost 50 pounds, which she credits greatly to trainer support received at [Boxing Gym].

Interviewee #9. Interview #9 self-identified as a Caucasian, married, 35-year old female. She reported currently working as a stay-at-home mom and having her Master’s degree. She said she has a long history of physical activity and has worked at many gyms. She has been diagnosed with Lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease, which, in her case, attacks her kidneys. She had a kidney transplant at the age of 25 and says she has struggled with feeling strong for most of her life as a result of the Lupus. She credited fitness boxing with helping her manage her symptoms and providing feelings of strength she’s “never felt before.” She has been a member at [Boxing Gym] for one year and participates in classes 4-5 times each week.

Results: Research Question #1

This study asked the question “What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity?” with the intention of gaining a better understanding of what participation in fitness boxing may mean to those who participate
regularly and what outcomes these participants perceive from their regular participation. Based on analysis of the qualitative interview data, six themes were constructed for this first research question. One of the six themes has additional sub-themes. Each theme and sub-theme is explained below and evidence of each provided.

**Theme #1: Fitness boxing is a means of emotional release.** Each of the nine participants discussed how fitness boxing serves as a form of emotional release. Some participants focused more on the release of stress, while others focused more on how fitness boxing helps them to control anger by both releasing it and preventing it.

Stress can arise from a variety of situations, and participants in this study described different ways in which stress presented itself in their daily lives and how they felt fitness boxing is a reliable means for relieving daily stress. For example, Interviewee #9 described this when she mentioned how hitting the bag and “fighting it out” served as a stress reducer for her:

I9: … I really build a ton of stress, it’s just if I've had a bad day I feel 100 times better after I come in here. I mean, it's kinda cliché to say you come in here and 'fight it out' but it is. I mean it's just been a complete mental change for me.

Interviewee #7 also reported that hitting the bag was stress relieving. She described how her previous experiences with cycling were not as stress-relieving as the act of physically hitting something:

I7: … if you have a bad day at work and you come in here and hit that bag, oh my god the stress relief is phenomenal! I mean, I would go out and cycle before I found this place. Granted it was a stress relief because I loved being outside and cycling in nature, but when you know you can come in and hit something?! It's just so much better! It's like 'oh yea!'

Interviewee #1 described how fitness boxing for him has been a great way to vent and relieve stress. He too felt that hitting something is a good means for releasing stress, and emphasized that participating in fitness boxing provides a safe way to work out stress without the consequences that come with hitting things outside of boxing:

I1: It's a good avenue to vent. A safe avenue, ya' know. Sometimes you get so mad you want - feel like hittin' something other. Well, you *can* hit something here. You can release it. And you don't have to worry about any repercussions or any wrong moves or anything.
Anger is another emotion which came up in several interview discussions. Participants described how fitness boxing has helped them to control their feelings of anger. Interviewee #4 described how she often gets feelings of overwhelming anger and how fitness boxing has helped her to control those feelings:

I4: …but psychologically I just don't stress out as easily, I don't get angry at people. When I was working full time teaching and bartending, sometimes I would get angry to a point of like, just wanting to go off on somebody. …And, it would be really hard for me to hold that in, and now, I don't know if it's part of being more mature or a combination of being more mature and knowing that I can work it out later here, but I no longer get that like overwhelming angry feeling.

Interviewee #4 expanded upon this discussion of controlling her anger when she described how she no longer feels like she cannot control her anger at work. She credited her experiences with boxing with helping her to control her anger and better express her frustrations:

I4: I think it's helped me a lot professionally. I was always kind of like, people knew that I was kind of like a tough girl. That I had a temper and if I had a temper I maybe would need to remove myself for a minute. Not because I was like a threat or anything, but just because I needed to cool down so I could think and process through. Sometimes I think, the anger would like, block my ability to think rationally through a problem, and I don't think I really have that block as badly anymore. I feel like I can get emotional about something and still communicate as a professional pretty easily. So, I think it's helped me a lot in my job when sometimes - I feel very passionately about what I do, and when other people try and prevent kids from reaching their potential, or prevent me from helping them the best that I can I get, I take it personally. I get angry about it. And I think it's, I've been able to, not have to take that break. Just kind of explain my side a little bit better, and get through it.

Interviewee #5 had similar experiences to interviewee #4, as he described the anger he used to feel while playing video games. He explained how now that he participates with fitness boxing, he has discovered a safe means for releasing anger and aggression without suffering the consequences of hitting a person or a wall. He also described how he feels better through the release of endorphins through exercise while relieving his anger by hitting the bag:
I5: …I was playing a lot of video games and all that good stuff. And I wanted to, that's probably why I packed on a lot of weight, but I get really aggravated, it sounds stupid, get like 'gamer rage', and throwing controllers and hitting walls and stuff like that. And it's a lot better, it feels much better to hit the bag, better to hit a bag than to hit a person or a wall. So, it's definitely like you said it's kinda like, a little bit of therapy. And definitely relieves your stress. Uh, if I'm just feeling really ticked off I'll just put the gloves on and just slam the bag around and it'll be good to go, getting endorphins and everything out too while you're working out. Get that good feeling going, so, kinda helps.

**Theme #2: Non-combat fitness boxing is different.** Four of nine participants discussed their preference for fitness boxing because of its difference from “normal” gyms and types of exercise. Most of the participants in this study participate in other forms of physical activity, including more traditional-style gyms or physical activity types. Traditional gyms are those which contain basic cardio equipment (e.g., treadmills, ellipticals, bikes), free weights, and resistance machines. These gyms are often set up for the user to workout independently, versus in a class setting. While it is not unheard of for these gyms to have kickboxing classes and/or boxing equipment, most gyms do not offer classes similar to that of [Boxing Gym].

Interviewee #8 has experience with traditional types of gyms as well as experience with team sports. She talked about how she feels like she’s under-educated and unsure of what to do in traditional gym settings:

I8: I'm not very good at doing traditional gyms. I don't like to go in there any just lift weights and I don't know what I'm doing. I don't have any physical background, I don't have a nutrition background, I don't have any of it. So getting into a regular gym you're kinda blind. You're like 'I hope I'm doing the right stuff right now.'

Interviewee #2 talked about how boxing is traditionally viewed as a sport more than a form of fitness. She appreciates that fitness boxing is something different and non-traditional when she stated, “It’s different … Nobody really boxes all the time. Not for fitness at least.”

Interviewee #7 added to the conversation about fitness boxing as a different form of fitness. When asked why she started participating at [Boxing Gym], she talked about how her father used to box, and how she feels a sense of connection to her father by participating in
fitness boxing. She started participating with fitness boxing because she wanted to try boxing and because she wanted to try something different from her normal routine:

I7: Because I wanted to do something different. And my father used to box in high school and college. And I brought him up here a few times. He was in his 80s, he passed away in February, but anyway I brought him up here a few times and just to see him try to do the speed bag and everything it just kinda brought back a lot of memories. 'Cause we had a speed bag in my garage. In our family garage. And after work he'd come home and punch the speed bag so I thought 'hmm I think I'll try this'. Plus I was getting bored with my routine. I belong to the Y, and I used to cycle and do weights. And do the elliptical and all that stuff up there. And I just, it got stale. And I wanted to try something different. I always wanted to try boxing, and I just happened to drive by here and notice that there was a boxing place. So I thought 'oh what the hell I'm going to give it a try.'

Interviewee #9 talked about appreciating the fact that [Boxing Gym] classes include the ability to make contact with the bag versus just shadow boxing (punching the air) which occurs in most aerobic kickboxing classes. This difference is something she values and enjoys: “But like I said I always love the kickboxing type classes that I took. And this, just takes it to a completely new level. But I do like being able to hit something instead of, just the air like the aerobic classes do.”

Each interviewee discussed their perception of fitness boxing as a different form of physical activity for females. At the same time, for men, boxing participation is typically associated with the sport of combat boxing, not necessarily fitness boxing. Interviewee #5 discussed how he originally imagined boxing at [Boxing Gym] to be a combat sport, but how after taking part in one class he enjoyed that [Boxing Gym] was a non-combat form of boxing participation:

I5: I just really kinda walked in, I didn't know what it was all about. I thought it was gonna be like, ya' know, hit in the face (laughs) and everything. I was like 'uhh, I don't know if I'm about that life but it wound up being a really good thing. It was the fitness classes that we do now, and I really liked them a lot.

**Theme #3: Non-combat fitness boxing at the [Boxing Gym] is a good, effective form of exercise.** Five of nine participants interviewed described fitness boxing as a challenging, total-
body workout. These participants were interested in participating in physical activities at this level of intensity and were attracted to the challenge fitness boxing presented. Interviewee #9, a lifelong participant in sports and physical activity, describes fitness boxing as the hardest workout she’s ever had. She described how her experiences at [Boxing Gym] varied from her experiences with other gyms and competitive sport, and how she is motivated by the challenge fitness boxing presents:

I9: …before joining here, I was a member at [another gym] and then it changed to [another gym]. And I would take the group classes there, and, I guess I would just, I would watch the clock in those classes. And just, 'how much longer of this class do I have?' And I would rarely break a sweat. In here I'm sweating in like the first 5 minutes. And I am a sweater. Like, I sweat a ton. And I think leaving here just like completely drenched, it's just motivating that I felt like I did something and I worked, that I worked hard. … I’ve never had a workout at this level. Like even when I played sports, the conditioning was never like classes here.

Interviewee #7 also compared her current fitness boxing workouts to her previous experiences. Like interviewee #9, she has been a life-long exerciser and spent a significant amount of time with cycling. To her, fitness boxing provides a better total-body workout than cycling:

I7: I'd say with the fitness boxing it's an overall fitness of your whole body versus like cycling. Cycling you're just working out your legs, ya know, your thighs. But I find with fitness boxing, we kinda work, like I said your whole body. I mean everything's involved. So I feel like I'm getting a whole body workout versus just individual muscles.

**Theme #4: Non-combat fitness boxing is a means of physical improvement.** A variety of physical improvements were described by interviewees as resulting from their participation in fitness boxing, including strength gains and improved energy levels. However, weight loss was also perceived as physical improvement and was discussed most frequently by study participants.

Regarding improved energy, interviewee #3 describes how he feels motivated and energized each day because of his participation in fitness boxing classes. He describes how he
attends fitness boxing classes after work, which sets the stage for him to eat healthy, sleep well, and wake up energized to take on a new day:

I3: …if I wasn't doing this … I wouldn't have the energy and I wouldn't have the motivation I had before and I wouldn't feel as good going into my daily life as I do today. 'Cause today I feel good when I work out. And I go home and I eat, and I sleep and I wake up and go to work. So, I mean, it's good.

As noted the physical improvement most frequently discussed by interview participants was weight loss. Six of the nine participants described weight loss as the most important physical improvement they saw from their fitness boxing participation. Interviewee #2 discussed how, for her, fitness boxing led to significant weight loss within a short period of time after she started her participation: “… last year the first four months I lost 20 pounds in like, two and a half months."

Interviewee #5 described how his weight loss was initially unintended, but after realizing how effective fitness boxing was for him for weight loss, he went on to lose 60 pounds.

I5: I never intentionally planned to actually lose weight. I never had a goal in mind as far as what I was going to do. Until I started doing it and I realized 'oh wow, I can actually get really cut up from this’. … I wound up losing I think like 60lbs.

For many of the participants interviewed, weight loss sparked feelings of empowerment and improved confidence. This is described in more detail in following sections.

**Theme #5: Non-combat fitness boxing at the [Boxing Gym] is a supportive and motivating social community.** Each of the nine participants interviewed described the environment of [Boxing Gym] as a supportive, accepting, and motivating social community. These conversations covered motivating and helpful trainers, supportive friendships, and acceptance from other club members. Many of the study participants also discussed their preference for exercising in a group setting. This was because they liked the trainer guidance they received as well as feeling social support from other club members. Interviewee #7 described how she prefers to work out with a group. She explains how having group support is motivating for her to try harder during her workout:

I7: I like working out with a group. I think, if anything morally it boosts you up.
And I think I work harder if I'm in a group atmosphere. If I'm outside cycling by myself I might just go at a regular pace and really not get a good workout. But
when I come here and I'm in a group atmosphere. I try to do 10 times better or 10 times more. Plus you kinda want to out-do your partner or out do the person next to you so you gotta work harder! So that's a big motivation for me also.

Interviewee #3 shared these beliefs regarding group exercise as motivating. He described how having a group of people and an instructor help provide him with the motivation to exercise after work, as opposed to going home and attempting to run on his own:

I3: … and I like working out with other people. So the idea of running, I used to do a lot but that's boring. Coming up here and having a group of people, having an instructor, people that motivate you somewhat when you're being instructed, watching other people, I mean, the music, whatever it is, I mean, it all makes it easier to want to come up here and do it than for me to just say 'oh I'm gonna go out runnin' and put headsets on…

Interviewee #1 took this conversation a step further by explaining how the people he has met at [Boxing Gym] have become his friends, and people he cares about. He described how participation in these classes has helped him to develop close social friendships, and how he worries when certain people aren’t in class:

I1: One thing I really like about this facility is the interaction with all the people that I've met. Ya’ know, you get to see certain people at the classes and you talk with them and um you kinda get worried when they're not there or if they haven't been there for a while. And you get other ya' know connections with them.

Multiple interviewees described [Boxing Gym] as a “family atmosphere”. Interviewee #5 describes his perception of [Boxing Gym] as a family atmosphere, explaining that club members rely on one another for motivation and support: “This is a family atmosphere and that's kinda what I really like about it, is everybody kinda relies on one another to push, motivate, and feel good."

Interviewee #7, who admitted to trying to talk to everybody and keep everyone upbeat, described her first experience at [Boxing Gym]. She talked about how at first she was intimidated by the idea of fitness boxing given her age, but then shifted into describing how she feels a special connection to [Boxing Gym] and feels it to be an accepting, family atmosphere:

I7: …after I started coming I realized this is a family atmosphere. It doesn't matter what age you are, they accept anybody. And I love seeing kids of all ages come in
whereas some places you go to, I don't know, you walk in and there's all the 'buffed-up' guys and 'buffed-up' women and you think 'oh crap. What am I doing here?!' But I don't get that at this place. I feel like anybody can walk in, it doesn't matter how you look or how fit or unfit you are, you're welcomed. And you're not looking downed upon, like 'oh my god, look how fat that person is!' or 'look how unfit that person is'. You don't get that here. It's just like, ‘okay c'mon, let's give it a try!’ and I love that part too.

The family atmosphere was described as including both supportive club members and supportive trainers. Interviewee #8 described feeling welcomed and encouraged by the club’s trainers. She discussed her perception that at a lot of other gyms the trainers are not willing to engage with members:

I8: Ya know you go into regular gyms and nobody talks to you unless you're paying a billion dollars a month for them to talk to you. And here everyone at the front desk it's, it's a welcome, you want to come back. And that's, these past 2 weeks I've actually wanted to come back.

She then proceeded to describe how for her, fitness boxing provides trainer support, and she appreciates the welcoming atmosphere and the trainers’ willingness to work out with club members.

I8: Yea, I think that they don't act like they're better than you. Like, 'we're in shape and you're not'. They come in, they joke around, they laugh with you. They're willing to get on the floor and sweat with you, and they make you feel like home. Like it's, like a separate little family for you.

Interviewee #7 also expressed an appreciation for the trainers at [Boxing Gym]. She credits the trainers with providing her with the necessary confidence to take on more challenges:

I7: But, another thing I must say about this place, the trainers are awesome. They're at you and they make sure that eventually you'll get it. And, so, I feel like I can take on more challenges because it's like 'oh yea I used to be able, or I couldn't do that before, but now I can do it!'

The overall impression from these interviewees is that [Boxing Gym] is a welcoming, supportive and motivational atmosphere, creating feelings of acceptance and a desire to continue participation with this type of physical activity.
**Theme #6: Fitness boxing is enjoyable.** All nine participants described their fitness boxing experience as enjoyable in some way and for varying reasons. While the activity of fitness boxing itself was described as enjoyable by some, for others it was the uniqueness and variety of the workout and/or the trainers and other fitness boxing members that made the activity enjoyable. Enjoyment also came from the perception that the classes passed quickly. Others liked that participation did not take a lot of thinking or their feeling that their participation was not required.

Many participants also talked about feeling immediately connected to fitness boxing at [Boxing Gym], experiencing feelings best described as a “love at first sight” phenomenon: “…and I came for one class and I loved it.” [I2]; “That's exactly what happened. Dead on. I just walked in there and I was like 'this is it.'” [I5]; and “…I don't know I just kinda got hooked on it. Hitting the bag I guess.” [I6].

Interviewee #9 discussed how fitness boxing classes at [Boxing Gym] are unlike any class she’s ever taken. She has had previous experience with kickboxing classes, but feels that the classes at [Boxing Gym] are different in that the workouts go by quickly: “I mean, it's like, unlike any other workout that I've ever done before. It's an hour long and it feels like it (snaps fingers) goes by like that.”

Interviewee #2 perceived fitness boxing as enjoyable because she experienced it as a “mindless” workout experience. She described her past experiences with soccer and going to the gym as activities requiring active thought about working out. To her, fitness boxing does not require that active thought and is an enjoyable way to lose weight:

I2: Yea, because when I used to play soccer it wasn't really, you would think about working out and you stay in shape, and then going to a gym I think the whole time you're actually thinking, oh I'm working out, so it's harder. … It's kinda the same thing here. It's like you're enjoying it, so, you can enjoy yourself while you lose weight.

Interviewee #4 described her workout as fun as opposed to something dreadful or burdensome. To her, participating in fitness boxing is something she enjoys and “gets” to do versus “has” to do: “… It's not like 'oh my god I have to go to the gym' it's like, 'alright! time to go!' Like, I get to go punch a bag for an hour…” Interviewee #6 shared this belief, explaining his desire to participate in fitness boxing classes more frequently than he does currently: “I'd come
twice a day if you'd let me. If I could, not if you'd let me. If I didn't have to work I'd be here all day."

**Results: Research Question #2**

This study also asked the question “How do individuals participating regularly in fitness boxing perceive the relationship between fitness boxing and empowerment?” Given findings of previous research on leisure time physical activity participation and personal empowerment, this study explored participants’ perceptions and beliefs about the development of personal empowerment through their participation in fitness boxing. For this study, empowerment was defined as “the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged and inspired to take action” (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993, p. 504). This definition was provided to study participants after the first part of the interview when they were asked to describe their perceptions and experiences of fitness boxing. Feelings of empowerment were reported both directly and indirectly by study participants as they discussed their experiences of participating in fitness boxing - and prior to being directly asked about empowerment. When asked directly, each of the nine participants also reported feeling empowered in one or more dimensions of their lives as a result of their fitness boxing participation. Experiences of independence, confidence, strength, security, and breaking through perceived age and gender roles, and gaining a sense of greater body control and an improved sense of self were all discussed by study participants.

Based on analysis of the qualitative interview data, two themes were constructed in answer to the second research question: *Fitness boxing is empowering through proactive self-improvement* and *Fitness boxing is empowering because it challenges age and gender norms.* Each of these themes is comprised of sub-themes. A description and evidence of each of theme and sub-theme are provided next.

**Theme #1: Fitness boxing is empowering through proactive self-improvement.** The participants of fitness boxing interviewed indicated feelings of empowerment resulting from *proactive self-improvement* - specifically, the five sub-themes of mood improvement, enhanced self-confidence, physical weight loss, strength development and improved social interactions. These feelings are *proactive* as they are the result of study participants’ decision to engage, and continue to engage, in fitness boxing. By actively engaging in fitness boxing (i.e., being proactive), they are experiencing outcomes that they perceive as empowering. They noted that not only are they aware of the empowering outcomes they have experienced from participating in
fitness boxing but that they have received recognition from others (i.e., colleagues, friends and family) as well. The all-encompassing nature of these phenomena create feelings of empowerment as the internal self is improved and external physical self and social relationships are strengthened.

**Sub-Theme #1: Mood improvement.** Participants indicated feelings of improved emotional states and “feeling better” mentally and emotionally following participation in fitness boxing classes. The mood improvements discussed are potentially related to the feelings of emotional release discussed above (1st theme of Research Question #1), as decreases in stress, anger and anxiety are likely to result in increased feelings of emotional well-being.

Interviewee #8 discussed how her participation in a hard fitness boxing workout makes her feel better mentally, emotionally, and physically. To her, completing a fitness boxing workout provides an overall emotional release, resulting in positive feelings and a desire to continue participation:

*I8: No, I think it's because I enjoy doing stuff. I've seen that there's a lot of positive outcomes, mentally, physically, emotionally from this. It's not like I love coming out here and getting my butt kicked and coming home and being like 'alright, I'm not walking for 3 days.' But I like the feeling that when I, honestly when I, this sounds cheesy too, when I leave here, I like, ya know what, turn up my radio and roll the windows down. I just feel so awesome. And I think that that's keeps me coming back.*

Interviewee #9 also shared her experiences of “feeling better” mentally, emotionally and physically following a fitness boxing workout: “… feeling just like overall everything, ya know, physically I feel better, ya know, mentally I feel it, emotionally I feel better…”

In addition to discussing how participation in fitness boxing changed her own feelings, interviewee #9 also discussed her perception that the moods other participants were enhanced as well:

*I9: …seeing somebody that has done this for a few years, and that they're ability just to, I guess to, um, glow? I mean there's a certain glow that people have after they've worked out for a while? And they're ya know, just happier in everything and I've noticed it in him. Um, I'm sure you're aware that I talk to almost everybody in this place (laughs) so I try to keep everybody upbeat, but I noticed it
in other people too. You can just see like I said there's, this, like a glow in them and like they're happier and it's just like, I don't know, they walk better, their posture is upright, you know what I'm saying?

The “glow” interviewee #9 is discussing is representative of her impressions of empowerment occurring in other participants. To her, the improved mood results in a more positive outlook internally as well as a brighter outlook externally. Overall, most of the interviewees discussed feeling better in a variety of ways following their participation with fitness boxing.

**Sub-Theme #2: Enhanced self-confidence.** All but one participant (Interviewee #4) indicated feeling empowered through enhanced self-confidence. Improved self-confidence was described in different ways - as a result of feelings of competence in the activity of fitness boxing itself, being physically active in general, or feeling more able to deal with everyday situations.

Interviewee #5 described his feelings of enhanced self-confidence and his perception that others noticed it as well:

I5: Like, from, from a physical standpoint I just feel good. And when you feel good, you're gonna start acting a little bit different. You feel good, you're gonna have an up-beat vibe, you're gonna be able to talk to people a little bit differently. When I'm like trying to sell a membership, people can feel that I love what I do and I love [Boxing Gym] and I love hitting the bag and everything like that. So it does definitely carry over to everything I do, and especially outside with family and everything like that. They notice a huge difference and a huge change in my personality from the fact that I'm more confident of a person. I'm definitely, I'm always, I'm just always alert. I'm not just sitting there, kinda twiddling my thumbs or anything. I always feel like I need to do something and it gives you more energy I guess. I feel like I get a lot of energy out of it. I feel like I have energy, confidence on pretty much all the above with it.

He elaborated on this feeling further later on in conversation, adding how he believed his increased confidence directly impacted his social relationships:

I5: I'm very lucky to be where I'm at and it was all through the fitness boxing. …

Without the boxing there is no confidence probably, there's no, there's really
nothing. There's no confidence, no friends, no new people, and I don't know where would be at this point. So definitely there is that sense of empowerment and you feel good.

Interviewee #9 discussed how her enhanced self-confidence has been observed by her husband. She acknowledged feeling more confident, but her response indicated that she was unaware of her improved self-confidence until it was noted by her husband:

I9: …my husband even says I carry myself a little bit better. Like I have more, he thinks, he feels like I have more confidence. And he can see it. Like, I might not necessarily see it, but he's kinda said that, I look like I'm more confident. Which I could say I probably do and have felt that a little bit.

Interviewee #7 talked about how she thought participating in fitness boxing improved her mental functioning and sense of confidence, allowing her to take on new challenges:

I7: I enjoy things a lot better. Like reading a book. I mean, it's really hard for me to concentrate and everything, and I don't know if this has to do with the fitness boxing, but I've noticed I can sit down and read and really grasp what the book is telling me. I don't know, it's really hard to explain. But mentally I feel better about myself. I think sharper mentally and I just, oh how do I want to put this? I guess more confident. I can take on - I'm not afraid to take on a challenge as much. 'Cause I feel like I can pro-, at least I can try it whereas before I'd be a little bit 'mm, I don't know.' And I don't know if that's because I feel better physically, so it makes me feel better mentally. If that makes any sense.

Interviewee #6 was skeptical throughout his discussion of how much fitness boxing had influenced him psychologically, but ultimately his reflections indicated he felt there was an increase in his self-confidence since beginning fitness boxing classes, specifically in relation to his willingness to volunteer for “new stuff” at work:

I6: …So I'm one of the first to volunteer. Now would I do that, maybe this has helped me feel better about myself, so ya know 'I can do this'. Heck, if I can do the stuff in here, I can go, do what I gotta do at work. So, I guess I'd say maybe. I mean I don't shy away from stuff at work. Maybe in the past I did. And I cer-, I don't know this job that I'm doin', ya know 100%. The last one I had I, psh, I
knew it. So, I, ya know, I jump out to learn the new stuff, so maybe this is helping me ex-, ya know, get out there faster.

Interviewee #6 was not the only participant to describe how his improved confidence influenced him in his occupation. Interviewee #1, a physical education teacher at a juvenile correctional school, also discussed how confidence has played a critical role in his work. He credited his participation in fitness boxing with giving him the confidence to both stand his ground and allowing him to build rapport with his students:

I: …with the school that I'm teaching at one thing that you really have to have behind you is confidence. Know what you're doing and, cuz you're gonna get challenged by our students. And learning some extra skills here, not that I ever hope to use any of them … that's the last thing I ever wanna do. But ya' feel confident that in some of the situations you can handle it. And it has actually worked cuz I've told my students that I box and everything, I've showed 'em my gloves and stuff, and I've had some kids that, 'I don't wanna mess with the old man, he knows how to box.'

As noted, 8 of the 9 study participants felt that their participation in fitness boxing enhanced their sense of self-confidence, though just how or why it did so varied. Further, while some spoke of a personal awareness of improved self-confidence, others reported that others (family, friends, colleagues) recognized it as well. Further, for some, highly related to improved self-confidence was the weight loss they experienced by participating in fitness boxing and this sub-theme is discussed next.

Sub-Theme #3: Physical weight loss. Weight loss was reported to be a source of empowerment for five of the participants interviewed. Interviewees 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8 each discussed how their weight loss from participation in fitness boxing impacted their life in a variety of ways. While each participant who lost weight had unique experiences and saw varying degrees of “success” with their weight loss, each of them experienced accompanying feelings of pride, satisfaction, and confidence.

Interviewee #5 discussed how he most enjoys the “ab workouts” and takes a great deal of pride in his new-found physique. He reported that he lost nearly 60 pounds through his fitness boxing participation and is now employed at the gym as a trainer to help others realize similar
weight-loss success. He talked about his quick weight-loss results from fitness boxing and how he went far beyond any success he ever imagined he’d have:

I5: This is some pretty cool stuff and, and (I) started doing it for a while, I did it for like 2 or 3 months and got all my results super fast. I got it within 2 to 3 months, about 90 days I think it was, is when I lost like the 60th pound or something like that. … I got a lot of physical gains out of it. … I never dreamed I’d have a 6 pack or anything like that.

Interviewee #8 also discussed pride when talking about her recent vacation and how she felt confident enough to wear a bikini for the first time. She noted that she was not choosing to wear a bikini to please others, but rather she described feeling a sense of accomplishment and a desire to show off her hard work.

I8: …we went to Panama, actually, this May, right after I graduated, and I put a bikini on for the first time. And I would've never done that. And I think that's a social, I was willing to go out in public in front of all of these people on the beach that I had no idea and kinda showcased myself. And I think that, I wouldn't have done it had I not been here.

Researcher: Do you feel like that was something that was super important to you to be able to do in your life?

I8: Kinda. Not in like the sense that it was like a materialistic, I needed everyone to accept me kinda’ thing. It was like to prove to myself, you've worked so hard for a year, you've had setbacks, you've overcome things, like look how far you've come.

Interviewee #2 also described feeling a sense of newly-discovered confidence in her body following weight loss during fitness boxing participation. When asked to provide examples of any physical outcomes she had experienced from fitness boxing, she mentioned the changes that occurred with her body. She talked about how previously she would have been hesitant to wear certain clothing, but now wears tank tops without feeling uncomfortable because she “doesn’t care as much [what others think]” as she now feels more confident:

I2: Besides just, I guess like my arms, I guess. Ya know it looks better in shirts, I used to not like wearing tank tops, but now I don't really care as much. It's not a big deal anymore.
Researcher: Do you think that's strictly because of the weight loss? Or do you feel like you've just gotten more okay with it?"

I2: Both I guess? I probably haven't really lost that much, ya' know, many inches or whatever around my arms, but, I guess this place just makes me feel confident. These data provide insight into the psychological changes that study participants perceived occurred because of the physical changes (weight loss, increased muscle definition) their fitness boxing participation provided. The four interviewees who reported weight loss as a physical outcome resulting from their participation perceived that they were also more confident and secure in their body and lives otherwise - and they were proud of their accomplishments.

**Sub-Theme #4: Strength development.** In addition to weight loss, a second physical outcome experienced by these fitness boxing participants was that of strength development. A sense of the development of physical strength was perceived by some as leading to increases in mental strength and self-confidence as well.

Specific to physical strength development, interviewee #7 described how she believes fitness boxing helped her develop new muscular definition and strength, while previous participation in weight training never did:

I7: … I can give you an example. We had a family reunion a couple months ago, and my sisters looked at my arms and said 'oh my god what have you been doing?' And I've worked out with weights for years, my biceps, triceps, *never*, never can you, you couldn't tell. I've been boxing for two years and they said ya' know 'your arms have really gotten big, Jo, what have you been doing?' And I said 'just boxing'...And before I never focused on that before. So, I think with boxing it, like I said you get an overall workout for your whole body. It's not certain muscles that you're just working out.

As noted, while increased physical strength was experienced as a source of empowerment, feelings of empowerment also were expressed as the development of “mental strength” that came through experiencing one’s body as strong. Interviewee #4 talked about how she has always felt and been physically strong, but through fitness boxing her sense of strength is both physical and mental. She talked of feeling more confident and “tough” because she feels that if she can make it through a fitness boxing work-out she can do anything:
I4: … I knew I was strong before I started this, like I knew I could lift a certain amount, or, I remember there was one point in time, my dog is 75 pounds, and he was sitting on me, and I just put my arms around him and stood straight up. And, somebody was like 'did you, were you just able to do that without even trying? ’ and I was like 'oh yea I'm strong, okay.' But this is like a different type of strong. Strong like - anybody can hit the bag, but like, to kinda like feel it when you, when you're actually punching and then, I don't know, it's in a way like knowing you could, not that I ever feel like I have to protect myself or anything, but knowing that I could, knowing that I'm tough enough to get through some of these work outs that they, the crazy warm ups that they make us do and everything. It's nice to, it does give you a good amount of confidence. A good amount of, 'Alright I can do, I can do, my body can do anything.'

Another example of improved strength through fitness boxing participation can be found with interviewee #9. As was previously mentioned, Interviewee #9 was diagnosed with Lupus and had a kidney transplant, leaving her body weak. Feeling physically weak because of her illness led to her highly value the strength she gained through fitness boxing. She described how fitness boxing has helped her combat feelings of weakness and how her participation has led to feelings of strength she has never felt before:

I9: When I was 16 I was diagnosed with Lupus … It's basically a disease where your body has these antibodies that if you catch a cold these antibodies will fight off, ya' know, whatever illness that you might have. My body created too many of them. So they started just attacking, well it usually zones in, Lupus, on one major body system, and mine was my kidneys. And for 10 years it just kinda', slowly, just kept eating away at me. And then finally, I guess I was about 26, it's almost my 10 year anniversary, I had a kidney transplant. So since I've had that, health-wise, I've been pretty good. I still go to doctors a lot, still get lab work and things checked. But I haven't had any major problems since then. But I guess I've had problems with feeling not like, muscle-y strong, just basically since I was 16, my body just kinda gives up on itself. Like I just feel like there's nothing you can do. I've got this disease that my body attacks myself and there's nothing I can do.
about it. And so, since I joined here, I just feel like, along with the mental aspect of it, I just feel so much, stronger, like a strength that I haven't ever felt before.

Interviewee #9 also described how she not only felt physically stronger because of fitness boxing, but that she feels more in control of her disease, a sign of improved mental strength. She talked about how she has often felt as if there was nothing she was able to do to make herself feel better, but how fitness boxing has given her a feeling of control she did not previously have: “…that's exactly how I felt. Like I was just out of control. Like I couldn't do anything to help myself or there's nothing I could do to make myself feel better. And doing this, it helps with that. Kinda’ feeling in control like you said."

Strength development appeared to be fundamental in creating feelings of empowerment in the participants interviewed. Whether the developed strength was physical or mental, these participants described feeling encouraged, inspired, and more confident in their daily activities.

Sub-Theme #5: Improved social interactions. A final component of empowerment through proactive self-improvement study participants described experiencing through their fitness boxing participation was in social interactions. Several interviewees described feeling empowered in their social interactions with family, friends, or co-workers. This included both a willingness to seek out new relationships and/or to improve existing relationships.

Interviewee #8 described how her social interactions changed following her weight loss and how she experienced feeling more socially accepted. Social acceptance was not the reason for her initial participation in fitness boxing, but feeling this as a consequence of her participation has empowered her to continue exercising and be more active socially:

I8: Yeah. I definitely think that for me, when you first start it doesn't mean anything, I don't think to a lot of people. You just come in, you want to lose the weight. And then all of a sudden you're losing the weight, and, this sounds cheesy but I work at a bar, you go out and peo-, there's guys like talking to you. And you're like, well nobody would've done that before. Which is a different concept, but, it, I think it is really important. I think everybody wants to be accepted and have some sort of, validation behind them. I think I got that. I think that I was like, 'okay, well, I can be cool like this as well.'

Theme #2: Fitness boxing is empowering because it challenges age and gender norms. The participants of fitness boxing interviewed not only indicated feelings of
empowerment resulting from proactive self-improvement but also from challenging social norms - that is, resisting what they perceive society expects of them because of various markers of identity. Specifically, study participants talked about this experience of empowerment in relation to age and/or gender with some participants calling for a change in hegemonic notions of gender.

**Sub-Theme #1: Age-related empowerment.** Despite the aging of the general population and dramatic increases in participation of midlife and older adults in physically active leisure, some study participants believed that society expected them to retire from engagement in strenuous leisure time physical activity just as society expected them to one day retire from their careers. Four of the nine participants in this study (I1, I3, I6 and I7) were between the ages of 50 and 63 and discussed how their fitness boxing participation was a way they responded to the physical/bodily changes they were experiencing. Further, by “resisting” physical aging and engaging in an activity not expected of midlife adults (i.e., challenging age norms), they also felt a sense of personal empowerment.

Interviewee #1, for example, discussed his previous fear of injury as part of the aging process. He felt his participation in fitness boxing was empowering in that it allowed him a freedom from fear of falling: “The thing is I'm in better shape now … and I don't worry, even though I'm getting older and more brittle, more chance of injury, I don't fear it near as much as I was, say a year and a half ago."

Interviewee #3 also described his feelings toward being physically active in midlife. Specifically, he discussed how he uses fitness boxing as a means to combat what he saw as age-related strength loss. To him, participation in fitness boxing is a tool to help him stay healthy, be productive, and live longer:

I3: I think at the end of the day for me physically, I know I have to start balancing certain things as I'm getting older. I mean, I can't just sit around (and) not do anything. ... The more active (you are), the better you take care of yourself, the less health issues you have, the longer you live, the more productive years you have. Because I'm looking forward to retirement soon. So I mean I don't want to be a cripple...I don't want my health to fail me, ya' know?

Each of the midlife study participants found a sense of strength in being able to keep up with the intensity of a fitness boxing workout. All four of these individuals indicated feeling a sense of pride and satisfaction in being able to keep up with, and sometimes out-perform,
younger participants. This pride and satisfaction seemed to empower them to continue participating and helped them to feel good about their physical fitness when compared to the younger participants.

For example, Interviewee #6 discussed how for him, being able to exercise at a level competitive with younger participants is empowering and motivating: “...[T]his is gonna sound weird but, I look around and see people half my age that are pattering out halfway through and that drives me to go even harder. I see some of these young people in there dying and I'm like, 'I got this.'"

Interviewee #3 also talked about how being competitive with younger individuals in the fitness boxing classes is a driving force behind his participation:

I3: I'm a very competitive person inside so when I come up here, I probably look around and say I'm probably one of the oldest people when I'm working out. So for me to be able to compete and do the things that you youngsters are able to do makes me feel good knowing that I can still do it. So for me that helps me know that I am getting older but I'm not, I mean I know I'm getting slower and, but I feel stronger actually, so that way for me feels good.

Interviewee #7, too, spoke of feeling empowered through increased physical strength at this point in her life. She shared her disbelief in the physical abilities of kids, and felt a sense of pride in being able to out-perform younger participants at her age: “You’d be surprised how many kids can't do sit ups! It is really sad. Yeah, just regular sit-ups! I mean, I can go on and do 100 and they're lucky if they could push out 50!”

In addition to feeling a sense of pride in out-performing younger participants, Interviewee #7 described her feelings of personal pride in her current physical abilities. She discussed how it feels good to know that she can continue to take on physical challenges at her age: “… it just makes you feel so good inside knowing that you can still do things like that and taking on challenges that you would never have done before.”

For these midlife adults participating in fitness boxing, feelings of empowerment came through a sense of freedom from fear of falling or poor health, a sense of physical strength, and a sense of pride in their physical abilities, especially when compared to their younger counterparts - that is, from resisting their own physical aging and the expectations society has of them as midlife adults.
**Sub-Theme #2: Gender-related empowerment.** Five of the nine participants for this study were female. The women in this study described how their fitness boxing participation allowed them to feel both a sense of independence from men and personal security. Feelings of empowerment came from these experiences as well as from an awareness that they were participating in a form of physical activity from which females have previously been excluded.

Interviewee #4 discussed at length the feelings of independence that she gained from the physical strength she developed through her participation in fitness boxing. She discussed her perception that society sees women as the weaker sex, and her feelings of physical competence and independence that comes from the physical strength she has developed from her participation in fitness boxing:

I4: … I feel like women have to deal with that a lot. Have to deal with this like, social idea, that they aren't constructed the way men are or they shouldn't be able - they shouldn't have to pick things up, or shouldn't want to pick things up or move heavy things and it's like, 'I can though. And I can do it better than you can.'

Interviewee #4 elaborated further on the feelings of independence she experienced because of the strength she gained from her fitness boxing participation as she discussed living alone and her interactions with male co-workers:

I4: … Like when I lived alone it was nice when I, 'cause I was so strong that I, 'yea, no big deal', I can crawl up this ladder and lift up this giant box of winter clothes or something and put it on the top shelf of my garage without having to call somebody to come over and do that. It's nice to be able to do it on your own as opposed to having to ask a guy for help.

I4: … with bartending, if I ever work with male bartenders, they're like 'oh, I'll go get, I'll bring the beer out, I'll pick up the heavy cases of beer, you just put them in the cooler.' And I'm like, 'No dude, I can lift those up probably higher than you can!' So, I like being strong, I like being stronger than other people, and I like for people to allow me to be.

In addition to feelings of independence resulting from increased physical strength, the women in this study also indicated feeling empowered by the knowledge of self-defense fitness boxing gave them. While each participant who discussed this phenomena acknowledged that [Boxing Gym] does not promote their classes as self-defense classes, these women felt the skills
learned in the class are beneficial for them in terms of their feelings of personal security and knowledge of self-defense, as Interviewee #2 noted:

I2: … I feel like it's important for women to come here because women are viewed as weak and everything. And I go to [city] for school so it's nice to know that if someone, if something were to happen to me I could defend myself… And I think that's very empowering.

Interviewee #4 also discussed how her knowledge of punching has empowered her:

I4: It's not overly emphasized and I don't ever anticipate being in that situation... I do think I could knock somebody out though… Um, yeah, that's, I think the protection thing is less of it. I think it's more like I know that my body can, I know I could knock somebody out if I had to.

In addition to feeling physically stronger, more personally secure, and thus independent, female participants also discussed their experiences of participating in a traditionally male-dominant activity. Interviewee #8, specifically, mentioned how she believed her initial feelings towards boxing were consistent with what she saw as society’s view of boxing as masculine. She also discussed how her perceptions have changed since taking part in the classes, and the important role one of the trainers at [Boxing Gym] held for her in this regard:

I8: It was intimidating at first. But I think that a majority of people that I take classes with are women. I don't think I see, it's not that I don't see a lot of men, but I think that we kind of dominate it here. And I think [trainer] helped a lot with that. You see [trainer] coming out badass, she's running circles around half these guys and stuff like that. I think that that, I didn't think that boxing was a feminine sport, but ya' know, we're not going in the ring grappling anyone. But it's still, we dominate, I think here.

Interviewee #8 also discussed her interactions with her male work colleagues about her participation in fitness boxing:

I8: I've had people straight up look me in the face and tell me I don't do that. I'm like, [sarcastically] 'Do I do that then? Did I make that up that I go to boxing class? 'You've confused me all of a sudden!' But um, I mean then I've had people be like 'oh my god, that's the coolest thing.'
Interviewee 4 also discussed the stereotype that “boxing is for men” by providing examples from her family life. Interviewee 4’s father is from a country where, she noted, the cultural norm is that women do not participate in high-intensity physical activity. Interviewee 4 discussed her interactions with her father regarding her participation in fitness boxing, and how she finds a sense of acceptance from the fitness boxing community:

I4: I love that part about coming here. Being able to punch things and not have any, consequences for it. My dad's [ethnicity], and is pretty conservative, and he doesn't really like me boxing very much. He's like, baby, that's sooo, almost like there's a stigma obviously. In [his home country] a much bigger stigma than here, but I think even in America there's a little bit of a 'ohh that might not be a, like a classy thing to do' or something like that. But it's kinda like, I can come here and do it and it's a nice, it's accepted here. … So it's not like I'm getting angry and feeling like I need to hit something and people being like 'whoa she's crazy!' like, I can come here and just punch and it's normal.

Each of these women spoke about the feelings of empowerment they believed they gained from their participation in fitness boxing. Their attributed this sense of empowerment to the independence they gained, the increased sense of personal security they felt, and the pride they experienced in participating in a male-dominated form of physical activity. Their stories suggested that their feelings of empowerment allowed these women to live more confident, self-assured lives.

Sub-theme 3: A call for change in hegemonic notions of gender. Related to the empowerment the women in this study described gaining through participation in fitness boxing was a sense of frustration with existing cultural notions of gender and femininity. None of the five men but two of the four women in this study spoke about their desire for change in how society views females’ physical strength and beauty. Both Interviewee #4 and Interviewee #8 questioned/challenged societal perceptions of women as the weaker sex and Interviewee #8 was also concerned about dominant standards of beauty for girls women in the U.S. today.

In discussing women’s physical strength, Interviewee #4 spoke about feeling held back by beliefs that fitness boxing is not “classy”, while arguing that having the physical ability to protect herself is. She is a woman who highly values physical strength and fitness and feels
frustration knowing there are people who do not think women should participate in fitness boxing:

I4: So, yeah, and it's probably, frustrating feeling like you can't, ya know, like thinking back to my dad and saying 'oh it's not, it's not a classy thing to do.' It's like, but, protecting yourself is. Or being physically fit enough to protect yourself is. So, why, why hold me back like that?

Interviewee #8 echoed Interviewee #4’s frustration regarding those who cannot accept and are critical of women who participate in fitness boxing. As with Interviewee #4, to her, fitness boxing is equipping her with self-defense skills. She also hints at a belief she has that because there is no actual combat, it should be acceptable for women to participate in non-combat fitness boxing - since it is not as masculine or aggressive as the sport of combat boxing.

I8: Right. And that's, I mean, it's not that, like I said, we're not getting in the ring sparring with people, ya know, it's pretty much self-defense too. Why wouldn't men support that? Don't they want women to have that? Again, I have no idea.

In addition to feeling frustration over their experiences of others’ negative perceptions of females who participate in fitness boxing, Interviewee #8 also discussed her perceptions of the beauty standard society holds females to today. In describing the attention she has received since losing weight through fitness boxing, she questions why men seem to only talk to “skinnier” women and argues that social reforms are needed to change this mindset:

I8: I don't want to sound like that's why do it, or that's why I do it, I think that no matter who you are that's in the back of your mind. People can say 'I don't care what people think' and I normally don't, I don't have a filter or anything like that, but I care if people - so we used to make a joke. This guy, we went to school all together, never talked to me, never noticed me, we went out to a bar one night and he was like 'Oh (name), what is, oh my gosh! You're...' And I was like, ‘now that I'm skinny?’ You know what I mean? So it's like, I think that it kind of also points out the social reforms that need to happen. The fact that people don't wanna’ associate or talk to you or intermingle with people who were heavier or who were going through struggles, I think that that points that out too. But it's empowering to know that, people talk to you and notice you and, I don't know, it's a little, it's a pros and cons of both, 'cause you're thinking why do these people have a mindset

49
that they'll only talk to you if I'm skinnier if I'm looking a certain way rather than I have an awesome personality or I'm going to school and doing this. Why can't that be enough for them? So I think it brings out a whole different side of social culture.

Summary

The research purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of individuals’ perceptions of a particular form of leisure time physical activity, non-combat fitness boxing, in relation to the health-related physical and psychological outcomes experienced. Specifically, this study asked the questions: What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity? and How do individuals who regularly participate in fitness boxing perceive fitness boxing in relation to a sense of personal empowerment? As discussed above, analysis of the interviews resulted in a number of themes and sub-themes that answered these two research questions. The themes and sub-themes that comprise the results of this study are not discrete - that is, as is evident in the data/quotes provided they are often inter-related. These inter-relationships are illustrated in the diagram below (see Figure 1: Conceptual Map). The themes and sub-themes that answered the first research question are in green. The three themes and sub-themes of the second research question are in blue.
In terms of the first research question (RQ1), for this study’s participants, non-combat fitness boxing meant a Supportive and Motivating Social Community, a “Different” Kind of Physical Activity, an Emotional Release, a Means of Physical Improvement, Enjoyment, and a Good and Effective Form of Exercise. As indicated, not only were some of these themes related to one another, they were also related to some of the sub-themes of the second research question (RQ2). This reflects the holistic nature of humans’ everyday experiences, what qualitative research tries to capture. Specifically, the RQ1 theme an Emotional Release was related to the RQ2 sub-theme: mood improvement. The RQ1 theme a Means of Physical Improvement was related to RQ2 sub-themes: confidence building, strength development, and weight loss.

Two themes answered RQ2: Fitness Boxing is Empowering Through Proactive Self-Improvement and Fitness Boxing is Empowering Because it Challenges Age and Gender Norms. Interview data indicated there were 5 ways that participation in fitness boxing was empowering as a means of proactive self-improvement: mood improvement, confidence building, weight loss, strength development, and social interactions. Analysis of the interviews revealed Fitness Boxing is Empowering Because it Challenges Age and Gender Norms - and that resisting gender
norms was a particular experience two of the female but none of the male study participants discussed.

In the Discussion section that comes next, how the results constructed from the analysis of the interview data of this study relate to the extant research is presented. Further, implications of this study’s results for future practice and research are provided.
Chapter 4
Discussion

This study asked the questions: *What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity?* and *How do individuals who regularly participate in fitness boxing perceive fitness boxing in relation to a sense of personal empowerment?* The results of this study were just presented. In this section, these findings are discussed in relation to previous research on this topic. This section concludes with implications for future practice and research, that is, how the results of this study may inform practice and expand our thinking and raise new questions for research on this topic.

Six themes were constructed in answer to the first research question of this study (*What is the meaning of non-combat fitness boxing to those who regularly participate in this activity?*). Three themes, two of which contained sub-themes, were constructed in answer to the second research question (*How do individuals who regularly participate in fitness boxing perceive fitness boxing in relation to a sense of personal empowerment?*). Some of these themes are consistent with previous research on fitness boxing and physical activity motivation.

The themes resulting from the first research question mostly addressed the positive physical and psychological outcomes of fitness boxing participation and participant perceptions of the activity of fitness boxing and the environment of fitness boxing classes at [Boxing Gym]. Specific to physical outcomes participants discussed feelings of physical improvement (e.g., weight loss, strength gain) and a perception of fitness boxing as a good, effective workout. The belief of fitness boxing as a good, effective form of exercise supports the findings of Kravitz, Greene, Burkett and Wongsathikun (2003) and Bellinger and Gibson (1997), who described fitness boxing as a form of exercise with a high intensity and high energy expenditure, respectively. The themes of physical improvement and boxing as a good, effective form of exercise are interrelated. This connection is accepted in the literature as it is well documented that weight loss is achieved when an individual’s caloric expenditure exceeds their caloric intake. Assuming there is no dramatic increase in caloric intake through the participants’ diet, it is reasonable to relate a high-intensity workout like fitness boxing to participant weight loss. The relationship between these themes is additionally strengthened as muscular strength is developed through participation in resistance activities, including body weight activities, an emphasized element to fitness boxing classes.
Participants interviewed in this study described their participation with fitness boxing as a way to reduce stress and prevent anger. The idea of the act of punching something to relieve stress is not novel, but is debated in the literature. The act of outwardly expressing frustrations (e.g., crying, punching) to relieve emotions like anger stem from the idea of catharsis, “a feeling of release of relief following emotional expression of anger that resulted in the diminishment, if not complete abatement, of emotional symptoms” (Verona & Sullivan, 2008). Buss (1961) presented a model of aggression based on the idea of catharsis and stated that emotions which cause a “build up” of aggression and create tension in an individual can be reduced through an act of aggression. Schafer (1970) expanded this, claiming a reduction in future aggression following the release of tension. When investigation into this theory began, however, there were mixed results. Hokansen and colleagues (1968) found a reduction in systolic blood pressure in males following an aggressive response to an interpersonal provocation. This result did not occur, however, in female participants. The control group, who were either not allowed to respond to the stressor or were only allowed to respond in non-aggressive ways experienced a much slower drop in systolic blood pressure. These results support the notion that aggressive response to stressors can be beneficial in lowering blood pressure and clearing frustration from the individual. In a follow up to this study, however, Geen, Stonner and Shope (1975) determined that those individuals who responded aggressively to a stressor were more likely to respond aggressively to future stressors, possibly due to positive reinforcement (i.e., a reduction of blood pressure) of the initial aggressive response. Many participants in the current study believe fitness boxing and its aggressive nature to be a stress reducing activity. Without further investigation it is unclear whether these participants experience more aggression in their daily lives resulting from their use of cathartic activities to reduce stress. Follow up studies are required to gauge the impact of cathartic stress relieving activities (like boxing) on daily feelings of aggression.

At the outset of this study, no theoretical framework directed this study. However, analysis of the interviews indicates possible support for the constructs of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Based on their research on exercise and physical activity and SDT, Ryan and colleagues (Ryan, Williams, Patrick & Deci, 2009) found that such activity can be inherently rewarding and can contribute to both happiness and vitality in life. This theoretical model suggests that all humans have a desire to feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and
relatedness, and this desire leads to participation in activities to meet these needs (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen, 2002). The extent to which these needs are met determines the individual’s location along the continuum of motivation within this model, ranging from amotivation (i.e., no motivation) through extrinsic motivation (i.e., motivated by outside forces) to intrinsic motivation (i.e., motivated by internal forces of enjoyment, excitement, or challenge).

Discussions of these three “basic needs” of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were heard in participant interviews, and are part of several of the themes of the first research question of this study.

Feelings of competence, a sense of mastery, or the perception of being effective at a task (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen, 2002), were described by participants when they discussed their physical outcomes from fitness boxing. Descriptions of improved strength, being better able to “keep up” with younger participants, and overall physical improvement are related to feelings of competence.

A sense of autonomy, which is characterized by feelings of personal freedom and internal control (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen, 2002), was both discussed and assumed by study participants. Each of these participants chose to participate fitness boxing as a form of physical activity or exercise. They were not required or forced to participate. Their participation was voluntary. In addition to their choosing to participate in this activity, participants described fitness boxing as “different”. While the perceived “difference” of this activity was a motivating factor for some in choosing to participate in fitness boxing, the perceived uniqueness of the activity also supports the idea that study participants “freely” chose to participate in this activity.

Relatedness, or the feeling of inclusion and satisfaction with the social world (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen, 2002), emerged as a theme that answered the first research question as well. Participants discussed their satisfaction with the “family”, “community” atmosphere at [Boxing Gym]. Participants cited friendships and supportive trainers as positive outcomes of their participation, and indicated a greater sense of social belonging as a result of their fitness boxing participation.

As was previously mentioned per the SDT, all individuals feel a desire to satisfy their innate needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy and seek out activities which allow them to meet these needs (Kilpatrick, Hebert & Jacobsen, 2002). Participating in exercise and other forms of physical activity is one way for individuals to satisfy these needs, which can lead to the
development of intrinsic motivation. Individuals are considered to be at the intrinsic end of the motivation spectrum within SDT when they take part in the activity for the sake of doing the activity itself, rather than for reasons external to the activity. Intrinsic motivation is characterized by enjoyment, excitement or a sense of challenge, all feelings described by participants in the current study. One of the strongest themes (in terms of being discussed repeatedly by each study participant) that emerged in the current study was that of fitness boxing as an enjoyable activity. As Ryan and colleagues (1997) contended, intrinsic motivation is a critical factor in enjoyment and in sustained or maintaining physical activity participation over time. All nine participants described fitness boxing as enjoyable to them in some way, and each participant interviewed had also been participating in fitness boxing for over one year, thus leading the researcher to believe these participants are at least some-what intrinsically motivated, while acknowledging that extrinsic factors (e.g., weight loss) still existed for them (and that non- or former fitness boxing participants were not the focus of this study).

Also of interest to those who study physical activity motivation is the topic of empowerment. In the current study, empowerment was defined as “the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged and inspired to take action” (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993, p. 504). Existing literature supports the notion that empowerment may be developed through participation in sport and other leisure activities because it promotes feelings of personal strength and a willingness to take action in many dimensions of human life. In Blinde and Taub’s (1999) study of 28 college-age men with either physical or sensory disabilities, participation in sports resulted in feelings of empowerment. These men reported feeling greater competence as a social actor (e.g. self-confidence, awareness of potential, independence and control, sense of accomplishment and self-actualization), better able to set and pursue goals, and a sense of social integration through bonding, broadening social skills and experiences, and social inclusiveness. While the participants in the current study were able-bodied, the results are similar to those found by Blinde and Taub, specifically, regarding self-confidence and sense of accomplishment. Participants in the current study indicated feeling a great sense of self-confidence in physical and social settings. Additionally, feelings of accomplishment were reported, although these feelings were often associated with pride in weight loss or strength gain, and not from accomplishing a task perceived to be impossible due to disability. The differences in population demographics are
obvious, but the results hold that physical activity can contribute to greater self-confidence and feelings of accomplishment regardless of able-bodiedness.

As previously discussed, extant research has found participation in leisure time physical activity and sport at an older age can be satisfying for older adults. Dionigi (2002) interviewed 70 older women participating at the 8th Australian Master’s Games about their participation. These women, aged 55-85 years, were competing in track and field, half-marathon, cross country running, triathlon, cycling, squash, tennis, badminton, field hockey, netball, and/or basketball. Dionigi discovered these women were competing for one of two reasons: (1) to win or (2) to feel pride in being there and completing the challenge. Women in this study acknowledged the age-related stereotypes regarding physical activity that typically suggest older adults participate in sport and physical activity for the fun and pleasure of participation and at a lower intensity than younger individuals. Dionigi reported that some of the athletes in her study contradicted these stereotypes - and did not apologize for their competitiveness. These older athletes felt pride in meeting the challenge of elite sport participation and did so in a power, youthful, active way, thus resisting the “passive, disabled, and dependent” perception of older people (Dionigi, 2002).

The experiences of the midlife participants in the current study are consistent with those in Dionigi’s study who participated in elite sport for the pride and satisfaction of completing the challenge. The current study’s participants described feeling a sense of accomplishment in keeping up with the younger class-goers and completing a full fitness boxing workout. Dionigi argued that older adults may participate in competitive and challenge sport and exercise as a means of resisting the commonly held beliefs regarding physical activity and old age. Such was not extensively discussed in the current study; however, it should also be noted that “probing questions” exploring this issue were not asked. These adults primarily talked about their participation in terms of weight loss and health-related factors. At the same time, some also spoke of being motivated to and enjoying their ability to successfully master the challenges of fitness boxing alongside younger participants - and sometimes do better than those younger than them. They found enjoyment, satisfaction and pride in their participation. That is, while their motivation to begin participating in fitness boxing seemed to be primarily health-related, satisfaction and pride in “resisting” age-related stereotypes and social expectations for their physical activity participation was also an experience they reported.
Most of the female participants in the current study credited their participation in fitness boxing for helping them to develop feeling of strength, confidence, and personal security as a woman. This research was not conceptualized from a feminist lens. However, when conducting the interviews it became clear that gender issues were at play. The female participants described experiences of feeling weak, dependent, and “scared” prior to their fitness boxing training. Two participants took this discussion a step further by not only addressing how their feelings of weakness and insecurity changed, but also by questioning and calling for a change in what they saw as society’s limited and inaccurate perception of women.

Previous research has explored gendered experiences of leisure time physical activity and sport. Today, girls and women participate in more intense, competitive and highly skilled forms of leisure time physical activity, which contrasts greatly with previously held beliefs that females should participate in mostly cardio-focused physical activity types. Metheny (as cited in Wiley, Shaw, & Havitz, 2000) argued in her analysis of gender stereotyping in sports that gender (societal notions of appropriate masculinity and femininity) is seen as dichotomous in western cultures. Further, because using one’s body to physically overpower, coerce, or dominate others is part of what it means to be “masculine”, to be “feminine” means not using your body in this way. Hence, participating in sports where such is required is thus not appropriate for females. Additionally, athletes who participate in “more masculine” sports are expected to fall in line with masculine social roles while athletes participating in “more feminine” sports (that is, sports that do not require physical contact but rather emphasize grace and a particular female beauty) are expected to fall in line with feminine social roles (Jones & Cooley, 2015). The sport of boxing - even non-combat fitness boxing - is thus considered a “masculine sport” and is inconsistent with a particular ideology of femininity (Wiley, Shaw & Havitz, 2000). Female boxers are often stereotyped as “manly” or “butch” and must prove themselves to be legitimate athletes in a male dominated sport (Krane, 2001). Female participation in traditionally masculine sports like boxing or hockey can therefore create either self-consciousness in women (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004) or feelings of pride, resistance, and empowerment.

Much of the literature on leisure activity focuses on the experiences, meanings, and behaviors of individuals rather than larger political or social structures within which leisure takes place (Shaw, 2006). Until the 1990’s, leisure was viewed as existing outside of and inconsequential to other, more pressing political and social issues. Shaw (2006) elaborated on the
idea of leisure as a form of resistance, explaining that resistance can be seen as “an act or a series of actions that enhance freedom of choice and personal control” (p. 534). She argues resistance can be intentional or unintentional/conscious or unconscious and involves the refusal to conform to the dominant group’s beliefs of appropriate activity. As was noted earlier, boxing is an activity which is typically viewed as masculine (and thus appropriate for males) because it requires using one’s body to physical dominate or overpower another. Women participating in this sport, intentionally or not, go against this commonly held belief and are women in a “man’s sport”. Indeed, women in the current study acknowledged the gender stereotypes that exist in boxing, and two discussed the need for change in societal attitudes towards women and beliefs about their interests and abilities. These women commented on feeling empowered as women through their fitness boxing participation because it provided them strength development and improved confidence. While their reported motivations for participating in fitness boxing were predominantly rooted in stories of fitness and weight loss, rather than resisting society’s gender hegemonic gender ideologies, the stories they told of their participation in fitness boxing indicated resistance. That they emphasized fitness and weight loss is not surprising as these are socially “appropriate” female concerns. Within their discussions of these issues, however, are interesting indications of how gender “works” and the accommodation and negotiation that are part of resistance and any political act (Shaw, 2006).

**Implications for Practice**

With the growing popularity of fitness boxing and the growth in the development of fitness boxing gyms in the United States, there are increasingly more opportunities for individuals to take advantage of this form of physical activity. While there are many studies which have explored the physical and psychological benefits of regular, maintained physical activity, the current research in empowerment and physical activity is limited with this specific physical activity type. The patterns and themes which emerged from this study may serve a practical purpose in providing a more in-depth understanding of a specific type of physical activity and how its outcomes can influence empowerment and an improved quality of life in multiple dimensions. In the field of health promotion, it is critical that all opportunities for the development of empowerment and the enhancement of holistic quality of life are explored to develop as many options as possible for encouraging long-term physical activity maintenance and an improved quality of life for as many people as possible.
Implications for Future Research

The results of this study provide suggestions for future research. First, results indicate that participation in fitness boxing is a source of personal empowerment of those in this study. To better understand the potential of fitness boxing as a source of empowerment, it would be useful to study former fitness boxing participants (i.e., those who once participated and ceased participating) as well as those for whom participation in fitness boxing holds no appeal. This relates to a second direction for future research and that is to study individuals’ experiences of other types of physical activity. As noted in the literature reviewed in Chapter 1, participation in various forms of leisure activity have been found to potentially provide individuals with a sense of empowerment and continued participation - and various explanations for this have been proffered. Studying many different forms of leisure time physical activity and conducting a meta-analysis of the results of those studies may provide a better picture of the development of empowerment through leisure time physical activity participation. Another direction for future research suggested by this study is to explore this topic quantitatively. Results of this study (and the related extant research) provide insights into at least some of the components of leisure time physical activity that lead to continued or sustained participation. The qualitative approach used in this study allowed for an in-depth understanding of participant experiences. Given the results consistent with the constructs of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the use of an instrument like the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS; Deci & Ryan, 2000) that quantifies the constructs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, may be beneficial in understanding the generalizability of this study's results.

Finally, results of this study suggest that future research should investigate boxing as a form of resistance to hegemonic ideologies and practices of gender in relation to the development of a sense of personal empowerment. Two of the female participants in this study spoke explicitly of their desire for societal change in the way women’s strength and beauty are viewed. Whether females’ participation in fitness boxing is motivated by a desire for resistance to societal gender norms or if these feelings emerge through/because of participation or even arise post-participation, cannot be determined by this study. Further, the experiences of male fitness boxing participants should also be explored as participation in non-combat fitness boxing may be a way to resist hegemonic ideologies of masculinity. In sum, fitness boxing as a practice of accommodation, resistance, and/or empowerment warrants further exploration - not only in
terms of gender but in terms of other markers of identity (e.g., age, race, able-bodiedness) as well.
References


Krane, V. (2001). We can be athletic and feminine, but do we want to? Challenging hegemonic femininity in women’s sport. *Quest, 53*(1), 115-133.


Interested in talking about your fitness boxing experience?

Kristen Welker, a Miami University graduate student (and TITLE Boxing Club member), is looking to interview TBC members to learn more about any physical and/or psychological effects fitness boxing may have on its participants.

If you are over the age of 18 and have at least 4 weeks of fitness boxing experience, I would love to hear from YOU!

Study participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one interview to discuss their fitness boxing experiences. Interviews are expected to last approximately 30 minutes, and will be conducted at Title Boxing Club Liberty Township. Interview times will be arranged to work best with your schedule and all eligible participants who complete the study will be compensated for their time with a free pair of hand wraps (in the color of your choice!).

If you’re interested in participating, or would like additional information, please sign up below and you will be contacted by Kristen Welker. Feel free to contact Kristen at (513) 403-8514, welkerk2@miamioh.edu, or via Facebook message at any time.

All data will be used towards the completion of a Master’s thesis. At no time will your name be linked to data you provide and data will never be presented in a way that you could be identified. You can withdraw from the study at any time.
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Yes, I am interested in participating in this research study!

Name / Phone number (with area code):

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

The contact information you provide on this form will at no point be linked to your interview responses or any identifying information. This will be used exclusively to contact you to arrange an interview time and date.

All data will be used towards the completion of a Master’s thesis. At no time will your name be linked to data you provide and data will never be presented in a way that you could be identified. You can withdraw from the study at any time.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

1. Can you please tell me about your participation in [physical activity]?

2. Okay, now I’d like to turn to fitness boxing, specifically. When did you start participating in fitness boxing? What motivated you to become involved with fitness boxing? [ASK SEPARATELY]

3. Thinking about your participation in fitness boxing, what types of outcomes have you experienced?
   a. Do you see any of these outcomes as negative? How so? Could you describe an example?
   b. Do you see any of these outcomes as positive? How so? Could you describe an example?
   c. [If examples physical] Most of the examples you have described have been physical outcomes…
      i. Are there any psychological outcomes that you have experienced? Any psychological changes you believe are a result of your participation? [IF CLARIFICATION IS NEEDED: examples may include feeling a decrease in stress or anxiety, feeling more energetic, improvements in self-esteem or confidence, improved relationships with others]
         1. IF YES: Can you describe an example?
         2. IF NO: Okay, so you don’t think you’ve experienced any psychological changes… I was asking because some of the research suggests that physical activity participation results in reduced stress, enhanced mood states, positive sense of self - but that’s not the case for you. [GO TO #5]

4. [IF YES above] Focusing specifically on the psychological change(s) you just mentioned, how do you believe fitness boxing has led to this/these change(s)? Could you tell me more about that? Examples?
   a. [FOR EACH CHANGE] Is this a change that you value or is important to you?
      i. IF YES: How so? Could you tell me more about that and give me an example?
      ii. IF NO: Okay, so this change isn’t important to you.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

5. Do you see any carryover, that is, do you feel that your participation in fitness boxing has influenced/is influencing other aspects/dimensions of your life?
   a. IF YES: How so? Could you describe an example for me?
   b. IF NO: Okay so you don’t see any influence or carryover.

6. As you know, I am specifically interested in understanding empowerment through physical activity participation. One way empowerment has been defined is [lay down card with definition] - “the experience of feeling personally strengthened, encouraged and inspired to take action…”
   a. Have your experiences with fitness boxing been empowering for you in this way?
      i. IF SO: How so? Could you describe an example for me?
      ii. IF NOT: Okay so you haven’t experienced fitness boxing as empowering for you in this way…Have your fitness boxing experiences been empowering for you in any way?
         1. IF SO: How so? Could you describe an example for me?
         2. IF NOT: Okay so fitness boxing hasn’t be empowering for you in any way…
   a. Do you believe it’s possible to be empowered through any type of physical activity?
      i. IF SO: How so? Could you describe an example for me?
      ii. IF NOT: Okay so you don’t think it’s possible to be empowered through participation in physical activity…

I feel as if our conversation is coming to an end but before we end…Is there anything else that you that you can tell me that you haven’t had a chance to say that you think will help me better understand your participation in fitness boxing - in terms of what motivates you to participate, what it means to you, or what you feel you gain from it?
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM: COVER SHEET

Study Title: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of Fitness Boxing Participants
Principal Investigator: Kristen Welker
Study Dates: Jul-Dec 2014

Study ID#: _______________________
(The last 4 digits of your 11-digit barcode number located on your membership card)
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of Fitness Boxing Participants
Principal Investigator: Kristen Welker
Study Dates: Apr-Dec 2014

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This study is being conducted as part of a graduate thesis project in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University. The primary purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of Individuals’ participation in fitness boxing in terms of what motivates them to participate and whether psychological empowerment is experienced through participation. The following provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below before deciding whether or not you agree to participate.

Why is this study being done?
To learn more about individuals’ participation in fitness boxing participation - specifically, what motivates them to participate, what they see as the outcomes of participation, and whether psychological empowerment is experienced through participation. We are asking for your involvement because we would like to learn more about your experiences of participation in fitness boxing. The information we generate will serve to inform future research and health promotion interventions.

What happens if you join this study?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one in-depth interview with the primary investigator, which should not exceed one (1) hour in duration. The interview questions will ask you to provide information relative to your physical activity participation generally, and your experiences with fitness boxing specifically (in terms of motivations and outcomes). This in-depth interview will be audio-recorded, and will be scheduled for a time that works for you (the interviewee) during the spring/summer of 2014.

What are the possible discomforts or risks?
There are no physical risks expected during completion of the in-depth interview. Potential discomforts that may occur by participating in the interview include feeling uncomfortable when providing certain information (e.g., reporting your physical activity and/or experiences of participating in fitness boxing).

What are the possible benefits of the study?
This study is not designed to treat illness or to improve your health. The purpose of this study is to learn more about what motivates individuals to participate in a particular physical activity (fitness boxing), and specifically, their experiences of psychological empowerment through participation. Study outcomes will inform future research and health promotion efforts.

Is my participation voluntary?
You must be 18 years old to participate, and taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse participation in this study, with no consequences to you. If you choose to participate, you have the right to stop your participation at any time, with no consequences to you.
CONSENT FORM

Study Title: A Qualitative Exploration of Experiences of Fitness Boxing Participants
Principal Investigator: Kristen Welker
Study Dates: Apr-Dec 2014

Who do I call if I have questions?
Kristen Welker, a graduate student in the Department of Kinesiology and Health at Miami University, is carrying out this study. To ask or express any questions, concerns and/or complaints please email Kristen Welker at (513) 403-8514 or welkerk2@miamioh.edu or her advisor Dr. Susan Lipnickey at (513) 529-9247 or lipnicsc@miamioh.edu. You may also call or email the Office for Advancement in Research at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

Who will see my research information?
The information you provide will be collected at one time point, and will remain confidential at all times. We will ask participants to report their study ID number (the last 4 digits of your 11-digit barcode number located on your membership card) on the cover sheet of this consent form. This study number will be the only identifier on any printed material to maintain confidentiality. At no time will your name be linked to data you provide and the data will never be presented in a way that you could be identified. You can withdraw from the survey at any time with no consequences to you. The results from this study may be discussed at professional research meetings and could be printed in relevant scientific journals; however, data will be presented in aggregate form and in a way your individual responses could not be identified.

Agreement to Participate. I have read the above regarding the current study or it was read to me and I have been given a copy of this consent form. I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study. I choose to be in this study and understand that my participation is completely voluntary.

Signature of participant: ______________________________ Date: ______________

Participant Name (please print): ______________________________
Background Information Sheet

Interviewee

Date/Time/Place of Interview:

Sex:  F    M

Race: __________________________

Age (years): __________________________

Weight (lbs): __________________________

Formal Education:  High School  2-yr College  4-yr college Master’s  Doctorate  Prof’l School

Occupation: __________________________

Marital Status: __________________________

Physical activity participation (when and for how long):

________________________________________________________________________________________

Fitness boxing participation (how long you have been participating):

________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix E: Preliminary Sense of Problem

Preliminary Sense of Problem

I am interested in understanding more about how a particular type of physical activity, specifically fitness boxing, can influence and promote psychological empowerment in participants and how certain elements of a fitness boxing program can promote long-term maintenance for use in future physical activity program planning.

There are multiple ways in which to develop a preliminary sense of problem including: personal understandings, desire for change, scholarly interests, serendipity, intuition, autobiographical influences, casual or informal inquiry into others’ experiences, and casual or informal observation. When developing my preliminary sense of problem, I utilized casual observations, intuition, casual inquiry into others’ experiences, and my personal understandings.

In my casual observations, I notice changes in other participants at fitness boxing class in regards to their confidence and overall “presence” as they continued participation. Women who were generally timid were more outgoing and women who were weak were physically and mentally stronger. These casual observations were accompanied by a “gut feeling” questioning what was going on. My intuition tells me that there is a deeper connection to a physical activity like fitness boxing with an individual’s improved confidence, strength, and sense of self. When these transformations are taken in to consideration, it makes more sense in my mind that long-term maintenance in this particular physical activity type will be promoted.

In casual conversations with others about this intuition regarding their feelings of empowerment, there is a general agreement that fitness boxing is one type of physical activity which promotes this phenomenon. I am a member at the [Boxing Club] near my home and in informal discussions with other members, it appears when an individual takes ownership of their workout and is encouraged to “hit it hard” and work toward achieving their goals, they are more likely to realize success and see the results they are looking for. Also frequently mentioned by some individuals I’ve informally spoken with, there is an increase in their feelings of competence and they enjoy what they are doing to a greater degree. Enjoyment and perceived competence have both been linked to long-term routine physical activity through empirical studies, which furthered my belief that these empowered individuals are more likely to have long-term, maintained physical activity routines.
Appendix E: Preliminary Sense of Problem

While all of what I have discussed up to this point has helped me in my development of a preliminary sense of problem, it is predominantly my personal understandings which have been the largest driving force in my interest of empowerment through physical activity, specifically fitness boxing. In my personal experiences, I found that my participation in fitness boxing has allowed me to feel more confident, powerful, strong, and assertive in my life in more than just a physical sense. I also have experienced these changes in my social and emotional life. While I have tried many other physical activity types, I often felt bored and the repetitious nature of a lot of the programs were not challenging or enjoyable and did not tap in to my inner empowered self.

Through personal experiences, intuition, casual observation, and informal inquiry into others’ experiences, I believe there is a need for greater understanding of how empowerment is influenced by a particular physical activity type, specifically fitness boxing. I believe there is a connection between this empowerment and increased enjoyment, perceived competence, and ultimately long-term, maintained physical activity in participants. Through my analysis of this topic, I hope to identify various techniques associated with fitness boxing that could be utilized to encourage empowerment through other physical activity types to promote long-term participation.
Appendix F: Analytic Memo

Analytic Memo

Generally, empowerment is a term used to describe a situation in which an individual feels more powerful, secure, and “in control” in their life. Empowerment through physical activity, to me, is the sense of gaining these feelings of power, security, and control as a result of becoming more physically fit, strong, competent, and self-aware. My personal relationship with physical activity (specifically through fitness boxing) has generated feelings of empowerment in that I am more aware of my strength and am confident in both physical and social dimensions of my life. Empowerment is a term that is often used in this sense in casual conversation, but I worry that it is used inappropriately and incorrectly - but I also need to recognize that my definition of what it means to be empowered may vary from someone else’s definition. That said, I’m questioning what it truly means to be “empowered” in life. Does it only apply to a physical strength which translates into other areas? Or is it exclusive to the physical realm? Can you be empowered through physical activity without having experienced any significant changes in your strength or physical appearance? In what ways does this occur? While existing research/theory, and my own experiences, might tell me what empowerment means, might it be thought about differently by others? If so, how will I “know” or recognize empowerment? What might it “look like”? These are the questions I will need to keep in the forefront as I conduct my initial inquiry or I will only end up with evidence of what I already believe and not be open to “problematizing” or positively complicating this concept - which is the potential strength of qualitative research (Schram, 2006).

In addition to being uncertain on a solid definition of empowerment, I am beginning to question whether or not it is actually “empowerment” that I am wanting or needing to explore and better understand. Based on my studies of the Self-Determination Theory, I am curious if it’s actually a combination of the constructs of autonomy and competence that I am experiencing versus empowerment in its literal sense. This theory has been used in many previous research projects and improvements in these constructs have been found to be correlated strongly with physical activity participation. Part of what keeps me hesitating on the term “empowerment” is my lack of clarity in what participants may determine to be the differences between autonomy, competence, and empowerment. But perhaps this is not even important. The way research divides up and categorizes human experience may not reflect how individuals actually think.
about their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in this case their physical activity participation in relation to their sense of self.

Empowerment is typically used in a corporate or mental health setting. From a corporate perspective, empowerment is associated with feelings of autonomy within the work place, meaning employees feel a sense of personal responsibility in their careers, a freedom in decision making, and a lack of overbearing supervision from their superiors. In a mental health setting, empowerment is associated with re-gaining control of their life in terms of overcoming their illness and being able to make the appropriate choices for their overall health and well-being.

A third area in which empowerment is often used is that of physical activity performed by disabled individuals. When a person is either born with a physical disability or is somehow disabled through the course of their life, it can cause disconnect between the individual and their sense of freedom, mobility, and independence. Through physical activity interventions, disabled individuals have been able to regain a certain sense of their “physically active self” and have expressed increases in empowerment as a result. Regaining the ability to be independently mobile, participate in either competitive or recreational sport, or feelings of normalcy are all associated with empowerment through physical activity in a disabled population.

When viewed in these ways, I again feel hesitation on whether or not empowerment is the correct term to be used to describe the feelings of confidence, self-assuredness and power that are established through fitness boxing. While it has been appropriately terms in these settings, I wonder if it will be equally as applicable in a physical activity setting with an able-bodied population.

I find myself inquiring the following questions: In what ways will other fitness boxing participants view this phenomena? Will they agree that this is the correct terminology for what is going on? Do participants have other definitions of what it means to be empowered outside of physical activity? I believe through a qualitative analysis utilizing a focus group method, I may be able to think more broadly/openly and complexly about what it is that may occur through participation in a particular form of physical activity.