
PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT TROUGH PARTICIPATION IN WOMEN-ONLY BOXING CLASSES

A case study at the Young Boxing Woman Project

MSC THESIS

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Personal empowerment through participation in women-only boxing classes

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Abstract

This thesis analyses if boxing can contribute to the increase in experiences of personal empowerment in women. In this research the personal empowerment focusses on two main strands; physical empowerment, which can be obtained by women when they increase their strength, and 'power within'. Power within is the mental empowerment of people which is based on their developed confidence and capacities to change and take control over their own lives.

The study is conducted at the Young Boxing Woman Project in Perth, Australia. The trainings of this project are given in a non-combat women-only environment. Data for this study were obtained through observations, eleven semi-structured interviews and three group conversations with participants and trainers of the project. The participants of this project are between the ages of 10 till 24. The project has two extra features compared to normal boxing trainings; they focus strongly on community-building and there is a chat after the training which allows the girls to talk about diverse topics.

The obtained results suggest that boxing can contribute to a stronger experience of personal empowerment within women. Physical empowerment is raised due to the stronger physique of the participants. Mental empowerment is increased due to the skill-building and the feelings of achievement during the boxing training.

The special features of this programme contribute to the experiences of personal empowerment. It is not just the boxing but the combination of boxing, a chat and inclusion into a safe, non-judgemental community that give the participants an increase in especially their mental health and confidence and, hence, their personal empowerment.

Key words: empowerment, physical empowerment, power within, women boxing

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Although women's boxing already exists from the early 18th century, boxing is still seen by many people as a sport for boys. Research shows that boxing can provide many positive physical effects such as low body fat and high muscle mass percentages, well-developed muscle strength and an elevated cardiorespiratory fitness (Chaabène et al., 2015). These physical advantages, but also traits that come to the front during boxing matches such as aggression, strength and concentration on a high level, are often the reason why people consider boxing a masculine sport (Béki & Gál, 2013). Nevertheless, the last couple of years there has been a noticeable increase in several Western countries in the amount of women who do boxing (Elling, Schootemeijer & van den Dool, 2017; Dixon, 2010). This can also be seen in the actions of sport authorities; in 1994 the International Boxing Association declared boxing to be an unisex sport, in 2012 female boxing was at the summer Olympics in London (Béki & Gál, 2013).

In my direct environment I also notice changes towards girls who do boxing; in health magazines the benefits for girls to start (kick)boxing are a hot topic and more and more gyms offer (cardio)boxing classes especially for women. Two years ago I started boxing myself and by doing this I noticed physical as well as psychological changes not only in myself but also in the other women joining the training. I saw that my arm muscles became more defined and I could feel my core muscles becoming stronger. During the training I learned that it does not matter how good you are when you start, but that it is important how hard you are working during the training and that you keep trying to become the best version of yourself. Psychologically I learned to be less afraid, more confident in different kinds of social situations, and that 'stronger' does not always mean 'better'. Also my surrounding noticed these changes and it made me interested in researching if boxing can change women, I felt it within myself but this is of course not a sample for a research. I started thinking more about my ideas to have boxing, and women's boxing in particular as a subject for my thesis research.

The main theme I want to address in my thesis is the change that boxing can bring to the front in women in particular, and to see if there is not only a physical change but if there is also a psychological change or development in any way. The main change I encountered myself is that I felt a sense of 'empowerment', not only since I felt physically stronger but also mentally I felt better. Therefore the research is narrowed down to the physical and mental change towards a stronger experience of empowerment. The term empowerment and the division between the mental and the physical change towards empowerment will be further explained in chapter 2, the literature review. Empowerment is a hard term to measure, for this research I have chosen to conduct it in a qualitative and explorative way. This research focusses on the *experiences of empowerment* since it is difficult to measure empowerment in a quantitative manner. These experiences are measured by using semi-structured interviews, observations and group conversations to collect the data. This is chosen due to several reasons that will be explained in detail in the paragraph 'measuring empowerment' of chapter 2.

To be able to conduct this qualitative research I looked for a program that focusses on women's boxing and on generating a positive change and empowerment in these women. By simply looking online I came across a few different sport programmes and gyms that offered boxing classes for girls. To be able to research if there is a real change in these women I was not looking for a normal gym course, since in this situation their 'normal behaviour' (their behaviour outside the training) can only be observed for a short time. In a gym

class you often enter the gym, you do the training and afterwards everyone is almost immediately gone. I searched for a boxing training in which there would be more non-training time so I would get the possibility to observe the women more and not only during their sport activities. By keeping these characteristics in mind I started looking further on the internet and I came across 'The Young Boxing Woman Project' located in Perth, Western Australia. This project met all the characteristics I had in mind; they focus on changing and empowering women by doing boxing in a women-only boxing class, after the training they have a chat with the girls about their lives. These conversations gave me the possibility to observe the girls who are joining when they are not boxing and when they have the possibility to talk and laugh with each other. This way I came in contact with Lisa Longman, the founder of the project, she was enthusiastic about my research ideas and considered it a good idea to conduct a research at her project. The characteristics and goals of the project will be explained more extensively in the 'context' paragraph of this chapter.

Context: The Young Boxing Women Project

The fieldwork for this research is conducted at The Young Boxing Woman Project (YBWP), they offer young women (generally between 10 and 24 years of age) women-only non-combat boxing classes. Non-combat boxing entails that the boxing is only done on pads, gloves, bags or by shadow boxing. Lisa tells me that this is mainly due to regulations; it is very difficult to get a license to train combat boxing lessons. Furthermore some of the participants have encountered some form of violence in their lives, for them it is often more comfortable to come to the lessons when the trainings are in a non-combat form. After the boxing session the girls will sit together and have a conversation about their life and the struggles they came across during the past week. This combination of boxing and chatting is interesting for my research because I do not only look at the participants as individuals but mainly to the relations they are building and how this affects them. The chat is a good moment to observe these relationships and the behaviour outside the training. This focus on social relations, interactions and networks is called 'relational sociology' (Crossley, 2015), this theory will be further explained in chapter 2.

At the beginning of 2016 Lisa Longman and Stacey Ward started the YBWP in Perth as a non-profit project to build confidence, leadership skills and to create supportive networks among young woman through boxing. In the classes boxing is used as a tool to develop confidence and empower woman (Ward, 2016). This research is conducted to find out if these skills can indeed be developed by boxing, with the skill of empowerment in particular. At the moment the project is situated in three different neighbourhoods around Perth, all with young women in the age from 10-24, but all with different backgrounds. The classes are free of charge and every young woman can join by coming to the classes. Next to these open classes, the project is also available at a few schools that are situated in Perth. These classes are only available for the girls attending these schools.

The open classes are all situated in the PCYC's (Police & Community Youth Centres) of the neighbourhood. These are not-for-profit organizations that offer services for youth development and recreational activities in Western Australia (WA PCYC, 2018). The PCYC's receive financial support from the government next to non-governmental grants, furthermore they rely on sponsors and donations to help them stay financially healthy (WA PCYC, 2018). Underneath a short table about the differences between the locations of the open classes can be seen.

	<i>Location A</i>	<i>Location B</i>	<i>Location C</i>
<i>Group age</i>	Most around 20	2 groups: 10-15, 16-24	High school age
<i>Focus</i>	Mental health	Younger: physical Older: mental	Physical health
<i>Group size</i>	+/- 10	+/- 4 per group	+/- 15
<i>Features</i>	Close group Longest running group	Small group but enthusiast	Large group Little sport experience

Research questions

The YBWP is a special boxing project, with its own, unique, story. It is a story of girls who are building a community together by not only training together but also talking about the important factors happening in their lives. This combination of not only training but also talking provides a new story in health and health promotion and the possibilities to empower women through these actions.

In this thesis I extend upon the combination of empowerment and health through the boxing lessons by not only using the trainings but also using talking with each other as a tool to achieve this. I will look at the combination and the relatedness, if any, of personal empowerment and boxing in young women. The general objective of this research is therefore to get insight in the contribution of boxing to the mental and physical empowerment of women.

This leads to the following central research question of this research;

If and how does boxing contribute to the experienced mental and physical empowerment of women?

Sub research questions;

- Why do women attend women-only boxing classes?
- To what extent and how do the women attending boxing classes experience physical changes?
- To what extent and how do the women attending boxing classes experience mental changes?
- To what extent can mental and physical changes be seen as empowerment?
- What contribute to women's experiences of empowerment?

Relevance

Scientific

The increase in women boxing is a new development, this is a reason why little scientific research is done yet about the potential benefits of women in specific to do boxing. Research on physical activity and mental health is increasing, but still in the beginning phase. At this moment there is an existing knowledge gap in these two areas of research.

Already some research has been conducted about empowerment through sport or physical activity in general (Theberge, 1987; Mwaanga & Banda, 2014; Deem & Gilroy, 1998). No research has been done yet about the relationship between empowerment and women boxing in specific. Therefore this research will contribute to close the existing knowledge gap by looking into this connection.

Furthermore the relation between physical activity and mental health is interesting. More research is needed in this area, my scientific knowledge on mental health is relatively small. I therefore hope this research can contribute to the attention given to, and the discussions about, the importance of mental health and the relationship with physical activity. The research can also make a contribution to possibilities for future research within this scientific area.

Societal

This research will bring benefit to society by showing that physical and mental health can be improved in young women by using the practice of boxing. In contemporary society a lot of health innovations are still focussed on improving either physical health or mental health. Hopefully this research can show the importance and the possibilities of improving and combining both forms of health. Furthermore, this research shows that health institutions should not only focus on diseases and risks, but that it may be even more important to focus on health aspects and how to keep society healthy; the salutogenic approach towards health. The YBWP is a good example of a salutogenic approach by focussing on mental as well as physical health of young women.

Especially when looking at mental health, it is important to realise the magnitude of mental health problems in young women. The Mental Health Foundation in the United Kingdom mentions that the mental health of young women and girls is deteriorating. They found that young women are three times more likely to experience mental health problems than men (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). These differences between women and men can also be found in other countries such as Belgium (Gisle, 2014). Of course, there are differences in the kind of mental health problems women and men face, in which we will not go into depth in this research. Either way, it is very important to keep the mental health of girls and young women as healthy as possible, a focus on prevention instead of healing is important in this aspect since mental health is difficult to heal and prevention is always better than healing.

Chapter outline

This thesis will start with a literature review and theoretical model, chapter 2. In this chapter I analyse the already existing literature about the most used concept in this research. Furthermore I provide and explain the theoretical model that is used. In the third chapter I explain the methods and the data collection.

The five chapters that follow are the core of this research in which the results are addressed. Each of the chapters focusses on one of the research questions. Chapter 4 is about the motivations of the participants to start and keep coming to the trainings. In chapter 5 I analyse the physical changes and in chapter 6 the mental changes the participants encountered during their boxing trainings. In chapter 7 the most important change for this research is addressed; empowerment. The last chapter that will answer one of the sub-research questions is chapter 8, which is about the contributors to this empowerment.

The last section of this thesis consists of two concluding chapters. Chapter 9 will discuss the research findings and place them against the existing scientific knowledge and the presented theoretical model. Chapter 10 provides an conclusion in which the sub and main research questions are answered. Furthermore this chapter provides the strengths and limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2 Literature review and theoretical model

The main goal of this research is to investigate if health, physical as well as mental, in young women can be improved by participation in boxing lessons. In this chapter I will explore the scientific information already known surrounding the subjects of this study. The literature review is two folded, on the one hand I examine the known information regarding women's boxing and boxing in relation to mental and physical health effects. On the other hand I review literature on empowerment and its relations with sport and health. After the literature review I provide a theoretical model in which the hypothesis of this study is linked with the information of the literature review.

Women's boxing

Boxing is a combat sport with a long history. But for women the sport was banned for a long time. At the end of the 20th century the boxing associations became more open towards women attending the sport; the International Boxing Association accepted new rules and approved the first European and Global Championships. In 2012 the sport was reintroduced at the Olympics in London. The last couple of years the amount of women who do boxing is rapidly increasing in Western countries (Elling, Schootemeijer & van den Dool, 2017; Dixon, 2010). This can also be seen in the increased attention towards the sport by several lifestyle websites and sport magazines.

Since women's boxing is a relatively new sport, boxing is still often seen by the larger public as a male sport. Due to the combination of an upcoming, but still male-dominated sport this is an interesting sport to investigate in women. Not only the combat/fighting aspect of the sport, but also the masculinity that still surrounds the ideas of the sport. This can also be seen from the following quote from the book 'Martial arts in the modern world';

"Boxing is an essentially masculine activity associated with male physique and psychology, with no organic connection with femaleness.(...) Boxing, as Wacquand (1995: 90) argues, is deeply engendered, embodying and exemplifying "a definite form of masculinity: plebeian, heterosexual and heroic." (Thomas, Green & Svinth, 2003, p. 212).

Now that boxing for women is gaining more attention this image will probably change. This is already noticeable in the aforementioned lifestyle websites and magazines. When there is an article about women's boxing the text is often accompanied by 'sexy' pictures of a girl with only a sport bra and boxing gloves. The combination of masculinity and femininity is also a cause for the many 'sexy' pictures of boxing girls according to Thomas, Green and Svinth (2003);

"Because boxing is commonly believed to be a masculine sport, to mix it with images that exaggerate the female sexuality produces a provocative illusion (ibid)." (p. 227)

Especially since nowadays the fit body is more 'popular' than the thin body, the growth and attraction of women's boxing is easy explainable. This is a very interesting moment in time in the evolvment of women's boxing. Since on the one hand the sport is still considered to be very masculine, but on the other hand it is growing rapidly, people are interested by it and this new phenomenon spurs attention to several media channels. Because of this rapid evolvment people place the sport very different, some consider it still to be masculine, some consider it as a 'sexy' sport, while again others consider it interesting or 'cool'. Due to

this change in image it is interesting to find out why the women chose to start boxing. Furthermore it will be interesting to find out if these ideas also have an influence on the experiences of the girls attending the trainings.

Boxing and health

Doing boxing is a good manner to improve your fitness and strength. Being physically healthy is important to keep your mind clear and to feel more energetic. Next to physical health, also mental health is of great importance. Boxing can be beneficial for both physical and mental health of its participants, therefore both will be addressed in this paragraph.

Boxing is a good sport to improve your physical health. In the contemporary world this is important since a sedentary lifestyle has become the norm for most people. Due to this lifestyle it is hard for people to meet the minimum requirements of physical activity. Physical inactivity and its consequences have proven to be an important risk factor for several chronic diseases, among others cardio-vascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, cancer and obesity (Warburton, Nicol & Brendin, 2006). Also other health degrading diseases can be experienced by too little physical activity such as arthritis, lower-back pain and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Janisse, Nedd, Escamilla & Nies, 2004). This is connected to the reduction in mortality rates due to physical activity (Penedo & Dahn, 2005). Boxing is one of the many possible ways to do physical activity. It can strengthen the muscles, increase the cardiorespiratory fitness and lower body fat percentage (Chaabène, 2015).

A stronger body, or changes within the body, can also have an effect on someone's mental health. This is an important part this research is focussing on; the relationship of boxing and mental changes and health. It is therefore important to start with a look at mental health in general and how the YBWP is implementing contributors to mental health in their project.

Mental health is immensely important for everyone in this world, it is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community." (WHO, 2018). Mental health is determined by several different aspects such as social, psychological and biological aspects (WHO, 2018). Some life experiences can cause someone's mental health to decline, such as (sexual) violence, (gender) discrimination and exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle and stress (WHO, 2018).

The WHO recognizes mental health as an important part of global health, they strive to implement strategies for the promotion and prevention of mental health. The YBWP and the goal of this research are closely related to this goal of the WHO. In the YBWP they want to strengthen the mental health of the participants and give them a space to talk about whatever is on their minds. The boxing sessions of the project are given in PCYC's, these places try to provide a safe place for everyone without any form of exclusion or discrimination, which is fundamental to mental health (WHO, 2018). Furthermore, the project is focussing on youth between 10-24, a life-course approach towards mental health is important since there is strong evidence that mental and physical conditions originate in early life, but sometimes only show in later life (Fryers & Brugha, 2013).

The main goal of the YBWP is to create a greater self-esteem and sense of empowerment by doing boxing. The relationship between physical activity and mental health is a new field of study. Studies have shown

that (routine) physical activity can improve the well-being of the brain. Physical activity improves mental health, by reducing stress, anxiety and depression (Warburton, Nicol & Brendin, 2006; Penedo & Dahn, 2005), improving a positive mood (Janisse, Nedd, Escamilla & Nies, 2004) and decreasing the risk of sadness and suicidal thoughts (Brosnahan, Steffen, Lytle, Patterson & Boostrom, 2004). This last mentioned study states;

“Promotion of PA may be a useful part of intervention programs that include the reinforcement of other protective factors such as efficient social skills or a high self-esteem and aim at improving adolescents’ health as a whole.” (Brosnahan, Steffen, Lytle, Patterson & Boostrom, 2004).

It is important to study different forms of physical activity in relationship with different aspects of mental health to create detailed information about this correlation. No research is yet been conducted about the specific relationship between boxing and experienced empowerment, this study offers a first insight in this relationship.

Empowerment

In scientific literature thousands of articles entailing empowerment can be found. Still, when looking into this concept, it appeared to be often a very vague term and the ideas and insights behind it are sometimes not clarified in the articles. This paragraph will function as a grip to clarify the concept of empowerment and the way it will be used during the continuation of this research.

When digging into the concept of empowerment, there are a few viewpoints and ideas about the meaning of empowerment that often come to the front. When looking at the larger picture of empowerment distinctions have been made of different forms of empowerment, such as personal/social, economic or political empowerment. This research will focus on the personal and social dimension of empowerment. This dimension refers to the processes of change within a person, such as becoming independent, self-confident and being able to change social relations (Simber & Alizadeh, 2017). The research will focus on two different aspects of personal empowerment; the mental side and the physical side of empowerment. The research will focus on the experiences that the women encounter since it is difficult to measure empowerment in a quantitative manner. The experiences are measured by combining observations with semi-structured interviews, this will be further explained in chapter 3 on methodology.

Empowerment; the term

Power is at the basis of the conceptualisation of empowerment. When looking from a traditional point of view, power is seen as the ability of someone to exert power over something, such as people and resources. Feminist theory, such as stated by Rowlands, focusses on different forms of power of which one is the *power within*. The power within (or critical consciousness) is a concept first used by Paulo Freire in 1970; he states that when people have a high critical consciousness, they become aware of their ability to make life-changing choices.

Empowerment can be described as gaining control over your life (Rappaport, 1981). The most important factor of people who are or feel empowered is that they all control their own lives, make their own decisions and do not let people tell them what they should do. Another important characteristic within the concept of empowerment is change. As Kabeer (2005) states in her article, empowerment is not only the ability to make choices but also entails change. People who were never disempowered cannot be empowered

because there is no change involved. Closely related to the needed change; empowerment is always a process; a change towards something. When looking at a quote of Rowlands it can be seen that she describes empowerment as fluid;

“Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space” (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102).

The two aspects of change and taking control over your own life clearly come to the front in the definition of empowerment of the United Nations:

“The process of enabling people to increase control over their lives, to gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives, to increase their resources and qualities and to build capacities to gain access, partners, networks, a voice, in order to gain control.” (United Nations, n.d., p. 5).

The fluidness of the concept empowerment that we noticed in the definition made by Rowlands, can also be seen in the words used by the United Nations to describe the concept; the words ‘process’, ‘enabling’ and ‘gain control’ come to the front and show the empowerment is a process that entails change and that it takes effort to gain it. Due to the inclusion of different important factors in the definition of the United Nations, I choose this definition as main description of the term empowerment used in the further part of this research. This research will especially focus on two sides of empowerment; mental and physical. Underneath both these sides will be explained in further detail.

Physical empowerment

Physical feminism is chosen as a point of view to look at physical empowerment. Physical feminism focuses on the importance of women to develop physical strength (McCaughey, 1997), it states that physical strength can also be seen as a form of empowerment for women. McCaughey (1997) as well as Roth and Basow (2004) argue that physical activism and dominance can be physically empowering for women. This is an interesting viewpoint in the research on women’s boxing. Boxing is a sport that quickly increases your strength and that makes a lot of use of strength in the arms, which is often less focussed on in sports popular by women. It will be interesting to see if the women see this gaining of strength as a form of empowerment and physical activism.

This physical activism is closely related to the ideas of Shaw (1999; 2006). Shaw states that empowerment is connected with the concept of resistance. Shaw looked a lot into the combination of leisure activities and empowerment. Leisure can be resistance when the activity is not conforming the prevailing social norms. As Welker (2015) describes this perfectly:

“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 societal 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.” (p. 9).

One could say that the women attending the boxing classes are showing resistance since they are going in against the socially constructed beliefs that exist about boxing. They are doing a sport that is outside the general social norm for girls. This way boxing could be empowering for women since they develop strength but also since they show resistance against the social norms by participating in this sport.

Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) agree with the importance of women to develop physical strength but they also state that this strength does not automatically result in empowerment. They argue that women can be physically empowered through sport but that this is not necessarily also a mental empowerment. They state that physical development has to be accompanied by mental development ('feminist consciousness') to achieve empowerment. Therefore, this study will not only look at the physical empowerment but also at the mental empowerment through boxing.

Mental empowerment

Within personal empowerment, different components have been conceptualised. According to Rowlands (1995) there exist, among others, a *power within* and a *power with* when looking at empowerment. *Power within* is the personal empowerment of people in which they develop their own confidence and capacities to change and gain control over their own lives. *Power with*, on the other hand, is collective empowerment in which people work together to achieve something with a large impact, for instance changes in gender relations or political structures.

This distinction between personal (*power within*) and collective empowerment (*power with*) is made by many different researchers. This research will focus on the power within, the mental empowerment of the girls attending the boxing training. This choice is made since 'power with' often takes a long time to develop and cannot be measured in such a short period of time. Mental empowerment is required to be able to change power relations. By gaining more power within, women can recognize inequalities in their daily lives and therefore start a collective action. Since this collective empowerment starts with personal empowerment, this research will look at the personal empowerment of these girls, which eventually can lead to collective empowerment of the whole community, if exercised in the right way.

Measuring empowerment

Since empowerment is already an difficult term to get a grip on, it is even more difficult to measure it. I have chosen to conduct this study in a qualitative manner, I made this choice due to several reasons that will be explained underneath.

To start, the combination of a qualitative and explorative study design is an useful way to get insights in topics of which little is known yet, as is the case in this research. Women's boxing is a new and upcoming phenomenon and the combination of physical activity in general (and especially in women's boxing) and empowerment is a little researched area within the social sciences.

Next to this, a qualitative study design gives the opportunity to produce very detailed descriptions of the current situation and the feelings, opinions and experiences of the participants. This is an important notion within this research. The research focusses on the *experiences* of personal and physical empowerment of the women attending the women-only boxing classes. Experiences are difficult to capture in a quantitative scale that can be used for everyone. Every person is unique and experiences things different. It is important to clarify that this research does not focus on the fact *if* the women are empowered but that it only focuses on their *experiences* of empowerment. There can be a difference between the two but in this research the

experience is considered the most important factor in empowerment since people are only empowered when they experience it this way. Carter et al. (2014) have written an extensive article about the reasons to not only use quantitative data in research about empowerment and mention the usefulness of qualitative data;

“Approaches that focus on story-telling, life histories and other narrative methods can render visible the otherwise ‘unmeasured spheres of gender (in)equality and women’s (dis)empowerment’.” (Carter et al, 2014; mentioning of McIntyre et al, 2013, p. 343).

“Open-ended research methods which can capture a broad range of outcomes (expected and unexpected) clearly have an important role when monitoring and evaluating projects aiming to support women’s empowerment.” (Carter et al, 2014, p. 343)

As said, this research focusses on the ‘power within’ of Rowlands as a way to look at personal empowerment of the women. In Carter’s article Rowlands’ different forms of power are also mentioned. Carter (2014) states that ‘power to’ is a power that can be measured by quantitative methods (for instance by measuring the numbers of people trained in a certain skill), but that ‘power within’ is another area of empowerment in which quantitative methods are not the most suitable;

“However, ‘power-within’ is a realm of empowerment which does not directly lend itself to being captured by quantitative M&E methods” (Carter et al, 2014, p. 341).

Lastly, the qualitative design is also helpful in this study since this is a flexible study design, it gives the opportunity to the interviewee to bring up important topics and to give a deeper insight in her feelings and life. When new topics are mentioned by the interviewees or come to the front during the observations, the flexibility of the study design offers the opportunity to, if needed, adapt the interviews during the research (Rashan, 2016).

Concluding, the qualitative research design is chosen since it is hard to put a number on the subjects that are studied. The experience of increased confidence, empowerment, and personal impact of joining the boxing programme, are all aspects that are studied in this research. These experiences will be captured best by conducting a qualitative study.

Theoretical model

A salutogenic approach towards health

As can be seen, boxing can play a role in the development of physical health and maybe mental health as well. In the end the goal of this research is to see if women’s boxing can play a role in not only physical but also mental health promotion and prevention. To research this I will start with a broad perspective towards health promotion; salutogenesis. This perspective will function as a way to look at boxing in a broader health context and to see if and in what manner health promotion is achieved.

To understand better if health promotion is reached I look at the salutogenic approach towards health, developed by Antonovsky. This approach focusses not on diseases and how they emerge (pathogenesis) but on the basis of health and quality of life (Vaandrager & Koelen, 2011). He states that the criteria of health are the existing resources and how people work with these resources. Furthermore he mentions

that, especially when talking about health promotion, it is too limited to focus on disease trends (Quennerstedt, 2008).

In accordance with the goal of the project and this research, Antonovsky widens the concept of health and states that it is not about the individual but that it is a socio-cultural aspect; health as a relation between the individual and his (social) environment (Quennerstedt, 2008). Quennerstedt (2008) even mentions the interest in further research towards the relationship between physical education and empowerment as an aspect of a salutogenic approach towards health;

“For example, with reference to McCaughy and Rovegno (2001) and Quennerstedt (2006), it would be interesting to further develop the discussion about the relationship between physical education and health in terms of learning, empowerment, self-understanding or joy in movement as potential health resources in physical activities.”
(p. 278)

Quennerstedt (2008, p. 280) continues with another important aspect of the research and the project; the salutogenic approach towards health also consists of talking about questions about gender and the body;

“This also means that a salutogenic approach regards questions of gender, body, ethnicity or social class as important health issues to be addressed in physical education...”

All in all, the salutogenic approach is an interesting but foremost important way to look the development of health in individuals and the population as a whole. The YBW project is not only focussed on making the participants physically healthy but also mentally. This is not only done by the physical exercise of boxing but also by building a community with the group of girls that are attending the trainings and talking with them about things that young women encounter in their life. Therefore I approach health as not only formed by the individual but by his (social) environment and relations. This viewpoint will be further explained in the part on relational sociology at the end of this chapter.

Relational sociology

Next to the relationship between boxing and health, it is important for this research to dive further into empowerment and how boxing can contribute to this. Empowerment is a term that has a lot to do with social interactions of persons. It is about the way a person interacts with other social actors, also empowerment can be formed or developed by social interactions.

In this research I will therefore take social interactions into account as an important factor of change and a way to achieve an higher level of health and empowerment. An theory that gives great importance to social interactions is ‘relational sociology’. This theory is therefore used to construct the theoretical model of this research. Relational sociology is a theory that does not focus on the person itself as an object of sociology but on the relations between these persons (Donati, 2010). It focusses on interactions, social relations and networks between people (Crossley, 2015).

According the relational sociology, humans are shaped by their interactions. In my research I will focus strongly on these interactions. I do not only look at the interactions between the participants, but also on the interactions of the participant with her own body and mind and how this can change the behaviour towards others. My theory is that the participants are able to develop their personal empowerment further

due to the different interactions they have because they participate in the boxing classes. These interactions are for instance talking with other persons, training with different people and also having a different interaction with your own body. In the next part the theoretical model is explained in which these interactions are also visible.

Theoretical model

In this research the concepts of ‘physical feminism’ and ‘power within’ are important. For the theoretical model we start with the participant. The participant in the boxing project encounters two sorts of activities; the boxing and the conversations. The developed empirical model (figure 1) states that these activities have an effect on the physical and/or mental development of the participant. The physical development due to the boxing trainings leads to a stronger body, which in turn can lead to an experience of physical feminism. Both the boxing and the conversations can lead to mental changes and development that can lead to higher experiences of ‘power within’.

For this research this relation between physical and mental changes is important since the research focusses on the combination of sport (and the change of body that accompanies this sport) and talking to gain or enhance empowerment. The combination of this physical and mental empowerment can lead to a higher experience of personal empowerment within the participant.

In figure 1 some words are bold and underlined, this are situations in which the participant encounters interactions. As could be seen from the part on ‘relational sociology’; the development of a person is mainly due to its interactions with the social surrounding and with itself. During the boxing and the conversation the participant interacts with the other participants and the trainer. The boxing can also lead to other interactions of the participant with the world outside the boxing class. ‘Changing body’ and ‘changing mind’ are underlined since the participants can also encounter interactions with itself. Within interactions the body and the mind are important. When the body is changing the interaction of the participant can change, not only the interaction with other social actors but also the interaction within the person itself. The same is true for the mind, the participant can interact with herself and her thoughts, this can lead to other interactions with the outside world.

The interactions and relationships of the participants are observed and questioned during the research. The social relationships with family and friends are questioned and the changes when they started boxing. Furthermore the relationships within the boxing group are questioned and observed. Lastly, the relationship with the own body and mind and mainly the physical and mental changes encountered have been discussed with the participant.

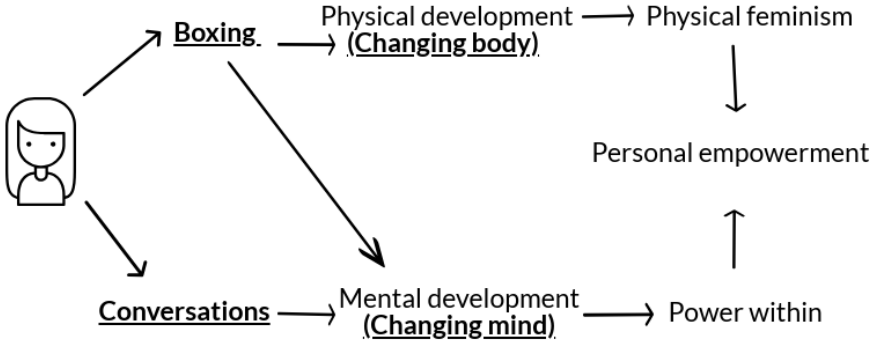


Figure 1 Theoretical model

Chapter 3 Methods

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” (Cameron, 1963, p. 13)

For this research a qualitative, explorative study is conducted. This research is established by the use of mixed methods; literature research, field observations, semi-structured interviews and group conversations. In total I have conducted 13 weeks of field research in several different locations and with different women boxing groups (all participating within the YBW project) in Perth within the months April, May and June 2018. In the 13 weeks of the fieldwork there was a two week school holiday in which only the trainings at one location continued.

Methods

For this research I conducted observations, semi-structured interviews, group conversations and questions sent by email. According to Simon (2011) there are two main roles possible for a researcher during qualitative research; the emic and the etic role. The etic role sees the researcher as an outsider, an observer. The emic role is the researcher as an insider, a full participant in the program. The emic and etic role are the two extremes of a continuum. For this research my role as research differed between the etic and the emic role. At one location I was constantly doing participating observations, at other locations I conducted both participating and naturalistic observations. This change of the role of the researcher has contributed to the research since a wide variety of data is collected and a mixed methods approach of qualitative data is conducted.

I attended the project during school term 2, in this period the continuous programme was running at three locations. These trainings have all been visited almost every week. Since on Thursdays two trainings are at the same time, every week a choice was made by me between these locations, the choice was mainly dependent on the possibility to do an interview before one of the classes.

The original idea for the research was to conduct the study mainly at the school programmes. The school programmes are good possibilities to do measurements since the participants start with no boxing experience. Therefore it is better to notice differences the participants experience. Unfortunately there was only one school programme running in school term 2 and this school was too far to reach often. This caused a change in research design and I have chosen to focus on the continuous programmes instead and to do more in-depth interviews.

Literature research

As start of the research and to gain more knowledge on the research topic, I have conducted a literature research with the focus on a few major themes within this research; (1) scientific articles on empowerment, physical as well as personal, (2) articles about women and physical activity, and women’s boxing in particular and lastly (3) articles on health and health promotion, this consisted of mental and physical health and the salutogenic approach of health.

These articles have proven to be an important basis to start my research. I encountered that empowerment was the most difficult aspect to do a literature research about since the term is often vague and a lot of

scientific articles within a wide range of academic areas have been written about this subject. Therefore, it was necessary to make choices within this subject since not every viewpoint and description could be mentioned.

Observations

In the beginning of the research I have only done observations. If the number of participants was even I did not join the boxing class and I conducted naturalistic observations, when the number of participants was uneven I joined the class and conducted participating observations. The only exception for this manner of observing was the at the oldest group, where I participated in every lesson. This decision was caused by circumstances; since most of the girls are around my age it felt unnatural to only observe the trainings. When conducting participant observation it was important for me to not become too involved, to be able to prevent bias as good as possible (McLeod, 2015). This proved to be difficult but I always kept this in mind. Sometimes I was invited to join certain activities outside the boxing programme, but I decided to keep my attendance in these outside activities low to prevent becoming too involved with the participants I was studying.

I collected the data of the observations by event sampling. During the first observations I have decided which 'events' I considered to be important to observe for this research. I have carefully observed these events, the other activities (non-events) are left outside the observation or have been observed less intense. I have decided to mainly focus on events that consist of interaction with others. The talk at the end was an important event for me to observe, also the duo boxing exercises were important. Aspects such as strength exercises have proven to be of less relevance since the participants are not, or little, interacting with each other. The only non-interacting aspect I did observe more intense was the shadow boxing. I have made this choice since shadow boxing shows how confident the participants are, not only about their boxing skills but also in general. It is a bit like dancing or singing, confidence is almost as important as your real skills. By choosing the events I have tried to pick the events in which confidence, interaction and in the end empowerment could come to the front while doing the practice.

Semi-structured interviews

Next to observations I have conducted semi-structured interviews. Carefully designed topics and questions were offered to the interviewee to get an overview of his/her ideas and opinions. To start the interviews, I made a list of topics and questions beforehand. During the first observation-period of two weeks I have added topics to this list to achieve an interview guide that was focussed on this project and the exercises and events in particular, and on the experiences of the interviewees. This interview guide can be found in annex 1 of this thesis. I conducted the interviews in a flexible way to give the interviewees the opportunity to add topics during the interview which they consider to be important for the subject.

Before the start of my research my idea was to start with broad interviews with most of the participants, in which I would ask them general questions. Due to small talk and the chat this was not necessary. Therefore I could immediately conduct longer interviews with the individual participants. The interview was constructed in this way to not steer them directly towards empowerment but to first let them come up with their own ideas about the mental and physical change that this project has caused. By using this approach question-order bias towards empowerment has tried to be avoided.

The semi-structured interviews are only conducted within the participants of the oldest group. The reason for this was twofold; in the beginning of my research there was a holiday break in which only this training continued. I quickly got to know the girls of this group better and I had more spare time to start conducting my first interviews. Secondly, this is the group that consists of the oldest girls and the project runs the longest in this location. Furthermore some of the women are 'deeper' involved than only participating in the training, they are for instance involved in the social media or they give some of the trainings themselves. Lastly, there was also a practical reason for this choice; the girls could come earlier to the location of the boxing session (where I held the interviews before the boxing session started) by themselves. Perth is a very car-minded and spread out city, so often the younger girls were brought by their parents, for these older girls it was easier to meet me for an interview since they had their own car or they could use public transportation on their own. A total of ten girls have been interviewed in this semi-structured manner. Next to this the founder of the project, Lisa Longman has been interviewed. To get more information in an informal manner, three group conversations have been conducted as well. One with older girls, one with younger girls and one with the three trainers of the project. These group conversations were structured around some main topics of my research. This group conversations have proven to be useful since the connection and relationship within the group is made clearer, furthermore the participants are discussing topics with each other which often created useful information. Lastly, this was an useful way to also get some insight in the opinions of the younger girls, since it was not possible to conduct personal interview with them.

Questions by email

I have also sent some girls questions by email. This is mainly done since, as said, the participants or myself could not reach the location on our own, and therefore could not make an appointment for an interview. Some of these girls have been sent a list of questions to fill in at home and send back to me. This gives of course less depth to the answers since you cannot ask further on certain things they have mentioned, nevertheless it turned out to be a good manner to also ask opinions of the girls who join in at other locations. In total four lists of questions have filled in by different girls via the email. The list of questions is attached in annex 2. Lisa also send an email to all the participants to ask them to fill in some questions for my research, unfortunately there was no response to this email.

Unstructured conversations

During the research I had a lot of unstructured conversations that still could be useful for the continuation and the depth of my research. Lisa often picked me up from my house and/or dropped me off after the training. During this moments we talked often about the training or the project in general. These moment were valuable for the research since they provided more depth and background towards the intentions and the history of the project.

Ethical issues

Several ethical issues have been taken into consideration while conducting the research, especially since younger people are part of the research and since they can have experienced bad things in the past or to this day. In the beginning of the research, and a few times in between, I have told the girls the reason why I attended the trainings and that they could come to me if they had any questions regarding my research. For the YBWP all the participants have already filled in a consent form. At the beginning of the interviews the interviewee is asked if it is all right for them to record the interview, and there is mentioned that they

will remain anonymous in the research paper. Their participation was always voluntary and they could withdraw at any moment. Next to the names of the participants, also the specific locations of the trainings are not mentioned in this paper. This is also for the sake of anonymity of the participants.

It is possible that the reason for some women to go boxing is that they have experienced bad things in the past. Therefore the interviews will be conducted in a safe and comforting environment where they feel at ease. I chose to conduct most of the interviews at the PCYC, the place where the boxing sessions are given. I did this because of convenience and because the women already know this place I hoped that they therefore also felt at ease in this area. The participants could always choose not to tell things or to tell them globally and, if needed, aftercare could be provided to the participants. This has not been needed during the research.

Sampling

Study population

The study population are women who attend in women-only boxing classes. It is difficult to generalise the results since this boxing project is unique in his way of combining the training with a chat afterwards. Nevertheless, I have tried to make this generalisation more possible by asking certain questions during the interview that focus on boxing in general and questions that make a distinction between the training and the chat.

Study sample

For this study the study sample were all the young women who participated in the boxing project during my fieldwork. I observed all the participants that were present at the moment of my participation. I did not have the possibilities to interview every participant due to time and transport limitations. For this reason I had to make choices for my study sample regarding the semi-structured interviews. In choosing the interviewees I tried to get the study sample of the interviewees as diverse as possible. This succeeded since the group consisted of people who participated with the project for a long time, or just started, women from university, high school and who were working and from different backgrounds.

Sampling method

The sampling method for this research is a combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling is done since most of the interviewees have been conducted with older participants, this is done since they could reach the interview location on their own, without help of their parents. Next to this, purposive sampling is done to get the study sample of the interviewees. I have tried to interview women with different stories and therefore I chose the women I interviewed on purpose. I wanted to have stories of trainers, the founder, peer mentors, 'normal' participants, people who participated for a long time or for a short time and people who are working, attending higher education and who are at high school. Due to this form of sampling I have attained a wide range of interviewees.

Data analysis

For the data analysis I had data from the observations, the transcripts of the interviews and the answers on the questions sent by email. First of all, I started coding the interviews. This was done by first developing a storyline; I wrote a paragraph on the most important things of the interviews and the story that I wanted to tell the reader of my thesis. I have used a hybrid coding method, by using a pre-set list of coding words

but at the same time remain open for other emerging codes. The pre-set list was derived from concepts of the conceptual framework and the research questions. The emergent codes were constantly shifting and added to the list due to new interviews and stories. After the first three interviews I set up the basis of my coding list and I coded these interviews. By setting up a coding list after a few interviews I had an idea about the stories the girls told and I could make a valuable list of main codes. By immediately afterwards coding these interviews I could check if all their stories came to the front by using these codes. When I coded an interview, I put all the quotes related to a certain code in a list, this way I got a list of the quotes from different interviews on one topic, which made it easier to write the analytical chapters.

Chapter 4 Motivation

To start the result section of this thesis I will begin at the moment that the girls have started attending the programme. All the girls have started the project at different moment and had different motivations to join and to keep coming to the trainings. This first analytical chapter will describe the background of the boxing women and their motivations to join to answer the first sub research question: *“What are reasons for women to attend women-only boxing classes, physical as well as psychological?”*.

Background

The information underneath is specifically about the girls that have been interviewed. Most of the girls go to university, some are already working, one is in her last year of high school. All the girls come from supporting families, by none of the interviewees the parents were against the fact that they started boxing. The parents of the girls all seemed to be enthusiast about the fact that their daughter started boxing, although sometimes they were a bit concerned about the safety. The sport background of the girls is very diverse, some had done several different sports for all their lives, for others their only workout was to dance at parties. Nevertheless, for all of them the trainings showed to be challenging and made them stronger.

Start

Most of the interviewed girls have been boxing for around a year, three of them have been attending the training already from the beginning of the project, two years ago. Almost all the girls came in contact with the programme via face-to-face contact with someone who was already joining the project. In most cases this was a friend, but other mentions where via her sister, roommate at a conference or at an arts festival. Most of the girls are trying to attend all the trainings, or at least one per week. The motivations to start with the project are different for all of the girls. The reasons mentioned are; being sick of studying, to have a form of stress relief, making new friends, getting stronger, to feel powerful, to have a routine and for physical and mental health. As can be seen the motivations for the girls to start the programme are very diverse, but all mainly focussed on personal improvement. It is notable that none of the girls only had physical reasons to start with the boxing. Sometimes there was a combination of physical and mental reasons. Most of the reasons mentioned can be considered more psychological and to get more grip or routine in their life.

Motivation

The motivations to start often showed to be different than the motivations to continue with the programme. The reasons to continue often showed to be mainly caused by the social environment.

“When I first started it was just me, me, me. But now I really enjoy seeing how it can help other girls as well and meeting the people that come to the boxing as well.” – interview participant 1

“What motivates you to keep going to the training?” “Definitely the girls, love all the people here...” – interview participant 4

All the girls mentioned that the group of friends they have made by joining the project is one of the most important reasons for them to keep coming to the trainings. Also the environment as a whole was

mentioned, the fact that it felt like a safe place for the girls and that they could train with other girls without judgement showed to be an important factor in their continuation of the trainings.

“In a lot of gym environments I feel like it is very like, you want to be the fittest and strongest, you don’t want people to look at you. so, here I don’t really feel that way. So that is probably why I have stuck to this programme so much.” – interview participant 5

*“Well, I think like boxing is a really cool sport. I like the female aspect, it is really interesting to me because I am very self-conscious so whenever I go to the gym or workout in public it is really awkward for me. So being around just women is really just a safe space to just, you don’t have to feel embarrassed because everyone is comfortable.”
– interview participant 9*

These feelings of a safe space and a good, comfortable environment to sport were also noticeable during the observations. The girls were laughing and looked comfortable with each other. I also felt this within myself, at a certain moment my eye was infected and very red, I did not feel comfortable to go outside the house. The only places I felt at ease and not judged were at home and at the boxing class. This comfort was also noticeable in the way the girls dressed during the trainings, especially compared to general gym environments. In most gyms everyone is trying to look their best and is wearing the newest and most fancy and flashy sport clothes. During the boxing trainings of the YBWP the girls were often wearing an old t-shirt, they did not try to show off by the clothes they were wearing. They also seemed comfortable with themselves and their bodies since most of them did not try to cover certain parts of their body. Girls were for instance only wearing shorts and a sports bra, they did not hide their bodies. It is noticeable that the more regular girls and the trainers are showing most of their body, this way they are setting the trend for the other girls to not hide their bodies and to be proud of it whatever shape it is.

Also, when new girls entered the classes the trainer tried to make them feel at ease within the group. The other girls had to introduce themselves to the new girls and some easy, social questions were asked to them to let them talk a bit about themselves and to make them feel a bit more relaxed from the start. Furthermore, the trainer often trained together with the new girls, for instance by holding pads for them, to make them feel more relaxed and to teach them the first basic techniques. This way the new girls are immediately involved within the group and they get more confidence in their boxing skills right away. These aspects contribute to the feelings of being comfortable and having a safe space to work out.

Conclusion

The girls attending the boxing classes had a diverse range of reasons to start with the boxing trainings. Most of the reasons to start are focussed on personal improvement. It is interesting to notice that they never had only physical reasons to start, non-physical reasons were mentioned by all of the girls. These often have to do with personal health or getting grip on life. The change in motivation is another interesting aspect to notice. At the start the girls are mainly focussed on personal development but the reason to keep coming to the trainings is the social environment in which they are working out.

Chapter 5 Physical changes

The main part of this research is about empowerment. Since this subject is big and hard to grasp first of all I look at the changes the participants encountered by starting to do boxing. This chapter therefore focusses on the physical changes the participants encountered when they started boxing. The next chapter will focus on the mental changes. Although physical and mental development and changes are closely related I have chosen to split them in two chapters for a clearer analyses. Within these different changes often signs of empowerment can be distilled, this will be mentioned more extensively in chapter 7 on empowerment.

In this chapter the second research question will be answered: *To what extent and how do the women attending boxing classes experience physical changes?* First I focus on the experienced changes, these are the changes the participants mentioned in the interviews. The part afterwards is about the changes in the girls that I have observed during the trainings.

Experienced changes

All the interviewed participants mentioned that they have become stronger or fitter by joining the programme. There is a big physical aspect in boxing, which is also mentioned a lot by the interviewees; they mention that their stamina, body strength, and their overall fitness has improved.

“And you get stronger every time and your stamina improves, and your cardio. So everything about it is just improving yourself.” – interview participant 10

“Because boxing twice a week is exactly what I needed for my physical health, so that is really nice.” – interview participant 6

Often they said that they maybe could not see the change from the outside, but that they felt the change within their bodies or could notice it because of other measurements, for instance because they had more endurance or because the trainings became easier for them. The fact that they feel it in their bodies even though they might not see the change in the mirror shows a mental awareness of their bodies of not only being led by their body image but as well to focus on their internal feelings within their bodies.

“Physically I have become a lot fitter. I wouldn’t say I have changed, in terms of how I look. But my fitness is improved....” – interview participant 1

“I feel like I have gotten stronger, not necessarily like that my body changed at all, but I just feel stronger...like a bit more confident” – participant 5 during group conversation

Next to the direct changes in their physique or endurance, some of the participants also mentioned changes in their physical movements, behaviours or appearance outside the boxing classes. Some of them mentioned that knowing that they are stronger makes them feel more confident when they are walking outside. It was often mentioned that this made them feel more powerful and more secure. These feelings of power do not only have to be caused by the fact that they are stronger physically, but according to the interviews this has been a contributing factor to it. One important factor that has contributed to these improved feelings of confidence is the fact that most of the participants felt more capable to defend themselves. Even though self-defence is not the main aim of the project or of learning boxing in general,

many of them mentioned this as a positive outcome since it made them feel more secure to go outside or to different places.

“I am not as afraid for it anymore because I know that there is a little bit of strength that will help. So I feel better.” – interview participant 4

“But I think feeling a lot more powerful and stuff, I also suffered from PTSD from an assault. So feeling more like I can defend myself and that I have presence and that that is a good thing. That has been really important to me. No longer be scared to go into a public bathroom or walk somewhere. I feel a lot tougher and more confident.” – interview participant 5

These experiences of power or feeling stronger are closely related to the topic of physical confidence. This is a physical change that was mentioned by many of the participants. Confidence is a dual term in the sense that it can be seen in the way you carry yourself and show yourself to the world; the physical appearance of your confidence. The other side is confidence in the mental sense; feelings and ideas of confidence within a person that might not been shown to the outside world, which will be discussed in the next chapter about the mental changes. Although this dualistic nature of confidence can make it harder to distinguish the form of confidence that is encountered, the citations shown underneath clearly show that these participants gained or showed more confidence due to their changed physique.

“... and you feel more confident in your own body because you feel stronger and you feel better about yourself” – interview participant 2

“I have become, I don’t know if this is the word but I think I have become a lot more body positive, and I think I have become more confident in the way I walk and carry myself.” – interview participant 1

This physical change is closely related to one of the main goals, and the main slogan of the YBWP namely; Claim Your Space. One of the most important goals of the YBWP is that the young women are learning to claim their physical and social space in this world and to not be overruled by men or older people. To show yourself to the outside world and be confident in what you are capable of and not say sorry when something is not your fault. But also to claim your physical space, so that you are walking with confidence and to take up the space you need. This slogan and underlying meaning showed to be of great importance, some of the participants even specifically mentioned the physical power and assertiveness they got from this slogan;

“I am probably more assertive, I mean I always was kind of assertive, but assertive intellectually, not assertive physically. So, when I walk into a room now I walk in with a lot more confidence and I am a lot more grounded. And much more aware of my physical space and the space that I take up, I am much more confident in taking up that space as well.” – interview participant 6

“I love the whole ‘claim your space’-thing. I think that is a really good like catch phrase for the group. Because that is really how it makes you feel. It just makes you feel like you can do anything...” – interview participant 9

The boxing also has a positive secondary health effects on the participants; that they take better care for themselves and are eating healthier. Furthermore, all the participants became more active, not only due to

the fact that they are boxing at the boxing project. Most of them have also started participating in another sport since they have started boxing because they (re)discovered the positive aspects of exercising.

Observed changes

During the observations of the trainings these changes were also visible, first of all I saw some girls getting stronger during the few weeks I was observing them. This was especially the case in the newest group. Some of the girls who were joining were very unfit at the moment they started the boxing training, therefore the changes in these participants were most noticeable. After a few trainings I saw their endurance going up and they also became more motivated to train, probably because it was more fun to do since they were getting stronger. Also the physical confidence was noticeable at most of the participants in the groups. When participants came in, especially when it was one of the first times they joined a training, they were shy and often standing in a closed position, for instance by crossing their arms. After the training and also after they came for a few times they opened up more, their shoulders were back, they laughed with the other girls and entered the room with more confidence. There are several possible reasons for this behavioural change, next to the physical changes. One of the main possible reasons is that they know the group members better and they start to know the environment but also that they know they are capable and that they feel more secure about their boxing skills.

As can be seen there are several possibilities for the change in physique. Therefore it is not possible to say with full certainty that this physical change in appearance is caused by the boxing. But since the observed changes correspond with the changes mentioned in the interviews changes are high that boxing changed the physique of the participants. The fact that they feel more physical confident outside the boxing classes is the most important physical change encountered by the participation in boxing.

Conclusion

To conclude, when looking at the physical changes that the participants encountered we can state that there are three main, closely connected, ways in which most of the participants have noticed a difference in their physical state. The main and most direct physical difference is that they feel fitter and stronger. These experiences have caused two other changes that are closely related to each other; feeling more powerful and showing more confidence. These experienced changes could also be observed during the trainings, they were noticeably stronger and more physically confident.

Chapter 6 Mental changes

The participants were not only interviewed about their physical changes but also about the mental changes they have noticed by starting the boxing sessions. For many of the participants this was a difficult question, not only because mental changes are often harder to notice than physical changes but also because most of the girls started boxing at a significant moment in their lives. Some started boxing at the same time they started university or working, others began with the trainings when they were on a very low point in their mental health situation. Due to these particular moments in their lives it was often harder for them to distinguish their mental changes and especially if they are caused by the boxing or by one of the other changing moments in their lives.

“Yeah, I feel it is definitely hard to distinguish if it is like this programme, or this degree, or this move to Perth because they all happened at the exact same time, but I think like the friends I have, the boxing girls and especially talking about some of the stuff they have done and their views on different things.” – interview participant 4

Mental health

A lot of the interviewees mentioned that they found it hard to distinguish the cause of their mental changes. However, for some of the girls it appeared to be clearer that the changes they encountered were caused by the boxing programme. This was mainly the case with the participants that were in a difficult mental health situation when they started joining the programme. For these girls in particular the boxing classes appeared to be a very important factor in their lives to make their mental health stronger or to keep themselves mentally healthy.

“And making it a regular thing is important for me. It makes me feel great. And particular highlighting my mental health as well, as the same is for my friend, she is having a hard time mentally and still she is coming and that is incredible. Because we both feel like this is benefitting our body and brain, those intersect a lot.” – interview participant 8

“So yeah, I definitely think that without boxing I wouldn’t have been six months sober. I think this has helped me a lot, and with all my other mental illnesses and stuff. If you could have seen me this time last year, you would not recognise me, at all.” – interview participant 5

It is incredible to hear what a mental impact the boxing in some of these girls has made. They notice that their mental health is better when they go to the boxing classes and that it worsens when they do not go. The feelings of achieving something, becoming better and the endorphins that are released during the boxing makes them happier and feeling better about themselves. Sometimes I observed during a training that they were not feeling very well when they arrived. They were for instance sitting in the corner or were very busy on their phone. When they started boxing they seemed to forget all of this and started smiling again. This mental change is probably not only caused by the boxing but also because of the social environment.

Confidence

As mentioned above in the physical changes, confidence can, next to a physical change, also be a mental change which is more related to the feelings of confidence within a person. This confidence within the participants is also mentioned a few times during the interviews. Not only the boxing, but also the chat seemed to make a contribution in these feelings of confidence. For one of the trainers the confidence did not come from the boxing or the chat in particular but it was more due to the feeling that she was helping the other girls in becoming the best versions of themselves and making an improvement in their lives. This shows the importance of social bonds and the feelings of accomplishment to gain confidence.

"I find that very helpful since you have a constant reminder to be confident. Because even if you know it, you kind of forget after a while, you stop fighting and you stop trying. But if you have that reminder every week it is really good to make sure that you stand up for yourself." – interview participant 1

"So yeah in that way, it made me feel more confident in knowing that I can be a part of something and make it successful." – interview participant 2

"Yeah, I definitely think that boxing in general has made me a lot more confident, just like as a woman in life." – interview participant 3

Next to general confidence several participants also mentioned body confidence as a specific mental change they have encountered when they started with the programme. The girls in the class all have different body shapes and during the trainings I already noticed that they do not seem to worry about this. No one is judged because of her body and everyone is wearing what they want to wear, not hiding certain parts of their bodies. This body confidence in some of the participants also showed to have consequences for the other participants. It was mentioned that they felt less insecure about their bodies because everyone else in the group felt comfortable in their body. Furthermore, it sparked the realisation that looks do not show what a person is capable of, for instance there are many different body types that can all be very strong. The general atmosphere within the group and the body positive behaviour of a few participants made the whole group open up more, being more secure about their bodies and not trying to hide their body in some way.

"I have become, I don't know if this is the word but I think I have become a lot more body positive, and I think I have become more confident in the way I walk and carry myself." – interview participant 1

"So, I definitely learned how to love myself better...that sounds so lame, but I do, I feel like okay with the way I see myself physically and if I don't see progress it doesn't mean that it is not happening." Interview participant 4

This body positiveness was for instance very noticeable during a special '80's-training' the trainer had organised. She motivated everyone to wear 80's-inspired outfits, a few girls showed up in very tight bright neon clothes and bathing suits. The atmosphere was very positive and the more 'daring' someone dressed the more compliments they got. This shows again the positive environment within this group and the body positiveness.

Conclusion

Overall three main mental changes mentioned by the interviewees can be distinguished; being more body positive, having more mental confidence and an improvement of their overall mental health. Most of these mental changes are caused by a combination of the boxing, the chat and the social environment in which the trainings are given. These changes could be observed by their confidence to wear whatever they want and the positive mood difference between before and after the training.

Chapter 7 Empowerment

The main focus of this research is the relationship of women-only boxing classes and empowerment. Empowerment can be a broad and intense term. Therefore, I asked the interviewees to describe empowerment themselves and to give characteristics of someone who is empowered, to get a better understanding of the way they see it. I will start with these descriptions to give an overview of what is considered empowerment by the participants. Afterwards I will focus on physical empowerment and power within in relation to the physical and mental changes discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter will answer the fourth research question; *'To what extent can mental and physical changes be seen as empowerment?'*

Empowerment; the term

When asked to describe the term empowerment, the ideas of the girls had a lot of similarities even though I asked the question in the individual interviews. There were three main characteristics that were mentioned to describe empowerment;

- To begin with, confidence. The girls often described empowerment as being confident and having confidence in yourself and your own capabilities.
- Taking up space, a form of this term was often mentioned when we were talking about empowerment. This not only consists of the physical appearance of having your shoulders back, but also for instance in daring to say things and letting people know that you have a voice.
- Building from within. Some of the girls mentioned that empowerment is something you always have inside you but that you have to work on it to show it to the outside world. Many of them mentioned that their environment had a big impact on how good they could work on their experienced empowerment.

I was very impressed by the answers given by the participants, the answers given were well thought off and showed that this is a concept that they already encountered in their lives and thought about.

It is interesting to see that all the three main characteristics in which they describe empowerment are changes that they have encountered when they have started boxing, as could be read in the previous two chapters. Especially the mental and physical confidence are two changes that the participants have encountered that now come back as a description of empowerment. 'Building from within' can be related to a higher mental health and the positive social environment in which they are training.

Next to this, it was good to notice that their idea of empowerment is closely related to how I describe the term in the conceptual framework of this thesis. This shows that they were on the same page as me when it comes to this concept, which made their answers on the next questions more useful.

Physical empowerment

Physical strength can be empowering for women. As can be seen in chapter 5 all the participants mentioned that their physique has changed since they have started boxing and that they have become stronger. During the fieldwork I also observed this in some girls, especially in the girls that began boxing during my fieldwork

period I noticed a rapid increase in strength and also in persistence to keep going and wanting to become stronger.

This physical change can be a contribution to experiencing more physical empowerment; experiencing more empowerment because you are stronger as a woman. During the interviews most of the participants mentioned that they felt more powerful or more empowered because they were stronger.

“Yes, absolutely, I think using your body in that way and building your fitness and strength is super empowering, because it gives you a feeling of physical empowerment because you feel stronger.” – interview participant 2

“Yes, I feel that boxing itself is very physical empowering and gives you strength and you feel more secure because you can kind of...even though it is not self-defence it does give you more confidence in that respect.” – interview participant ...

Also the way they describe this confidence is interesting. Again, they often talk about ‘claiming their space’, this shows the way in which they behave themselves and how they show their confidence in their daily lives; by letting their voice be heard and showing that they are important and that they do not make themselves smaller for someone else.

“Now I do boxing in other places as well, you know, in gyms for all genders. And don’t feeling like ‘oh I don’t belong here’, I walk in feeling like ‘fuck it, I box too, I am just as welcome here as anyone else’. So yeah, I think that is definitely a positive change as well, not even feeling welcome in that community but feeling that I don’t have to be welcome. Men don’t have to welcome me into their spaces to begin with. I can just do what I want.” – interview participant 5

The way in which they show their confidence could also be observed, for instance during the pad-work. One example stands out for me in this respect. A girl joined the boxing sessions after a few weeks into the school term, in the beginning she did not dare to really hit with power, she was walking with her shoulders in and she was apologizing every time she made a mistake. Already after a few lessons I could see her change before my eyes, when she came into the room she had more confidence. Her shoulders were more back, her punches became stronger and she did not seem to care if she made a mistake. Instead of saying sorry and saying that she cannot do it, she tried again to do it right this time. This is also the general change that Lisa notices in most of the girls she has trained with;

“...but yeah, I definitely see the changes and when they come in after a few weeks you see them taking up space. Literally they are taking up more space, their shoulders are back, they speak louder, they dare to speak to somebody else, when they punch you see them putting something behind it.” – interview Lisa

In general, one can state that the experienced physical empowerment in the participants definitely changed due to the fact that they started boxing. All the girls feel stronger and show physical signs of more confidence. In the interviews they mention that their gained strength is an important part of the confidence and empowerment they have gained.

Mental empowerment

Some of the mental changes that the participants encountered are closely related to the 'power within'. As was the case with the mental changes, the experienced 'power within' was difficult to distinguish for most of the girls. Therefore I will focus more on *if* the girls experienced more mental empowerment that necessarily of this is caused by the boxing.

Confidence is the mental change that is the closest related to mental empowerment. This change can be seen as a characteristic of empowerment, which is also described this way by the participants. All the girls felt confident and empowered within the boxing group and that social environment. In other aspects of their lives they sometimes felt more insecure or they had the feeling they still had to work on this. Many of the interviewed girls are in a transition period between university and starting to work, during the interviews it became clear that this transition was a tough one for many of them. They still felt insecure in the workplace or were trying to find their way in this world. Although they encounter these struggles, there is a main aspect which shows that they do have an high level of personal empowerment; they do not resign. They are all building on their empowerment in these other spaces instead of just resigning and leave it be. Their willingness to become better and to make themselves feel stronger and more empowered in other aspects of their lives already shows a sign of personal empowerment in itself.

"Ehm I am still working on my own empowerment, still working on being able to stand up for myself, speak up, I am getting better at it." – interview participant 8

"Yeah, it is like I keep saying therapeutic but it is empowering as well. So, it is hard to find a way to feel empowered in your day-to-day life, I think you have to work for that and figure out what works for you. So it is different in every part of my life, like boxing makes you feel tough and powerful and taking the train to work makes you feel sleepy haha." – interview participant 7

When looking at 'power within' the most important aspects are confidence and believe in their own capabilities and influence. By some of the participants it is mentioned that they feel more capable due to boxing, or that they feel like they can 'conquer the world' when they have finished a training.

"And the improved confidence like when you have a skill that you are good at...I don't know if I am good at boxing but it feels like you are improving so it feels like you are good in a skill I guess." – interview participant 10

"Yes definitely, there is a whole sense of like...I love the whole claim your space-thing. I think that is a really good like catch phrase for the group. Because that is really how it makes you feel. It just makes you feel like you can do anything you know." – interview participant 9

This is not only mentioned in combination with the boxing but also in general some participants show that they believe in their own capabilities.

"I do, I feel like, I do have the ability to do a lot of different things if I dedicated myself to it." – interview participant 3

The abovementioned experiences of 'power within' are the general experiences the participants have, not especially related to boxing. Although from the quotes it can already be seen that sometimes boxing has played a part in the general experienced mental empowerment in these participants.

Conclusion

Empowerment is described by the participants as; having confidence, taking up space and as something that comes from within and that has to be build from within. Furthermore they mention that the social environment is important in building personal empowerment. In the participants physical empowerment can be seen, the participants have become stronger and due to this change they feel more confident in taking up space. Also mental empowerment can be distinguish within the participants. They feel more confident and they do not resign. Also working on their skills and the feelings of being capable helped in developing their experienced mental empowerment. The physical and mental changes that have been analysed in the previous chapters shown to be closely related with the experienced personal empowerment within the participants.

Chapter 8 Contributors to empowerment

In the following chapter the last research question; ‘*What contributes to women’s experiences of empowerment?*’ will be answered. During the interviews I asked the girls where they thought their empowerment comes from and if boxing was an influence in this. I also asked them if they thought that their experienced empowerment could be more prescribed to the boxing or to the chat.

Combination of boxing and chat

To begin with, all the participants mentioned that coming to the boxing project has improved their experienced empowerment. Already soon into the interviews the positive effect of the holistic approach of this project came to the front. Most of the participants did not prescribe their improved empowerment to the boxing alone, but they mentioned that it was the combination of the boxing and the chat that make it such a powerful programme.

“I think it is both, because the boxing makes me feel more physically better, like I am probably fitter now than when I started and it keeps getting better and that is really encouraging, it makes you feel better to keep getting better. And the chatting as well it is, it is good for your mental health and your physical.” – interview participant 9

“Probably the feeling of physical empowerment itself, because as I said you really do feel powerful and like being able to do boxing a bit better now I feel like I am able to walk around feeling a bit tougher than I would usually but I think in combination with the chat afterwards I feel like it is not only a method for physical empowerment but for mental, and psychological empowerment as well. And in combination with that physical empowerment I feel like it is more than double times as good. I don’t want to feel just physically empowered I want to feel empowered psychologically and mentally as well.” – interview participant 7

This last quote corresponds almost exactly with the opinion of Castelnovo and Guthrie (1998) about physical empowerment; physical empowerment should be accompanied by mental development to achieve empowerment.

As we can see from the abovementioned quotes, the participants experience a relationship between the physical and mental empowerment that is also observed during the trainings. The combination of boxing and a chat afterwards has shown to be an important aspect of the project for most of the girls. This is probably caused by the fact that this combination touches upon both the physical and the mental empowerment of the girls and therefore creates a stronger base for the girls to develop themselves further.

Social environment

Next to the chatting and boxing, also the space in which the training is given is an important contributor to the perceived empowerment. The trainings are given in a positive, open-minded environment in which everyone can be herself and no one has to feel ashamed. The fact that the group is female-only was a very important contributor for many of the girls. They felt that the atmosphere was less judgemental and competitive due to this.

“It is a safe space to be physical with each other but because we are women, and the way we are brought up it is so important that we are okay with what we are doing and on an emotional level. Which is lacking in male dominated spaces, including the work space. So yes, the combination of the two for sure, and especially that it is a female only group.” – interview participant 8

Next to having only females participating, another characteristic of the groups at the YBWP is the peer-mentor approach. This means that the groups are always constructed in such a way that the age range is of girls within a transition period. For instance from primary school to high school (age group 10-15) or from high school to further education or work (age group 16-24). This is done on purpose so the older girls in the group can tell about their life experiences towards the younger girls. This contributes to the knowledge of the girls and it also enriches the conversations about the topics addressed since the groups, and therefore the conversations, are divers.

“And I feel like this discussion group is just really fantastic because it moves between these topics that are really present for us as young women in our twenties, and then it can move back to things that are affecting those who are younger than us but we have experienced that when we were younger and are reflecting on to that now when we are older. I think that is really great as well and healthy.” – interview participant 8

“...we don't really learn a lot about like feminist issues and stuff at school. So that's why I learned most of the stuff from the girls here, because they are all pretty much older than me, when I first started. They are all at uni, they have different experiences than me but it was just interesting to, like, be able to understand some current issues more.” – interview participant 10

The participants considered the group of girls as one of the most important reasons to keep coming back to the trainings and to stay motivated. The sense of community does not only contribute to the motivation to come but also to the motivation of the participants during the training. They are motivating each other in a positive manner. This has been observed in all the training groups. The girls are encouraging each other to keep going and the regular participants give advice to the newer people. Although everyone encourages each other to try their hardest, everyone can train on her own level and the reactions are supportive when someone needs a break or a sip of water in between. This supportiveness is not only seen during the boxing, but also during the chat. Another feature of the group that enhanced the joy to come was the absence of competitiveness. According to some this absence was mainly due to the absence of man. The girls did not feel that they were competing against each other or that they had to prove something to the others. The atmosphere is more focussed on doing this together and making sure everyone gets better and stronger instead of showing off. This made the girls feel more at ease and more willing to come to the trainings.

“...especially in the way we do it here because boxing is not a team sport but the way we do it, we make it like a team environment. It is not competitive, but you are kind of encouraged to go as hard as you can.” – interview participant 3

“Boxing is technically a solo sport, but it feels like a team sport when you are here because everyone is so involved in your workout and others people workout so it actually

feels like a team sport even though it is technically not. So the ideals of a team sport they are there and that is really nice.” – interview participant 6

Having a place to address topics of femininity, body and mind issues and being able to talk freely about this within a diverse and open-minded group of women has been a great contribution to the experienced mental empowerment of several participants. Also seeing other young women making the most of their lives, despite their struggles, makes for an inspiring environment. It was mentioned by a few of the participants that having a group of inspiring women around them already made them feel more empowered. They were also inspired to make more of their lives and to chase their dreams by seeing the women around them do the same.

“You never do something because you feel embarrassed or you want to prove something, competitive. You are doing it because the girls around you are so incredible empowering and supportive that you feel like you can do it. So it is like the least judgemental, least competitive space I have ever been in.” – interview participant 6

Boxing

A lot of the girls were talking about the endorphins and getting stronger as factors that have helped them in gaining more physical confidence. These factors are also achievable by doing other sports, therefore it is important to know if boxing in itself is the contributing factor in the experienced physical empowerment. Or could this be achieved by any kind of physical activity? Some of the interviewees mentioned that this effect could probably also be achieved by doing other sports.

“...so I think boxing as a sport definitely has the potential to empower, but I think personally most sport does.” – interview participant 1

“But this, even if it wasn’t boxing, even if it was like wrestling, just the female energy, laughter and joy.” – interview participant 8

Although some of the girls thought that this could also be achieved by other sports, most of the interviewees mentioned that there are certain characteristics for boxing in specific that made them feel it was even more empowering compared to other sports;

“Because I don’t think that you know, boxing gives you certain skills, but it is more like unlocking something inside of you. It is more about building that confidence rather than just be like, you know what I mean, you always kind of had that but you kind of unlock that and make it stronger. I feel like it is definitely empowering in that way. For some reason I feel like it is more than in other sports...” – interview participant 3

“So I feel like it is, it is very satisfying, it probably comes from some raw, animalistic place but you know it makes you feel about your body almost as a weapon. And that makes it, it is just a different way to look at your body, then previously. I am sure you get it from other sports but I definitely feel like it is very literal in boxing.” – interview participant 3

“...there is something about the power of like physically boxing, it’s like a release of endorphins, and it is really explosive, and there are so many things to be angry about and

this community and boxing is like getting it of your chest with a sane mind...” – interview participant 4

The pure, almost animalistic feeling you get from punching is an important characteristic of the sport to make it more powerful. Also, the explosiveness of the sport and how quick you can become stronger have shown to be reason why boxing can contribute more to physical empowerment within women. It is a sport in which a lot of upper body strength is required and where you don't have an 'attribute' such as a ball or a stick. These factors make the sport rawer, and still give it a more masculine feeling for a lot of people. The interviewees also mentioned this masculinity, but always in a positive way. Their friends think it is a 'cool' sport to do, especially as a girl. Being able to say that you do boxing as a girl and being proud of this also has shown to give a sense of social empowerment to the participants since they feel stronger by the opinion of their friends and family.

“But I also think that the way people talk about you and look to you when you say you box is different as well. So there is also a form of social empowerment.” - interview participant 1

“But I think it was definitely there and boxing is, even more, because it is such a cool sport, in that sense it is even more empowering.” – interview participant 1

Conclusion

A few contributors to the experiences of empowerment can be distinguished. First of all the combination of chatting and boxing appeared to be of great importance. For most of the girls it was not a case of either/or, but it is the combination that makes them coming back since in this way not only the physical empowerment but also the mental empowerment is targeted. Next to this the social environment plays a big part, they feel more empowered due to their environment during the trainings. It is a non-judgemental, safe space where all women are welcome and everyone can be herself. It is not only a group that is boxing together but a real community of people who are supporting and inspiring each other. Lastly the boxing, you can say that the physical empowerment can be achieved not only by doing boxing but can also be possible by doing other sports. Nevertheless, boxing brings a raw, animalistic and masculine vibe and has certain characteristics that can increase the experienced empowerment in women.

Chapter 9 Discussion

In this discussion I will interpret the main findings of this research, they will be analysed against the background of the theoretical model provided in chapter 2. I start this discussion with a look back at the aim of this research and the main findings. Afterwards I place the research in a broader perspective and analyse boxing as form of health promotion. Subsequently the strengths and limitations of this study are discussed. Lastly, I provide options for further research regarding this field of research.

Main findings

The aim of this study was to get insight in the contribution of boxing to the mental and physical empowerment of women. To be able to get this insight the sub-questions have been answered in the previous chapters. In this section I will discuss the results by focussing on the main findings of this research.

Physical empowerment caused by boxing

Starting boxing caused several changes in the participants. To start with the physical changes; all the girls mentioned that they have become stronger and fitter due to the boxing. This change in bodies turned for some of the participants into a change in behaviour. They are 'claiming their space' more; they take up more physical space. According to the theory of physical feminism, it is already a form of empowerment if a women gets physically stronger (McCaughney, 1997). When looking at physical feminism in this manner you can say that all the girls are physically empowered since they all mention that they have become physically stronger.

When looking at the data collected during my research I have not seen that physical strength on its own directly produced empowerment as is stated in the theory of physical feminism. It appeared to be that not the stronger body itself, but the behavioural change that follows the stronger body is the key to physical empowerment. The way in which a women walks around, shows confidence and claims her physical space is an manner in which you can more clearly see if someone shows empowerment. This 'claiming of space' was also mentioned by the participants as an important characteristic of empowerment. Having a stronger body and feeling physically fit can contribute to or enhance this behavioural change. This theory is in line with 'relational sociology'; the research has shown that the change towards a higher perceived physical empowerment comes from the interactions of the person with its environment, other people and with its changing body. If a body is strong but the behaviour and interactions do not show this, a person cannot be considered physically empowered in my opinion. This empowerment is shown by the interaction of the person with the outside world through behaviour and how this behaviour is received.

Another way in which the participants show physical empowerment is their resistance towards social norms. As mentioned by Shaw (1999; 2006), leisure can be a form of resistance when it is not in line with the social norms. Boxing is still a male-dominated sport, by participating in a sport that is not conform the social norms the girls show a form of resistance. This was especially noticeable in their interactions with others, for instance the reactions they got when they told their friends about boxing. This can again be related to 'relational sociology', since especially in this case they mainly feel empowered due to their social environment.

Mental empowerment caused by boxing

The mental changes caused by boxing is another important aspect of this research. This was harder to distinguish for the participants since they were often going through a transition period when they started boxing. Nevertheless, there were some mental changes that could be distinguished by the girls. A few of the participants have had problems with their mental health, these participants all mentioned that the trainings have been a great help in the improvement of their mental health. Furthermore the participants had more confidence and felt more body positive.

Within these mental changes some signs of empowerment can be distilled. The participants felt more confident, which has a positive effect on their mental empowerment. Having more confidence was also mentioned by the Rowlands (1995) and by the participants as an important factor of empowerment. Although the most of the participants felt more confident, they did not feel empowered in every aspect of their life. All the participants felt empowered during the boxing sessions and within the group of girls attending the boxing. The main life aspect in which they did not feel empowered was the working place. Nevertheless, a sign of personal empowerment within these girls is that they do not resign. They all try to work on building their empowerment in other aspects of their lives that they do not feel empowered in at this moment. This shows that they feel able to change the course of their life, which is an important contributor of empowerment according to Rowlands (1995).

Contributors to empowerment

A few important contributors to women's experiences of empowerment can be distinguished. First of all, the boxing itself. Boxing has certain characteristics that can make someone feel more empowered than other sports. It is a raw sport, which gives a sense of strength and masculinity, furthermore it is a skill-orientated sport. Building on these skills makes the participants feel more secure over their capabilities, which gives them more confidence in their daily lives.

Secondly, the combination of the chat and the boxing. During the interviews the girls indicated that it is the combination of having both the boxing and the chat that makes this programme not only unique but also powerful. The boxing contributes to both the physical and the mental empowerment whereas the chat focusses on the mental aspect in specific. This makes a stronger base for the development of the experienced empowerment within the participants. As shown in the conceptual framework and stated by Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998); physical empowerment should be accompanied by mental empowerment to be able to achieve full empowerment within women. The interviews give the same conclusion, the girls feel stronger and more confident because they are working on their physical as well as their mental health during the classes.

Next to this, the social environment is also an important contributor to experienced empowerment. The girls are supportive of each other and the atmosphere is uplifting, this contributes to feelings of confidence and of having capabilities to make changes in your life; the two main aspects of 'power within'. The social environment has shown to be such an important influence that I propose to add this factor to the theoretical model. This proves once again the influence of interactions in the development of people.

In the theoretical model only two main contributors have been distinguished; boxing and conversations. With the information from the data collection it has been made clear that these two factors can be confirmed as contributors. Next to this, the social environment in which the boxing and the conversations

take place also played a major role in the development of empowerment within the girls. The data show that it is the combination of these three contributors that is needed to achieve empowerment; an holistic approach. This is in accordance with Antonovsky, who already stated the importance of not looking at an individual, but at the whole socio-cultural aspect (Quennerstedt, 2008). A stronger focus on the social environment and the importance of the combination of the contributors would therefore be a valuable contribution to the current theoretical model.

Boxing as health promotion

When looking at the broader perspective of this study it is interesting to look if boxing for women can be seen as a way to promote health. To do this, I will first focus on the YBWP in specific and then discuss the broader context of boxing in general.

When looking from a salutogenic perspective, the YBWP can be seen as a good approach towards health promotion. Health is promoted in a salutogenic manner since several resources are addressed and because the project does not focus in the individual but also on their social context. The social context and the community building within the boxing group is very important in this project and has shown to be of great value for the participants. As Quennerstedt (2008) also states; health is not generated by the individual on its own, but by its relationships and social environment. Community-building is therefore incredible important as part of health promotion. It creates a feeling of belonging and it also contributes to the commitment to the trainings. The community is a safe space where the girls can talk about several topics without having the feeling to be judged. Having a positive and safe space to talk helps with a healthy development. The community is also of value since the girls are helping each other, this adds to the social resources of the girls. The relations within this group are positive, uplifting and non-judgemental. Having such a safe surrounding is an important contributor to mental health. The project is not only focussing on health promotion through physical health but it focusses on mental health as well. The mental health is mainly addressed during the chats in which several different topics come to the front that focus on mental health issues. Improving the knowledge of the girls about these topics helps them to develop their health and to strengthen their health resources. In combination with the increase in physical capabilities through the boxing the YBWP is a good way to promote physical as well as mental health in young women.

The YBWP is a special project due to its goal and the holistic approach. Nevertheless, boxing in general can also be seen as a good way to promote physical as well as mental wellbeing in its participants. The physical wellbeing is improved by getting stronger and fitter, furthermore the girls have more routine in their lives and are taking better care for themselves since they have started boxing. The mental wellbeing of the participants also improved due to the boxing. Confidence is created through boxing since the participants are working on their skills and have the feeling of competence and accomplishment. Boxing also contributes to the mental wellbeing because of the pure and explosive characteristics, they could use their anger and embrace it. In this way they were turning negative feelings of anger into positive feelings of endorphins and accomplishment.

When looking at boxing in general I would like to not only look at the benefits for the participants themselves, but also at the societal impact that women boxing can bring. Due to the raw and animalistic character of the sport it is still outside the social norms for women to box. Women attending the trainings are therefore changing the interactions with the social environment and are slowly 'normalizing' the sport for women. By doing this together women can create a form of community empowerment by going in

against the social norms. In this way a culture can be changed, which brings this part back to relational sociology. In Crossley (2015) it is stated that culture is an aspect that also can be seen from the perspective of relational sociology, which clearly comes to the front here. The women interact not only with each other but also with the outside world. By doing so they change their environment and the social norms. In this research this big social change is not researched, but the overall trend that can be seen in Western countries is that women's boxing is quickly getting more accepted by society. It would be interesting to further research the social changes that sports can bring.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

In this chapter I will shortly look back to the separate sub-questions, afterwards the main research question will be answered in more detail. Lastly, the strengths and limitations of this research and suggestions for further research will be stated.

Why do women attend boxing classes?

The motivations to begin with the boxing have shown to be different than the motivations to keep going with boxing. The reasons to start with the project were quite diverse for the participants, but they had one main characteristic in common: the reasons were mainly psychological and focussed on individual improvement. The motivations to keep going almost always involved the group and the social environment in which the trainings are given.

To what extent and how do the women attending boxing classes experience physical changes?

All the girls encountered physical changes, they felt stronger and fitter. This change made them feel more powerful and confident, which they showed in their physique. They 'carried' themselves differently and took up more physical space. These are signs of confidence that can be caused by the physical changes.

To what extent and how do the women attending boxing classes experience mental changes?

There are three main mental changes that the participants could distinguish since they started boxing. A general improvement in mental health was noticed by girls who have had problems with this beforehand. Furthermore the participants mentioned that they had more confidence and were more body positive since they started boxing.

To what extent can mental and physical changes be seen as empowerment?

The physical change of being stronger also brought a behaviour change in some of the girls, by showing more confidence. This way they show their physical empowerment in their physique. Also participating in boxing in itself already is a form of empowerment since it shows resistance against the existing social norms of boxing as a male-dominated sport. Mentally, they felt more confident which is positive for their mental empowerment. Another part in which they show mental empowerment is the fact that they feel capable of changing aspects of their lives.

What contribute to women's experiences of empowerment?

Three important contributors for the experiences of empowerment within the trainings have been distinguished; boxing, conversations and the social environment. The boxing gave the participants more physical empowerment, the conversations and the social environment contributed mainly to the mental empowerment of the participants. Furthermore the connectedness between these contributors has shown to be of great importance to achieve a higher level of empowerment.

Main research question; If and how does boxing contribute to the experienced mental and physical empowerment of women?

In general, one can conclude that the personal empowerment of the women has increased by joining the women-only boxing classes.

A lot of physical and mental changes due to the boxing can be distilled. This change is the first necessity when it comes to empowerment since empowerment entails change and therefore cannot be achieved when a person does not change. The women have changed physically, they have become stronger and fitter. Mentally, their overall mental health improved and they feel more confident and body positive.

Their physical changes have resulted in an increased physical empowerment since they dare to take up space and have a more confident appearance. Their mental empowerment has increased because they feel capable of achieving and accomplishing something and they continue to build on their skills. These are all factors of increased personal empowerment through the boxing in specific.

As can be seen, boxing is a very important factor for the increase of personal empowerment within the participants. The YBWP is a special project because they also incorporate a chat at the end and work on community-building within the boxing groups. These two aspects have generated a big extra contribution to the experienced personal empowerment, especially on the mental part. Having a comfortable place where you do not feel judged and can talk about everything you want has strengthened the girls and has given them more confidence. This safe community is the main aspect that keeps them coming back to the trainings. Knowing this is important since a project can be very valuable but participants need to come to the trainings for a project to be useful.

Overall, boxing can contribute to the experienced mental and physical empowerment of women. Boxing alone can only contribute till a certain extent. An holistic approach is needed to make the contribution to empowerment higher. Contributors to experienced empowerment are for instance the social environment and having a safe place to talk about your problems.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Measuring empowerment is very difficult, if not impossible, when you want to encompass every aspect of it. I have used qualitative methods to have a look into empowerment of the women in the trainings. To get a better insight in the term 'empowerment' and how the participants see this, I asked them how they would describe this term. This was useful and gave interesting insights in their viewpoints and the characteristics they use to describe the term.

The main benefit of using qualitative methods was that I was participating myself and could cover all the aspects I was seeing. I could use observations and interviews combined and therefore not only see how they are changed from the outside perspective but also hear how they are changed within themselves. This use of multiple methods has proven to be powerful in the conducting of my fieldwork and to see and hear about a situation from different perspectives. This has also enhanced the reliability of the results. Bias has been reduced by participating in the project, some of the girls told me that they forgot that I was conducting my fieldwork and therefore they did not act differently during the times I was observing.

Another important strength of this research is the project I have chosen to conduct my fieldwork. This project has shown the importance of community building in the empowerment of women and has shown

the importance of having a salutogenic approach towards health. Furthermore I got more information out of the girls since there was a chat afterwards, as I already expected beforehand.

Nevertheless, I have also noticed limitations in this research. Empowerment is a very big term and since it encompasses so many different aspects of someone's life and situation that it was not possible to give a total overview of the empowerment of the girls outside of boxing. It would have been interesting to see people behaving in other situations such as school, home or work. Furthermore including other persons, such as family or friends, to talk about behaviour change in the participant would have been interesting. This is done a bit by interviewing the trainers about their participants, but this still remained observations within the boxing environment. To follow the participants on this many levels was not possible due to several constraints, but it would be an interesting manner to research the empowerment of women.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, due to some constraints it was not possible to conduct the original study. This study would probably have given more clear data regarding the changes the girls encounter, since this would have included girls who never joined the project before. Since now most girls already participated in the programme before I started my fieldwork it was harder to distinguish changes during the observations.

Further research

This thesis has contributed to scientific literature by getting better insight in the relation between boxing and physical and mental empowerment in women. Since boxing in women is a recent field of study there are many possibilities for further research.

In women's boxing in specific still a lot of research can be done. It would be interesting to conduct a study with women who have never participated in boxing before and follow them for a certain amount of time, to see the changes they go through by participating in boxing. Another interesting research could be a comparison between the YBWP and a general women's boxing project without the focus on a holistic approach. This can provide useful information regarding the importance of an holistic approach towards health.

It is also interesting to look at the broader picture that comes with this research. Physical activity as contributor to different aspects of mental health is still a little researched area in which there are a lot of different research possibilities.

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Annex 1 Interview guide

Personal information

How old are you?

In which neighbourhood of Perth do you live?

Can you tell me about your sport background?

Participation information

At which location do you participate?

How did you come in contact with the programme?

When did you start joining the project?

How many trainings do you attend per month?

Did you always train this often per month or did it change? What caused this change?

What does your family/friends think of the fact that you do boxing?

Motivation

Why did you start with participating in this programme?

What attracted you to this programme in specific?

What do you think of the fact that it is a women-only programme?

What do you like the most of the programme?

What is your opinion about the boxing part?

What is your opinion about the talk afterwards?

Which of the two parts (training/talk) do you like the most?

What knowledge or skills (or both) have you gained since you started this programme?

Do you think you have changed since you started the programme?

- And in what way? (examples)

- Do you think that this change is caused by the participation in the programme?

When you think about your participation in the project, what kind of changes in yourself have you experienced? And do you think these changes are caused by your participation to the programme?

- Positive physical (body image)

- Negative physical

- Positive psychological

- Negative psychological

{For each change they noticed}; is this change important for you?

Do you recon the training or the talk is the main cause for these changes?

What do you consider as the biggest change or improvement in yourself since you have started participating? And is this caused by the participation to the programme?

Does participation in this programme influence other aspects of your life?

What motivates you to keep going to the training?

Empowerment

For the younger children:

Do you know the term empowerment?

How would you describe the term empowerment?

[if I notice that they have difficulties with describing this term, I will continue using the word 'confident' in the questions, as shown underneath]

Do you feel confident at this moment in your life?

Is this the same as since you started the programme?

- Yes

- No; why do you think this has changed?

Do you think that boxing can make girls feel more confident?

- Yes; what do you think is the reason for this?
- No; why not?

What could be done differently during the lessons to make you feel more confident?

Is there anything else you would like to say about your participation to the programme or about confidence?

[for older youth/ if the term empowerment is clear to them;]

How would you describe the term empowerment?

Do you feel empowered at this moment in your life?

Did you feel the empowered the same way before you started participating in this programme?

In my research I make the distinction between physical empowerment and psychological empowerment, I will for both describe the terms as I use them in my research and I would like to hear from you (from each of them) if you feel empowered in this way?

- *Psychological (personal empowerment); personal empowerment of people in which they develop their own confidence and capacities to change and gain control over their own lives*
- *Physical empowerment; physical strength as a form of empowerment and resistance since you are going in against the socially constructed beliefs that exist about boxing.*

Do you believe boxing could be empowering for women?

Why do you feel it is/is not empowering for you?

Could there be changes made in the programme to make it more empowering for women?

Is there anything else you would like to say about your participation to the programme or about empowerment?

Annex 2 Questions by email

Hello, Thank you for filling in my questions on the Young Boxing Women Project. The questions are part of the research for my master thesis. My research is about the combination of women's boxing and empowerment. The answers will be treated confidentially and you will remain anonymous. Please fill in the questions as extensive as possible for you. Thank you for participating! If you have any more questions about me, these questions or my research, do not hesitate to ask or send me an email.

- How old are you?
- Can you write a bit about your sport background?
- Since when are you coming to the Young Boxing Women Project?
- What motivates you to keep coming to the boxing sessions?
- How do you experience the boxing sessions?
- What are your feelings during the boxing session?
- Would you feel the same if there would also be men attending the training? Why, why not?
- What do you think about the chat at the end of each boxing session?
- Have you changed physically since attending the boxing sessions?
- Have you changed mentally since attending the boxing sessions?
- How would you describe the term empowerment?
- Do you feel empowered at this moment in your life? Why/why not?
- Do you think that boxing could be empowering for women? Why/why not?
- Is there anything else you like to say about the programme and/or empowerment?