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Portfolio submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Professional
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

*A Qualitative Study of the Embodied Experience of Female Amateur
Boxers*

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September 2022

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List of Abbreviations

AIBA – International Boxing Association

BAME – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups

EE – Experience of Embodiment

FAT – Female Athlete Triad

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

PABEQ – Physical Activity Body Experiences Questionnaire

PTSD – Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

UK – United Kingdom

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Firstly, and most importantly, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the eight inspiring women who entrusted me with their stories by taking part in this research project. Without them it would not have been possible, and I am truly grateful.

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This portfolio is dedicated to you all.

Declaration

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Preface

This Counselling Psychology doctoral portfolio is divided into three sections. Section A consists of a research study which investigates the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK. Section B is a clinical case study and section C presents a journal article version of the research study presented in section A. Despite being separate works, they are all united by a common theme: they all explore the relationship between body and mind. Below, I'll give a more thorough breakdown of these three sections and offer some reflections on how this overarching theme applies to my own personal experience as a counselling psychologist trainee.

Section A: Doctoral Research

This section contains my doctoral study, which explores the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK. The concept for this project developed from my passion for amateur boxing and being captivated by the many inspirational female amateur boxers I have met along the way. When the time came to think of a topic for my research proposal, I knew that I wanted it to centre on women's boxing. From here, I began to be more curious about how boxing impacts the female body and mind and felt excited to shed some light on this unique experience. Since the inclusion of female boxing in the 2012 Olympics, female participation in amateur boxing in the UK has risen significantly and is likely to increase further in the coming years (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020). Despite the significant increase among women participating in so-called "male sports", I was

shocked to find that there is still relatively little research exploring women's experiences in amateur boxing (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020). More specifically, there is still a lack of understanding of how female amateur boxers consciously or unconsciously use and view their body in meaningful ways. If efforts are made to reorient attention on what the body does and how it feels as opposed to how it looks, then understanding these bodily experiences may expose new pathways to wellbeing (Shiffmann, 1996). This qualitative study sought to address the gap in the literature by contributing to our understanding of embodied experiences of female amateur boxers.

Eight female amateur boxers who are currently actively training in the UK participated in online semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. From the data analysis, four superordinate themes and fourteen subthemes were identified. The impact amateur boxing has on the relationship between the body and the mind is captured by the first superordinate theme, "Mind-Body Dualism". The relationship between embodiment and wellbeing is explored in the second subordinate theme, "Boxing as self-healing". Participants discuss their experiences as women in the male dominated sport in the third superordinate theme, "Having a female body in male spaces." The final subtheme, "Impact of Boxing on Relationships", examines how boxing affects other aspects of life (e.g friends, family and work). The findings are explored in relation to previous existing research. Clinical implications for counselling psychology and other relevant professionals as well as recommendations for further research are discussed.

Section B: Clinical Case Study

This section of the portfolio presents a clinical case study. This case study details a piece of clinical work I completed while working in a complex PTSD Secondary Care service during my final year of training as a counselling psychologist. My growing interest in complex trauma led me to choose this client, and I found this case to be both interesting and difficult. Additionally, this was also the first time that I had used Narrative exposure therapy (NET) on a white British adult. My work with the client presented with various learnings and reflections, developing my skills and knowledge in complex PTSD work using NET, understanding the impact of unexpected endings and the impact of trauma work in terms of vicarious trauma. *The Body Keeps the Score* is a well-known book written by Van der Kolk (2014), who addresses how previous "adverse experiences" are permanently stored by our body in a locked account. I learnt through this piece of work the impact of emotional and physical trauma, not only on the mind but also on the body. My research also touches on this overall subject of the connection to the body.

Section C: Journal Article

The journal article I present in this last section is based on the study I gave in Section A. It focuses on "Mind-Body Dualism", one of the four identified superordinate themes, which captures how amateur boxing impacts the relationship between body and mind. I have chosen to focus on this superordinate theme because it has not been explored in the existing literature. The findings are reviewed in light of current theory and research, and the implications for counselling

psychologists and other professionals are considered. This article has been formatted in accordance with the submission guidelines for the journal to which I have chosen to submit it, the *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. There are several reasons why this journal was chosen. Firstly, the journal is committed to advancing the psychological understanding of qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, all of which are pertinent to this study. Secondly, given that the journal is a cross-disciplinary publication with an international readership, I would hope that the findings of my research would be extensively shared with a variety of professions, including sport psychologists, sociologists, coaches and practitioners. Lastly, this journal has the highest impact factor of any qualitative publication within its relevant subject category. Due to its international readership and potential for high impact, I hope that this journal will make the results of my study available to as many relevant academics and practitioners as possible.

Personal Reflections

In keeping with the overall tone of this portfolio, my long, difficult and exciting training to become a counselling psychologist frequently left both my mind and body feeling stressed, fatigued and anxious. Especially during my final year placement in Complex Trauma, I found that repeatedly being exposed to narrations of physical and sexual abuse had a large impact on me. It affected my mood; I noticed I was increasingly sad, and my body became increasingly uncomfortable when being touched by my loved ones. This experience has taught me the impact that trauma work can have. Echoing both the clinical work in Section B and the research participants' narratives, I valued the importance of seeking support and practicing

self-care. I found that I coped with the stress of clinical work by making sure I was consistent with my training as a female amateur boxer. Furthermore, echoing the participant's narratives in 'Body as Self-healing', I felt that continuing to box during my training provided me therapeutic benefits in coping with daily stresses; here, boxing was a form of escapism that provided a sense of empowerment, allowing me to channel my difficult emotions and to feel more in control in my life. Overall, the path to becoming a counselling psychologist has inspired me to improve my relationship with both my body and mind, particularly in terms of how stress and anxiety are managed. Instead of being self-critical and feeling like I'm "not good enough", I'm attempting to recognise these moments and improve my confidence by practising self-compassion and self-care. As Simone de Beauvoir (1997) wrote:

"Not to have confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself." (de Beauvoir, 1997, p.355)

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Section A: Doctoral Research

A Qualitative Study of the Embodied Experience of Female

Amateur Boxers

Supervised by

Dr. Charlotte Whiteley and Dr. Fran Smith

Abstract

Research on lived experiences of female amateur boxers has increased over the years; however, the literature is still sparse. There is limited understanding of how female amateur boxers consciously or unconsciously use and view their bodies. This qualitative study sought to address the gap in the literature by exploring the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK. It aims to shed light on how boxing influences female amateur boxers' self-perceptions, including the ways in which their bodies exist in, and interact with, the world. To explore the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from eight female amateur boxers. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. Four superordinate themes and fourteen subthemes emerged from the data analysis. The first superordinate theme, 'Mind-Body Dualism', captures how amateur boxing impacts the relationship between body and mind. The second superordinate theme, 'Boxing as self-healing', explores the links between embodiment and wellbeing. In the third superordinate theme, 'Having a female body in male spaces', participants describe their experience of being female in a male dominated sport. The final superordinate theme, 'Impact of Boxing on Relationships', explores how boxing makes an impact on other areas of life, such as on social life. The findings are explored in connection to previous existing research. Clinical implications for counselling psychology and other relevant professionals as well as recommendations for further research are discussed.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Overview

This study investigates the lived embodied experiences of women that train as amateur boxers in the UK. This chapter covers the context and rationale for this study in the following sections below. First, I will look at defining female amateur boxing and consider ways of conceptualising embodiment. I will then briefly review findings related to embodiment, sport and martial arts. Next, in order to comprehend what is already **known**, I will review the literature currently available on the experiences of female amateur boxers. Towards the end I will review studies that have made a large contribution to female embodiment boxing literature. These studies examined how female boxers viewed and experienced their bodies in the boxing gym. Studies that have been published within the last five years will be given more attention than those that have been published before that. To end, I will introduce the current study.

1.2 What is Amateur boxing?

While both amateur boxing and professional boxing involve attacking and defending with fists, there are still key differences between them. Amateur boxing has no monetary reward for competition (Stewart, 2011) and has its own regulatory bodies. In order to compete as an amateur boxer, the individual must be registered with the relevant national body. In the United Kingdom, this is the Boxing Association of England (also known as England Boxing). Amateur boxing being a globalised sport (Woodward, 2014) is organised internationally by the International Boxing

Association (formerly known as AIBA). The highest level and most well-known amateur boxing AIBA events are the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games and the World Championships (Chaabene et al., 2015).

Like most combat sports, boxing is a weight-based competition, with boxers divided into certain weight categories in order to be matched fairly in terms of strength, body size and agility (Langan-Evans et al., 2011). Amateur boxing has fewer weight divisions than professional boxing. There are 10 weight categories (from 46kg to 91kg) for men and 10 weight categories (from 46kg to 80kg) for women in amateur boxing (Chaabene et al., 2015). As of August 21st, 2021, AIBA increased men's weight categories from 10 to 13 and women's weight categories from 10 to 12 (AIBA, 2021). Dependant on gender, experience and age, there are either 3 or 4 boxing rounds, with each round lasting between two and three minutes, and with 1 minute rest in between each round (Bianco et al., 2013). A boxer typically wins a fight by scoring more points than their opponent, or they stop their opponent from continuing fighting (also known as a knockout).

1.3 Female Amateur boxing

Women participating in boxing can be mapped back to the eighteenth century (Hargreaves, 1997). However, boxing is traditionally seen as a male dominated sport that has historical associations with power, aggression and of imposing domination upon another, all of which are typically seen as traditional norms of masculinity (Gems, 2014). Women engaging with boxing are viewed as challenging traditional gender notions of femininity by showing an aggression that is more commonly linked to masculinity (Oats, 1980). This may have contributed to the large resistance

towards women being involved, and participating, in boxing (Sugden, 1996). AIBA allowed women's boxing matches to be conducted internationally in 1994. However, some countries, like Cuba, still do not allow women to compete in boxing (Tjørndal, 2016a).

In more recent years, there have been significant changes and consideration in encouraging female participation and acceptance in amateur boxing. Arguably the most significant moment came in London in 2012 when, for the first time in the history of the Olympic Games, women were eligible to compete in boxing (Kipnis & Caudwell, 2015). Woodward (2013) argued that this inclusion created a shift in the way society views women's boxing, indicating an institutional change by accepting women into this male dominated space from which they were previously denied. However, Tjørndal (2019) states that the Olympics only included 3 weight categories for women while men had 10 weight categories, indicating that men are still offered far greater opportunities than women to compete. Furthermore, Tjørndal (2016b) conducted a content analysis strategy where 23 online texts were analysed to understand power relations between men and women in boxing. The analysis concluded that, because female boxers at the Olympics were obligated to wear what could be considered as more typically 'feminine' outfits, this suggested an intention on the part of the organisers to make female boxers appear to be more closely aligned with traditional norms of femininity, thereby drawing a clear distinction between men and women boxing.

Since the inclusion of female boxing in the 2012 Olympics, female participation in amateur boxing in the UK has risen significantly and is likely to increase further in the

coming years (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020). Despite this significant increase among women participating in a so-called "male sport", there is still relatively little research exploring women's involvement and experiences in amateur boxing (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020).

1.4 Psychological Perspectives of Embodiment

The writings of the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) are the foundation for our current knowledge of embodiment. The concept of embodiment describes how we experience our bodies as integral parts of ourselves that serve as a vehicle for experiencing and interacting with the outside world, rather than as a distinct entity (Mayoh et al., 2020). Embodiment has been conceptualised within a range of different disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Sodhi & Cohen, 2012): philosophical perspectives of embodiment consists in part with discourses of mind and body dualism (Besley & Peters, 2007); anthropological perspectives view embodiment as bodily experiences that are influenced by culture (Anderson-Fye, 2012); and sociological perspectives view embodiment as the social construction of bodily experiences (Monaghan, 2001). However, as the present study falls within the field of counselling psychology, the focus of this literature review will be on the psychological perspectives of embodiment.

Embodiment, in the context of social psychology, refers to the idea that thoughts, feelings, and behaviour are rooted in bodily and sensory experiences (Meier et al., 2012). The term 'body schema' has been used to describe a system of sensory,

motor and body-environment information, with the indication being that bodily experience information is processed unconsciously (Morasso et al., 2015). Whilst the suggestion is that these body schemas exist unconsciously, when interacting with the environment they can become more conscious (Gallagher, 2005). The concept of embodiment is also known in psychology as 'lived embodiment', which refers to a conscious and unconscious knowledge of bodily feelings and sensations as we live and feel it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

In his genealogy of punishment and social control, *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault analysed the role institutional power plays in shaping the way individuals conceptualise their embodiment. He argued that modern cultures wield power and authority through by implementing disciplinary techniques that are internalised by individuals, causing them to learn to be submissive 'docile bodies'. Feminist researchers have emphasised and contributed to sport studies by highlighting the significance of gender inequality in the production of submissive female bodies (Bordo, 2020; De Beauvoir, 1974; Theberge, 1997). Sport bestows, generates, and reinforces gender meanings and relationships at the same time. For example, we can see how sport plays a significant part in perpetuating and glorifying sexual distinctions, as evidenced by the widespread sporting practice of sex segregation (Channon et al., 2016; Travers, 2009). In the next section, I will introduce psychological theories of embodiment in order to look at greater detail into the embodied experiences of girls and women as they interact with their surroundings.

1.5 Psychological Theories of Embodiment

Attempts to define embodiment as a measurable psychological construct have resulted in a plethora of theories, many of which are rooted in and inspired by these earlier discussions of embodiment (Perey & Cook-Cottone, 2020). Piran's (2002) Development Theory of Embodiment investigates the link between social interactions and the embodied experiences of girls and women as they engage with the environment around them. This embodiment theory has arisen from mixed-method research, including 171 interviews and 116 focus groups with girls and women, focusing on the lived embodiment experience and the related aspects that influence them (Piran, 2016). Piran (2017) argues that participants described a multi-dimensional core construct called Experience of Embodiment (EE), encompassing a range from positive embodiment to negative embodiment. The quality of EE is seen as being influenced by five dimensions, such as body connection and comfort, agency and functionality, experience and expression of bodily desires, and that of attuned self-care and inhabiting the body as subjective vs objective (Piran, 2019). Following that, the EEs described by women identified protective and risk factors that alter embodied lives through three major pathways: physical experiences, mental experiences, and experiences that are directly tied to social power and relational connections (Piran & Teall, 2012). This model provides an understanding of the links between social interactions and the embodied experiences of women; however, this model does not specifically look at links between physical activity, specifically competitive sports like boxing, and the embodied experiences of women.

Menzel & Levine's (2007) offers the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image that specifically explores the relationship between physical activities and embodiment. The model views physical activities and experiences, linked with embodiment, as

playing a vital role in developing positive body image. Researchers have found that a specific type of mind-body integration state is observed in athletes called “flow” (Menzel & Levine, 2011). Among the many factors influencing the likelihood of experiencing flow in sport, according to Jackson et al. (1998), are feeling in tune with and in control of one's movements, giving rise to an ability to block out distractions in order to focus, thereby regulating emotions in order to feel relaxed. Embodying activities lead to individuals being in a “flow” state which promotes mind-body integration, boosts bodily awareness and response, and generates a sense of physical empowerment and competence (Menzel & Levine, 2011).

Recently, Menzel et al., (2019) conducted quantitative research testing the Physical Activity Body Experiences Questionnaire (PABEQ), delivering the questionnaire to 606 female undergraduates to explore links between embodying activities and embodiment. The results of this study supported the use of a two-factor scale: Mind-Body Connection (e.g looking at relationship between the mind and the body) and Body Acceptance (e.g feeling good internally in relation to one's body). Additionally, the results supported the effectiveness of this questionnaire to predict body awareness, body responsiveness, positive body image, body satisfaction, self-objectification, disordered eating, and positive body image (Menzel et al., 2019). However, while this theoretical model is based on a conceptual examination of competitive sports, there is a strong suggestion that martial arts and boxing are further embodying activities (Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016).

Overall, the psychology of embodiment in sporting organisations is a growing field and scholars have acknowledged the need to pay more attention to embodiment

research (Van Amsterdam et al., 2017). When reviewing the current approaches above, there are three overlapping features of embodiment theories that are fundamental: first, the body is the source of lived experience; second, various factors influence the quality of embodiment; finally, the expression of a person's inner and outside worlds as they navigate their life experience is referred to as embodiment (Perey & Cook-Cottone, 2020).

1.6 Embodiment and Sport

There has been growing research on the notion of the embodiment of adolescents and adults in relation to sports, including how this relates to bodily experiences (Piran & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020), gender roles (Shakib, 2003; Watts, 2011), and body image and well-being (e.g., Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). De Beauvoir (1974) argues that women experience their bodies as a burden, carrying a sense of fear and discomfort towards the hormonal and physiological changes that their bodies endure during puberty, menstruation and pregnancy. The philosopher Iris Young (1980) builds on this to explain the phenomenon of “throwing like a girl”. Young (1990) compares the performance differences of men and women in sport, noting that women tend to be more constricted with their bodies while men moved with more freedom. She explained that women could take an observer's perspective on their own bodies and therefore do not develop a relationship with their bodies as an agent of action. Young (1990) argued this increase in self-consciousness causes women to move their bodies with lack of trust, with hesitation, timidity and incompleteness. Other scholars have agreed with this by noticing women's self-consciousness about their bodies (Allison, 1991; Yovosky & Sayer, 2013), and with

women viewing a clash between femininity and physical strength (McCaughey, 1998). In another study, however, women were just as willing as males to take risks or be injured (Young & White, 1995). The difference in these findings may be due to the latter study conducting their research on female athletes, while other studies focused on women participating in sports. Therefore, female athletes, who regularly train in the sport to compete, may have gone through a larger process of becoming comfortable using their bodies as weapons to harm, rather than being self-conscious about their bodies.

Young (1980) stated that there are three modalities for feminine movement, and these consist of ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality and discontinuous unity. Ambiguous transcendence refers to women restricting and underestimating their movements through the world. This results in inhibited intentionality, where abilities are questioned, leading to a feeling of “I cannot” rather than “I can”, resulting in a discontinuous unity between own goals and their environment (Maclean, 2019). Men, on the other hand, are socially encouraged to see their bodies as tools for expressing themselves in the world, taking up space, and dominating where they can (Pronger, 1999). However, Young’s and De Beauvoir’s work was conducted in the 1900s when societal attitudes viewed and focused on women’s bodies as limiting and inferior to men (Roper & Polasek, 2019). In comparison to men's bodies, women's bodies were thought to be weaker, frailer, and less capable of performing demanding physical feats (Christine-Robin et al., 2012). Since the 1900s, there has been an increase in female participation in sport, and female athletes now have more options than ever before to compete in sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Coakley (2017) argues that modern sport is still dominated by men, identified with

men, and centred on men. Even research on embodiment and sport has been largely centred around men (Channon & Jennings, 2014), which indicates limited research concerning the embodied lives of female athletes, specifically female amateur boxers.

Many researchers argue for a "physical feminism" that confronts these early belief systems and modifies women's consciousness and bodies through rigorous physical bodily experience (McCaughey, 1998; Boyle, 2005; Van Ingen, 2011). These voices argue that strong and capable female bodies challenge cultural norms that perpetuate the notion that physical power, competition, and aggression are unfeminine characteristics. According to Hargreaves (2002), it is important to move towards studying the bodily experiences of power rather than society's interrogations of female empowerment. In recent years, women's empowerment through participation in sports and other forms of physical activity has gained attention (Dionigi, 2013; Liechty, Willfong & Sveinson, 2016). According to research, involvement in athletics, particularly in primarily male-dominated activities, can empower women by facilitating an increase sense of self, assertiveness, and body confidence (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993; McGinnis et al., 2003). Furthermore, full-contact sports like hockey and tackle football can be particularly empowering for women since they provide them with a greater level of physicality (Theberge, 2003). Martial arts training has been shown to boost women's self-confidence in their physical abilities, lessen their fear of victimization, and allow them to confront stereotypes around women's fragility and vulnerability to violence (Paul, 2015). Physical aggression (i.e. hitting and being struck) can contribute to feelings of release of daily pressures, leading to a sense of bodily power (Paul, 2015). This

body of research suggests that there is a strong link between full-contact sports and women's empowerment.

According to researchers, women's empowerment through athletics is often an embodied process because women experience the world through and from within their bodies (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014). Embodied empowerment can help women bridge the mind/body divide by allowing them to perceive their bodies as "what I can achieve" rather than focusing on what the body looks like (Liimakka, 2011). For example, Liechty, Willfong & Sveinson (2015) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 15 female football players to explore embodied empowerment. The results of this study revealed three themes that suggest playing football was empowering for women, consisting of feelings of strength related to the game's physicality, a sense of breaking boundaries and a sense of belonging to the team. Overall, this led to feelings of increased confidence and self-acceptance. Paul (2015) also conducted a qualitative study using qualitative fieldwork and in-depth interviews to explore the experience of female athletes that participate in roller derby, martial arts and rugby. The study discovered that empowering encounters often took three forms: firstly, an increase in physical empowerment through the discovery of previously unknown strength and power via sports (Paul, 2015); secondly, an increase in healthy and positive body image by redefining and signifying the body in terms of how it moves and performs rather than how it superficially appears; lastly an increased sense of self-assurance and a means of self-expression that generalised into their personal and professional lives. However, like with all qualitative studies, the findings are tied to a specific group, and the findings may not be applicable and generalised to female athletes in other sports.

Channon and Jennings (2014) conducted a review of the empirical research around embodiment and martial arts. From this review, studies have highlighted evidence of women feeling increasingly strong and confident in their bodies through martial arts. However, there are several limitations to this review, due in part to its narrow scope of analysis, which excludes many psychological studies and work in other languages. In the current literature, embodiment has been investigated in male-dominated competitive sports like roller derby (Liu et al., 2018), football (Migliaccio & Berg, 2007), wrestling (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009) and running (Faulkner, 2018); however additional research is needed to further understand women's embodied experiences in other sporting contexts, such as female amateur boxing.

Psychological research has been remarkably limited in its discussions of the body, which is surprising considering it is, as a discipline, interested in the ways humans think, behave and interact (Theberge, 1991). In a substantial review of the body in culture and sport, Loy, Andrews & Rinehart (1993) advocated to "bring the body back" to research. Likewise, DePauw (1997) noted that "traditionally our study has not focused on the body as whole, the body in a social context, or the body in connection with self" (p. 419). As a response, this study is an attempt to contribute to embodiment research and, in so doing, further understand the lived embodied experience of female amateur boxers.

1.7 Women, Embodiment and the Martial Arts

Over the years, there have been various research endeavours exploring the lived embodied experiences of women participating in martial arts. McCaughey's (1997) research focuses on her own embodiment through her participation in a variety of

combat sports, such as self-defence and martial arts. She found that she learnt how to move her body in various ways involving jabbing, punching, kicking and yelling. (McCaughey, 1998). She claims that through these physical movements, women may debunk the stereotype that women's bodies are weak and fragile and instead feel empowered and thus reject the victim narrative. Castelnovo and Guthrie's (1998) study of the female body in martial arts investigates the benefits to women when participating in martial arts within a female-only gym. Women who took karate classes at the female-only dojo developed physical skills that empowered both their minds and their bodies, improved their body image, improved their impressions of other female bodies, and facilitated their engagement in healthier relationships with men (Castelnovo & Guthrie, 1998). Similarly to McCaughey (1998), there is an argument that physical empowerment is critical to liberating women. Empowerment, according to their findings, is not only linked to physical strength, but also to deconstructing gendered narratives of women as fragile, questioning women's weakness, and establishing a positive body image. However, neither of these studies adequately address the impact of structural constraints to women's independence (Olson, 2001).

Dewelde (2003) builds on this literature and shares similar findings of empowerment in her study. She conducted an ethnography on the experience of being a woman on a self-defence course. Consistent with findings from previous literature, she found that the self-defence course allowed women to gain physical abilities that became empowering, thereby helping them to reject victimisation narratives. DeWelde (2003) argues that dualisms such as inactive or active, body or mind, and power or powerless are ineffective because self-identities can be contradictory, and women

can be both powerless and powerful at the same time, reminding us that gendered embodiment is fluid and not fixed. It is important to acknowledge that the previous studies mentioned have looked at embodiment in all-female spaces and therefore are limited to our understanding of the embodiment experiences of women participating in mixed sex spaces.

More recently, Velija et al. (2013) conducted a study where they interviewed 11 females to explore the embodiment experience of women in martial arts within a mixed-sex space. In line with previous research outlined above, they found that women felt empowered by feeling physically strong and more confident. However, on a wider level, participants did not dispute the prevailing beliefs that males were regarded as strong and women as weak. Instead, they discovered that participants challenged gender embodiment only on an individual basis. For example, participants noticed that their physical appearance, abilities, and self-image had improved, but they were eager to support the notion of masculine power and to make links with this towards being better suited for martial arts and fighting. This raises questions about whether women competing in male dominated combat sports experience empowerment on all levels.

1.8 Literature on Current Experiences of Female Amateur Boxers

Some research has revealed several challenges and disadvantages faced by women in boxing. For instance, studies have shown how women in boxing frequently face prejudice, marginalisation and exclusion in their sport (e.g., Lee, 2009; McCree, 2015). Kaskan and Ho (2016) identified three prevalent microaggressions faced by female athletes: (a) an assumption of inferiority (e.g. assumptions that female boxers

are inferior to male boxers), (b) sexual objectification (e.g. female boxers having difficulty earning respect due to their bodies being seen as sexualised objects), and (c) gender norms that are restricting (e.g. an overemphasis of feminine norms on female boxers). According to current research, female boxers frequently face a lack of acceptance in training facilities (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Ross, 2011). Because the boxing gym is a male-dominated environment (Matthews, 2014), female boxers must frequently prove and demonstrate that they are eager to spar and compete in order to be taken seriously (Sekules, 2012).

Mennesson (2000) conducted a sociological study in France that explores the social construction of identities among female amateur boxers participating in the male-dominated sport of boxing. The two main aims of the study were to understand how women got into boxing and stayed in it, as well as the types of identities they created in the process. Data collection involved two years of participant-observation and in-depth interviews with 12 female boxers and their coaches (Mennesson, 2000).

Mennesson (2000) found that women entrance into, and continuation in, boxing depends on their situation (e.g. having difficulties in life) and their disposition (e.g. counter-feminine identity and having a natural taste for combat). Women who discovered boxing by chance at a later point in life were more likely to join a club that favoured a 'soft' style, whereas those who started earlier were more likely to join a club that favoured a 'hard' style, which demands a more intense level of physicality. She also found that female boxers found it difficult to balance boxing and education, work, social life and romantic relationships, with one boxer describing that boxing takes up all her time and that she “thinks of nothing else” (Mennesson, 2000). On the other hand, boxers described a large passion for boxing and that the experience was

a 'revelation'. However, this study was conducted in France and therefore does not give an accurate picture of the lived experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK. For example, Mennesson (2000) noted the cultural differences between France and England in feminine identity and social expectations of women. Furthermore, Mennesson's study has not paid much attention to how female amateur boxers actually experience these processes (e.g how they go into boxing, why they stayed in boxing and the identities that were created in the process) through their bodies and how this influences the relationship between mind and body.

Schinke et al. (2019) builds on this by highlighting the identity challenges that are faced by female amateur boxers on the Canadian National Team, but it also considers how this may impact performance and wellbeing. The article is based on a project that was conducted by Schinke (2007) that documents the observations from a four-year position as a sport psychology consultant with the Canadian National Boxing Team. The article emphasises three identity challenges faced by female boxers: (1) that of being a female boxer in a male dominated sport, (2) difficulties around LGBTQI+ identities, and (3) feeling "different" as racial/ethnic minorities (Schinke et al., 2019). Female boxers that participated in the project expressed feelings that they needed to prove themselves due to not being taken seriously as athletes. They also expressed that their boxing achievements were often downplayed. Moreover, female amateur boxers remain cautious of not coming across as overly feminine due to fears of being sexualised or not being taken seriously (Schinke et al., 2019). In terms of difficulties with LGBTQI+ identities, queer female amateur boxers spoke about feeling uncomfortable talking about their sexual identity, as well as about feeling uncomfortable during weigh ins and in changing

rooms. Queer female amateur boxers explained that they occasionally worried that their heterosexual teammates would believe they were sexualizing others rather than being serious about the sport. Additionally, ethnic minority female amateur boxers expressed experiencing marginalization, frustration being portrayed as racial stereotypes (e.g as loud and uneducated) and expressing feelings of isolation insofar as not being able to share struggles of what it is like to be the only athlete of colour on the team. Similar findings have been found in other studies (Blodgett et al., 2017; Ross & Forsyth, 2021). Schinke et al. (2018) argue that these identity challenges have an impact on mental health, such as depression, alienation, sleep disturbances and anxiety. Since the study was conducted with Canadian female amateur boxers, it would be interesting to see if similar identity challenges come up with female amateur boxers in the UK.

In the study “Girls Are Not Made of Glass!”, Tjørndal (2019) conducts a qualitative study of the lived experiences of Norwegian female amateur boxers, as well as those of their coaches. Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with seven female amateur boxers and three female boxing coaches. Similar to Schinke’s et al. (2019) study, Tjørndal (2019) found that there are still struggles for female amateur boxers to be taken seriously as athletes, and they are still often seen as intruders. Participants in the study reported that male coaches frequently treated them like “girls”, rather than serious athletes. For example, a participant expressed that the male coaches were always trying to take care of and protect her. The study indicates that male coaches often play a paternalistic and authoritative role in female amateur boxers lives, with participants describing feeling close to their coach, as like a “father” (Tjørndal, 2019). According to the cultural coding of masculinity,

paternalistic and authoritarian leadership are linked to uneven gender/power relations (Connell, 1995), and this can at times lead to the misuse of power. For example, a participant described a coach sexually harassing or being verbally abusive to other female boxers in the gym (Tjønndal, 2019). Tjønndal (2019) highlights the current challenges of female amateur boxers in Norway and recommends future research to expanding this investigation of the challenges and experiences of women in boxing to other parts of the world. The limitation of Tjønndal's study is that there is lack of racial diversity; as women are not a homogeneous population, racial diversity is an important factor to consider. Racism and anti-racist conversations are crucial considerations in the profession of counselling psychology, as psychologists usually operate in thriving multicultural communities with a diverse population of races and cultures (Nelson-Jones, 2002). **Embracing a** pluralistic theoretical platform affords us a lens through which to view and make sense of these issues.

More recently, Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) recognised the shortage of psychological research on female amateur boxers and conducted a qualitative study to explore challenges faced by female amateur boxers in the UK, as seen from the viewpoint of sport psychology. This explored different phases in participants' boxing careers, for example, early, middle and later years. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with eight female amateur boxers via Skype, and an inductive content analysis was used to analyse the results. Findings indicated that female amateur boxers faced difficulties in their early years when competing as a female boxer (e.g in line with previous findings of experiencing sexist and stereotypical comments) and received no support from the governing body (e.g governing body

not taking female boxing seriously). Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) also found that there was resistance within families due to traditional and cultural views held of women that were incompatible with being a boxer (e.g. mother had said start “acting like a girl”). Despite this, participants commented on feeling empowered to pursue their passion, able to challenge negative comments and to prove that women can box. Challenges in the middle years involved a lack of support and opportunities for female boxers (e.g. female boxers had to arrange time off work and funding while male boxers typically had a sponsorship and support from their club). However, the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers have not received much attention in this study. Instead, the emphasis was on improving athletes' performance in amateur boxing, rather than exploring other topics, like wellbeing and the connection between the body and mind

Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) also found that boxing had a negative impact on female boxers' relationships and social life, where boxing led to the sacrificing of time with relationships. Additionally, participants expressed developing an unhealthy relationship with food in order to stay within fighting weight. This is consistent with previous studies which have explicated the female athlete triad (FAT), a set of unique medical problems that female athletes face, consisting of low energy availability, menstrual cycle disturbances and low bone mineral density (Márquez & Molinero, 2013; Nazem & Ackerman, 2012). Thomas et al. (2021) found that 38% of female combat sport athletes were likely to be in risk of developing FAT due to commonly engaging in rapid weight reduction strategies. Lastly, the challenges faced by female amateur boxer in their later years involved difficulties losing weight during their menstrual cycle and being frustrated at limited weight categories at Olympic

level. Interestingly, some female amateur boxers reflected that they developed better eating habits in their later years where they had developed coping strategies such as learning to challenge negative thoughts. Arguably, the findings from this study are hyper focussed on the challenges female boxers faced, and therefore the study neglects the positive effects of the sport, or other elements, neglecting to give us a full understanding of the lived experiences of female amateur boxers. Their study gives us the most recent exploration of the lived experiences of female amateur in the UK. However, in its rootedness to sports psychology, the study aims to enhance athlete's performance in amateur boxing, rather than looking at other areas, such as wellbeing, the relationship between body and mind, and other processes that occur that we have yet to fully understand.

Overall, the current literature on the lived experiences of female amateur boxer is dominated by sociological studies, with the majority conducted outside of the UK, alongside a few psychological studies, though all psychological studies fall firmly within a sports psychology framework. While studies have attempted to gain a better understanding of the way female amateur boxers experience and interact within a male dominated sport, the question of how female amateur boxers actually experience this process through their body has received very little attention from researchers. The research on what is currently known about the ways in which female boxers experience their bodies is introduced in the next section.

1.9 Embodiment and Female Boxing

Martial arts is a broad term that refers to a range of different combat sports, consisting of different combat skills, movements and rules (Channon & Jennings,

2014). As a result, it is important to review literature that looks directly at female boxing in relation to embodiment. There has been an increase in research that examines the embodied experience of female boxing. Particularly, a significant number of ethnographies have dominated this field, wherein researchers have investigated the boxing world, utilising their own bodies as data collection tools (Paradis, 2012). This section of the literature review will spend some time reviewing these prominent ethnographies that have made a large contribution to female embodiment boxing literature.

In 2012, Paradis (2012) conducted an ethnography in a San Francisco Bay Area boxing gym. She uses Bourdieu's theory of practice to explore how a female body is perceived in boxing and how this gendered experience has an impact upon women's experiences in boxing. Data was collected from ethnographic field notes; Paradis (2012) visited the boxing gym 64 times, logging 200 hours of training and observation. She reported that she immersed herself in being a boxer to the extent that boxing flooded into other areas of her life, including her diet, sleep, work schedule and social life outside of the gym. Paradis (2012) noted that, in terms of their boxing performance, women are held to higher standards than men if they are to be recognised as "contenders", highlighting the heightened sense of awareness that women feel in their need to prove themselves in boxing. This is also supported by McGannon et al., 2019 and Tjørndal (2019), who argue that women's acceptance in training gyms is based on their ability to replicate masculine boxing norms in order to appropriately perform boxing physique . Therefore, women must prove their boxing skills by having a strong range of sharp punches, a strong defence, good footwork and the ability to combine this in the ring. Paradis (2012) found that, in

sparring, women face difficulties and a lack of opportunities in two main ways. Firstly, there is a belief that a boxer needs to pay “his dues” in order to have more sparring opportunities; however, this can be exacerbated by women's reluctance to ask and by their comparatively reduced sense of entitlement. Secondly, cultural views regarding women's need for protection, and the value of their physical appearance, may lead coaches to under-prepare their female boxers, such as by not giving them enough ring time, or by not pairing them with ring partners who will push them to improve (Paradis, 2012). Additionally, Paradis (2012) noted that while she felt confident and strong in her body, she also noticed that periods appear to conflict with boxing's weight-class system, and some female boxers have encountered this strong portrayal that women are victims of their periods. However, a limitation of this study, as stated by Paradis (2012), is the way in which that the ethnographic ethos violated by her having intense feelings and a strong reaction to an informant being unable to manage her weight. This may have distorted and misrepresented the findings. Paradis (2012) shows how there is an impactful social element to the embodiment experience, particularly in relation to how the female body is perceived by others. However, this study is lacking insofar as it neglects to consider how the body is felt and perceived by the self. For example, how does the body feel strong? How does the body move and feel in the ring? How does the body feel during the menstrual cycle? It is these details that the present study aims to explore by shining a light upon new and direct bodily experiences, understanding further the relationship between mind and body.

Owton (2015) builds on Paradis (2012) study by conducting an ethnography that focusses on the lived body and thus provides a ‘fleshy’, detailed sensory perspective

on boxing embodiment. The study was conducted in a boxing gym in the southwest of England. Data collection and analysis involved fields notes, personal logs and reflective journals. Similar to Paradis's (2012) findings, Owton (2015) found that, in order to be taken seriously as a boxer, she needed to 'prove' herself by conforming to dominant masculine norms. She notes the experience of being steered towards boxercise classes when initially showing interest in attending the boxing gym. Boxercise appears to be more aligned with feminine norms, which simultaneously seeks for 'I can' (exercise) and limits the female body to the self-imposed 'I cannot' (fight) (Young, 1980). Owton (2015) notes that individuals who challenge traditional gender roles, which perpetuate sexism and oppress women, are labelled as anomalies or deviants (Krane, 2001). Furthermore, it is considered masculine behaviour to engage in energetic, forceful, assertive, and competitive boxing movements, which clashes with cultural views of feminine behaviour, that of being passive, fragile and weak (Mennesson, 2000). This can cause women to feel unwelcome, inferior or seen as the "other" in male-dominated spaces, like boxing (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury, 2021). Owton (2015) reports her experience of sparring, with descriptions of her body being reactive, feeling enjoyment and freedom. However, this was disrupted by male sparring partners not taking the spar seriously, sometimes making sexist comments like "I don't really hit girls". This shows the challenges female boxers may face in sparring, also hindering positive bodily experiences. Lastly, Owton (2015) reports her experience during training and a fight. During training, she reported experiencing a "stronger sense of self", feeling stronger and lighter, and experiencing heightened senses. During a fight, she highlights feelings of adrenaline, pain, discipline, control and the body going through intense physical processes (e.g. gasping for air). One of the limitations of ethnographies is

that it can lead to cultural bias (Suzuki et al., 2005). A researcher may have entrenched views before conducting the study (e.g. links to previous boxing experiences which may inform current views) which may therefore affect her behaviour toward, and thoughts about, informants. This can reduce the reliability and accuracy of the study.

Nash (2017) builds on the existing ethnographies that document the embodied experiences of female boxers by conducting an autoethnographic account of boxing in a Tasmanian boxing gym over a 30-month period. This study attempts to understand embodiment in a way that places emphasis on gendered experiences. The data analysis of this study involved grounded theory. Nash (2017) describes continually negotiating her femininity within the Tasmanian amateur boxing culture. She describes difficulties of hypermasculinity in boxing clubs (Crocket, 2012), where she felt that she needed to prove her masculinity while expressing some sort of femininity (e.g. continuing to wear feminine clothing such as singlets) in order to be also seen as a woman. Women's sexuality is frequently questioned when gender hierarchies are challenged in sports—the term "lesbian" is used to deter women from rejecting normative femininity (Gat, 2010). A female boxer's identity as a woman may be jeopardised if her body is perceived as masculine. In order to be accepted by other boxers as women, boxing women typically exhibit femininity by wearing pink boxing gloves, having long hair, and by wearing skirts in the ring (Lafferty and McKay, 2004). Nash (2017) also notes how she faced difficulties with societal views of femininity outside the ring. For example, a stranger she had met was surprised that she was a boxer that "actually punch[es] people". Additionally, she reported that she internalised, and was compliant in the reproduction of,

hypermasculinity in the boxing gym; this was in order to 'fit in'. She began to view beginner female boxers as 'weak', and she distanced herself from them in fear that it would 'taint' her status as being 'one of the boys'. This all conflicted with her own feminist views. Similarly to Paradis (2012) and Owton (2015), Nash (2017) noted that men would 'pull back' their punches during sparring, viewing her as an unequal partner. This, however, felt like a waste of time when men 'pulled' their punches, and she was left with the emotional labour in which she had to make men feel at ease (Satterlund, 2012). This study provides an insight into gendered embodied experience, but it is limited in that it doesn't attempt to understand, psychologically, the impact had upon wellbeing, nor the relationship between mind and body.

Carlsson (2017) has also contributed to the debate of gendered experiences and hypermasculinity in the boxing gym. There are a few differences between her ethnography and the previously mentioned studies: she is a competitive amateur boxer whose research concerns the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers, this time in Scotland. However, whilst the ethnographies mentioned above were sociological, Carlsson's is a geographer. She uses the ethnographic method called apprenticeship, facilitating four semi-structured interviews with other female boxers as part of her fieldwork. Carlsson (2017) findings were consistent with those of the earlier studies, such as how the desire to be accepted as "one of the boys" resulted in her distancing herself from female beginner boxers. Carlsson notes that this is due to a conditioning to view these other women as "weak", with displays of femininity seen as conforming to repressive gender norms. Carlsson (2017) also notes her discomfort when exhibiting feminine characteristics in hypermasculine environments and when exhibiting masculine characteristics (such as a muscular

physique) in feminine environments. Similarly, Channon and Phipps (2017) discovered that female boxers purposely enact femininity in order to prove that they can be both a 'real woman' and a 'real boxer' at the same time. Carlsson (2017) described boxing pushing her to 'take up space' and to use her body fully in various ways that encouraged her to overcome fears, insecurity, and beliefs of being frail and weak. She noted that, unlike the previous studies, embodiment encounters in sparring involved her not thinking of herself as a woman and not thinking of her opponent as a man. Instead, she describes being so fully focused in the present moment that all distractions and thoughts leave her mind. This is consistent with descriptions of the mind-body integration state called "flow", adopting an ability to block out distractions in order to focus (Menzel & Levine, 2011). However, there are a few limitations to apprenticeship studies, such as the researcher's circumstances, which limit the topics and communities that can be investigated. Since the researchers use their own body as a research tool, while also considering that the researcher decides what subjective experience to include in their study, this can lead to the marginalisation of the people they are studying (Butz & Besio, 2009). For instance, Carlsson (2017) claims that there are restrictions on the subjects that can be studied, such as how boxing affects the romantic and personal connections of gym patrons. Furthermore, Carlsson (2017) does not pay attention to the bodily experiences as a whole or the relationship between the body and the self. The present study aims to bridge this gap by gathering a better understanding of the embodied experience—in the way they use and make sense of their bodies interacting in the world—of female amateur boxers. Additionally, this study will explore the embodied experience by considering how amateur boxing impacts different areas of life, including relationships, friends, family and work.

Overall, much of the current research that explores the embodied experiences of female amateur boxing is dominated by sociological and geographical studies which focus largely on gendered experiences within feminist and social justice perspectives, using an ethnographic methodology. Up to now research into female amateur boxing has not focused on how the body itself is viewed, nor has it considered self-perception with regards to how the body moves and interacts with the world—this is especially the case with psychological research.

Ethnographic research offers a number of challenges to counselling psychologists (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue that ethnographic research faces criticism in three main areas: in representation, legitimation and praxis. Firstly, the criticism of being representational includes questioning the validity of ethnographers' assertions that they accurately reflect lived experience. Critics point out that the research shaped by their experience only (Suzuki et al., 2005). Secondly, the area of praxis faces criticism due to concerns about the consequences of switching from passive, objective observation to a more active, hands-on, and subjective research methodology. Lastly, the criticism of legitimation involves critiques of rigor, accuracy and generalisability. Ethnographies have come under fire for generalising their findings to a wider population from studies that consist of a small sample size of the population (Suzuki et al, 2005). Creswell and Poth (2016) argue that rigor and accuracy can be negatively affected when faced with problems concerning objectivity which can blur research boundaries. Furthermore, the findings of ethnographic research is written in the form of a narrative, which may limit the

work's readership and deter authors accustomed to standard scientific research writing styles (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

1.10 Rationale and Aims

This literature review highlights various gaps in current research that are worth exploring. It does this in three significant ways.

Firstly, although research on lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers has increased over the years, the literature is limited. There is still a lack of understanding as to how female amateur boxers consciously or unconsciously use and view their bodies when training, during the fight itself and in their personal lives. Qualitative research has effectively documented the challenges that female boxers face in hypermasculine boxing environments, while also highlighting the value in understanding the individual's experience of female boxing. However, the current research that explores the embodied experiences of female amateur boxing is dominated by sociological and geographical studies that focus largely on the relationship bodily experiences and social construction, and on questions of gender identity within feminist and social justice framework. The few studies that have conducted psychological research come from sports psychology, the aim of which in these cases is to enhance performance. Therefore, there is a lack of research when it comes to our understanding the conscious and unconscious knowledge of bodily feelings and sensations in relation to wellbeing, and in relationship to that of the body and the mind.

Secondly, the methodology adopted from majority of the literature is employing ethnographies and, therefore, heavily influenced by the researchers' own bodily experiences. Furthermore, while the current research exploring the embodied experiences of female boxing has been conducted in various countries (e.g Norway and USA), relatively few have taken place in the UK. Our understanding of the experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK is limited and should therefore be further researched. A robust, qualitative research study is required to close the gap in the literature, to move academic understanding forward and provide informed recommendations for professions and practitioners.

Thirdly, this present study therefore contributes to the literature gap by using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the in-depth embodied experiences of a group of female amateur boxers, which has not been done before. Until now, papers have not focused on how the body itself is viewed, or on how self-perception regarding how the body moves and interacts with the world, within a counselling psychology framework. This gap of enquiry is well suited to the field of counselling psychology as it aims to promote and improve mental health and the well-being of individuals (Gelso et al., 2014). Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) argue that psychologists can help develop our understanding of the relationship between mind and body. This links with the field of counselling psychology, which traditionally places an importance on wellness, longevity and strength (rather than illness or deficit). By exploring embodiment we can better understand the various ways in which female amateur boxers experience their bodies. The study of bodily experiences may open new pathways to wellbeing if efforts are made to reorient attention toward what the body does and how it feels as opposed to how it looks (Shiffmann, 1996).

The intention was to give female amateur boxers a voice and to gain a deeper understanding of how they experience their bodies, done so by exploring the content and complexity of this experience from their viewpoint. This study is expected to produce findings that will add to the existing research base, the intention of which will be for it to serve as a platform for future research by encouraging others to focus on this under-researched topic. It is hoped that the information generated will enrich the work of counselling psychologists, as well as that of other professionals and policy makers involved in understanding and improving the wellbeing of female amateur boxers, broadening their understandings and equipping them more suitably.

Importantly, it is intended that the research process would empower and be of value to the female amateur boxers that participated in this study, providing them with an opportunity to express their personal experiences with amateur boxing, and to have these views heard, valued and respected. By shedding light onto female amateur boxers, and onto how they feel and make sense of their bodies and minds, I hope these findings will have a significant influence on further research in this field.

In summary, this qualitative study aims to explore the embodied experience of female amateur boxers in the UK, and in a way that has not been done before. This qualitative study is expected to sit in the field of counselling psychology fitting in line with the exploration of the relationship between mind and body. The research aims are explicated in the literature review above, which suggests that there is a gap in research to understanding the embodied experience of female amateur boxers in the UK. With this in mind, the main research aims for this study are as follows:

1. To understand the ways in which boxing shaped and reshaped female amateur boxers' perceptions of themselves, including the ways in which they perceive their bodies to exist in and interact with the world.
2. To explore links between embodied experiences of female boxers and wellbeing.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview

This chapter outlines the methodological and epistemological approaches that were drawn upon to address the research question. This chapter will discuss the stance of critical realist and social constructionist approaches, and it will then explain why IPA was chosen over other methods. Additionally, this chapter will outline the rationale for my methodology, data collection processes, recruitment, sampling considerations, reflexivity, ethical considerations, as well as describing the analytic procedure.

2.2 Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

Traditionally, in the general field of psychology there has been more emphasis on positivism and objectivity rather than having a deeper look at the subjective experiences of individuals (Wolfe et al. 2003). However, in the last decade psychology has embraced qualitative methods (Riley et al., 2019). In the field of counselling psychology, qualitative methods are considered to be beneficial for producing rich and meaningful data (Henton, 2012). The focus of qualitative research is that of having an in-depth exploration, in making sense of the subjective experiences of individuals by stepping into their world and allowing new information to arise (Willig, 2013, p. 69). This fits in with the study's aim of exploring the lived experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK, specifically its focus on embodiment. Furthermore, there is currently a lack of qualitative research around this area, suggesting, therefore, a need to better understand these experiences. Although others have argued that this is simply a

"descriptive methodology" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), an interpretative phenomenological approach tries to develop information about the meaning of experience within a larger social and psychological context (Willig, 2013).

2.3 Rationale for IPA

Several qualitative methodologies were considered for this study to explore how women interpret and understand their own embodied experiences of amateur boxing. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that, when comparing and selecting a qualitative approach to data analysis, it is not helpful to think what the 'tool for the job' is but instead to question 'what the job is' (p.43). The three main approaches considered the most appropriate for this study were Grounded theory, Discourse Analysis and IPA.

For researchers considering employing IPA, the primary alternative method that is often regarded is Grounded theory (Smith et al., 2009). Grounded theory was developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967). The primary aim is to develop a theoretical explanation of the social processes under investigation (Howitt, 2010). As the aim of the present study is to *explore* the embodied experience of female amateur boxers, rather than to *explain* it, grounded theory appears inappropriate. It can be argued that Grounded theory's goal, to offer a theoretical account, would overlook the "texture and nuance" (Smith et al., 2009, p.202) of the lived experiences of female amateur boxers with which the study is concerned.

The basis of Discourse Analysis is to explore how individuals construct their personal, social and political experiences through their own use of language (Starks

& Trinidad, 2007). Were Discourse Analysis to be used in the present study, the attention would be placed on *how* stories are told by female amateur boxers, using language to help mediate and shape their sense of reality (Georgaca & Avdi, 2012). On this basis, Discourse Analysis was ruled out because it would be concerned with the “how” female amateur boxers talk about their experience as opposed to understanding this experience itself.

Overall, IPA was chosen for this study because there is a large emphasis placed on constructing a detailed picture of how individuals see and make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, 2017). IPA is deeply rooted in phenomenology, which explores how people experience and learn about the world around them (Willig, 2001). This commitment to phenomenology aims to provide an opportunity for the participants’ stories to be told, while an interpretation of these stories allows the researcher to “make sense” of these experiences and for this interpretation to be made explicit (Larkin et al., 2006). Therefore, IPA is most suited to the research aims of this project, which looks to build a detailed exploration of how female amateur boxers experience the world and their bodies.

2.4 Overview of IPA

IPA is becoming more widely accepted and continuing to advance in the domains of Counselling, Clinical-, and Social psychology (Smith et al., 2021). IPA is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) ideas, which posited that our body is intertwined with our sense of self and our daily world. Instead of there being a single, objectively accurate reality, IPA makes the fundamental assumption that each of us constructs our own reality in response to our social and contextual understanding. As a result, the cultural,

social, and historical environment in which we are situated affects our inner world, which is an interpretation of our experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By concentrating in depth upon a small number of cases, IPA can preserve the richness of individual descriptions while seeking to elucidate these lived experiences and comprehend how people make sense of their inner world. It is crucial for researchers to be aware of their contribution to the research because IPA research is seen as a collaboration between the participant and the researcher. The researcher is seen as having an active and significant involvement in the collaborative, dynamic process of research. To understand that "other" personal reality through the process of interpretation, researchers must have their own concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2008). According to Smith et al. (2009), this procedure is known as a "double-hermeneutic", in which the researcher engages in a two-stage process of interpretation to understand how the participant is attempting to make sense of what is happening to them.

Giorgi (2011) has criticised IPA's theoretical underpinnings. He argues that the terms IPA claim, around "lived experience" and "examination of meanings", is too generic and not exclusively to phenomenology. Additionally, Giorgi (2011) contends that IPA fails to adequately explain how research is affected by the hermeneutic tradition. Giorgi contends that the founders of IPA are instead trying to be hermeneutically eclectic while having only a limited and general influence. According to Smith et al. (2009), phenomenology could be hermeneutic in that it calls for the researcher's personal interpretation in order to comprehend the phenomenon as it manifests itself in human awareness. While it is important to acknowledge the criticisms that IPA has received, I still feel that IPA fits best with my research aims, and it made it possible for me to interpret the meaning of each participant's own experience. Furthermore, IPA

recognises that I will certainly analyse the data from a psychological perspective because I am a counselling psychologist in training.

2.5 Ontological Position

It is critical for a researcher to understand the relationship between epistemology (the nature of knowledge), ontology (the nature of reality), and methodology (how knowledge is to be discovered) in order to establish a sound research paradigm (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). From realism to relativism, ontology is considered as a continuum having two polarised perspectives. A realist ontology aligns more to quantitative research as it sits on the view that there is an objective singular reality which can be measured independently from human perceptions, beliefs and constructions (Smith & Ceusters, 2010). Contrastingly, relativism adopts the view that there are multiple realities created through social constructs, different experiences and multiple interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The ontology of this study is critical realism, which also aligns with my personal beliefs: that a real external reality exists, one not purely constructed by language, but at the same time accepting that an understanding of this reality is shaped by our differing inner interpretations (Gorski, 2013). Therefore, there is not just one understanding of the world but many differing interpretations that are based on the beliefs and values of the individual (Finlay, 2006). For example, it can be claimed that the female amateur boxers in this study are describing experiences of real events, that there is a reality to embodied experiences, such as hunger and pain. This study is interested mainly in the embodied experiences of the participants and it recognises that the embodied experiences of these participants will be different

depending on different interpretations of their experiences of boxing. This position also aligns with my personal beliefs, that knowledge about the world is not truly known or certain but instead beliefs and values guide us to make sense of the world, resulting in differing interpretations and experiences of the world.

2.6 Epistemological Position

The constructionist viewpoint argues that the mind plays an active critical role in the construction of knowledge and processing stimuli (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This means that to analyse the collected data, it is important to acknowledge the fact that different individuals have different experiences, and each individual interprets their own experience in a unique way. Kidd (2004) points out that social constructionism can often be confused or interchangeable with the term “social constructivism”. This is due to sharing certain similarities, such as individuals having an active role in making sense of their experiences, data seen as a co-construction between researcher and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Additionally both maintaining the view that there is not a single reality but instead are multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). But the distinction between the two is that constructionism places more focus on social formation, and on how language specifically does this and creates knowledge (Gergen, 2009). Constructivism emphasises the individual mind and the ways in which it processes information through relationships and interactions with others, emphasising an "outside-in" approach.

The epistemological stance for this study is social constructionism, which emphasises how the social context and our interactions, particularly language, shape our experience in the world and even determine what kind of experiences are

possible or not (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Social constructionism places emphasis on language being a vital tool to access and communicate our experiences and inner world. For example, participants use language to access and share how they make sense of their embodied experiences. According to social constructionism, there is no single truth and knowledge is influenced by the participants' and researcher's respective viewpoints (e.g., social, cultural, and political). As a result, the data is viewed as a collaboration co-construction between myself and the participants. Overall, linking ontology, epistemology and methodology, this research adapts the phenomenological epistemology that focuses on gathering each person's experiences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

2.7 Reflexivity

Berger (2015) notes a co-construction arises through the way in which a researcher accesses and interprets a participant's experience. As a result, the researcher's ability to access and interpret these experiences collected from participants may be influenced by their own experiences, gender, race and other personal factors. In particular, the researcher's positionality in qualitative research is a crucial concept in gaining an awareness of how enduring social identities are and in how they bestow a status that allows or restricts the exercise of power (Frost & Holt, 2014). By being conscious of their positionality, researchers can gain a greater understanding of, and thereby respond to, the shifting balance of power that pervades and affects the research process (e.g. Lavis, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial, as a researcher, to clarify how my role can impact data collection that has been co-produced in ways that are due to influences from my own interpretations, interests, values and beliefs. This is to acknowledge that I will always be an active agent within this research

process and, therefore, reflections are needed every step in this process to stay close to the participants' voices.

This research topic is personal to me, making it particularly interesting. Boxing is a sport that I am passionate about. I currently train as a carded amateur boxer. As a result, I have dedicated a lot of my time to this sport and have personally experienced many benefits, from seeing my body become stronger to helping me cope with daily stresses. However, I have also experienced the pressure and stress of intense training, and of my body needing to be consistently at a certain weight in order for me to compete. As a researcher, these experiences allow me to connect with the topic on a personal level. Therefore, it is important as a researcher to consistently remain reflexive and to ensure these personal connections are made explicit and to remain mindful of them throughout the research process. By investigating the experience of others, the research allows me to frame boxing as more than just a physical sport, thus generating keenness in the analysis of data, research outcomes and participants' involvement.

When entering the research process, I adopted Finlay's (2008) 'phenomenological psychological attitude' and 'critical self-awareness' in order to reflect on any pre-understandings and beliefs that would be going into the research. Rather than ignoring or side-lining them, I was able to use them, engaging with these thoughts and feelings throughout the study. In light of this, I decided to keep a reflective journal throughout the study, as suggested by Wall, Glen, Mitchinson, and Poole (2004). Here I wrote down any relevant thoughts and sensations as they arose, allowing me to become more conscious of my experience as a researcher, as well as

enabling me to reflect upon and question my process. I spent some time before the interviews trying to identify and explore my pre-existing opinions regarding the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers. I noticed that my personal experience of being a female amateur boxer, as well as the literature I have read, have primarily shaped my opinions. It became clearer to me that I felt strongly that boxing had a positive impact on women's physical and mental wellbeing. I felt that it would be important for me to reflect on how to remain impartial and open minded to the possibility that my personal views about boxing might be challenged. For example, being mindful and not defensive if a participant did not have a positive experience, or if they expressed that they had not found boxing useful.

Personal feelings need to be a source of reflection, in order to ensure that the research is conducted with transparency and coherence (Lucy, 2014). According to Flanagan (2011), reflexivity is more than just the awareness of personal biases. It is the further establishing of knowledge of the researcher in terms of their reaction to the research process, bringing them to different understandings and insights from the research. As the research progressed, I took the opportunity to be reflexive throughout (utilising my own personal therapy, reflective diaries and supervision), including analysing data to see possibly what perceived impacts are made.

2.8 Design

As mentioned above, I will be using a qualitative design that is influenced by the epistemological stance to try to address the research questions mentioned. Eight female amateur boxers who currently actively training in the UK participated in semi-

structured one-on-one interviews. The duration of each interview was 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed.

2.8.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The most popular form of data collecting for IPA research is that of semi-structured interviews because they are adaptable and individually focused instruments; they enable a conversation by inviting thoughts, feelings and stories from participants (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2001). According to Eatough and Smith (2008), this provides a framework that allows the participant to be the expert on their own experience, and the researcher can assist the participant in examining their lived experience. Dearnley (2005) discovered that the questions' openness generated depth and vigour, which aided in the emergence of new concepts. This openness can thus help researchers to gather rich data for analysis, which can improve the validity of the study. Therefore, it was decided that semi-structured interviews were a good technique to access the lived experiences of the female amateur boxers in this study. However, it is important to note that using semi-structured interviews also came with limitations. Firstly, one of the disadvantages is that it is time consuming (e.g. it takes time to prepare, set up, conduct and analyse the interviews) and labour intensive (Newcomer et al., 2015). Secondly, inexperienced researchers frequently struggle to decide where to pose probing questions or solicit responses, which may prevent them from collecting all necessary information (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Lastly, the power dynamic between the researcher and participant may also have an impact on the interview's content, as the researcher may accidentally steer the conversation in their favour and the participant may feel under pressure to please and perform "well".

Despite this, overall semi-structured interviews provide richer data (Smith and Osborn, 2008). This is because they can be flexible and adaptable, allowing for the exploration of topics that naturally arise through open-ended questions. Additionally, the skills I have developed as a trainee counselling psychologist fits best with the semi-structured interview process, insofar as my experience of having one-to-one sessions with clients has provided me with abilities to listen, facilitate meaning making, and maintain curiosity.

2.8.2 Interview Schedule

Researchers are advised to create an interview ahead of time that is based on the range of subjects they intend to cover; this is done in order to accurately address their research question (Smith et al., 2019). Considerable time was spent adjusting the number of questions and their exact wording when I created the interview schedule. Although the current study did not set out to test any specific models, the literature review was used to pinpoint certain areas (e.g. gendered experiences, training, bouts, relationships) to explore which would serve as the basis for the interview schedule.

According to Willig (2008) and Smith et al. (2009), the interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was created to gradually "work up to" increasingly intimate/sensitive topics. The interview schedule was made up on predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging during the interviewee-interviewer conversation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A rapport was established through an introductory interview question regarding the background and context on what led them to amateur boxing. The questions then move to how they experienced their bodies and how they

make sense of this in relation to boxing, when both training and in the ring. Then the questions shift to an exploration of embodiment, specifically in relation to having a female body in a male dominated sport. Following this were questions that link the understanding of embodiment to other areas of life, such as wellbeing, relationships and work. My supervisor and I discussed the uniqueness of conducting research during a global pandemic, and we therefore decided to add a question on how lockdown impacts the embodied experience. The interview questions were designed in such a way as to elicit the participants' ideas, feelings, and impressions—using prompts to urge more in-depth information—all in an attempt to capture the participants' lived embodied experiences. Participants were asked if there was anything further they wanted to say before we ended the interview to give them the chance to add any information they felt was significant that had been missed.

2.9 Procedure

2.9.1 Data Collection

All the interviews were semi-structured and were conducted online. It is important to note that interviews were conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted a lockdown in the UK. According to Turpin et al. (1997), it is recommended that doctoral trainees have a minimum of six participants for an IPA study. Smith et al. (2009) goes further, suggesting that a sample size of eight participants is suitable for an IPA study. This sample size helps to fulfil the requirement to explore each participant's lived experience in-depth, to make judgments about the similarities and differences between individuals, all the while limiting the number to ensure the qualitative data gathered is not overwhelming. The sample size of eight was agreed

on so as to reflect my commitment to answering the research question. This includes wanting a better understanding of the phenomenon by hearing as many subjective experiences as possible while, at the same time, being able to allocate enough time and resources to each interview transcript, thus enabling an in-depth study.

2.9.2 Recruitment and Sampling Considerations

This study recruited 8 Participants from local Amateur Boxing clubs in the UK. Head coaches from local amateur boxing clubs in England were contacted via email with an attachment of a recruitment flyer. All England boxing clubs have head coaches contact details on their website. The recruitment flyer was circulated and was also displayed in the boxing clubs. Participants who had identified themselves as female amateur boxers who were interested in taking part had volunteered by getting in touch through the contact details on recruitment flyer. Eight participants were recruited based on their voluntary response towards research advertisements (See appendix 6).

Since participants volunteered to participate in this study, therefore choosing to opt in, I did not know or have any of the participants' personal details until they contacted me. Any potential participants could contact me, using details from the flyer that had been circulated, via email or mobile telephone. This initial contact was an opportunity to check for eligibility, for participants to raise any concerns, and for them to ask me more information about the study. At this stage, assumptions around consent to participate in this study will not be made.

Nine individuals expressed an interest in participating in the study. Most of the participants made contact via email after seeing the research poster that had been circulated in their boxing gym by their coach. I sent a pre-written email in response to each possible participant, using this chance to evaluate each one's eligibility for the study and to confirm their location in the country. In order to further determine each respondents' eligibility and preparedness to participate in the study, a screening telephone call was set up with those who were still interested in taking part (see Appendix 1). To ensure the recruitment process was as transparent as possible, potential participants were chosen in the order that they had answered. One participant dropped out between the telephone screening and the interview due to personal time constraints. After the prospective participants were agreed as being eligible and eager to share their experiences, a date and time were agreed and organised for the interview. Email was used to coordinate and confirm this. The research was conducted via a secured online platform (Zoom). With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded. I ensured that the participants found a comfortable place where they could have complete privacy so that they could fully engage in the interview.

2.9.3 Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To participate, individuals needed to meet the following requirements, so as to ensure homogeneity in the sample:

Inclusion Criteria

- Minimum age of 18 years.
- Actively training and competing as a female amateur boxer.

- Participants must have completed at least one competitive fight at a regional level.

Exclusion Criteria

- Participants under the age of 18.
- Participants with less than two years of competitive training experience. This is due to studies showing that the terms “elite” and “expert” have been ascribed to athletes with a minimum of two years of accumulated practice (Welch & Tschampl, 2012).

2.9.4 Participant Summary

This research describes the experiences of eight female amateur boxers aged between 18 and 40, who have had over two years of competing in amateur boxing. The participants were all female and living in the UK. Seven participants’ first language was English, while one participant’s first language was Polish. The table below outlines the demographic information (collected during the telephone screening) that was given to me by the participants to contextualise them. All names and other personally identifying information have been modified or omitted, and participants have been given pseudonyms, in order to maintain anonymity. It is also important to note that, given the female amateur boxing scene in the UK is still relatively small, I will maintain anonymity by providing some of the information within a range or category.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Competing	Number of bouts	Occupation	Family Status	Prior Sporting Experience
Sarah	Early 30s	White British	4 years	15	Academics	Living with partner (also boxer)	Football
Priya	Early 30s	Asian British	9 years	13	Healthcare	Living alone	Describe as always being "sporty" but not specified
Melissa	Early 30s	White American	10 years	70-80	PhD Student	Living with a friend	Boxing classes in university
Amanda	19	White British	4 years	8	Student	Living with family	Swimming
Sabrina	Mid 20s	White Canadian	2 years	2	Community Development Coordinator	Living with partner (also boxer)	Ballet

Lola	Late 20s	White British	5 years	2	Manager	Living with partner	Running
Jessica	Early 40s	White Polish	2 years	2	Office role	Living with her two children	Dancing (Zumba, Street dance and Salsa)
Rebecca	19	White British	3 years	3	Student	Living with family	Swimming

Table 2.1 Relevant participant information

2.10 Ethical Considerations

2.10.1 Consent

This research is situated within the ethical framework of The British Psychology Society, Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) and the City university ethical guidance. This is aimed at lessening the psychological distress that might be associated with the study as well as reducing the exposure of participants to any further risk as evident in everyday life. Initially I went through the screening questions to check if the participant was eligible (see Appendix 1), discussed consent with each participant and gave participants an information sheet (see Appendix 3). However, in the event of people being unable to read, it I would be able to go over details on the phone too. Participants were given a minimum of 24 hours to consider their participation once they had received all the information. All participants signed a

well-written and informed consent form, after a brief on the nature of the research (see Appendix 2), to ensure the participation is without coercion (Jackson, 2018). Participants were also be given some time before the interview to address any issues or questions. Before the study, participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Since participants were over 18, parental consent was not required.

Following the interview, 15 minutes was allocated for participants to be debriefed; a debrief form was given to all participants (see appendix 4). During this time, participants had the chance to express how they felt that the interview had gone, if they had any questions, or if they were interested in reading the final results of the study.

2.10.2 Assessment and Management of risk

The study was conducted with a non-clinical population. While I did not anticipate that the research itself will cause any significant distress for the participants, it is an important ethical consideration to be prepared and aware that, when participating in this research there may be some challenges for individual participants. Measures were put in place to address any emotional distress that might have arisen as a result of the research, including providing guidance and information about other services that are available (See Appendix 5). In situations where a participant became distressed, participants would be asked whether they wanted the interview to be paused for a couple of minutes so that they can have some space to recover, or whether they wanted the interview to be stopped completely. Participants were informed that, whilst further conversations will continue to be recorded for their

protection and for that of the researcher, they will not be included in the research. No information shared in this participation was passed on to a third party without the participant's permission. In addition, all details were anonymous, and pseudonyms were used for all participants to maintain confidentiality (see appendix 2 and 3). In cases where they may have been feeling overwhelmed, participants were allowed to stop the participation at any point, and without having to provide an explanation. I did not offer clinical support to participants; instead participants were given details of other services that could provide them with support and advice (see Appendix 5).

2.10.3 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical review and approval from the necessary regulatory body, which is the City University's Ethics Committee. The research was conducted only after being approved by City University's Ethics Committee. The research was carried out in accordance with the HCPC and BPS codes of ethics, and, as a result, I strived to respect the participants' autonomy and dignity, aiming to maximise benefits while minimising harm to individuals involved in the study (HCPC, 2016; BPS, 2014).

Issues of confidentiality were discussed with each participant prior to the start of the interview. This involved informing them that all conversations were confidential between myself, participant and academic supervisor. Participants' material was anonymised, stored securely and used for the purposes of research only. I always aim to discuss any breach of confidentiality with participants prior to discussing the information with a third party. This is to ensure that a collaborative way of disclosing the information can be devised. All interviews were recorded using audio recording

devices, which participants were informed about. The results of the present study include direct quotations that were transcribed from these audio recordings. However, all participants were referred to by a pseudonym and the overall results comprised quotes from all participants, not individual participants. The data recorded was transferred at the soonest opportunity to an encrypted and password protected laptop, to which only I had access. All information gathered, including the transcripts, will be safely stored for five years in compliance with British Psychological Society rules (2010) before being destroyed.

2.10.4 Dissemination of results

The raw data may be identifiable as it is in an interview transcript and so it will not all be published. Excerpts shared in publication will be carefully anonymised.

Pseudonyms will be used to present direct quotes and short extracts that might be included in the final reports. To further ensure anonymity, no identifiable personal data, such as locations and names, has been included in the write-up, future publications or given to any other party.

I fully intend for this study to be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, which could potentially mean that the write up of this research may become publicly accessible online. Participants were able to indicate whether they would be interested in having a copy of the final report. The participants who had shown this interest and opted in for a copy, the details of their email address were kept by me for the copy to be sent via email. This will be stored separately to the transcripts and research data. A record of any personal data (including addresses) will be destroyed following the relevant correspondence.

2.11 Evaluation of Research

An important aspect of conducting qualitative research is to evaluate validity. As a result, many sets of criteria have been devised by to assess the quality of qualitative research. According to Yardley (2000), there are four main criteria to consider when ascertaining the validity of qualitative research: (1) sensitivity to context; (2) commitment and rigour; (3) transparency and coherence; and (4) impact and importance. As Yardley's (2000) criteria are often used to assess qualitative psychology research, and are well suited to a phenomenological method, I referred them all when assessing the quality of my qualitative research.

2.11.1 Sensitivity to context

In order to determine whether the study is sensitive to its context, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the vital aspects of context within the research (e.g. epistemology, social context, culture and ethics). This was done through the introduction chapter where I conducted a detailed literature review to identify gaps of knowledge around the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers. Additionally, the present chapter has covered the theoretical factors that influenced the design, planning and implementation of this study. Regarding the social-cultural context, I reflected on the ideological, historical, socioeconomic and linguistic impact on participants during this research process, as well as reflecting about myself as demonstrated in this chapter (Yardley, 2000). Through reflexivity, throughout the analysis process I kept the opinions of the participants in mind, making sure that my interpretations were based on their words. By drawing on my skills as a trainee

counselling psychologist, and by using semi-structured interviews to collect the data, I ensured that the participants felt listened to and valued, all the while being vigilant to any interactional issues.

2.11.2 Commitment and rigour

Regarding commitment and rigour: it is required that the researcher is committed to a long engagement with the research; they must also be able to appropriately use the research methodology; data must be collected completely, and the analysis of the data and the results must be suitably thorough (Yardley, 2000). I made sure I was fulfilling this criteria by learning more about qualitative research techniques. To do this I read IPA literature and attended IPA lectures and seminar groups. I also practiced interview questions on myself and a friend from my boxing gym in order to make sure the interview questions made sense and were suitable.

According to Smith et al. (2021), in order to achieve rigour the researcher must be able to and be consistent in their probing, always paying attention to key cues from participants. To demonstrate this, participants commented that I attempted to understand them by picking up on signs and asking more questions, especially when it came to topics (e.g. how there were mixed feelings of having a female body in a male-dominated space) that others had previously conceptualised incorrectly. As will be seen in the analysis chapter, the analysis process was methodical and comprehensive. Themes were generated, tweaked—and, on a few occasions, rejected—based on if I thought another theme better represented the data.

2.11.3 Transparency and coherence

Transparency and coherence refer to the capturing of potential influences on the research process while questioning whether the research question and philosophical perspective of the research are suitable and aligned (Yardley, 2000). I did this by explaining the rationale, by outlining every step of the research process, by explaining the recruitment and sampling process, by providing the rationale for IPA, explaining how the research questions came about, as well as detailing the conduct of the interviews and the analytic strategy. Transparency was maintained by including diagrams, tables and samples that summarise significant participant data in the relevant chapters and appendices. This provides more detail on the research process, analytical approach and the resulting data.

2.11.4 Impact and Importance

Impact and importance look at how the research adds value and contributes to the field (Yardley, 2000). This was highlighted in the introduction chapter where I outline the importance of this study and the contribution it is making to the field of counselling psychology. This research adds to the literature on the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers, contributing to the gaps in the research I outlined earlier. By examining the details and complexity of this experience from the perspective of female amateur boxers, it was hoped to offer them an opportunity to share their experiences and develop a better knowledge of how women experience their bodies. By encouraging other researchers to concentrate on this understudied area, one aim of this study is to provide a foundation for subsequent contributions to the existing research. By developing their knowledge and providing them with better tools, it is

believed that the information produced would enhance the job of counselling psychologists, as well as that of other experts and decision-makers involved in comprehending and enhancing the wellbeing of female amateur boxers.

2.12 Analytic Strategy

One advantage of utilising IPA as an analysis tool is that Smith et al. (2009) have clearly outlined six steps for the analysis process. As a first time IPA researcher, it was comforting to be able to follow these guidelines rigorously. I implemented these steps in the following way: (I will discuss how I interacted with the data during each of these steps.)

1) Reading and re-reading

The IPA literature often emphasises the significance of 'immersing' oneself in the data (e.g., Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2001). This was particularly relevant for me during the first stage of analysis, where I transcribed each interview myself and listened to the interviews several times whilst reading the transcripts. The aim of this is to re-familiarise oneself with both the lifeworld of the participants and the overall interview experience. This process also allowed me to note down any reflections and observations on the data in my research diary as recommended by Willig (2001). Additionally, I wrote a short narrative summary of each participant for my own reference.

2) Initial noting

The second stage of analysis is described by Smith et al. (2009) is 'the most detailed and time consuming' (p. 83). It involves having a closer look at the content and

language used in the transcripts at an exploratory level. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009), detailed comments were made in the right-hand column of the text in a word document (See Appendix 1 for an example). These exploratory comments were separated into three distinct types that are descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. In order to make these types distinct, descriptive comments were typed in standard text, while linguistic comments were italicised, and conceptual comments underlined.

Descriptive comments are the explicit content as described by the participant, and with as little input from my own knowledge and opinions as feasible. They are seen as indicating what really matters to the participant (Smith et al., 2009). Linguistic comments were made to document how language conveyed the content and meaning of the participants' lived experience. These comments also considered behaviours such as nonverbal communication, laughter and repetition. Lastly, conceptual comments are seen as looking at the overarching patterns through a conceptual and interrogative lens drawing on professional knowledge and experience to make further sense of emerging understandings.

3) Developing emergent themes

The third step of the analysis was to use these initial exploratory comments to start capturing emergent themes. The aim here was to reduce the amount of detail in the notes in a way that still represented the data's richness and complexity.

It is important to note that some of the terminology used in IPA has changed recently (Smith et al, 2022). For example, “emergent themes” are now called “experiential statements”. However, since the data analysis for this study was well underway when this new terminology was announced, the old terminology will be used. We recommend future research to use the new terminology.

The emergent themes were typed in the left-hand column of the text and were often written as a brief statement or phrase. These emergent themes are intended to reflect a grounding in what was explicitly described by the participants. They also allow an integration of my own psychological interpretations. As a result, the transcript is temporarily fractured into parts but Smith et al. (2009) points out an exhibition of the hermeneutic circle. This is where analysis goes 'back and forth' between different areas of the text to allow new meanings to emerge, where fractured parts will be reassembled into a 'new whole' in the final stage of analysis.

4) Searching for connections across themes

The fourth step of the analysis was to list these themes chronologically, separated in a spreadsheet, with the aim of finding connections between them. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), the spreadsheet was printed out, cut out and placed onto a large table where I started to observe the themes together and think about how they may link. I followed Smith et al. (2009) recommendation for grouping. This includes abstraction (e.g., themes clustering naturally gaining a superordinate title), subsumption (e.g. a theme gains super-ordinate rank as a result of its role in bringing together a group of related themes under it), polarization (e.g. discovery of opposing

themes), contextualisation (e.g. themes that are linked by particular events) and numeration (e.g. how often similar themes appeared indicating an important experience). While using these grouping methods, the themes were interpreted to get a sense of the phenomenon behind these lived experiences. It is also important to note that several themes were condensed and removed during this process because they were either irrelevant, poorly expressed in the text, or simply captured better by other themes (Willig, 2008).

The grouping process soon came to a point of saturation (Smith, 2004) where the grouping procedure was not able to go any further. I therefore made a summary table in a spreadsheet containing the superordinate themes and subthemes, as well as verbatim quotations from the text and corresponding page and line numbers.

5) Moving to the next case

The fifth step of the analysis involved repeating the steps one to four (as shown above) for each participant's transcript. According to Smith et al. (2009), it is inevitable that that which has already been discovered will have an impact, and this effect can lead to the discovery of themes that have already been discovered in previous transcripts. Though being mindful of this and in line with the idiographic nature of IPA, the steps outlined were closely followed, and ideas that were influenced by prior transcripts were held back to allow new themes to emerge.

6) Looking for patterns across cases

The sixth step of the analysis involved integrating the data by looking for connections across cases in order to create a master list of themes that mirrored the overall experience of the participants. Using the grouping methods mentioned in step 4, superordinate themes were placed spread onto a large table so as to help make a comparison across participants. This led to the formation of four subordinate themes with a group of subthemes under each; I also checked the direct quotes to show evidence of this grouping. Overall, this formed the basis for the analysis chapter.

3. Analysis

3.1. Introduction

This chapter offers a detailed narrative account of the research interviews in order to answer the research question 'How does boxing shape and reshape female amateur boxers' perceptions of themselves, including the ways in which they perceive their bodies to exist in and interact with the world?'. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this section will present the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview and literature. This is done to provide an understanding into the lived and embodied experiences of these female amateur boxers. Direct quotes from the transcripts are included in the analysis, which, together with an interpretative position, ensures transparency, amplifying the participants' voices, allowing for a more in-depth comprehension of their experience.

Due to the large amount of data collected, direct quotes from the transcripts were chosen carefully to best illuminate the themes. When selecting the quotations, I sought to portray each participant's voice, and I tried to find extracts that most correctly conveyed the sum of the participant's experience. The extracts were transcribed verbatim, including pauses, grammatical faults and personal speech peculiarities. It is important to mention that non-verbal communications are placed in square brackets, pauses were indicated by an ellipsis, and omitted material is indicated by an ellipsis within square brackets. The participant's pseudonym, page number and line number follow each quotation; this information is included so as to easier locate them within the transcript.

Four superordinate themes and fourteen subthemes were revealed from the analysis (see Appendix 7 for a diagrammatic representation of superordinate themes and subthemes). Whereas all participants shaped the superordinate themes, not all of the subthemes were stated by all participants. A table detailing the appearance of themes for each participant can be found in Appendix 8. The superordinate themes and subthemes are outlined below to represent the lived experiences of female amateur boxers, and the rest of this chapter will explore them in depth.

1: Mind-Body Dualism

- 1.1: Body as Performance
- 1.2: Control and Restriction
- 1.3: Mind and Body Alignment vs Misalignment

2: Boxing as Self-healing

- 2.1: Feeling Strong and Confident
- 2.2: Way of Coping
- 2.3: Rewarding
- 2.4: Catharsis and Fight Itself as Release from Restriction

3: Having a Female Body in Male Spaces

- 3.1: Negation of Female Body
- 3.2: Understanding the Female Body
- 3.3: Experience of Being Less Than
- 3.4: Challenging Societal Norms

4: Impact of Boxing on Relationships

- 4.1: Difficulty Balancing Life and Training
- 4.2: Connection to and Disconnection from Others

4.3: Impact on Romantic Relationships and Dating

3.1.1 Definitions

Gender. Gender refers to a range of characteristics that define masculinity and femininity and that which distinguishes them. These characteristics include the biological sex (such as being male, female or intersex), gender identity (Richards & Barker, 2013) and gender roles and expressions in social structures. In this research, I solely focused on cisgender women due to the clear binary gender system in boxing and sports as a whole. During the recruitment process, I stated the recruitment criteria on the poster, and during the screening telephone calls, that I was recruiting those who both identified as female amateur boxers and were assigned female at birth.

Masculinity. Masculinity, as a social position, refers to a set of features and behaviours that are associated with male dominance (Schippers, 2007). Physical strength, the ability to employ interpersonal aggression in the face of dispute, and authority are all traits typically associated with masculinity (Schippers, 2007). Currently, boxing is described as a masculine sport, with the setting itself perpetuating masculine values (Wellard, 2002).

Embodiment. Todres et al. (2007) draws on Merleau-Ponty (1962) to define embodiment as the experience of the body as a vital part of ourself, rather than a separate object, working as a medium to experience and interact with the world.

Mind-Body Dualism. Originating from Descartes in the 17th Century, cartesian dualism (also known as substance dualism) sees mind and matter as two fundamentally different substances—both real and separate from one another—which share a causal relationship (Robinson, 2012; Grankvist et al., 2016).

Bout. Participants referred to a competitive fighting match as a “bout”.

Weight-cutting. Boxing is a combat sport where boxers are categorised according to gender and body mass. Cutting weight refers to a common practice where boxers lose weight before being weighed in order to compete against a lighter opponent (Barley et al., 2019).

3.2 Introduction to the themes

As previously mentioned, the analysis revealed four superordinate themes and fourteen subthemes. The superordinate theme ‘Mind-Body Dualism’ captures how amateur boxing impacts upon the relationship between body and mind. The second superordinate theme, ‘Boxing as self-healing’, explores the links between embodiment and wellbeing. In the third superordinate theme ‘Having a female body in male spaces’, participants describe their experience of being female in a male dominated sport, as well explaining the challenges they face. The final superordinate theme, ‘Impact of Boxing on Relationships’, explores the impact boxing had upon other areas of life (e.g., social life, romantic relationships, friends, work and family).

3.3 Superordinate theme 1: Mind-Body Dualism

This superordinate theme explores the embodied lived experiences of female amateur boxers, looking closely at the relationship between body and mind. This insight explores the participants’ mind-body dualism, where two entities are experienced at times in conflict and separated but other times as complementary and together as one. This insight is crucial to contextualise the rest of the analysis, as I believe that, in order to understand the participants’ embodied lived experiences, we firstly need to understand the relationship between their mind and their body. As

it is central to my research, it is important to pay close attention to mind-body dualism.

In the first subtheme, 'Body as performance', participants spoke about maintaining their body in order to perform at an optimal level; they also reflected on how their lives are affected by this. In the second subtheme, 'Control and Restriction', participants described their turbulent experience of restricting their diet to control their weight, overtraining, and how they are affected by these difficulties. In the final subtheme, 'Mind and Body Alignment vs Misalignment', participants describe the relationship between the body and the mind through their 'out of body experiences', or the instances in which they were reactive to their opponent, and through their experiences of the difficulties wrought by physical exhaustion, both in training and during their bouts.

3.3.1 Subtheme theme 1: Body as performance

All eight participants described how they view their body as a tool that needs to be well taken care of in order to perform well in boxing. Jessica highlights this by suggesting that the whole body needs to be worked on:

“You know, it's not just punching a bag. It's fitness, it's eating, you know, parts and you know, so you work on your whole body.” (Jessica: 63-65)

Jessica describes training as a practice that goes beyond the boxing gym and suggests that it influences her daily life. I think Jessica's constant checking – “you know” – relates to an anxiety about whether she is articulating her point in a clear way. This could be related to the fact that English is not her first language. Her

description of boxing as not “just punching a bag” suggests a larger commitment to thinking about fitness in relation to eating and to other aspects of life that involve the “whole body”. Jessica’s use of words such as “parts” and “work” implies an emotive distance from the body, perhaps indicating how she perceives the body as a machine or tool to perform in a certain way.

Lola echoes Jessica’s description of the body being used as a tool; however, Lola may also have experienced how others perceive the body similarly during a bout:

“They put your mouthguard, then they put the Vaseline on—and what have you—and your headguard on. And you kind of pampered a little bit. They make you feel quite special. And then, and then, they kind of just shove you in the ring and then go there you go [laughs]. And then you come back for like thirty seconds and they are pampering you again.” (Lola: 611-615)

Lola reveals how others “pamper” her for a bout, suggesting that there is a feeling of indulgence, with the attention being paid and comfort implied, while they are preparing her to fight well in the ring. This can be interpreted that the body is viewed by others as a sort of tool to support and enhance in order to perform at the best of its abilities. Lola relates this to a sense of feeling “special”, the sense that others care and focus only on her. However, the repetition of pampering and shoving emphasises a quick change in very different states that I imagine may be overwhelming. Her laughing demonstrates this point, showing how quickly things changed, with her seemingly finding the irony of being “shove[ed]” into the ring while simultaneously being pampered somewhat laughable.

In the extract below, Sabrina's observation of developing a "precious feeling" towards her body caused her to want her body to consistently be at an "optimal level" for performance:

"I started having this...like kind of like precious feeling about my body, where I was like, because I knew, like, the optimal feeling in my body of like when I'm treating myself the most optimally for performance, anything below that felt like...like I felt kind of almost like...not scared...but like uncomfortable with the idea of being at anything less than that." (Sabrina: 456-460)

This extract suggests that when amateur boxers view and train their bodies only for performance, there may be a pressure or fixation on making sure that their body is always performing at its best. Sabrina's description of anything being less than this "optimal feeling" will lead to feeling "not scared...but like uncomfortable", emphasising a high level of discomfort. This reiterates how the body is viewed as an instrument in boxing, making clear the high standards that are placed upon the body to perform well.

Sarah echoes this and reflects on the extent to which boxing influences how much she takes care of herself:

"...maybe makes me feel a little bit like my ability to look after myself is very tied to boxing, so, like when I'm competing, I have training on and stuff I want to eat well and not drink and get enough sleep and like emotionally stable for

boxing. But I think what I found about lockdown, like without boxing and stuff on. I felt a bit like oh it doesn't matter then.” (Sarah: 400-404)

Sarah describes not only taking care of her body physically through diet and “sleep” but also in a way to ensure her body is “emotionally stable for boxing”. This indicates that both the mind and body need to be actively cared for, suggesting a clear sense that both need to be “looked after” in order to be able to perform. Sarah later appears to be struck by the realisation that, during “lockdown”, that taking care of both her body and her mind “[didn't] matter” were it not for boxing. This suggests that, for her, the body and mind are seen purely as instruments for boxing, and, without boxing, difficulties may arise when navigate through this.

This view is shared with Rebecca, who highlights how it can be unsettling when not knowing how much training is enough:

“Normally, I think it's, I think guilt has a lot to do with. Like guilt of not, not training enough or training too much. I feel bad. I'm like, oh, I shouldn't have done that because I'm going to burn out.” (Rebecca: 476-479)

Rebecca emphasises the feelings of “guilt” associated with balancing “training enough or training too much”, which could be linked to not feeling good enough. Amanda also expressed difficulties when she feels that training is not going well, expressing anxiety around underperforming in boxing:

“...if you sparred and if you don't feel like it went very well or if you were hit quite a lot or if you got injured, it can really make you feel, like, a bit rubbish. Like, you are, like, ‘oh I have not come very far’ or ‘I'm worse than I was before’.” (Amanda: 232-234)

This extract provides an insight into how Amanda feels when she experiences that training did not go “very well”. She talks about being “hit quite a lot”, or being “injured”, which makes me wonder if there is a feeling of failure when she perceives her body to not be working in the way that she wants. This appears to have an impact on feeling “rubbish”, and perhaps leading to anxieties around performance, where she questioned if she was “worse” than before. This may suggest that it is hard for female amateur boxers to experience setbacks or injuries. Similarly, Priya describes her difficult relationship with injuries and portrays injuries as a big inconvenience:

“...So that's like annoying [talking about injuries] because then it feels like that's kind of impacting you to train. But obviously you need to take like a few weeks of training off to, like, fully recover. But you just know you can't do that. Like, you physically can't do that. [...] [L]ike I couldn't, I couldn't afford to take that much rest off, I feel like I would be set back, like I would be. It would be too detrimental on myself.” (Priya: 323-333)

Priya describes injuries as “annoying”; she sees them as negatively affecting her training. It could be interpreted that an injured body is perceived as an inconvenience, and that injuries are to be ignored, rather than taking a “few weeks”

to “fully recover”. At this point, I noticed that Priya was talking faster after mentioning taking a “few weeks of training off”, which hints at an increase in anxiety when thinking about taking time off to recover. There is a sense of panic in this extract, which helps me understand how anxiety provoking this must have felt for her. I was struck by her repetition of the words “can’t” and “couldn’t”, word that emphasise the difficulty she felt when contemplating the time it would take to recover from injuries, which hints at how distraught she would be if she had to do so. Her broken speech appears to reflect the way she was making meaning of, while being conflict with, the prospect of taking time to recover from injuries. She believes that taking time to recover from injuries is a luxury that she “couldn’t afford”, and that if she did do it then it “would be too detrimental” to herself and her boxing. Priya’s description of possibly taking time off from injuries can be interpreted as anxiety and fear, that it will be so harmful to her ability to box that she will not be able to recover from it. Contrastingly, Melissa talks about injuries in terms of ‘acceptance’, as something that is a fundamental part of being an amateur boxer:

“Ummm the nose. I just lived with it because I am not done competing yet, and I might need surgery when I stop, but it seems pointless to do it now in case it happens again, because it might.” (Melissa: 42-44)

Interestingly, Melissa talks about her nose in a more distanced and objectifying manner, referring to it as “the nose”, and then continuing to refer to it as “it”, which suggests she is externalising the injury to forge an emotional distance. She talks about surgery being “pointless” now as it “might” get injured again, which suggests

that she views her body as an instrument that must go through pain and imbalance to compete competitively in boxing.

3.3.2 Subtheme theme 2: Control and restriction

Seven participants spoke about their experiences of restricting and controlling their bodies for boxing, with Sarah highlighting how weight is something that is constantly on her mind:

“I think because boxing is a weight category, you become really hyper aware of weight. So, like, if, if you're in normal life, like, if you put on a bit, that's nothing but if you go from your fight weight its like ‘Oh, my god’. So it definitely reinforces it in some senses.” (Sarah: 83-85)

Sarah differentiates the significance of weight in boxing to weight in “normal life”. Boxing, according to this comparison, places more emphasis and a greater sense of on weight because it determines a boxer’s ability to compete. Her reflection on how it “reinforces it in some senses” gives the sense of hypervigilance, and of being “hyperaware”, in relation to weight, which appears to be heavily monitored. She acted out the expression “Oh, my god” to demonstrate the large reaction amateur boxers may feel when gaining weight. This implies the sense that the body gaining weight is tantamount to failure, a notion that is developed in her later extract:

“When I think you put a pressure on yourself to be a certain weight for fighting, any weight that is higher than that you feel you're failing.” (Sarah: 763-765)

Lola echoes this feeling, expressing her constant anxiety of gaining weight, so much so that she would restrict her body and exercise even when sick:

“I had, like, a sickness bug a while back. And I worked out. I actually only had one rest day, and it lasted a few days because I would drag myself downstairs and I’d be like, oh, I can do weights sat down [laughs]. I was doing these weights because I was so desperate to think, you know, ‘if I miss a day, then it’s all going to just pile on’. And it’s just, like, a constant panic.” (Lola: 351-362)

Lola speaks about over-exercising and not being able to listen to her body to rest and recover. This is driven by her “desperation” to not gain any weight. It could be interpreted that Lola has a certain distrust towards her body as it risks failing her and, therefore, needs to be externalised, restricted and controlled. Her laughter suggests that doing weights sitting down while sick was so extreme that it was laughable. Lola goes on to talk about how this has impacted her mental health:

“It’s so tiring, but I don’t know what else I can do. And yeah. So that gets me down sometimes, because sometimes I just want to blow it all off and be, like, I just want to eat what I want. I want to be able to do a work out, come home and eat a chocolate bar. That’s all I want to do. And it’s, just, it’s tiring.” (Lola: 342-347)

Lola's repetition of it being "tiring" emphasises this constant battle with her weight, and when she claims that she "[doesn't] know what else" she can do, there is a sense of powerlessness in her words. She expresses with a sense of sadness and frustration a longing to be free of the restriction to be able to eat whatever she wants.

Jessica also felt a desire to constantly push her body physically, even at times to the point of feeling sick:

"when I'm tired you know, I always push myself, you know, sometimes I feel sick even, because I like to prove something to myself, like, come on, you cannot stop." (Jessica: 210-213)

Jessica describes an intense physical experience, where she appears to be feeling a pressure to keep pushing the body as far as possible; furthermore, when she claims feeling as though she "cannot stop", her words imply difficulties around recognising when the body wants to rest and recover. This pressure appears to be in the form of needing to "prove something", hinting a strong will to show that her body is capable beyond her limitations.

Sabrina shared her history of suffering from an eating disorder, describing how being in a weight orientated sport makes sense to her:

"...is a different mentality to dieting for me, like, I feel, like, because it...there's the goal of performance and, like, there's a goal that's external to the way I look. It's easier mentally for and, like, especially with, like, a history of eating

disorder, it's hard to justify doing that. But I think because it's got, like, that external goal: it felt okay.” (Sabrina: 124-129)

Sabrina highlights how the intense training and strict can diet provide a different meaning when associated with boxing. She expresses that this restriction and control over her body is easier for her “mentally” because the motivation behind it is different; instead there is a “goal of performance” that is “external” to physical appearance. I imagine this may be conflicting and unsettling for Sabrina at times when it may be “hard to justify doing”, and it only felt “okay” rather than good. Perhaps finding it difficult to disentangle between disordered eating motivation versus boxing motivation.

Priya discusses how coaches may encourage amateur boxers to restrict and maintain a low weight:

“...[I] lost a lot of weight and went to the even the lowest weight category. And so then my coaches said, okay, fine, stay at that category for the championship that was coming up. And, and that will benefit me more because I'm really tall for that weight and even the weight that I'm at right now. So I then I maintain that. And that was really hard because it was quite out of my like my normal body weight.” (Priya: 920-925)

Priya highlights the relationship between coaches and a boxer’s weight. The view that the lowest weight that a boxer can possibly go to is “fine”, and possibly seen to be more of a “benefit”, may encourage boxers to continue to restrict and overtrain in

a potentially unhealthy way. This is evident when Priya was told to maintain the weight even though it was “quite out” of her “normal body weight”.

There appears to be a pressure on boxers to regain their fighting weight through restricted diet and overtraining. This is evidenced by four participants who all talk about losing their period. Rebecca reflects on training and dieting as being too “restrictive”, explains how her menstrual cycle was interrupted when she was overtraining and restricting her food intake:

“I was being very restrictive with, like, calories and stuff, like, started counting calories, etc. And I was also upping my training massively because I'd just started a new sport... So I actually ended up losing my period for I think it was over a year.” (Rebecca: 109-112)

Rebecca’s description gives a strong sense of how easily it may be for amateur boxers to be overly restrictive and controlling of their bodies to the point where the female body is physically affected. Similarly, Amanda also experienced the disruption of her menstrual cycle due to overtraining and diet:

“It was worrying because, because obviously when it was happening, I didn't know why...Yes quite worrying, but then I think I didn't go to the doctors about it. I don't really know why I didn't. I guess, I guess at the time I was scared what they were going to say about, about why it was” (Amanda: 419-424)

This disruption to her menstrual cycle appears to have made Amanda feel anxious. Her stumbling and repetition of words hints at her struggles to convey her feelings, possibly reflecting the intensity of the confusion and anxiety of the experience. She is scared to go to the GP because of what they would say, suggesting her worry that there is something so wrong with her body that she would be unable to cope. Additionally, her worry seemed to increase because she “didn’t know” why it was happening implying a lack of awareness and perhaps a topic that female boxers are fearful of talking about.

It is worth noting a peculiarity of this study’s timing. As mentioned earlier, the interviews took place during a pandemic. Six participants in this study commented about taking a break from the restrictions and controls they placed on their bodies during lockdown. Priya shares her experience highlighting this enjoyment:

“...I’ve enjoyed it, like being able to eat whatever I want and not care about my weight or well, initially, and to, like, you know, have late nights, go out and all, that kind of things. So now, now I’m, like, enjoying not having the discipline. But, like, I guess physically, I’m missing it because I liked that and I like the effect it had on me, so I’m just feeling really, really conflicted. (Priya: 1145-1150)”

Because boxing gyms being closed during lockdown, Priya explains how she enjoyed being able to “eat whatever” and “not care” about weight, even being able to have “late nights”. This implies that she felt a new sense of freedom when she was able to indulge more, rather than being consistently restricted and “having the discipline”. However, she continues to talk about missing this discipline from boxing

and how she feels “conflicted”. Her repetition of the word “really” emphasises how torn she feels between wanting to indulge herself and wanting to be disciplined for training.

3.3.3 Subtheme theme 3: Mind and Body Alignment vs Misalignment

Participants described the relationship between body and mind through their out-of-body experiences. Indeed, all eight participants spoke about having an out-of-body experience during the actual fight, demonstrated in this extract from Rebecca below:

“...[I]t's like an out of body experience. You completely lose, I completely lose any thought process. It's like that's the odd moment where I'm able to consciously think about what I'm doing. But you get out the ring afterwards and I could be, I can't, I can't even remember that. That was a complete blur because adrenaline just completely takes over.” (Rebecca: 715-719)

Rebecca reports an intense experience in which she loses all “thought process”, despite limited moments during which she is able to “consciously think”. This suggests an absence of cognitive involvement but instead suggests a more reactive and unconscious process. This gives the sense of the mind and body coming together and focusing on the opponent in front of them. The repetition of “can’t” emphasises the “complete blur” that is experienced afterwards. When Rebecca describes the “adrenaline just completely [taking] over”, she refers to a primal state where the fight-or-flight response is activated for survival.

Sabrina builds on this, naming this out of body experience as “flow state”, reflecting on how she is not able to remember and feel in the ring:

“...part of the flow state thing is like I don't feel getting hit when I'm in the ring and then after I watch it back and I'm like, oh, they hit me a lot because I'm, like, oh, that's pretty good I didn't even get a hit (laughs). But then I watch it and, um, like, no I did get hit.” (Sabrina: 242-245)

As previously described, Sabrina does not feel “getting hit” and does not remember being hit as well. Her laughter appears to support this. There appears to be a numbness or lack of conscious feeling during a fight where she is unable to feel punches. Additionally, such an intense focus in the ring can affect the fighter's memory of the fight. Priya shares more about how she experiences emotion in the ring:

“Like the nerves go, the excitement goes. So like I'm just totally calm and just, like, ready, erm, and, like, yeah, I guess I'm just really focused. I want to, I want to do good, I want to get the win...” (Priya: 950-956)

Priya talks further about how anxiety and excitement are replaced with a feeling of being “calm” and “ready” as soon as the bell goes in the ring. This evokes an image of an animal prowling, about to spring on it's prey. Priya seemed to experience the process of controlling and regulating her emotions in order to perform well. She goes on to explain this change in emotions due to her being “really focused” as she is strongly motivated to “do good” and want to “win”.

Melissa echoes this and shares her experience of her emotional state straight after a fight:

“It can be overwhelming. [...] because you're fighting through the fatigue for so long and it's such a physically, mentally taxing affair that, when it stops, you just sometimes lose it.” (Melissa: 801-809)

Melissa describes how “overwhelming” it can be in the ring during a fight, how this is due to trying to fight the physical exhaustion. She gives us an insight into how incredibly “taxing”, physically and mentally, fighting is, describing how she fights “through the fatigue” for so long. This suggests how a strong level of control and perseverance is required to push through physically and mentally, which is followed by a huge sense of relief “when it stops”. Melissa’s use of the phrase “lose it” illustrates a transition from being in control to being out of control.

It appears that there is a strong relationship between the body and mind in boxing, but six participants describe when this relationship changes and the body is externalised instead. The extract below from Sarah highlights how she experiences a “disconnect” between body and mind when she is tired:

“I am thinking oh I am really tired and I need to be moving more. But I can't because I am tired. And that's kind of that's frustrating and interesting to experience that disconnect between what you want your body to be doing and what you're actually doing. And you're, like, ‘no, I want to move forward now’,

but your legs are like ‘nah, you’re not going anywhere’ [laughs].” (Sarah: 268-272)

Sarah shares her “frustration” about a split between what the mind wants her “body to be doing” and what the body is “actually doing”. Her use of the word “disconnect” stresses the conflict and separation she experiences between her mind and her body. Sarah goes on to share a powerful image of a dialogue between her mind and her “legs” in which they appear to be disagreeing about how to move. This can be interpreted as the body being externalised, feeling like a separate entity, when the body is physically exhausted but the mind wants to override it. Jessica echoes this and describes her experience of her mind overriding her body when tired:

“I was tired, but my brain told my body, you know, ‘go for it!’, you know, so there is like kind of emergency energy, you know, somewhere, always, and when you get hit, does that make you feel you want to hit back?” (Jessica: 573-576)

As with Sarah, Jessica shares a dialogue between her “brain” and her body in which she encourages her body to “go for it”. Jessica’s mind appears to be overriding to control the body to enable her to continue pushing through the fatigue. She seemingly goes on to entice her body, asking “does that make you feel you want to hit back?” This is maybe an attempt to convince her body to continue fighting, by invoking this “emergency energy”.

It is clear from this section that female amateur boxers are challenged when the body is externalised and treated as performance tool. Participants describe struggling with the control of, and restriction around, dieting and overtraining; some also described having performance anxiety, while others expressed the conflicting thoughts they had had when boxing became unavailable during lockdown.

Participants provided a unique insight into the relationship between the body and the mind when describing the out-of-body experiences they had had during fights, and about the ways in which they could become disconnected with their body when they felt tired. The following superordinate theme will build on this relationship between body and mind by exploring how boxing affects the physical and mental wellbeing of female amateur boxers.

3.4 Superordinate theme 2: Body as Self-healing

This superordinate theme explores the way in which boxing influences how participants feel in their mind and body and how this affects their wellbeing.

Participants identified several benefits that will be explored in the following four subthemes: in 'Feeling Strong and Confident', participants describe the various ways in which boxing helps them to feel strong and confident; 'Way of Coping' considers the therapeutic ways boxing helped the participants to better cope with their daily stresses; 'Rewarding' explores the ways in which the participants found their boxing experiences to be rewarding; 'Catharsis and Fight itself as release from restriction' describes the ways in which the participants found training and fighting to be cathartic.

3.4.1 Subtheme 1: Feeling Strong and Confident

All eight participants described how boxing helps to improve their relationship with their body, making them feel stronger and more confident, as demonstrated in this extract from Sarah below:

“When I started boxing, it felt really good to be, like, strong, to really change how I think about my body” (Sarah: 80-81)

Sarah found boxing to “really change how” she thinks about her body, to conceive of it in a more positive way. It appears that this “change” comes from noticing herself feeling “strong”. Due to the sport’s physical demands, boxers’ senses appear heightened, more attuned to the changes in their bodies. This is reflected in Sarah’s observation of her own body getting stronger. Sabrina echoes this, commenting further on how it feels to notice the strength of her body:

“And ,like, it just is such a....empowering thing for the women that I have talked to and myself too. To feel like you can, like, lift that big, heavy thing over there and do all these things with it that you never thought that you could do.” (Sabrina: 168-171)

Sabrina’s use of the word empowerment implies the power and confidence she gains when she notices how her body becomes stronger. I get the sense of how proud Sabrina is to be able to “lift that big heavy thing” and do all things that she “never

thought” she could do. She seems to feel a sense of achievement in developing her body to be strong enough to do various things.

Lola explains how feeling good in her body has given her more confidence to wear certain clothes:

“I would have worn tops that would come over the arms and I wouldn't have exposed my back at all, whereas I'm [now] more confident to do that.” (Lola: 138-140)

Lola talks about being self-conscious about her shoulders, arms and back, and about how in the past she would choose certain clothing to cover up these areas, e.g. wearing “tops that would cover over the arms”. The implication here is that since starting boxing she feels more confident about her body to the extent that she is now able to show parts of her body instead of hiding them.

Sabrina’s experience is similar in relation to her eating disorder:

“I had an eating disorder and kind of, like...well addiction is the wrong word but, like, used exercise in an unhealthy way. Erm...and...boxing was one of the first activities that I did...well initially I liked it because...because of the mental aspect. It was just something that got me outside of...relating to exercise in a way that had to do with my body size.” (Sabrina: 23-27)

Here Sabrina refers to a time in her life where she had an eating disorder; she shares how she used exercise “in an unhealthy way”. Her broken speech appears to reflect her sudden realisation, and ongoing meaning making, of how boxing is different from other forms of exercise in relation to her eating disorder. It is first unclear of what her attraction to the “mental aspect” is, but she then makes it clear that boxing gave her meaning outside her “body size”. Boxing appears to be therapeutic for Sabrina insofar as it changed the aim of exercise for her—of becoming strong rather than just being thin—providing an alternative positive way for women to experience their bodies. Sarah develops this notion further:

“I’ve always had kind of, like, vague sort of disordered eating. So I think boxing is really good for me and, kind of, like, showing me how important it is to be properly fuelled and stuff.” (Sarah: 48-51)

Sarah shares her previous struggle with “disordered eating” and how she finds that boxing has had a positive impact on this. She reflects on the way boxing has shown her how “important it is to be properly fuelled”. This extract highlights how boxing can encourage women to “properly fuel” their bodies and tackle disordered eating behaviours.

All participants also described boxing as helping to increase their confidence, with Rebecca highlighting her attitude towards new environments:

“Then I think I can walk into any room or any environment and be completely fine. Like, it's not going to be more scary than that. Its not going to be more

scary than going in a ring with someone else and, like, having a bout. So, like, it has massively helped my confidence, I think.” (Rebecca: 358-361)

It struck me how confident Rebecca said she felt about tackling new situations, that she knows it is not “going to be more scary than going in a ring with someone else”. This has in turn “massively helped” her confidence. This suggests that boxing may provide female amateur boxers with skills that help them to face their fears (e.g. fighting in front of many people), as well as skills to help them overcome challenges, all of which can be transferable to their personal lives. This confidence was also experienced by Priya, who shares how her status as a female amateur boxer affects her confidence in social situations:

“And since I started boxing, my family and my friends have like, noticed and said how like, you know, you, like, really change. You've come out of your shell, you're, like, engaging in conversations. And like now I feel I could talk to, like, anybody, you know, like...like about anything.” (Priya: 253-257)

Priya describes her friends and family noticing a big “change” in her since she started boxing. The description that she has “come out of [her] shell” shows a wonderful image of Priya developing her confidence so as to put herself out there into the world and become, as her friends and family put it, more “engaging”. Priya also notices this change in herself, where she feels as though she “could talk to anybody”. This suggests that boxing contributes to an embodied experience by fostering confidence in the participants, helping them to engage with others in social situations outside of the ring.

3.4.2 Subtheme 2: Way of coping

All eight participants describe how boxing has provided therapeutic benefits in helping them cope with mental health difficulties and daily stresses. Jessica describes about boxing as her “time” to do something that is just for herself:

“But that's my time, you know, that's my one and a half hour. That's for me, you know, okay, behind the door there is my life but in here it is just me.”

(Jessica: 290-291)

Jessica is one of the older female amateur boxers who is also a mother. What struck me about this extract is how much boxing meant to Jessica, with her implying that whereas “behind the door” she juggles a lot in life, when she boxes it is just about her. Her repetition of the words “my” and “me” highlight that boxing is time for herself, not for others, thereby practicing self-care. It could be interpreted that boxing offers an escape from day-to-day struggles. Sarah echoes this, describing boxing as “meditative”:

“...its kind of quite meditative because you have to be so focused when you are doing it. [...] I am quite an over thinker, I am quite a meta thinker quite generally. So like in other bits of my day I am always just like half distracted by my own thoughts. I find it hard to be properly present. While boxing session, I feel that I am actually there. I'm not thinking about something else. I'm just boxing.” (Sarah: 26-32)

As previously mentioned, Sarah describes boxing as “meditative” due to it requiring a lot of focus. It sounds like boxing helps Sarah to be “properly present” when she struggles with overthinking, or when she is “distracted” by her own thoughts. This implies that the physical intensity of boxing helps to manage rumination and to practice mindfulness. Saying that she is “actually there” and that she is not “thinking about anything else” further supports this. The participants suggest that boxing offer ways of coping with anxiety and rumination.

Amanda highlights that boxing helps to lift her mood:

“...then if I do go and it does make me feel better, like my mood is lifted.”

(Amanda: 391-392)

Amanda points out that, when she goes to a boxing session, it makes her “feel better”, that her “mood is lifted”. This suggests that boxing can provide benefits to mental health. Priya builds on this by sharing how boxing affected her depression and social anxiety:

“I was just really low on, like, having, like, spells of depression quite a lot and a lot of social anxiety where I had, like, a lot of counselling and CBT as well for that. And I did try, like, antidepressants as well. And actually, like, the thing that really helped was actually boxing, like, before nothing really impacted me much. I was just getting, like, it was just ongoing really. But it was boxing that took me out of that.” (Priya: 811-817)

Priya describes trying a range of support such as CBT, counselling and antidepressants to help with her “spells of depression” and “social anxiety”. Her repetition of the word “a lot” emphasises both the amount of support she received but also how much she felt she struggled with depression and anxiety. She goes on to express that the support she received did “nothing really” as her depression and anxiety was still “ongoing”. Priya reflected that boxing stood out to be “the thing that really helped” as boxing “took” her “out of that”. The phrase “took me out of that” portrays a very physical action, which is parallel to boxing being very physical. This can be interpreted as boxing being an alternative therapeutic tool to manage mental health difficulties, offering something that is more physical than psychotherapy, which tends to be more focused on cognitions and affect.

Lola describes how boxing supports difficult feelings she has that resulted from a past trauma:

“I feel like...because of what happened before [referring to sexual assault], I, I won't go into it. But I would get quite cross and frustrated and quite anxious if I wasn't in control of something. And I feel like by, by doing the boxing, I don't get those feelings as much anymore and I'm more aware of myself because I think in boxing you have to be aware, so then you're more conscious.” (Lola: 916-920)

It was clear that, for Lola, speaking about the sexual assault was difficult; I respected this. I admired how much she shared regarding the impact the sexual assault had had on her in terms of the “frustration” and “anxiety” she felt when she “wasn't in

control of something". She said that boxing helped her to cope with "those feelings", which do not appear as "much anymore". This implies that boxing is an important source of empowerment for Lola, allowing her to feel more in control in her life. Lola also mentions that boxing helped her to become more "conscious" and "aware" of herself. It is unclear whether the awareness is around noticing these difficult feelings, but she has interpreted it in the sense of being more in tune with herself. I wonder if women having "to be aware" in boxing provides opportunities to improve their relationship with the self, by being more "conscious" of their needs and feelings.

3.4.3 Subtheme 3: Rewarding

Seven Participants spoke about finding both the training and the fight itself as rewarding experiences. Amanda highlighted how the fight itself is rewarding:

"It's very rewarding. Yeah. It's like all year all the work you put in and then you feel very proud of yourself." (Amanda: 23-24)

Amanda describes boxing as "very rewarding", of feeling "very proud" when she steps into the ring to fight her opponent. For her this moment represents the accumulation of "all the work" that she had put in "all year". Her repetition of the words "very" and "all" reflects how much effort and time that she has put in to her training in order to be able to be ready to fight. This strong sense of achievement is also shared by Sabrina:

“...it's a test of, like, mental strength, a test of like skill and a test of physical strength. And so it encapsulates a lot in the one thing that you're doing. And so that's really rewarding.” (Sabrina: 753-755)

Sabrina describes boxing as a “test of mental strength”, “skill” and “physical strength”. Her use of the word “encapsulates” emphasises the range of skills that boxing offers her. This can be interpreted as boxing providing a sense of achievement, not just in terms of physical strength but also in mental strength. Rebecca builds on this, highlighting the feeling of progress and improvement:

“Like I pushed myself there, I improved in some respect whether it's fitness or, like, whether you're learning something new.” (Rebecca: 319-320)

The opportunity to be able to be “pushed” and “improved” appears to be valuable to Rebecca. She explains that boxing improves her fitness, or by developing her technique by “learning something new”. Her use of the word “push” suggests a sense of pride of being able to push her body and mind past the point she had thought possible. There is an implication here that this embodied experience of pushing the living body feels rewarding, which is maintained through the continuous growing— through the learning of knowledge or skills, or by becoming physically stronger.

3.4.4 Subtheme 4: Catharsis and fight itself as release from restriction

All eight participants described a huge release in energy when they box, which is due to the physical intensity, and they all spoke about how this release affects them. Amanda highlights how boxing is cathartic by releasing “stress or aggression”:

“...it is very...um..whats the word... cathartic, like, releasing by any stress or aggression during, like ,anything, by even just the work to release energy.”

(Amanda: 119-120)

Here Amanda’s broken speech, and the time she takes to find the word, may suggest that this is the first time she has thought about the process that goes on in boxing. She boxing as “cathartic” as it helps to release “any stress or aggression”. Her repetition of the word “release” emphasises the large amount of energy that is released when boxing. Sabrina shares a similar experience of catharsis:

“I think there's just there's so much tension that you're holding in your body too, and, like, so much adrenaline and so much energy that's being expended outside of just the act of punching...” (Sabrina: 704-706)

Sabrina describes holding “so much tension” in her body. It is unclear what the tension is but I wondered if it is pent-up stress and aggression, of the kind previously described by Amanda. However, it is clear that Sabrina feels the release of this tension through “adrenaline” and “energy” being “expended” when she boxes. The use of the words “just the act of punching” indicates that one punch alone can have a big impact. Her repetition of “so much” highlights the sheer amount of energy and force that goes into this process. Boxing could be interpreted, therefore, as cathartic,

providing psychological release, channelling and redirecting stress or painful emotions when training and competing.

In the extract below, Sarah presents an alternative view, finding a similarity between being on “drugs as a teenager” and boxing:

“It's kind of similar to, like, when I used to, like go, out and take drugs as a teenager and I'll be, like, this is really fascinating to see where your brain can go to or whatever. [...] It's really kind of exhilarating. So, like, I enjoyed that a lot.” (Sarah: 254-258)

Sarah describes the physical extremity of boxing as similar to taking “drugs”, finding it “fascinating” to see where “your brain can go to”. She invokes a powerful image of pushing limits and boundaries of mind and body past what is expected. I wondered if her use of the word “drug” also implies a potential for addiction, or if catharsis provides a sense of feeling high. She describes the feeling as “exhilarating”, which suggests strong feelings of excitement, elation, and adrenaline.

In a similar vein, Melissa shares how “everything is just released” after a fight in the ring:

“I've had a few where I've been so tired at the end that I've cried. Well, that can be hard to explain. I am not sad about the outcome. I'm just so tired because everything is just released.” (Melissa: 802-803)

Melissa describes being so tired at the end of a fight to the point where she has “cried”. She goes on to say that it can “be hard to explain”, suggesting that she has experienced a complex and unique occurrence. She explains that it is because “everything is released”, suggesting a process of catharsis. This provides insight into how overwhelming it can be for female amateur boxers to experience such a strong sense of physical and emotional release during a short time period. Building on this, six participants explored what it means for boxing to encourage and allow them to hit someone as hard as they can. And how this contrasts with hitting someone outside the ring. Priya describes a positive feeling of “not holding back”:

“So, like, it's unnatural isn't it? To like...to, like, try and punch somebody. It's not something that we are really allowed to do in life, but obviously it's in a controlled way and a part of the sport so it feels...erm...I don't know, it just feels good like that, that feeling where you're punching something so hard and you're not holding back at all. And you can actually do that with somebody, whilst you are sparring or fighting, and it just...I don't know...that kind of, like, cathartic release.” (Priya: 228-236)

Interestingly, I noticed that Priya tried to check in with me when she described fighting someone as “unnatural”. This might be because she was unsure of what others perceive as unnatural or natural. She describes the act of hitting someone as “something that we are not really allowed to do in life”. She then initially finds it difficult to express how this makes her feel, which suggests an intense feeling that is difficult to explain. She continues to describe that it “feels good” to be able to punch somebody so hard and not hold back, something that can actually be done “with

somebody” in boxing. This suggests a connection to primal and bodily instincts that can get lost in our cognitive rule-based world. Priya appears to be tapping into something nearly animalistic here, which is contrary to the ways in which we are normally instructed to meet the social expectations of how to use our bodies. This can be interpreted as follows: for Priya, the fight itself offers the freedom to “not hold back”; fighting can thus provide a release from the restrictions that may be imposed upon her in society or in her everyday life. Priya describes this as a “cathartic release”, reiterating the strong release of energy she feels when hitting as hard as she can.

Lola shares a similar experience and highlights the conflict between what she feels is socially acceptable and how this relates to her desire to win her fight:

“...[H]er nose was quite bloody. And, you know, normally you'd think that your natural instinct would be, like, ‘oh, I'm so sorry, I've hurt you’. But actually it's the opposite. Then you find that someone's bleeding and you think, oh, yeah, I'll go for that spot because that's bleeding. Then I'm more likely to win the fight if I go for that spot. And I was horrified at that feeling. I just thought, ‘oh, that's not very nice’, its like animal instinct there. But when you, you get some really clean good shots in and their head sort of goes back, I really like that because you feel like you've done well, you know. (Lola: 667-674)”

Lola shares her experience of giving her opponent a bloody nose during a bout. She reflects that “natural instinct” would make her apologise for hurting her opponent; however, she was “horrified” to find that she wanted to keep hitting her opponent’s

bloody nose. This implies an internal battle within the self between the need to meet societal norms—which hold that it is “not very nice” to hit someone—and her “animal instinct”, through which she is “more likely to win the fight”. This is a paradox, of animal instinct, being an immediate response to a trigger, versus learned behaviour. Interestingly, Lola uses the past tense to describe how she used to be “horrified” at that feeling and then switches to present tense to describe her enjoyment of having “clean shots”. This can be interpreted to mean that, over time, female amateur boxing helps women delve deeper into their "animal instincts," which can be pleasurable and satisfying.

This superordinate has highlighted how boxing has been helpful and self-healing in many ways. Participants described boxing being helpful in increasing their confidence, lifting their mood and in managing their mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression. Participants find boxing rewarding and that it gives them a strong sense of achievement. Furthermore, it provides a cathartic release and a unique experience of being released from the restrictions of societal norms.

3.5 Superordinate theme 3: Having a Female Body in Male Spaces

In this superordinate theme, participants reflect on their experiences of having a female body in a male dominated combat sport. In the first subtheme, ‘Negation of female body’, participants reflect on challenges of being both female and a boxer. In the second subtheme, ‘Understanding the female body’, participants reflect on their understanding of training a female body in boxing. In the third subtheme, ‘Experience of being less than’ explores participants’ experiences of feeling less than equal and of being treated unequally when compared to male boxers. The last subtheme,

‘Challenging societal norms’, describes how participants challenge societal gender norms and conventional gender roles as female amateur boxers.

3.5.1 Subtheme 1: Negation of female body

Interestingly, three participants mentioned that they got into boxing through either their brother, father or boyfriend. This highlights male influences on women entering the sport. Seven participants spoke about challenges of having a female body in boxing. Priya shares how she tries not to see a difference between a male body and female body:

“...I guess I just try and, like, I feel, like, in myself there isn't a difference, but there actually is. And maybe without realising as well. Like when I'm on my period, then there might be reasons, like, for when I am feeling, like...just really slow or weak, that kind of thing.” (Priya: 892-896)

Priya mentions that she feels in herself that “there isn’t a difference” between male and female boxers. However, she appears to be coming to the striking realisation that “there actually is”. Her use of the words “guess...maybe...might be” reflect the uncertainty and confusion of identifying as both female and a boxer. She uses the words “without realising” to describe that she does not often consciously register that she has a female body. This implies that being female can be forgotten in male dominated spaces, perhaps due to wanting to be able to perform and be treated in the same way. However, she appears to be reminded that she has a female body when she has her period. Interestingly the extract changes from feeling there is no difference to then criticising the effect of her menstrual cycle for making her feel “slow or weak”. This can be interpreted through the lens of society’s view of females

as “weak” compared to males, which could lead to an attempt to ignore and reject the female body.

Melissa describes others not accepting that she has a female body in boxing:

“...for instance saying, oh, you need to tuck your hands in, you need to bring this further and I say, ‘I can’t, one of my boobs are in the way, I can’t just move it and then keep going, it’s just going to go right back’ (laughs).” (Melissa: 507-509)

There is a sense of frustration in this extract as Melissa describes a male coach instructing her how move her body. Melissa describes that she “can’t” move it the way the coach wants her to because one of her “boobs [is] in the way”. The use of the words “in the way” suggests that the female body can be seen as an obstruction, one that is encouraged to be ignored by trying to “move it” and “keep going”.

Melissa’s laughter emphasises that it is laughable to suggest that her female body can be ignored as her “boobs” will “go right back”. Lola builds on this by describing how she is treated as “one of the guys”:

“Yeah I think it is difficult because sometimes, sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t. Sometimes they treat me as one of the guys to a point where they leave and say, right come on, you, you blokes, you know, pick up this. And I’m like hold on I’m not a bloke and I’ll try and correct them. I’ve got to the point where now I’ve just given up on and just accepted that I’m one of the blokes.” (Lola: 552-556)

Lola talks about it being “difficult” because she is treated inconsistently where she “sometimes” gets treated as a woman and “sometimes” does not. She goes on to give an example where everyone is addressed as “blokes”, including Lola. This implies a dominant masculine culture in boxing, and that there is a pressure to conform to this culture. It appears that Lola tries to challenge this culture when she tries to “correct them”; however this effort appears to be in vein as she gives up and “just accept[s] that” she is “one of the blokes”. This hints that it is difficult to be recognised as a woman in a male dominated boxing culture, and that it is even more difficult for female amateur boxers to challenge this culture. Rebecca also found difficulties being accepted as a “girl” in boxing, reflecting on how being a boxer and being female is constantly separated inside and outside of boxing:

“I went boxing a few weeks ago. I had like a bit of lip filler and they were like ‘what?’ They forget that I’m, in boxing, they forget that I’m, like, a girl and I’m a girly girl outside of boxing. But outside of boxing that they forget that I do boxing. So it’s like it’s quite weird.” (Rebecca: 242-245)

Rebecca describes others in the boxing gym being shocked that she had a “bit of lip filler”. It appears that she used this example to emphasise how others in boxing “forget” that she is “like a girl”. Her use of the phrase “girly girl” suggests that Rebecca feels she exhibits more conventional femininity outside of boxing, hinting that being a “girly girl” is incompatible with the male-dominant boxing culture. Rebecca reflects on how it is “weird” that she is forgotten as a female in boxing but forgotten as a boxer outside of boxing. This suggests that it is difficult for female

amateur boxers to be identified as both female and boxer but instead is seen as one or the other. This appears to be a reflection of societal norms and gender stereotypes where boxers are not seen as feminine and women are not seen as boxers. Her repetition of “I” and “they” suggests this divide, implying a struggle between how Rebecca sees herself and how others see her in line with these gender stereotypes. Rebecca later goes on to talk about how it feels “wrong” to have a female body as a boxer:

I: [...] How does it feel to have a female body as a boxer?

R: It kind of feels, it almost feels, like, wrong. Like, I always think, like, it would be so much easier to be a boy. And I think it sounds bad, but, like, when I go training, I'm, I'm conscious of what I'm wearing. Like, I don't like to look, I, like, kind of dress like a boy when I'm at training. Just because you don't, I wanted to be treated the same. (Rebecca: 611-615)

Rebecca describes that having a female body “almost feels, like, wrong”. It seems as though she is very uncomfortable with having female body in male dominated spaces. Rebecca expressed that it would be “easier to be a boy”, highlighting the difficulties of being a woman in boxing, hinting at a strong desire to assimilate stereotypically male attributes when in the boxing environment. Her reflections on how “it sounds bad” imply a feeling of guilt; I wonder if she is experiencing a sense of disregard of the self. She explains that she does not “like to look like” a woman but instead dresses “like a boy”, suggesting that she is trying to remove any indication of her femininity in order to be “treated the same”. Female amateurs may therefore face

pressure to conform to oppressive norms in order to be accepted and “treated the same”.

Contrastingly, Sarah expressed that while, as a woman, she felt more comfortable in a boxing gym, she feels “unwomanly” in all-female spaces:

“But, like, sometimes girls come in, like, their crop tops and in their, like, fancy leggings and got their make up on. And they are kind of, like, doing their thing. And suddenly it makes me feel a bit, like, oh wait, what, should I be doing that. Like, I just kind of come in my shorts and t shirt and I wear no make up to the gym. And, like, you can feel like sort of, like, it kind of makes you feel unwomanly in contrast.” (Sarah: 615-620)

Sarah describes “girls” attending recreational boxing classes with “their crop tops”, “fancy leggings” and “make up”, which appears to trigger difficult feelings and confusion regarding her identity as a woman. She wonders if she should be doing the same, and her description of feeling “unwomanly in contrast” implies a sense of not fitting in with cultural and traditional gender norms and feminine stereotypes. This indicates that some female amateur boxers may feel “unwomanly” when they reject feminine stereotypes and might be more attracted to boxing, an activity through which they can feel like a woman in the way that they connect with.

However, Jessica feels that her character is “more like a man”:

“My character is more. I don't know. More like a man, don't take me, like, you know, I don't know how to put it.” (Jessica: 335-336)

As previously mentioned, Jessica describes being “more like a man” and hints at embodying more masculine traits. This can be interpreted to mean that, as masculinity is associated with boxing, the sport places femininity and gender under question. Her broken speech and expression that she does not “know how to put it” suggests that she is struggling to put her thoughts and feelings into words, reflecting an ongoing meaning making and inner conflict when it comes to gender stereotypes. This embodied experience may highlight how gender identity and hypermasculinity are continuously produced in boxing spaces.

3.5.2 Subtheme 2: Understanding the female body

The challenges of having a female body, which were highlighted in the previous theme, can also influence inconsistent perceptions and understanding of the female training body. This divergent theme explores participants’ mixed understanding and knowledge of how to train a female body in boxing. Six participants spoke about having a limited understanding of their menstrual cycle and expressed a desire to learn more about it. Lola highlights the importance of understanding the impact of her menstrual cycle as an amateur boxer:

“But I've never taken the time to research it and I was, like, yeah that makes complete sense. So now I actually give myself a bit more credit and I let myself off a little bit more, whereas before I would have been really hard on myself:

‘why are you struggling?’, like, ‘you obviously aren’t very fit!’, or, you know, there would be negative thoughts going on.” (Lola: 191-195)

Lola admits that she had “never taken the time to research” how her menstrual cycle affects her athletic performance. Because of this, she gives herself “more credit” and lets herself “off a little bit more”, suggesting that by understanding her menstrual cycle and her body better she developed self-compassion. However, when she on had a limited understanding about her menstrual cycle she was “really hard” on herself, developing “negative thoughts”, seemingly attacking herself (e.g “you obviously aren’t very fit”). This illustrates the positive impact that can be had by increasing the knowledge and understanding of the physiological impact of the menstrual cycle on boxing training.

In the extract below, Melissa expresses frustration around la ack of understanding of female amateur boxers:

“It can be frustrating. Because now coaches are predominantly men, which is fine. But sometimes there can be a lack of understanding. There's different construction. So, for instance, it took me a very long time to be able to do real push ups and being yelled at: ‘Why can’t you do it? Just do it’. It doesn’t help.” (Melissa: 500-503)

Melissa talks about coaches being “predominantly men”, which, for her, leads to a “lack of understanding” of the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers. The use of the word “construction” refers to differences in physical and physiological

attributes between male and female boxers. Melissa gives an example of being “yelled at” when it took her longer to do push ups. This suggests that coaches lack an understanding of the female body, or perhaps they are unaware of the importance of having such an understanding because they are mostly male, working in a male dominated environment. Melissa expression that “it doesn’t help” emphasises her frustration about this lack of understanding, that being treated as a male boxer instead is not helpful.

Priya shares her worries of her body being “damaged”:

“...there's been times where say I've got really badly punched, like on my boob, on my breast and, like, it's been really, really bad. And then like, I guess, I just, I don't know...If it, like, like, if it impacts anything or if it, like, you know, like, can cause any damage or what.” (Priya: 838-841)

Priya talks about there being times where she has been “really badly punched” on her breast. Her repetition of “really” and “bad” emphasises the pain that she felt and her anxiety around the impact that this had. Her sentences start to break, highlighting her anxiety and confusion she feels when reflecting on the impact boxing has had on her body and the potential “damage” it can cause. This suggests there is a lack of understanding and knowledge around how boxing impacts the female body. Her “don’t know” also suggests that this is not discussed in boxing. Amanda has a similar experience, worrying that getting hit in the body will impact her ability to have children:

“...you can get hit in the body quite a lot, so that's a bit, like, worrying in terms of, like, ‘oh, is that going to damage my future’, like, if I want to have children? Or because sometimes because I've been hit a couple of times quite hard and, and, like, oh, is that going to damage me or anything.” (Amanda: 369-372)

There seems to be an anxiety around the negative impact that being repeatedly hit can have on the body. Amanda worries that it will “damage” her future of having children. Her repetition of the word “damage” emphasises her fear of her body being severely impaired. This made me wonder how many female amateur boxers feel this way and how these anxieties continue to remain unaddressed, due to the lack of conversation, which inhibits a more developed understanding.

3.5.3 Subtheme 3: Experience of being ‘less than’

All eight participants shared experiences of being treated unfairly because of their gender, expressing a need to train harder to prove that they are equal to male boxers. Seven participants spoke specifically about these challenges being more prominent during sparring, with Sabrina highlighting her experience of not feeling seen as “equal”:

“So, like, once people know me and my ability then people will partner with me, but it feels like you have to get past the barrier of being in a female body to be seen for your skill or seen as an equal in the gym. There's the acute awareness that people don't want to spar with you because either you're going to be better than them and then they will be embarrassed or they're not going

to, like...they're not going to try as hard because it's a woman.” (Sabrina: 504-511)

Sabrina discusses her issues around partnering up with men in the gym. She explains that there is a feeling of having “to get past the barrier of being in a female body” in order to be seen “as equal”. This suggests that there is an initial assumption being made that female boxers are not as skilled as men. Furthermore, by describing the female body as a “barrier”, Sabrina highlights the restrictions and limitations that are imposed upon the female body in boxing. Her description of “acute awareness” accentuates the painful feeling of being conscious that “people don’t want to spar with” her. Sabrina goes on to give several reasons why men would not want to spar with her, and both reasons are based on her being a “woman”, suggesting that her gender directly impacts how others treat her. Her interpretation of others being “embarrassed” if she was “better than them” suggests a culture of toxic masculinity, whereby it is socially unacceptable for women to be more aggressive or dominant than men or else it will be seen as emasculating. The alternative is that male boxers are “not going to try as hard”, which suggests that female boxers are not taken as seriously as male boxers.

Jessica builds on this by sharing how others are shocked when she shows how “tough” she is:

“And they was, like, they've been, like, gentle with me. And I said, no, guys, I came here to train with you all, you know, doesn't matter I'm a female. And

they, when we finish, they say, ‘Oh, my god. You're quite tough!’ ‘You know, ‘For a female, you are really tough’.” (Jessica: 500-503)

Jessica describes the “guys” being more “gentle” with her. This reiterates Sabrina’s experience of male boxers treating female boxers differently by holding back.

Jessica goes on to talk about how she encourages others to treat her equally because it “doesn’t matter” that she is “female”. Her portrayal of them saying “oh my god, you’re quite tough” expresses that the male boxers were surprised at how “tough” Jessica is. It could be considered that, at an unconscious level, these men had not fully comprehend that women can embody toughness. Whereas women are not commonly seen as tough and aggressive in society, it could be argued that female amateur boxers challenge these societal norms. I wondered whether the mention of tough “for a female” is an attempt to put some distance between male and female boxers so as to emphasise that women are not as “tough” as men.

In the extract below, Melissa describes not being treated with the “same importance” when it comes to competitions:

“And this is indicative of the fact that we're not considered to be of the same calibre as the men. Or of the same importance, and it happens with things like that or with our fights being rearranged at short notice, but not the mens’ and then people saying, oh, we just have to get on with it. I realise no one's annoyed, but if this is happening to the men, people would be.” (Melissa: 674-679)

Melissa talks about challenges, such as “fights being re-arranged at short notice”, that female amateur boxers face during mixed tournaments. She reflects that this is because women are “not considered to be of the same calibre as men”, suggesting that female amateur boxers are not viewed as being as good or “of the same importance” as male boxers. The use of the word “calibre” suggests that there is a focus on the level of ability in such a way where female amateur boxers may be seen as less skilled. There is a strong sense of frustration in this extract, as Melissa talks about the disparity between “fights being re-arranged” for women but not for men, with others being “annoyed” for men but not for women. These reflections struck me and I felt a huge sense of injustice about the lack of thoughtfulness towards women in boxing and about how female amateur boxers may be made to feel secondary.

Building on Melissa’s reflections, Sarah describes that there is a “hierarchy”:

“...you get treated a bit like a joke occasionally or, like, sometimes you have quite a hierarchy thing. If go to, like, a London training session, like, the whole city, often it is kind of, like, Okay, male boxers is going to be downstairs in the main rings, women and children are upstairs using the crappy rings. So often you get pushed off to the side.” (Sarah: 653-656)

Sarah’s description of being treated as a “joke” implies that women’s boxing is not taken seriously. She goes on to describe a “hierarchy” where women and children are made to use the “crappy rings”. This illustrates a powerful image of female boxers being seen as inferior to male boxers. Interestingly, Sarah’s description of “women and children” being put together can be interpreted as women perhaps

being viewed as fragile as children, as aligned with gender norms and stereotypes. Her use of the words “pushed off to the side” is reflective of the physical force of women’s boxing being moved to “crappy rings” and therefore made to feel secondary to male boxing. Sarah also shares her experience of when one of her coaches reinforced gender norms and stereotypes:

“You get asked stupid things sometimes, like, you get...like ,one of the coaches one time asked me, like, um, ‘Does your boyfriend mind you boxing?’ Or something like that. Like, would you ask that to a man about his girlfriend? I don’t know. You get weird questions.” (Sarah: 657-660)

Sarah’s use of the words “stupid” and “weird” to describe the questions that she is asked emphasises the frustration and anger she feels at how she is treated as a female amateur boxer. She gives an example of a coach asking her if her “boyfriend mind[s]” her boxing, almost as if to imply she requires permission from a man to box. There is an implication here that women participating in boxing might be viewed as unfeminine and unappealing to their male romantic partners. This hints that some coaches may reinforce gender norms and stereotypes rather than trying to change them. Sarah appears to highlight the unfairness by pointing out that a man would not be asked the same question about his girlfriend. I noticed that Sarah often spoke in generalised terms in her narrative, using the plural third person ‘you’ rather than ‘I’. I have considered that this is perhaps a functional strategy of creating distance between her and her experiences by generalising them. Alternatively, perhaps she is generalising to refer to common experiences that have been shared with her by other female amateur boxers.

Similarly, Rebecca reflects on the gendered comments that she receives:

“...so when I'm going in for sparring and every time he'll [referring to coach] go, whoever I am sparring against, so and so said girls shouldn't box [...] and like basically every session, I get told that I fancy one of the boys or get taken the mickey out of. So, I do have to be careful with what I say and do.”

(Rebecca: 679-683)

Rebecca describes the comments and jokes about her being a female amateur boxer. The comment that “girls shouldn’t box” might reflect how society views women in boxing. Her description of “basically every session” highlights the frustration of the frequency of this unfair treatment based on her gender. Her being told that she fancies “one of the boys” implies that she may been seen a sexualised object rather a legitimate boxer. This suggests that, for some, these women are seen as sex objects and not boxers. Rebecca also mentions having the ‘mickey’ getting taken out of her, suggesting that she is constantly made aware that she is a woman, which further implies that perhaps there is pressure for her to conform to the male-dominant boxing culture by being careful with what she does “say[s] and do[es]”.

3.5.4 Subtheme 4: Challenging societal norms

All eight participants described how they challenged traditional gender norms and gender roles as female amateur boxers. The extract below highlights how female amateur boxers challenge the societal norms that idealise thinness. Rebecca describes how boxing changed her views of being “the skinniest person ever”:

“I think my training has become more of a priority over worrying about being, like, the skinniest person ever, and that would probably be a bigger concern if I didn't train. And look, I think looking on social media as well, like, I don't know, I don't feel as concerned as I used to because I'm, like, ‘okay, it doesn't matter as much’, like, especially because I feel like I'm training for something.”
(Rebecca: 412-416)

Rebecca suggests that she would have a “bigger concern” around her weight if she did not box; instead, boxing helped her overcome her worries about wanting to become “the skinniest person ever”. This implies that boxing perhaps challenges societal pressures for women to be thin, potentially allowing women to feel permitted to be strong rather than skinny. Her broken speech when talking about the pressures of “social media” suggests that she is not consciously aware of the impact had by social media upon beauty standards. However, Rebecca appears confident that she resists these pressures of being thin, saying that “it doesn’t matter as much”, and that this is because she feels that she is “training for something”. Boxing therefore appears to provide her with an alternative goal, that of needing to be strong and properly fuelled in order to perform well.

Similarly, Lola felt that boxing changed her perspective on her “broad back”:

“I wanted to look girly. And my sister had a petite back and I always wanted what she had. And, and then when I came into boxing, one of the coaches said, ‘Oh. You’ve got quite a broad back, haven’t you’? And I thought oh, here

we go. And I was oh, don't say it. And he was like, 'No, it's fantastic. I love it.'
And he actually said it in a positive light because it also, actually, it, it does
kind of help. And, and then I started to appreciate that actually that was a
strength and not weakness.” (Lola: 144-149)

Lola expresses her desire to look “girly” and associates this with wanting to have a “petite back” like her sister. Her use of the word “girly” and “petite” reflects societal expectations around women needing to be small to be feminine. Her repetition of the word “wanted” emphasises Lola’s previous desire to look “girly” and “petite” rather than “broad”. Lola describes the coaches noticing her “broad back”, suggesting that she felt self-conscious and was anticipating a negative comment. However, he spoke about it in such “a positive light” that Lola now sees it as a “strength and not weakness”. There is an implication here that female attributes that may not fit into traditional feminine stereotypes of being “girly” and “petite” are embraced and celebrated in boxing. This implies that boxing helps to change the way female amateur boxers see their bodies, by being encouraged to have a strong body rather than a thin body.

Interestingly, Sarah reflects on how it can be difficult to navigate between beauty ideals in relation to what is “best for boxing”:

“I have a bit of a tension sometimes between, kind of, like, what's, like,
conventionally beautiful and what's, like, best for boxing. And I don't really
care, like, I would rather just be an athlete and look like an athlete. But I think

of, like, when guys make comments like that, like, should I be like that?"

(Sarah: 189-192)

Sarah talks about experiencing a "tension" between that which is "conventionally beautiful" and her athletic ideals. This suggests an internal conflict, on the one hand wanting to appear in a certain way that is seen as beautiful by "guys", while on the other wanting to look like an "athlete". This got me thinking about how it might be difficult for female athletes to defy conventional western beauty standards and how often they might get caught between the two ideals. It's interesting to note that Sarah says she would prefer to "be" and "look" like an athlete. This raises the possibility that Sarah may feel "stress" regarding her appearance and it feels to identify as a female athlete. Sarah goes from saying that she does not "really care" to question if she "should be like that" when "guys make comments", which further supports the notion that there is an internal conflict that goes back and forth.

Priya talks positively about how she wants to show that women can be boxers:

"...I'm quite petite. So for them then it actually makes them think like, well, you're really a boxer. Like, no, you're not. How can you be? Must be like doing ballet or something. It kind of, like, I guess makes them think, like, oh, like, actually she can do it, like, she's, she's a boxer. They are quite interested to, like, know more about it and it's different I think. It's always had, like, a really positive reaction." (Priya: 440-446)

Priya describes others as being shocked, assuming that she must be “doing ballet” because she is “quite petite”. There is an implication here that female amateur boxers may be met with resistance from others due to gender stereotypes. It implies a disbelief that women can be both feminine and be a boxer. It struck me how proud Priya felt for challenging these stereotypes, by making others think that “actually she can do it” and that “she’s a boxer”. Priya appears to feel positive about her ability to invite others to be “interested to know more” about women’s boxing. Priya highlights that being a female amateur boxer “is different”, emphasising how unique she feels about being a boxer.

Below Jessica also expresses a sense of pride for being an older female amateur boxer:

“...and showing other people, you know, like, age doesn’t matter, you know, you can be still be fit” (Jessica: 652-654)

Jessica describes that she is able to show others that “age doesn’t matter” and that “you can still be fit”. Her assertion that “age doesn’t matter”, combined with the phrase, “still be fit”, could be understood as her ability to disprove assumptions that older females are not fit enough to box; instead, she knows that boxing is for women of all ages.

3.6 Superordinate theme 4: Impact of Boxing on Relationships

Participants reflected on the impact being a female amateur boxer has on other areas of their lives, especially relationships; their thoughts and reflections on this are explored in this superordinate theme.

In the first subtheme, 'All encompassing with difficulty to balance life and training', participants describe the challenges of balancing training with other areas of life. In the second subtheme, 'Connection to and Disconnection from others', participants describe how others do not understand what it takes to train as an amateur boxer; here they reflect on the other ways they have been able to connect with others through boxing. In the final subtheme, participants reflect on the impact boxing, and their status as female amateur boxers, has had upon their romantic relationships and dating.

3.6.1 Subtheme 1: Difficulty balancing life and training

Seven participants spoke about difficulties balancing their training with other areas of their lives. Sabrina highlights how much her life revolves around training:

"...[T]raining takes up a lot of time and sometimes I'd be training twice a day. But then, like, cutting weight just means that, like, you have to focus so much and prioritize your nutrition and sleep and all the other things. [...] [I]t's like a really big element in people's lives, it's not just a casual hobby." (Sabrina: 369-374)

Sabrina describes how training takes "a lot of time" including having to focus on "nutrition" and "sleep". This suggests that boxing training is all encompassing and

influences lots of aspects of her life. Sabrina also describes boxing as a “big element” of her life, illustrating that amateur boxing is more of a lifestyle than just a “hobby”—one that requires a lot of commitment. Her use of the word “casual” emphasises the serious and dedicated commitment needed to pursue amateur boxing.

Rebecca builds on this by sharing the struggles she has “balancing” her social life with her training:

I think balancing social and, like, training is very hard because I feel bad either way. Like, if I, if I miss out on going out with my friends because I've got boxing tonight and I feel bad for, like, ditching [...] it's hard because if I missed, if I missed training and went out with my friends instead, then I would be probably the other way round. (Rebecca: 463-468)

Rebecca felt that it is “very hard” to balance her social life and training. Her rushed speech during this extract gives me a sense of how difficult it is for her to be constantly torn between boxing and her social life. More specifically related to embodiment, Rebecca’s experience suggests that the living body of female amateur boxers experience conflict when interacting with the social world. Her repetition of the words “feel bad” appears to emphasise the difficult feelings that come up when she feels she must choose between boxing and spending time with her friends. She elaborates that she feels bad “either way”, which suggests difficulty she has to be a boxer with a social life. In contrast to this, Sarah appears to favour boxing over her social life:

“When I’m boxing, I feel like my life is exciting and the people around me who also box, I feel like we share that excitement about it, and I feel kind of like something kind of like quite cool and risky, and you get that kind of buzz from it. But then when you go to a social thing and you’re the one, like, drinking water and not eating anything and everyone else is like having a nice time getting drunk and do[ing] what they want to do. Suddenly you feel like the one which is, like, the kind of boring square ones.” (Sarah: 539-546)

Sarah goes into detail, contrasting the experience and feelings she has between her boxing life and her social life. Boxing seems to create a world in which she feels excited and “cool”, one where she is able to share this unique experience with others “who also box”, who also understand it. Her use of the word “risky” is interesting to me as it implies a sense of excitement and “buzz” that is felt in both the body and mind. Interestingly, she goes from describing feeling “cool” and “risky” to quickly feeling like a “boring square” when she socialises, highlighting the paradox between these feelings, of the living body interacting with boxing and socialisation.

In the extract below, Jessica describes that it can be difficult balancing training with her role as a single working mother:

“Sometimes it’s hard because, you know, I’m coming back from work, I have to cook [...] I have to find someone who will stay with my son when I’m training.” (Jessica: 529-531)

Jessica describes it being “hard” to juggle training, work and motherhood. She talks about having to “find someone” to look after her son when she is training, which suggests that she is committed to amateur boxing while hinting at how difficult it can be for women to balance amateur boxing and caring responsibilities.

Melissa also describes her struggle to balancing boxing and work:

“I’ve essentially lost two jobs for boxing related reasons. It was fine, they were not ideal.” (Melissa: 375-376)

Melissa describes losing “two jobs” due to “boxing related reasons”. This suggests that being a female amateur boxer can significantly affect the boxers’ working life, that boxing may be prioritised over work. It is not clear what it is meant by the jobs not being “ideal” but it could be interpreted as being “not ideal” for boxing due to the time that is required to train and compete—time which certain jobs do not permit.

During lockdown, Priya reflected on how she “restricted” herself for “so long”, leading her to question whether she should continue boxing:

“I’m definitely questioning and even, like, thinking to stop boxing and stuff because I just feel, like, I’ve restricted myself so long now that I feel, like, I’m not sure what to do really and that kind of, like...erm...it does kind of like...erm...make me feel also really confused, like, mentally, in terms of, like, I feel. But when I, when I think about stopping boxing, then I feel, like, well, what

am I going to do? And, like, what if I don't feel happy and what will make me feel happy then after that, like, what will be next kind of thing.” (Priya: 731-741)

There is a strong sense of hopelessness in this extract, with Priya feeling conflicted about whether she should leave boxing or not due to the long term restrictions she has placed upon herself in order to compete. I wonder if the closure of boxing gyms during lockdown caused Priya to question her life without boxing, to consider impact it has had on other areas of her life. Her broken speech suggests her struggle to put her ideas to words, reflecting the strong “confusion” she seemingly feels. However, the thought of “stopping boxing” appears to bring anxiety as she questions what else would make her “feel happy”. This implies that it is difficult to tolerate the uncertainty of a life after boxing, which for Priya appears strongly linked to her ways of coping.

Later, Priya clarifies what she means by “restricting” herself, elaborating on the impact this has:

“...restricting myself from having, like, a social life and stuff. That's when I started becoming, like, more and more of, like, an internal conflict and, like, loads of, like, guilt and, like, regret when I missed training in that kind of thing. So then, like, it was, like, later when I was, like, thinking why am I missing out on my life, I suppose, and, like, missing out on loads of fun things and family events and stuff like that.” (Priya: 762-768)

Priya explains how the sense of “restricting” is linked the absence of “having a social life”, reiterating the difficulty with balancing boxing and social life. Her repetition of

“missing” emphasises the great sense of loss she feels about social opportunities, such as “fun things” and “family events”. She describes an internal conflict between boxing and other aspects of her life, thus emphasising how stuck and torn she feels between the two. Her expression of “why am I missing out on my life” highlights a great sense of “regret” and “guilt” she feels for the sacrifices she has made to be a female amateur boxer. Internal conflict seems to arise in the embodied experience because of the limitations that boxing places on one's opportunity to interact physically and socially in various social events. This sense of internal conflict is echoed regularly in other transcripts, and I believe this difficulty in balancing amateur boxing and other aspects of life is an important challenge facing female amateur boxers.

3.6.2 Subtheme 2: Connection to and Disconnection from others

While exploring the impact of amateur boxing on other areas of their lives, six participants spoke about how others do not understand the amount of commitment that goes into training as an amateur boxer. Priya begins by reflecting on how certain family members do not understand due to her culture viewing competitive sport differently:

“...it's just, like, in the Asian culture as well, it's just not really seen as, like, ladylike or, you know, not many. Like, there's no one in my family who do any sports [...] And [my aunt's] like, ‘Why are you going to the gym?’, like, ‘You're skinny anyway!’ And I was like, ‘That's not the point’. Like, it's, like, what if I want to, like, go to the gym to, like, put on weight, like, to put on muscle? It's like people don't really understand.” (Priya: 515-526)

Priya describes boxing as clashing with “Asian culture” as it is not seen as “ladylike”, suggesting that women’s boxing does not fit with the gender roles of some other cultures. There is a sense of frustration when Priya reflects that “no one” in her family does any sport. There is an implication here that families, and their cultures more broadly, perceive female participation in sport differently, which may make it difficult for them to understand why Priya wants to be a female amateur boxer. Priya goes on to explain that her aunt asked her why she wants to go to the gym when she is already “skinny”. This suggests that cultural and societal pressures shape gender expectations, making it difficult for her aunt to understand why a woman would like to be strong rather than “skinny”. Later in the transcript, Priya talks about how this lack of understanding can lead to cultural and societal pressures to “stop boxing”:

“...now [my mother] wants me to, like, stop boxing and focus on, like, career and well, mostly just, like, having a family, that kind of thing. Like, she's, like, you need to stop boxing now and that kind of stuff. So I guess that kind of, like, annoys me a bit because...because I don't want to stop” (Priya: 544-550)

Priya explains that, while her mother is supportive, there is a sense of pressure put on Priya to “stop boxing” and instead focus on a “career” and “having a family”. This made me wonder about how the embodied experiences of female amateur boxers is influenced by societal and cultural pressures, especially around gender and age. This pressure may encourage women to give up amateur boxing and “focus” on living more in line with the accepted gender norms and roles (e.g creating a family).

This “annoys” her, and her broken speech after this may indicate her realisation that despite feeling these pressures, she does not “want to stop”.

Amanda’s experience further highlights how “frustrating” it is for her when her friends do not understanding why she would choose to go to boxing rather than go out with them:

“It is, like, frustrating. Like, like I said, when they are, like, oh, why don't you just come or you're boring or whatever. But they've never had something that they're, like, passionate about. Like, I am with boxing, so they just don't understand it.” (Amanda: 355-357)

As stated previously, Amanda describes feeling frustrated when explaining to her friends that she has to go boxing. She is met with resistance where she receives comments such as “you’re boring”, or when her friends try to convince her to “just come”, suggesting their lack of understanding, which becomes a sort of peer pressure to conform. This might be read as a clash between how Amanda perceives and uses her body and how her body is perceived by her friends. Amanda seems to suggest that this lack of understanding is due to her friends “never” having something that they are “passionate” about. This resistance that female amateur boxers face when trying to maintain their training, which is echoed regularly in other transcripts, made me wonder whether it is a manifestation of perpetuated gender stereotyping, reflecting gender inequality in sport and the difficulty female athletes have reconciling their sporting lives with their family and social lives.

Seven participants spoke about how boxing had a positive impact on their social life, how it helped them to connect with others. Six participants described the positive influence of having a meaningful relationship with their coaches, with Sarah highlighting a “parental relationship” with her coach:

“...to be looked after by somebody and, sort of, and allowing yourself to, sort of...erm. I guess its, like, a trust thing, isn't it? It's, like, five minutes of this situation where it's, like, literally very dangerous. But this person is there looking out for me and I'm not here on my own. [...] I think it's quite a parental relationship with your coach and I think, like, its really nice that relationship with coaches.” (Sarah: 344-359)

Sarah describes her coach looking after her and allowing herself to “trust” them to look after her. Interestingly, Sarah mentions “trust” in a form of a question; this may reflect a sudden realisation of the trust involved, of the ongoing meaning making behind this. She goes on to say that her coach is “looking out” for her during “very dangerous” fights, suggesting that she feels supported and looked after, especially at times when she perhaps most needs it. Her statement that she is ‘not here on [her] own’ indicated an emotional and unique relationship that is shared between boxer and coach. Sarah describes the relationship as “parental”, which implies a relationship in which the coach embodies the qualities of an authoritative caregiver. Similarly, Melissa describes the boxing club as being the closest thing she has to a “family”:

“Community, I think. Security. I don't have any family in the UK, so that's the closest thing I have to a family.” (Melissa: 466-468)

Melissa describes her boxing club providing a sense of “community” and “security”, suggesting that boxing provides her with feelings of belonging and safety. This appears to be important to Melissa because she does not have “any family in the UK”, and she describes her boxing club being the closest thing she has to a “family”. Her use of the word “family” emphasises how personal and connected she feels towards her boxing club; it is clearly more than just a sport to her. Sabrina echoes this and speaks about being able to connect with her friends and family through boxing:

“...[I]t's positively impacted my relationships in that, like, a lot of my friends and family look to me for support and any training and stuff. So, like, over the lockdown I've done some training sessions with my mum and her friends. They have, like, a little fitness group and I've, like, led fitness classes for them.” (Sabrina: 431-435)

Sabrina describes boxing as having a “positive” impact on her relationships insofar as it help her to “support” her friends and her mum with their fitness. This suggests a positive experience of connecting and helping loved ones with physical activity, which appears to be a big part of Sabrina’s life. It made me wonder if this is a way of Sabrina being able to share a very significant area of her life with her loved ones. Leading “fitness classes” for her mum and her friends indicate the value and trust they put in Sabrina and brought new ways of connecting “over the lockdown”.

3.6.3 Subtheme 3: Impact on romantic relationships and dating

The previous subtheme explored the impact of boxing upon friendships and family. Seven participants also spoke about the impact boxing has had on their romantic relationships and dating. Four participants described the ways in which boxing contributed to the ending of their long-term relationships. Lola explains how this happened to her:

“I was with somebody before in a long-term relationship who wasn't and didn't like me boxing. So it got, in the end, it got to the point where actually it broke down the relationship and that was part of the reason why we went our separate ways.” (Lola: 415-418)

Lola described that her previous partner “didn’t like” her boxing. It could be interpreted that Lola felt unsupported by this, and, with her partner’s disapproval of her boxing, difficulties arose to the point where “it broke down the relationship”. This might be read as a conflict between Lola's perception of and use of her body and the perception of her body that was held by her partner. Interestingly, she mentions that he “wasn't” a boxer or involved in boxing, which could have also been problematic. This can be taken to mean that, when partners are not understanding or supportive of the demands of amateur boxing, participation in the sport can lead to a significant change in the romantic relationships of female amateur boxers.

Melissa also shares that it is “difficult” to explain to a partner that she prioritises boxing above her romantic relationships:

“I would say it's very difficult to explain to a partner that you're always going to come second. If we have plans and I get that message that says, you know, there is a spar opportunity or there's training opportunity, you're getting ditched.” (Melissa: 376-379)

Melissa describes that her partners are “always” going to “come second” to boxing, suggesting that it might not always be easy for her to maintain romantic relationships because they cannot be a priority. When hearing this statement it struck me that boxing is Melissa’s true love, her main relationship with which nothing else can compete. Her use of the words “getting ditched” depicts a very physical removal that emphasises how easily partners are discarded when boxers have to choose between boxing and their romantic relationships.

Two participants had previously dated their coach and two participants are dating boxers. Priya highlights how “helpful” it is to date someone in boxing:

“Luckily, in fact ,like, the, the, when I've been in relationships, there have been people who are either competing themselves or into boxing. So it's really good because we're both, like, we'd meet up and not always just, like, go out to eat or something. Like, sometimes we meet up and train and that's what I really like. So it's been really helpful.” (Priya: 647-650)

It seems as though Priya values being with people who are “competing” or “into boxing”. Her use of the word “luckily” suggests that she feels fortunate to be in a relationship with someone in boxing. Priya articulates that it is “helpful” and “good” because they get to “train” together and because there is a mutual understanding that they do not always have to “go out to eat”. This can be interpreted as the benefits of having a shared common interest and able to live a similar lifestyle. Her repetition of the word “really” emphasises how “helpful” and “good” it is to be in a relationship with someone who has similar values and interest—someone, perhaps, who celebrates the contribution that physical prowess makes to the embodied experience of being a female amateur boxer. This may in part explain why some female amateur boxers favour more progressive feminist relationships over patriarchal relationships.

Overall, this analysis has explored the participants’ experience as embodied female amateur boxers and has aimed to give voice to, and make sense of, these experiences. I hope that the themes that have come out of my interpretations of the participants’ experiences convey a strong sense of their experience and that the voices of the participants can be heard clearly throughout.

4. Discussion

4.1. Overview

In the first section of this chapter, I elaborate on the results of this study and place them within the body of current literature. As seen in the previous analysis chapter, there are four super-ordinate themes that will be elaborated. I aimed to adopt a "phenomenological psychology approach" (Finlay, 2008) and avoided citing previous research throughout to ensure that my interpretations were as close as possible to the experiences of the participants. I will next explore the relevance my findings have to counselling psychology and the implications they have for practice. Following this, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this study, as well as reflecting on its epistemology, procedure and methodology. The final section of this chapter will include suggestions and recommendations for future research.

4.2. Mind-Body Dualism

Participants shared their experiences of mind-body dualism, in which the two entities are sometimes perceived as competing with and apart from one another, while at other times they are complimentary and joined as one. Participants describe externalising their bodies as an instrument for boxing. Consistent with the literature, many female athletes expressed experiencing their bodies as instruments of physical power and aggression (Paul et al., 2015; Kane & Snyder, 1989). Participants spoke about needing to look after their bodies through their diet, sleep and social life. Sabrina shared that she wanted her body to consistently be at an "optimal level" for performance. This is similar to the findings in Paradis's (2012) ethnography from a San Francisco Bay Area boxing gym. She notes the way boxers make sense of and take care of their bodies, describing the body of a boxer as a learning tool,

instrument, weapon, and, most importantly, something they invest in. She also noticed that her identity as a boxer impacted her life in terms of nutrition, sleeping needs, work schedule and social life outside the gym (Paradis, 2012).

Furthermore, participants gave us an understanding of the difficulties that come with viewing the body as purely an instrument for performance. Rebecca highlights how it can be unsettling not knowing how much training is enough. She spoke about feeling “guilty” for either not training enough or overtraining. This is echoed in Bar & Markser’s (2013) paper, who discuss sport-related mental health issues that elite athletes face. The authors argue that athletes face a fundamental dilemma between knowing when exercise is supportive of their mental and physical health versus when it can become harmful and, in some instances, addictive. Bar & Markser (2013) note that exercise addiction/dependency can lead to feelings of guilt, discomfort and anxiety. Additionally, participants shared having a difficult relationship with injuries. For example, Priya describes continuing to train with an injury because taking time to recover from injuries “would be too detrimental” to herself and her boxing. Wiese-Bjornstal (2010)’s systematic review revealed that athletes may ignore and continue to train with injuries due to psychological aspects, such as wanting to demonstrate resilience or “toughness”.

Richardson et al. (2008) present The Overtraining Risks and Outcome Model to explain the causation of overuse injuries and overtraining. This model's central idea is divided into four levels that are hierarchically organised and explain how stress, recovery and overtraining in athletes are related. Level 1 outlines the environmental, intrapersonal and interpersonal risk factors that can exacerbate the response to

stress. Level 2 addresses the imbalance between stress and recovery, which can result in the early indicators of overtraining (the athlete's inability to manage the demands of the sport or the demands in other areas of his or her life). Level 3 discusses the athlete's response to these early indicators. Factors described in level 1 determine if the athlete will be able to identify the signs of overtraining and then select the best coping mechanism. Level 4 illustrates the outcomes, depending on whether the athlete recognises the signals or reacts inappropriately, if they are unable to adjust and restore the original balance between stress and recovery. The model attempts to answer the following issue: What occurred "in an athlete's past that led to the development of overtraining behaviors, and what is going on in the present to drive or maintain such behaviors" (pp. 170). When working with athletes who experience these challenges, counselling psychologists and other healthcare professionals may find this framework to be helpful in aiding formulation and providing support.

The subtheme "control and restriction" captured how participants engaged in restricting and controlling their bodies for boxing. Sarah describes a pressure to be a certain weight and implies that gaining weight can lead to feelings of failure. Participants build on this by expressing that the demands of training and the pressure to be a certain weight led to them developing disordered eating behaviours. For example, Lola describes feeling a "constant panic" over her weight. She describes adopting a range of diets to restrict her food intake and describes an event where she forced herself to do exercise even though she was sick. She goes on to talk about how this negatively impacts her mental health, including making her feel low, tired and frustrated. This supports Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) study that

found female amateur boxers to develop an unhealthy relationship with food, adopting unhealthy weight maintenance strategies, such as starvation and dieting. This also supports the wider current literature that evidences how female athletes are at higher risk of developing eating disorders (Smolak et al., 2000). Coelho et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review to discuss the major factors involved in the development of eating disorders among female athletes. Coelho et al. (2014) found that psychological factors include attachment, body image dissatisfaction, depression, stress, perfectionism, low self-esteem, and sociocultural factors include influence of the media to conform to an unrealistic standard of thinness and beauty. This is supported by Greenleaf et al. (2009), arguing that female athletes “not only face the typical social pressures to be thin, which all women in Western culture are exposed to, but they are also immersed in a social context that focuses on their bodies’ appearance and performance” (p. 489).

Coelho et al. (2014) also stated that there are many unhelpful beliefs and misconceptions about body weight and performance among competitive athletes. The most common being that a female athlete must reach their lowest body weight and body fat percentage in order to excel in the sport. This can be seen with Priya, who was urged to maintain a weight outside her normal body weight by her coach in order to give her a height advantage during her bouts.

Disordered eating is also commonly known as forming part of the "female athlete triad" (FAT), alongside amenorrhea and bone demineralization (Stand, 2007). The morbidity of each condition varies, but the combined effects of the three can be detrimental to long-term health. Thomas et al. (2021) found that 38% of female

combat sport athletes were likely to be at risk of developing FAT due because they frequently adopted rapid weight reduction strategies. FAT is a recurring theme in the current findings, with four participants stating how boxing was linked to their absence of menstruation (amenorrhea). For example, Amanda spoke about not understanding why she had lost her menstrual cycle and expressed that she was afraid to ask for or seek support. In support of this, Ko et al. (2017) stated that there was a severe lack of specialist help available, such as a psychologist, nurse and nutritionist, even though extreme weight loss and intense exercise have been found to make an impact on the physiology and irregularity of female reproduction. Overall, the results show that, despite the positive feelings that female amateur boxers express about the ways that boxing motivates them to take care of their bodies and minds for performance, they still encounter many difficulties in terms of overtraining, of the difficulty with which they handle injuries, and of the risks of developing FAT. These challenges may have an impact on the mental and physical health of female amateur boxers. This information would be helpful for counselling psychologists, as well as other professionals and policy makers involved in understanding and improving the wellbeing of female amateur boxers.

The subtheme “mind and body alignment vs misalignment” provides a unique insight into the relationship between body and mind during boxing. Participants described how, at times, the mind and body feel aligned, while at other times they can feel disconnected. All of the participants spoke about having experiences of their mind and body integrating during their bouts. For example, Rebecca describes it as all a “blur” and loses all thought process. Sabrina and Priya echoed this while adding their experiences of intense focus and calm. This is consistent with the concept of a

specific type of mind-body integration state observed in athletes called “flow” (Menzel & Levine, 2011). Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) describe this as a phenomenologically embodied state, whereby the mind and body are working in unison (merging in action and awareness) to experience the world together. This merge results in experiencing a loss of time, loss of self-perception and a transcendent form of bodily awareness (Hopkinson, 2015). The findings also support Menzel & Levine’s (2007) Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image. The model claims that embodying activities lead “flow” states, which promote mind-body integration, boost body awareness and response, and generate a sense of physical empowerment and competence (Menzel & Levine, 2011). These positive bodily experiences may encourage psychologists to recommend clients to participate in sport or exercise.

Interestingly, participants spoke about the emotional states they have after this very controlled and emotionally regulated “flow” state, with some describing crying or dancing. For example, Mellissa describes the bouts being so overwhelming, both physically and mentally, that, when they end, she loses control of her emotions. There is a lack of literature that documents this transition from being in and out of control.

In contrast, some participants described experiences of mind and body misalignment. Sarah expressed a “disconnect” between her body and mind when she is tired. She describes a conflict between what the mind wants her “body to be doing” and what the body is “actually doing”. Participants describe that when their body is physiologically worn out, the body becomes externalised as a separate

entity, with the mind wanting to take control by overriding the body. It may be useful to see this as like a dialogue between the mind and the body. For example, Jessica spoke about her brain telling her body to “go for it”. This echoes Velija et al.’s (2013) study that found that participants had to convince themselves that they “[could] do it” even though they felt that they physically could not. Velija et al. (2013) reported this as an indication of empowerment, of rising beyond physical power. Hopkinson (2015) conducted an ethnography in Montreal and Edinburgh to explore the body via men’s boxing training. He states in similar findings how “boxing is a conversation with yourself”, observing that boxers embody both emotional and physical self-control in order to “not get caught up in the moment” of fatigue. However, there is a lack of literature that captures the frustration and conflict of the misalignment between mind and body, or of mind the mind overriding the body. On the whole, the findings suggest that boxing not only promotes mind-body integration but they also imply that boxing advantageously affects emotional regulation, producing a sense of physical empowerment and competence. This exploration of bodily experiences can be useful for counselling psychologists by helping clients to understand the potential effects that boxing may have on their daily interactions.

4.3. Body as Self-healing

The findings of this study revealed that participants felt that boxing had a positive impact on their wellbeing and that it helped to strengthen the relationship between their mind and body. All eight participants talked about how boxing helps them to feel stronger and more confident about their bodies. This is in line with the current research which indicates that women participating in boxing experience a stronger

sense of self, and that this is due to them feeling powerful and strong in their bodies (Carlsson, 2017; Owton 2015; Paradis, 2012). Channon and Jennings (2014) conducted a review of the empirical research and found evidence that women who competed in martial arts felt increasingly strong and confident in their minds and bodies. Participants explained that it was empowering to be able to complete physical tasks that they had previously thought their bodies incapable of. Carlsson (2017) and Velija et al. (2013) found that women who become aware of their physical power then rejected beliefs of being frail and weak to which they may have become accustomed before taking up the sport. Overall, these findings support McCaughey's (1998) significant work which suggests that women's participation in martial arts creates "physical feminism". This implies that women who train in martial arts are able to reconstruct their embodied gendered selves, rejecting ideas of inherent female weakness and vulnerability, instead replacing these with an empowered, reshaped sense of femininity (Channon and Jennings, 2014).

For Sarah and Priya, these new realisations around physical and mental capabilities were transferred into their personal lives. They both felt that it helped increase their confidence when tackling new situations. Similarly, Paul (2015) conducted interviews with female rugby players and discovered that, by expressing themselves physically when playing the sport, it may lead to them perceiving their body and the environment differently, which could increase their confidence in their ability to handle situations outside of the sport.

According to some research, women frequently criticise their own bodies, including their weight and appearance (Monteath & McCabe 1997; Thomsen, Bower, &

Barnes, 2004). Additionally, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders are directly connected with the frequency of negative body talk among women (Salk and Engeln-Maddox 2011). The current findings suggests that boxing helped participants to break the cycle of negative body talk and the resultant body dissatisfaction. For example, Lola spoke about previously being self-conscious about her shoulders, arms and back and would purposely cover them up. However, boxing helped increase her confidence and she is now able to show parts of her body rather than hiding them. Additionally, one participant shared their previous struggles with an eating disorder, while others shared their previous experiences of disordered eating behaviours. The findings indicate that boxing played a therapeutic role in these disordered eating behaviours and eating disorders by changing the aim of exercise: instead of just being thin, boxing encourages fighters to be strong and “properly fuelled”. Narrative theory can help us make more sense of this; old narratives about how the body ought to be can be re-written, offering hope, celebration and more flexibility in relation to how the individual wants to use, and feel in, their own bodies (Duba et al., 2010). This is similar to Paul’s (2015) study that found that roller derby helped some participants with their eating disorders by increasing self-esteem and decreasing worries about body types. Paul (2015) argued that competitive sports can provide a different way of evaluating the body, an evaluation that is based on how the body moves as “what I can achieve”, rather than focusing on what the body looks like (Liimakka, 2011). In this context, this encourages female amateur boxers to engage with their bodies in ways that challenge traditional western cultural norms and beauty standards.

All eight participants described how boxing provided therapeutic benefits in helping them to cope with their mental health difficulties and daily stresses; boxing was, for them, a form of escapism. Weiser and colleagues (1995) claimed that training in martial arts can help individuals self-regulate, concentrate, and learn to accept who they are, all the while still aiming for progress. This could boost their self-esteem and confidence. This is echoed in the present study in which the participants reported several psychological benefits, including the reduction of stress, as well as an increase in confidence and wellbeing. Furthermore, this is in conjunction with previous research that has found that individuals who participated in combat sports demonstrated higher levels of relaxation, emotional stability (Konzak & Boudreau, 1984), decreased anxiety (Mackay & Neill, 2010), and were better able to cope with stress (Petrovic, 2017).

Participants describe boxing as “meditative” in that it can help to stop them ruminating and improve their focus on the present. Martial arts are frequently thought to include certain mindfulness-related elements (Jansen & Pietsch, 2020). When performing throws and certain combinations, martial artists spend a lot of time by themselves and pay close attention to how their bodies are positioned (Callan, 2018). Mindful practices all pay close attention to one's own body and breath (Baer & Krietemeyer, 2006). Jansen & Pietsch (2020) found that female martial artist athletes possessed higher levels of self-compassion compared to a control group, and linked mindfulness to these higher levels of self-compassion. This may explain why the participants in this study felt that boxing offered therapeutic benefits of being present, reducing rumination. These therapeutic benefits appeared to help with daily tensions outside of boxing. However female amateur boxers appear to deal with pressures

and difficulties more related to the sport, like overtraining, health anxiety, performance anxiety and disordered eating habits, in line with this study's previous findings.

Participants also reported that boxing benefited the mental health difficulties they faces, such as depression, anxiety and trauma (e.g. sexual assault). One participant reported that she tried a range of treatments, including CBT, counselling and antidepressants, to treat her depression and anxiety. However, she claimed that these treatments had not helped her; instead she found that boxing stood out to be the most helpful tool she had used for managing her anxiety and depression. These findings build on the current literature that posits exercise have positive effects on mental health and wellbeing (Brush & Burani, 2021; Callaghan, 2004). North et al. (1990) conducted a meta-analytic review on the research that examines the effects of exercise on depression. They found that exercise can help to reduce depression by altering daily routines, enhancing social connections, assisting with weight management and by overcoming significant physical and psychological challenges. Additionally, research has shown similar positive findings that show how exercise reduces anxiety (Kandola & Stubbs, 2020; Mackay & Neill, 2010).

Lola shared how boxing helped her to cope with the difficulties she had experienced as a result of being sexually assaulted. She implied that boxing allowed her to channel her frustration and anxiety. This appeared to be an important source of empowerment and self-awareness, which allowed her to feel more in control of her life. Paul (2015) found that, with the aid of MMA, female fighters adopted a technique for reclaiming their fear and anger and worked on facing it constructively. This led

them to gain control over areas of their daily life. Dewelde (2003) shares similar findings of empowerment in her study. Consistent with findings from previous literature, she found that a self-defence course allowed women to gain physical abilities, empowering them and helped them to reject victimisation narratives. More recently, Forsdike et al. (2022) examined how women recovered from trauma by participating in sport and found that it provided a means of renegotiating the disempowered selves, providing an opportunity to feel in control and narrate an experience of empowerment. Overall, the findings from this study suggest that not only does female amateur boxing offer an alternative therapeutic tool for managing mental health, but it also re-writes narratives around female weakness and vulnerability, which is a powerful new story that female amateur boxers embody. This new story can be particularly profound when applied to women who may have experienced an eating disorder or sexual abuse.

Seven Participants spoke about finding both the training and the fight itself to be rewarding experiences. Participants explained that boxing provided them with a sense of achievement in the way that it improved their mental and physical abilities. Additionally, some participants implied that it is rewarding to be able to continuously grow and learn in terms of knowledge, skills or strength. This builds on the current research in which boxers emphasise a sense of achievement, of becoming stronger, both mentally and physically, during their amateur boxing career (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020; Velija et al., 2013). Furthermore, McCaughey (1997) argues that women have traditionally been instructed to view their bodies as fragile rather than as "tools with which to accomplish anything" (p. 92). But it is evident that boxing gives female amateur boxers a place where they can feel like they can use their

bodies to "accomplish anything", and in which they can enjoy being physically empowered. This is in line with the concept of 'physical feminism', which emphasises the importance of women developing physical strength in order to challenge the notion that women are weak and thereby contributing to empowerment.

This can be explained further by Piran's (2002) Development Theory of Embodiment. This model claims that amateur boxing promotes positive embodiment through the influence of five dimensions, including body connection and comfort (e.g., controlling breathing and noticing positioning of body), agency and functionality (e.g., using the body as a tool), experience and expression of bodily desires (immersed in physical intensity), attuned self-care (e.g., nutrition and sleep), and inhabiting the body as a subjective vs objective (e.g. countering societal views of women's bodies as fragile). The results of this study indicate that female amateur boxing provides a sense of accomplishment by enhancing the mental and physical capacities of the boxers. This could encourage psychologists to consider including boxing in their work with women who struggle with low self-esteem.

As explored in the subtheme "Catharsis and Fight Itself as Release from Restriction", all participants described a huge release of energy when they box, which due to the physical intensity of the sport. They spoke about the act of boxing as a cathartic process that released stress and aggression. Consistent with the literature (McCaughey, 1997; Paul, 2015; Theberg, 2003; Van Ingen, 2011), and as evidenced by the participants' comments, intense physical contact led to a sense of empowerment while releasing anger and everyday stressors. Elias and Dunning (1986) emphasise the cathartic significance of sport and its capacity to incite and

relieve stress by eliciting fear, pleasure, and joy—emotions that have become more tightly controlled and regulated in most other social contexts. Atkinson (2008) noted that athletes in endurance sports take great pleasure in feeling their muscles drained, being out of breath, and of their minds being “cracked”. This mirrors Sarah’s portrayal of boxing as being similar to taking drugs, where it is “fascinating” to see where “your brain can go to”. This suggests that female amateur boxers desire to be pushed physically and mentally in order to experience “intense social and emotional stimulation” via “suffering athletically” (Mierzewski & Phipps, 2015, p. 245).

Some participants also expressed that they were conflicted by their bodily capacity to inflict physical harm on their opponents in a bout. For example, Lola implies there is an internal battle within the self between societal norms where it is “not very nice” to hit someone and “animal instinct” where she is “more likely to win the fight”. Young (1990) has shown in her research on gendered bodies that women are frequently socialised to use their bodies in ways that are constrained and contrite. This slight reluctance from Lola to embody dominance may be related to her socialization, whereby she may conceive of conventional feminine forms of embodiment (e.g. feeling apologetic for hitting someone). However, most participants expressed pleasure in “not holding back” to inflict physical harm upon their opponent. The findings of this study build on current research suggests that physical forms of aggression (of enduring or/and inflicting pain) provide female amateur boxers a pleasurable release from restrictions that may be imposed on them in society or in their everyday life. This release from restrictions can allow women to feel more confident when challenging narratives of female weakness and fragility. This can

provide further mental health benefits by increasing empowerment and confidence in both body and mind.

4.4. Having a Female Body in Male Spaces

As explored in “negation of the female body”, participants shared their difficulties of being seen as both female and a boxer. For example, Rebecca expressing feeling “wrong” to have a female body and Priya implied that being female can be forgotten in male dominated spaces. Additionally, Melissa shared her experience of a male coach instructing her how to move her body but not understanding that one of her “boobs [was] in the way”. This supports current literature that has shown female athletes to be viewed as not fitting traditional norms of femininity in ways that can prevent them from being socially accepted as women (Pieper, 2016). It is said that female athletes’ capabilities do not accurately reflect those of “normal” women; at most, they qualify as “honorary males”, and, as a result, do not upset the normative symbolic conceptions of male superiority (Griffin, 2002; Kavoura et al., 2015). This can also be seen in Lola’s narrative of her giving up and accepting that she is “one of the blokes”. Jessica, however, noted that she adopts more masculine traits and therefore feels accepted in a male dominated sport that celebrates those traits (Tjørndal, 2019).

A few participants described their female bodies as obstructing them from performing as they would like to. For example, Priya criticised her menstrual cycle for making her feel “slow or weak”. This can be linked to women internalising society’s view which posits that a lack of ability, weakness and slowness are feminine traits (Nash, 2017; Young 1990), therefore causing Priya to distance herself from these traits.

Nash (2017) and Carlsson (2017) found that women internalise these views and are compliant in the reproduction of hypermasculinity in the boxing gym in order to 'fit in'. Carlsson (2017) also notes her discomfort with exhibiting feminine characteristics in hypermasculine environments and with exhibiting masculine characteristics (such as a muscular physique) in feminine environments. This resulted in her distancing herself from female beginner boxers. Carlsson notes that this is due to her viewing them as "weak", while displays of femininity were seen as conforming to repressive gender norms. Similarly, Sarah expressed feeling "unwomanly" in feminine spaces and described distancing herself from the "girls" that attend recreational boxing classes with "their crop tops", "fancy leggings" and "make up on".

The subtheme, "understanding the female body", captured the participants' mixed understanding and knowledge of training a female body in boxing. Six participants expressed having limited knowledge about the impact of their menstrual cycle on their training, and two participants expressed worry about the effect that being repeatedly struck would have upon their bodies (e.g. not be able to have children). These findings support Oftadeh-Moghadam et al.'s (2020) recommendation to provide training for coaches so that they can better understand the influence of the menstrual cycle on training and, more broadly, the physiological differences between male and female boxers. This is echoed by Melissa who shares her frustration of coaches being "predominantly men", which leads to a "lack of understanding" of the female athlete body. The study found that the small number of participants who investigated how their menstrual cycle affected their sports performance showed an increase in self-compassion.

All eight participants shared experiences of being treated unfairly because of their gender; they that they were required to train harder to prove that they were equal to their male counterparts. Consistent with the literature (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020; Owton, 2105; Paradis, 2012; Tjørndal, 2019) and as evidenced by the participants' comments, female boxers must frequently prove their boxing abilities, and demonstrate their eagerness to spar and compete, in order to be taken seriously (Sekules, 2012). The "boxing body" and masculinity are claimed to be intricately related (Nash, 2017; Scott, 2020). In the boxing community, "trim," "taut," and "hard" (male) bodies are the body types that are traditionally appreciated (Wacquant, 2004). As a result, Fitzgerald, H., Stride, A., & Drury, S. (2021) argue that the physicality of boxing thus immediately contrasts with the kinds of physicality that women "learn" under more general normative social conditions, where women are given more social capital for embodying feminine traits. This is also supported by McGannon et al. (2019) and Tjørndal (2019), who argue that women's acceptance in training gyms is based on their ability to replicate masculine boxing norms and perform boxing physique appropriately. Therefore, women must prove their boxing skills by having a strong range of sharp punches, a strong defence, good footwork, and the ability to put this all together in the ring.

One participant described an experience of being frequently sexualised rather than seen as a legitimate boxer. This supports Felshin's (1974) theory of the 'female apologetic', a concept that describes the frequent pressure on female athletes to uphold and exhibit "enough" femininity in an effort to "apologise" for taking part in a masculine sport. This supports the idea that for women to be socially valued they must be sexually appealing to males (Channon and Phipps, 2017). This can be

demonstrated in the findings of Rebecca's experience of often being told that she "fancies one of the boys".

The subtheme "challenging societal norms" captures the various ways in which participants challenged traditional western gender norms. Rebecca and Lola described that boxing helped them challenge traditional beauty standards and thereby help alleviate societal pressures to be thin. It is suggested that many women experience shame about their bodies because of the ever-evolving and unreachable beauty standards that are perpetuated in popular culture, particularly in advertising (Hollander, 2015). Hollander (2015) found that self-defence classes changed how women viewed their bodies, which caused an emotional transition for them, from shame to pride. Women reported that whereas before the class they had felt embarrassed about their bodies, after the class they expressed an increase in pride and self-love in relation to having a body that is greater in size and strength (Hollander, 2015). This is echoed in Lola's narrative that, despite being initially self-conscious about her "broad back", boxing helping her to transform this shame into pride as she now sees it as a "strength and not weakness". These findings suggest that boxing helps to change the way female amateur boxers see their bodies, encouraging them to have a strong body rather than a thin body. Sarah, however, describes a tension between looking a specific way that "men" find attractive and looking like an "athlete." This suggests female boxers can still find it difficult to defy conventional western beauty standards, pointing to the extent to which they might find themselves torn between the two ideals.

Overall, the findings indicate that while female amateur boxers find it empowering to be able to challenge conventional western gender norms, they still have to contend with numerous gender-related power disparities, mistreatment that is based on their gender, and placed in a constant battle to be accepted as both women and boxers. It would be important to consider these worries when considering mental health issues with this client group. These findings may help counselling psychologists and other relevant professionals better understand that female amateur boxers might still experience the traditional pull of femininity. Recognising female amateur boxers for who they are, rather than for who they "should" be, and by thus respecting them in a non-judgmental way, may well improve their wellbeing.

4.5. Impact of Boxing on Relationships

As explored in "difficulty balancing life and training", seven participants spoke about difficulties had had when balancing training with other areas of life (e.g. their social life, caring responsibilities and work life). Participants spoke about amateur boxing being a large commitment rather than a "casual hobby". Participants described having to train often, sleep at a reasonable hour and not to drink alcohol, which can make it difficult to balance a social life. For example, Sarah explained turning into a "boring square" when she goes to a "social thing" because she is the only one "drinking water". During lockdown, Priya reflected on whether she should leave boxing due to the sacrifices she had made to be a female amateur boxer (e.g. missing out on "fun things" and "family events"). There appears to be a conflict in the way these women experience their using their bodies, with boxing limiting their opportunity to interact physically and socially outside of the ring. This sense of internal conflict is echoed regularly in other transcripts, and these findings suggest a

difficulty in balancing amateur boxing with other aspects of life, and that this is an important challenge that is faced by female amateur boxers. These findings build on Oftadeh-Moghadam et al.'s (2020) study that suggested female amateur boxers have experienced boxing as having a negative impact on their social life, emphasising how the prioritising of responsibilities is a common strategy used to schedule training around family and social events.

Six participants aired frustrations about how others did not understand the level of commitment required to train as an amateur boxer. For example, Amanda shared that her friends called her “boring” because they do not understand why she would choose boxing over socialising with them. This might be read as a clash between Amanda's perception and use of her body against the perception of her body that is held by her friends. This sense of resistance female amateur boxers face for trying to maintain their training echoed regularly across other transcripts, which may reflect the persistent reproduction of gender stereotyping, embodying oppressive gender expectations and restrictive norms based on gender differences in both boxing and society (Benitez Silva, 2021).

According to Varela (1994), it can be conceptually overlooked that the moving and embodied body is a social and cultural entity. Priya describes boxing as clashing with “Asian culture” because it is not seen as “ladylike”; she then reflects on how certain family members do not understand why she would compete in boxing. In a study of Muslim girls in the UK, Kay (2006) found that family has a significant impact on the likelihood that they will participate in sports and that the family environment can be both encouraging and restricting. This is also supported by Dagkas et al. (2011) who

revealed that parental influences had a significant impact on Muslim women's participation in sport in the UK. This links with Priya's narrative account of her mother being supportive; however, there is a sense of pressure to "stop boxing" and instead focus on having a "career" and "a family". These findings suggest cultural and societal combine and place pressure upon women to give up amateur boxing and "focus" on adopting more acceptable gender norms and roles of working and creating a family. This is echoed in Tjørndal & Hovden's (2021) research on female Muslim boxers in Norway. They found that interviewees faced conflicting relationships with their families, based on culture and religious views on gender norms, leading to contradictory messages that were rooted in their intersectional identities. However, the interviewees were tenacious in their fight for greater self-determination.

The subtheme "Connection to and Disconnection from others" also captures the ways that boxing can have a positive impact on the participant's social life by helping them connect with others. Six participants described the positive influence of having a meaningful relationship with their coaches, with Sarah highlighting it as a "parental relationship". This is consistent with Tjørndal's (2019) study that indicates male coaches often play a paternalistic and authoritative role in female amateur boxers' lives, with participants describing feeling as close to their coach as they would a "father". All participants have described their boxing club as something that provides them with a sense of "community", "family" and "security". Similarly, Fitzgerald and colleagues (2021) found that women embodied a sense of belonging at the boxing club and it became a place that held significance in the same way as being a member of "a big family". This sense of belonging also included a strong desire to

remember and uphold the traditions of their boxing communities (Fitzgerald, Stride & Drury, 2021). Using Atkinson's (2018) discussion of 'pain community', the findings from the present study suggest that boxing is a space where boxers come together to share a common goal and sense of exciting significance. For example, Sarah describes that her and others in the boxing gym "share that excitement about it" and "get that kind of buzz". These findings suggest that boxing can provide a sense of belonging and increase a sense of community. This sense of community can be particularly profound when applied to women who may struggle with connecting with the community and experience isolation.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a societal shutdown, including the closing of boxing gyms, which put boxers' mental health under threat (Brooks et al., 2020). Roberts & Lane (2021) compared the mood states of boxers before and during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic by using the Brunel Mood Scale. MANOVA results revealed that, during the pandemic, boxers were increasingly angry, tired and depressed, with their healthy coping mechanisms diminished. However, this contrasts with the findings of this study, with the majority of participants reporting that they managed to cope well, continuing to train and staying connected with their boxing club. Sabrina shared that she facilitated "fitness classes" for her mum and her friends, bringing new ways of connecting "over the lockdown".

Participants spoke about how boxing had an impact on their romantic relationships and dating lives. Four participants described boxing contributing to the ending of long-term relationships; this was because their partners were not as interested in boxing as they were, or they did not like them boxing altogether. This might be read

as a conflict between the participants' perception of and use their bodies and the perception of their bodies held by their partner. This is consistent with findings from Oftadeh-Moghadam et al.'s (2020) study in which a female amateur boxer explained that her romantic relationship was neglected and that her partner resented boxing for taking her "away from him". This can also be seen in Melissa's assertion that her partners are "always" going to "come second" to boxing. Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) also suggested that female amateur boxers may have to deal with sexist views of gender roles from their partners. For example, this can be seen when a female amateur boxer described that her boxing "emasculated" her partner. The findings of the present study suggest that it can be difficult to maintain a romantic relationship if partners are not understanding or supportive of the demands of amateur boxing. This is supported by Priya who felt "lucky" that she dated men who were interested in boxing; she implied that there are benefits to this, such as sharing common interests and living a similar lifestyle. Overall, the findings highlight the difficulties female amateur boxers confront in the sport, including the prejudice and misperception they encounter from society, their friends, co-workers, and romantic partners. It is important to take these difficulties about relationships into account when working with or thinking about the mental health of female amateur boxers.

4.6. Relevance to Counselling Psychology and Implications for Practice

Chapter One details how the lived experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK is under-researched within psychological literature (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020). In her article about "Female boxers and mental health", Moghadam (2017) highlighted that there is little guidance available about mental health for female amateur boxers, despite them regularly facing "gender stereotyping pressure",

“sexualisation” and “discrimination” compared to male boxers. Given that counselling psychology is known for embodying aspects of the “scientific practitioner” and the “reflective practitioner,” (Teachman et al., 2012) the field is ideally positioned to close the gap between research and practice. Given this, it has been interesting that counselling psychology’s research and application of thought around the subject of female boxers, or women’s sports in general, has been hard to locate in the literature, or indeed in my doctoral training. Perhaps this is due to the divide between the divisions of “sport and exercise psychology” and “counselling psychology”, and therefore there may be confusion as to which field the wellbeing of athletes, such as female amateur boxers, falls under. I hope that the current study’s findings will enrich the work of counselling psychologists, as well as other professionals and policy makers involved in understanding and improving the wellbeing of female amateur boxers, by broadening their understandings and better equipping them.

The core aim of Counselling psychology is to promote and improve mental health and the well-being of individuals (Gelso et al., 2014). Mrdjenovich and Moore (2004) argue that psychologists add value to our understanding of the relationship between mind and body. This study provides some insight into how female amateur boxers experience their bodies in various positive ways. By shedding light onto what the body does and how it feels as opposed to how it looks (Shiffmann, 1996), the findings have highlighted how boxing has formed pathways to wellbeing by enabling female amateur boxers to strengthen the relationship between their minds and bodies. For example, the female amateur boxers I interviewed described how boxing helped to increase their confidence, helped them to feel stronger, to break the cycle of negative self-talk and body dissatisfaction, and to provide therapeutic benefits to

help them to cope with mental health difficulties and daily stresses. This can be explored with clients by enabling them to recognise the impact that boxing may have on their daily interactions. This will provide clients with a greater sense of choice, control, and responsibility—a priority for counselling psychologists (Cooper, 2009).

An important outcome of this research is that it provided an opportunity for female boxers to illuminate the difficulties they face. In particular, the female amateur boxers that I interviewed described their disordered eating behaviours (e.g. participants reported overtraining, restricting food and anxiety regards to gaining weight), falling into the “female athlete triad” (Nazem & Ackerman, 2012). Although this qualitative research does not allow us to generalise to the entire UK population, we can draw conclusions about the importance for practitioner counselling psychologists working with this community to consider issues of disordered eating behaviours and the “female athlete triad” in therapeutic formulation. Suggestions for policy and practice should include ensuring female boxers have access to expert help (e.g., injuries, weight management techniques specific to female boxers, the impact of training on the menstrual cycle, and physiological differences between male and female boxers).

We can draw attention to the challenges of being seen and valued as both female and as an amateur boxer. The female amateur boxers that I interviewed expressed that they felt pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, with some experiencing sexualisation and discrimination. Participants experienced gender stereotyping, and the associated pressures, not only in the boxing gym but also within friendships, family, romantic relationships and within wider society. This might

encourage clients to develop a growing culture of acceptance that those in gendered practices that explicitly denote both "woman" and "power" make up a genuinely different kind of femininity (Channon & Phipps, 2017). We hope that these findings will motivate female amateur boxers to speak up when they encounter prejudice, sexualization, and gender stereotyping in order to push for gender equality and to normalise women's boxing within society. Moreover, for coaches to be aware of the inappropriate language used in the boxing gyms that can reinforce gender norms and stereotypes.

It is important to note the gender-related power inequalities and socially-created norms for this group, and it would be crucial to take these concerns into account when thinking about mental health difficulties in the female population (Moradi & Yoder, 2012). The study has highlighted societally pushed views that may limit women and stop them from engaging in physical activities (e.g boxing) that could provide benefits to their wellbeing. These findings could help healthcare professionals to better understand that female amateur boxers may still feel the traditional pull of femininity. Respecting this in a non-judgemental manner might help feminism's psychological perspective by valuing female amateur boxers for who they are today rather than for who they were or what they "should" be.

One suggestion made by participants from this research is the need for additional spaces where women can discuss their experiences in an environment of mutual support. Participants reported a lack of understanding and knowledge from their coaches when it came to female-specific boxing matters, including the influence of training on the menstrual cycle, weight management techniques, the female athlete

triad, and the physiological differences between female and male boxers. Female amateur boxers may be encouraged to talk more openly about female boxing related difficulties and the impact it has on their sense of self; this can be done by providing a space for them to talk about their various experiences.

4.7. Strengths and Limitations

This study's main strength comes from the participants. Their generosity and candour in sharing their experiences produced a wealth of information. Despite the fact that this study claims to solely focus on the experiences of the eight individuals who were interviewed, there are key insights that can be drawn from this rich data that are applicable and transferable to other female amateur boxers. Participants provided me with feedback that detailed the extent to which I had put them at ease and demonstrated my desire to understand them by, for instance, asking follow-up questions and checking if I had heard what they said correctly. This felt especially meaningful when they were discussing subjects that, in their opinion, were not often spoken about. These comments imply that I had gained their trust, which may have made it easier for them to talk in depth about their experiences.

A criticism of using IPA in this study is that IPA depends on participants being able to articulate the depth of their experience. According to Willig (2013), not all participants will be able to accomplish this. The ability of the individuals to communicate their experience did vary in this study. This might be because the participants' ages and educational experiences varied, or it might represent the fact that some of the participants weren't accustomed to thinking about or verbalising their inner experience. I followed Smith et al.'s (2009) guidance that, when participants

occasionally had difficulty communicating their meanings, I made sure that I remained curious and used prompt questions. I felt this helped me to obtain more in-depth explanations and detailed reports. For Jessica, however, English was not her first language and struggled at times to find certain words to describe her experiences. This is evidenced by her asking if she had used certain words correctly, asking at one point if I spoke Polish. According to Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett (2004), culture is internalised and communicated via language. Considering this, it is possible that Jessica's experiences might have been depicted differently in English than in her native tongue. There could also be a possibility that these women felt a pressure to be "good participants". This may have had an impact on what the participants felt they were willing and able to share. For example, Melissa asked prior to the interview if I could send her the interview questions before so that she could make sure she was answering them correctly. Nevertheless, each participant volunteered to participate in this study on their own accord, so they were all eager to speak and ready to share their experiences.

One limitation is the recruitment procedure. According to Rozmovits and Ziebland (2004), participants who self-volunteer may have different reasons for taking part than those of a larger sample. Participants in this study, for instance, might have been motivated to take part due to either a particularly pleasant or a terrible experience with amateur boxing. Although it is impossible to completely rule out this possibility, the variety of experiences described and the diversity of the reasons the participants gave for participating (e.g. to share their experiences, to support psychological research, to bring more awareness about female boxing, and to

advocate for female boxers) gives me confidence that there was not a single shared motivation guiding their participation.

Another limitation involves the demographic of the participant group. Most of the participants interviewed in this study were white and highly educated. Within female boxing research, these groups are frequently overrepresented (Tjønndal, A., 2019). Additionally, little research has been done on the phenomenon of interest. Because of this, it is still difficult to gain a clear insight of the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers of different backgrounds. In order to accurately reflect the realities of these populations, research on female amateur boxers has to include perspectives from people with a variety of ethnic, social, and educational backgrounds, and this should be prioritised.

4.8 Methodological Reflexivity

Qualitative research acknowledges that each researcher contributes their own biases to the data analysis. Therefore, using IPA meant that my own views and beliefs would inevitably have an impact on the interpretive process, which would have an impact on the validity and reliability of the findings (Smith et al., 2009). As a qualitative researcher, it is crucial to recognise the ways in which my own experiences and assumptions influenced the way the interview was conducted; furthermore, I must also recognise how my reactions to their experiences could have had an impact on the data I collected. Through my research supervision, reflective diary and personal therapy, I was able to continually reflect on how my own experience impacts the data collecting process (and that of its analysis).

When formulating the interview questions I was aware of how my own experience as a female amateur boxer might influence them and prompt further questions. It is inevitable that my personal and professional preconceptions impacted the interview questions, which thus affects the content of the interviews and my findings (Larkin et al., 2006). I felt that I struggled with this process as I wanted to design the questions to be as neutral as possible and I also felt concerned that I might not capture something of significance. This led to drafting a very long list of questions that was impractical to use. Following discussions with my research supervisor, and personally after reflecting on my preconceptions, the interview questions were changed numerous times. My supervisor had suggested to help the literature guide me and to conduct a pilot interview to see how the questions elicited information. As seen in Chapter One, the literature explores various stages in amateur boxing such as training, sparring and the fight itself. Therefore, this helped guide the interview questions to follow these stages, as well as looking at the impact of this on wellbeing and other areas of life (e.g social life, work and relationships). Additionally, the pilot interview helped me to build my confidence in conducting interviews and obtaining feedback on the interview questions. My pilot participant was a friend from my boxing gym who was eligible for the study but was unable to take part because of our friendship. Although she expressed her appreciation for the questions' ability to inspire in-depth reflection on her experience, she noted that some of my questions could be phrased more precisely. I felt this experience was valuable to help design the questions further it and helped me to develop my confidence in them.

4.9 Procedural and Epistemological Reflexivity

It is worth noting that this research was conducted during the pandemic when amateur boxing gyms had just started opening again. Therefore, the female amateur boxers interviewed in this study would have spent considerable time away from boxing gyms due to lockdown. As a result, participants were asked to share their memories retrospectively, which could have been subject to recall bias (Hassan, 2005). Due to the multiple sources of bias that undermines the validity of such retrospective reports, scholars have suggested that they are questionable (Schwarz & Sudman, 1994). However, Willig (2013) argues that the focus of IPA research is on individuals' perceptions of reality.

Due to being a carded amateur boxer myself, I felt that I could be seen as an “insider”. I was therefore mindful throughout the process that my views and perspectives would differ from the participants own unique experiences, making me instead an “outsider”. This was done by keeping a reflective notebook and keeping my interpretations close to the text. Furthermore, unless specifically asked, I chose not to disclose that I am an amateur boxer prior to the interview. In these circumstances, I shared this information with the participants because I wanted to be transparent and avoid jeopardising the researcher-participant connection.

Admittedly, I worried that my being a boxer might impact the research process and restrict what the participants felt they could share. For instance, when Lola was asked about her experience in a fight, she struggled to articulate it and answered, "You know that feeling." This illustrates how having a knowledge of my status as a boxer may limit how much detail the participant shares about their experience. I wondered if she was holding back more details because she assumed that I

understood her, as an amateur boxer myself, and, therefore, there was an expectation that I would just know what she meant.

I was conscious of managing my potential 'outsider' status in the study by emphasising my respect for the participants, the use of supervision and use of reflective diaries. In addition, I emphasised the value of their stories and experiences at every level of the research process, including taking into account how I conducted myself during interviews, when creating of the poster and when writing up the research.

I have personally grappled with the phenomena that I have been investigating throughout the course of this research study. I have at times struggled to juggle between my commitments to my boxing training, social life and my doctoral training. I have often felt unable to keep up with training demands of attending the amateur sessions, keeping up my fitness outside of the sessions, and making sure I am consistently in 'fight weight'. These personal experiences, together with hearing first-hand of the challenges faced by female amateur boxers in this study, and reading relevant literature, has had a big impact on me. It has made me proud, in light of all the challenges that are faced, to be a female amateur boxer and it has strengthened my passion for 'physical feminism'.

4.10. Future Research

There is a clear lack of research in this area exploring the lived experiences of female amateur boxers, which therefore calls for further research in this area. The gaps in this area that require further research will be outlined below. In addition, this

study is a small-scale doctoral project; therefore, I would recommend future research for to take the form of a quantitative study with a larger sample size. Social change, and influences on policy and action might be more easily accomplished with a larger scale project.

The findings from this study suggest certain areas that would be interesting to focus and explore further. One of the difficulties that the women I interviewed faced were disordered eating behaviours and the experiencing of the 'female athlete triad'. To offer us a more complete view of how boxing affects these challenges, it would be vital to investigate this further. According to Sabrina, restriction and control over her body is better for her "mentally" because it is focused on "performance" rather than her physical appearance. Future research could explore the experiences of female amateur boxers who have an eating disorder *prior* to getting into boxing, to understand further the relationship between disordered eating motivation versus boxing motivation. This kind of research could help determine whether boxing presents greater difficulties or therapeutic benefits to women who have eating disorders prior to amateur boxing.

The majority of participants in this study were British Caucasian women. Priya, being the only Asian British participant, revealed that her identity as a female amateur boxer led to clashes with her culture and certain family members. Therefore, I would suggest future research to explore the lived experiences of female amateur boxers of different ethnicities and cultures. It would be interesting to see whether the lived embodied experience of amateur boxing differs across different cultures and ethnicities. It is acknowledged that research studies frequently underrepresent Black,

Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups (Raghavan et al., 2018). According to Farooqi et al. (2022), communication and language barriers (such as English being the second language or information sheets consisting of overly complicated language), mistrust of research, and a lack of connections to the BAME communities may be the main obstacles to recruiting BAME participants for this study.

Suggestions for future research to be more accessible to BAME participants could be to offer help with interpretation/translation, to build trust and rapport by going into boxing gyms to talk to boxers face-to-face and build community links (e.g. to community leaders and charities) (Farooqi et al., 2022).

This study has only focused on the experiences and views of female amateur boxers. It would be interesting to gather multiple views on female amateur boxing.

Future research would benefit from looking at multiple views from those close to female amateur boxers, such as coaches, partners and parents. This would assist in triangulating the findings gained from this study and could offer important insight into useful ways to best support female amateur boxers.

4.11. Concluding Thoughts

The present study set out to develop our understanding of the embodied experience of female amateur boxers in the UK. The study offered in-depth insight into how boxing influenced female amateur boxers' self-perceptions, including the ways in which their bodies exist in and interact with the world. Additionally, the study revealed links between embodied experiences of female boxers and wellbeing. The findings from this study adds to the current literature, illuminates practical implications and provides a platform for future research by encouraging others to

focus on this under-researched topic. I am very passionate about the significance of these findings, and I hope the findings will enhance the knowledge of counselling psychologists and other experts involved in understanding and enhancing the wellbeing of female amateur boxers. I hope I have done the participants justice by making sure that their voices were heard throughout the research process. Lastly, I hope this study will inspire others to continue to pursue research in this area.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Screening call and interview schedule for female amateur boxers

5-10 minutes allocated for screening call. To ensure that participants meet inclusion criteria, the following questions will be answered.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. To start, I am going to ask you some questions first to check that you are eligible to participate. Are you happy to begin?

How did you hear about the project?

What made you interested in getting involved in the project?

How old are you?

Are you currently training as a female amateur boxer?

How many years have you been competing?

How many competitive fights have you had?

Thank you for answering those questions.

Interview Schedule

60-90 minutes allocated for individual interview.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. If you are ready, we can begin to ask questions that are related to this research project. These questions will be related to your body's experience as a female amateur boxer. I just want to remind you that if you feel you want to stop the interview at any point or withdraw from the study, you can and should feel free to do so. Are you happy to begin?

Interview Questions

- 1) What led to you to become an amateur boxer?
- 2) Have you noticed any changes in your body since you first started training? If so, what kind of changes?

Example prompts:

What has that been like?

How do you feel in your body at the moment?

Can you describe the changes you have seen in the mirror? What has this experience been like for you? How have you experienced reactions from others?

What has this felt like for you?

- 3) Can you please describe how it feels in your body during training?
Example Prompts:

How does it feel? Emotionally? Physically? Mentally? Holistically?

Are there any parts that have been difficult?

Are there parts that have been enjoyable?

4) Can you please tell me your experience of how it feels in your body in the ring during a fight?

How does it feel? Emotionally? Physically? Mentally? Holistically?

Are there any parts that have been difficult?

Are there parts that have been enjoyable?

How do you feel in your body at that moment?

5) How does it feel to have a female body as a boxer?

Example Prompts:

Do you feel that being female impacts on your boxing/training/fighting? If so how?

Could you give me an example?

Does the menstrual cycle make an impact?

Does weight loss/gain make an impact?

6) What has been the impact (if any) of these changes been on how you feel about yourself and wellbeing?

7) What has been the impact been on other areas of your life? Like relationships, social life and work?

8) Can you tell me how it has been like for you to not be able to train or fight during lockdown?

Example Prompts:

How did you feel in your body during lockdown?

How does it feel? Emotionally? Physically? Mentally? Holistically?

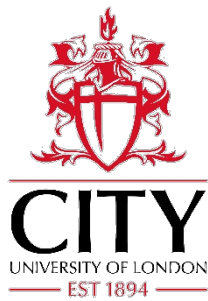
Are there any parts that have been difficult?

Are there parts that have been enjoyable?

- 9) Looking back, how do you feel about the whole experience of being an amateur boxer?

Example Prompts: If you could go back what would you say to yourself at the start of this process?

- 10) Is there anything that we have not talked about that you think is important, or you would like to talk about before we finish?



Appendix 2: Participant Consent Form

Name of Principal Investigator/Researcher: Zaffran Jami

REC Reference Number: ETH2021-1892

Title of Study: *A qualitative study of the embodied experience of female amateur boxers*

This research is being conducted as part of my doctorate in Counselling Psychology at City University and is being supervised by Dr. Fran Smith, chartered Counselling Psychologist.

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this project. You are being asked to participate in an online interview that will last about 60-90 minutes. The aim of the interview is to explore how female amateur boxers experience their bodies in meaningful ways.

The interview will be audio-recorded and then transcribed as a way of making sure that the information retrieved from the conversations is accurate, and the view can be presented in the final report. The recording and transcript will be only accessible to those directly involved in the research project and will be stored securely.

Any information you provide is confidential, and your confidentiality will be protected at all times through the study. Pseudonyms will be used to present direct quotes and short extracts that might be included in the final reports. To further enhance anonymity, no identifiable personal data such as locations and names will be included in the write-up, future publications or given to any other party.

Please tick
or

initial box

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw without giving a reason without being penalised or disadvantaged.	
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the time of transcription.	
4.	I agree to the interview being audio recorded, transcribed and used for research.	
5.	I understand that we can both stop the interview at any point.	
6.	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) explained in the participant information and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	
7.	I would like to be informed of the results of this study once it has been completed and understand that my contact details will be retained for this purpose.	
8.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

As the researcher, I agree to maintain participant's confidentiality at all times. Participant's material will be anonymised, stored securely and will be used for the purposes of research only.

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Contact information

Researcher:

Supervisor:

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet

Title of the study: A Qualitative Study of the Embodied Experience of Female Amateur Boxers

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you would like to be part of this study, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and how you will benefit by taking part. Please take your time to go through the following information carefully. You are free to discuss it with others if you may wish. In case there is information that is not clear, feel free to ask for clarification.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to give female amateur boxers the opportunity to share their lived experiences, focusing specifically on what their body does and how it feels. We hope and believe that the findings of this research will further the understanding of what it is like to be a female amateur boxer and how they experience their bodies in a meaningful way. This would steer further research in this area and could enlighten pathways to psychological wellbeing through understanding bodily experiences (linking mind to body). This study is being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology Programme at City University.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are currently training and competing as a female amateur boxer. Participants should have two or more years' experience as a female amateur boxer and should be over 18. In total, there will be 12 female amateur boxers participating in this study.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in the study. Participation in this project is voluntary, and you have complete authority over your participation. If you choose to participate, you will be required to sign a consent form. However, you are free to withdraw from participating at any time in the research progression without being disadvantaged or penalised in any way. You are equally allowed to share as much information as you are comfortable with. You are free to not answer questions you might find too intrusive or personal.

What will happen if I take part?

- *If you are interested in taking part, we will give you a screening call which will include some questions to establish that you are eligible to take part in the study as well as answer any questions you might have. If you are eligible to take part and are still interested, we will inform you of when and at what time the online interview will take place.*
- *You will be asked to complete a consent form to participate.*
- *The interview will be online and should last between 60-90 minutes.*
- *The interview will be audio-recorded. However, everything will be kept confidential, and all identification variables, like names, will be changed in the write up to maintain anonymity.*
- *Before the start of the interview, I will answer any questions you might have. During the interview, we will ask you about your embodied experience of being a female amateur boxer.*

What do I have to do?

During the interview, we will ask question about your experience embodied experience of being a female amateur boxer. It is important for you to be honest and open with us during

the interview. However, it is okay to not respond to a question you don't feel comfortable with.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part in the interview?

Since the questions will be based on your personal experiences, there may be a risk of emotional upset. However, it is okay to not answer questions you don't feel comfortable approaching.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The most significant aspect of taking part in this study is the ability to share your bodily experience as a female amateur boxer, whether negative, positive or both. This could be a helpful reflection for you and a valuable contribution to our study. It is hoped that the information gathered in this study will foster future research and could help how others are supported in the future.

What will happen if the research study stops?

When the study is completed, the information you share will be stored safely and secured with a password in a designated computer. Once the data has been utilised, it will be destroyed completely.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

- *Your information will only be accessible by the researcher*
- *This will be kept confidential and de-identified (your name and other identifying details will be replaced by a code, that is only known by the researcher).*
- *The data will be stored in a designated encrypted computer and secured with a password. The data will be destroyed in 10 years.*

- *The researcher may have to break confidentiality if there is an apparent risk of harm to yourself or others.*

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results acquired from the research study will be used as a part of the current thesis and may be published in a research journal in future. Your data will remain anonymous, and pseudonyms may be used to refer to you in future researches.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

If at any point you feel overwhelmed by the study, you are free to withdraw without an explanation or penalty.

What if there is a problem?

*If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is *A Qualitative Study of the Embodied Experience of Female Amateur Boxers*.*

You can also write to the Secretary at:

Anna Ramberg

Research Integrity Manager

City, University of London, Northampton Square

London, EC1V 0HB

Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City University London Research Ethics Committee, (approval code ETH2021-1892).

Further information and contact details

Contact the supervisor (Dr. Fran Smith) through:

Email: Fran.Smith.1@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking your time to read this information sheet.

Appendix 4: Participant Debrief Sheet

A Qualitative Study of the Embodied Experience of Female Amateur Boxers

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished, we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

The aim of this research is to give female amateur boxers the opportunity to share their lived experiences, focusing specifically on what their body does and how it feels. We hope and believe that the findings of this research will further the understanding of what it is like to be a female amateur boxer and how they experience their bodies in a meaningful way. This would steer further research in this area and could enlighten pathways to psychological wellbeing through understanding bodily experiences (linking mind to body).

If you are experiencing distress, whatever you are going through, please contact your GP or the Samaritans free anytime 116 123.

Crisis and emergency service is available to support people who are experiencing a mental health crisis and who need help quickly. The service can be accessed through your GP and by calling 111. Lines are open 24 hours, 7 days a week.

We hope you found this study interesting. If you have any other questions, please feel free to contact us via:

Researcher: Zaffran Jami – Zaffran.Jami@city.ac.uk

Supervisor: Fran Smith – Fran.Smith.1@city.ac.uk

Ethics approval code: ETH2021-1892

Appendix 5: Resource List

Below is a list of organisations which offer information, support and/or counselling. If feelings come up for you and you are unsure of what support you need, please contact your GP. If your GP surgery is closed, you can call NHS Direct on 111 or if you or anyone else is in immediate risk please call the Police or Ambulance Service on 999.

Information, Advice and Support

MIND – Nationwide mental health charity, offering information and support
www.mind.org.uk

Rethink – Mental health information and support www.rethink.org

TheSite.org – Provides non-judgemental support and information www.thesite.org

Headmeds – Information on mental health medication www.headmeds.org.uk

The Samaritans – Offer confidential emotional support Telephone: 08457 909 909 (7 days a week, 24 hours) www.samaritans.org.uk

SANE – UK-wide charity, providing information and emotional support online and over the phone.

Therapy Directories

NHS Talking Therapies (IAPT) – Talking Therapies offers a range of free and confidential talking therapies and specialist support to help you feel better. Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/>

MIND - Adult mental health - Over 18, workshops/counselling/advocacy Website: www.mind.org.uk



Appendix 6: Recruitment Flyer

Department of *Psychology* City, University of London

Are you currently a Female Amateur Boxer?

Would you be willing to share your experience?

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study about the Embodied Experience of Female Amateur Boxers.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to take part in an online informal interview via Zoom around 60-90 minutes, in which you will have the opportunity to share your experience on what your body does and how it feels as a boxer.

Participants should be at least 18 years of age.

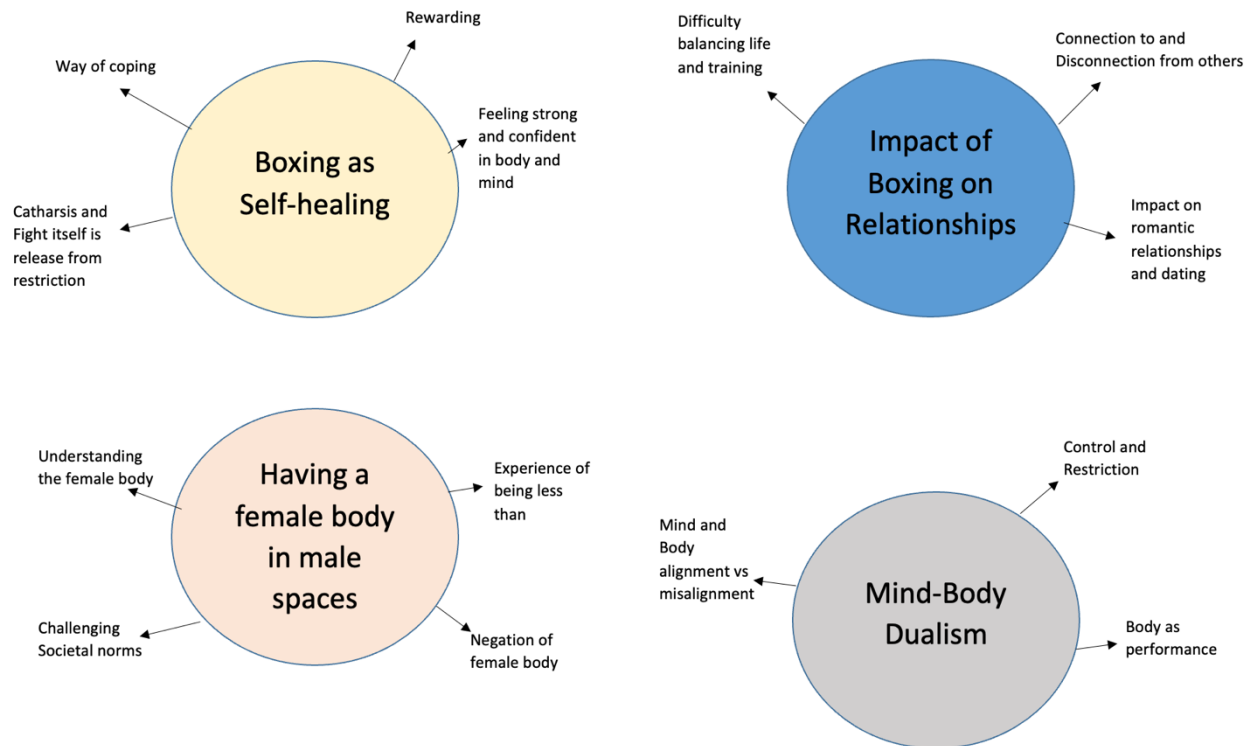
For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Researcher: Zaffran Jami - Zaffran.Jami@city.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance (REC reference no: ETH2021-1892) through the Psychology Low Risk Review Committee, City, University of London. It is being supervised by Dr. Fran Smith, Chartered Counselling Psychologist. (Email: Fran.Smith.1@city.ac.uk).

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk. City, University of London is the data controller for the personal data collected for this research project. If you have any data protection concerns about this research project, please contact City's Information Compliance Team at dataprotection@city.ac.uk

Appendix 7: Diagrammatic representation of superordinate themes and subthemes



Appendix 8: Appearance of themes for each participant

Themes	Participant who display this theme
1. Dualism	
Body as performance	All participants
Control and Restriction	7/8 (all but Melissa)
Mind and Body Working Together vs Body being externalised	All participants
2. Boxing as Self-healing	
Feeling strong and confident	All participants
Way of coping	All participants
Rewarding	7/8 (all but Priya)
Catharsis and fight itself as release from restriction	All participants
3. Having a female body in male spaces	
Negation of female body	7/8 (all but Jessica)
Understanding the female body	6/8 (all but Sarah and Jessica)
Experience of being less than	All participants
Challenging societal norms	All participants
4. Relationships	
All encompassing with difficulty to balance life and training	7/8 (all but Lola)
Connection to and Disconnection from others	All participants
Impact on romantic relationships and dating	7/8 (all but Jessica)

Section C: Journal Article

The Lived Embodied Experience of Female Amateur Boxers: Mind-Body Dualism

6.1 Foreword

I want to submit this article to the Journal of Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health. It has been modified to ensure that it complies with the portfolio requirements even though it was developed with the submission criteria in mind (See Appendix 9).

6.2 Abstract

Research on lived experiences of female amateur boxers have increased over the years, however the literature is still limited. There is limited understanding of how female amateur boxers consciously or unconsciously use and view their bodies. This qualitative study sought to address the gap in the literature by exploring the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from eight female amateur boxers and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the data. Four superordinate themes emerged from the data analysis: 'Mind-Body Dualism', 'Boxing as self-healing', 'Having a female body in male spaces' and 'Impact of Boxing on Relationships'. For the purposes of this article, only the findings about mind-body dualism will be explored. The findings are explored in connection to previous existing research. Clinical implications for counselling psychology and other relevant professionals as well as recommendations for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Female amateur boxers, IPA, Embodiment, Boxing, Wellbeing

6.3 Introduction

In more recent years, there has been significant changes and consideration gone towards encouraging female participation and acceptance in amateur boxing. The most significant perhaps being including women to compete in boxing in the London 2012 Olympics for the first time (Kipnis & Caudwell, 2015). Since then, female participation in amateur boxing in the UK has risen significantly and likely to increase further in the coming years (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020). Despite this significant increase among women participating in so-called "male sports", there is still relatively little psychological research exploring women's involvement and experiences in amateur boxing (Oftadeh-Moghadam et al., 2020).

Some research has revealed some of the challenges and disadvantages that women in boxing face. For instance, studies have shown how women in boxing frequently face prejudice, marginalisation, and exclusion in their sport (e.g., Lee, 2009; McCree, 2015). Tjørndal (2019) found that there are still struggles for female amateur boxers to be taken seriously as athletes. Similarly, Nash (2017) describes difficulties of hypermasculinity in boxing clubs (Crocket, 2012) where she felt that she needed to prove her masculinity as well as express some sort of femininity (e.g. continuing to wear feminine clothing) in order to be also seen as a woman. To support this, Channon and Phipps (2017) discovered that female boxers purposely enact femininity in order to prove that they can be both a 'real woman' and a 'real boxer' at the same time. In a recent qualitative study, Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) found female amateur boxers experienced sexist and stereotypical comments, lack of support from the governing body, resistance within families due to traditional and cultural view and an unhealthy relationship with food. This is persistent with previous studies who have stated that the female athlete triad (FAT)

is a set of unique medical problems that female athletes face, and it consists of low energy availability, menstrual cycle disturbances and low bone mineral density (Márquez & Molinero, 2013; Nazem & Ackerman, 2012). While studies have attempted to gain a better understanding of the way female amateur boxers experience and interact within a male dominated sport, how female amateur boxers actually experience and view their bodies has received very little attention from researchers.

Todres et al. (2007) draws on Merleau-Ponty (1962) to define embodiment as the experience of the body as a vital part of ourself, rather than a separate object, working as a medium to experiencing and interacting with the world. There has been growing research on the embodiment of adult in relation to sports, including bodily experiences (Piran & Neumark-Sztainer, 2020), gender roles (Shakib, 2003; Watts, 2011), and body image and well-being (e.g., Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). De Beauvoir (1974) argues that women experience their bodies as a burden and a fear and discomfort towards the hormonal and physiological changes that their bodies endure during puberty, menstruation and pregnancy. Additional scholars have agreed with this by noticing women being self-consciousness about their bodies (Allison, 1991; Yovosky & Sayer, 2013) and women viewing a clash between femininity and physical strength (McCaughey, 1998). Coakley (2017) argues that modern sport is still dominated by men, identified with men, and centred on men. Even research on embodiment and sport has been heavily populated about men (Channon & Jennings, 2014) which indicates limited research on understanding the embodied lives of female athletes, specifically female amateur boxers.

According to research, involvement in athletics, particularly in primarily male-dominated activities, can empower women by facilitating improved sense of self, assertiveness, and body confidence (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1993; McGinnis et al., 2003). Furthermore, full-contact sports like hockey and tackle football can be particularly empowering for women since they provide them with a distinct level of physicality (Theberge, 2003). Martial arts training has been shown to boost women's self-confidence in their physical abilities, lessen their fear of being victimised, and allow them to confront stereotypes about women's fragility and vulnerability to violence (Paul, 2015). Physical aggression (i.e., hitting and being struck) can contribute to feelings of release of daily pressures and a sense of bodily power (Paul, 2015). This body of research suggests that there is a strong link between full-contact sports and women's empowerment. Women's empowerment through athletics is often an embodied process, according to researchers, because women experience the world through and from within their bodies (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2014).

There has been an increase in researcher's examining the embodied experiences of female boxing. Particularly, a preponderant number of ethnographies have dominated this field where researchers investigate the boxing world utilising their own bodies as data collection tools (Carlsson, 2017; Nash, 2017; Owton, 2015; Paradis, 2012). Previous ethnographies have mainly explored female boxers' experiences of gender construction (Carlsson, 2017) and hypermasculinity (Nash, 2017) within feminist and social justice perspectives. To the current knowledge, papers have not focused on how the body itself is viewed and self-perceptions on

how the body moves and interacts with the world, especially within psychological research.

Psychological research has been remarkably limited in their discussions of the body, considering their interest of the ways humans think, behave and interact (Theberge, 1991). In a substantial review of the body in culture and sport, Loy, Andrews & Rinehart (1993) advocated to “bring the body back” to research. Likewise, DePauw (1997) noted that “traditionally our study has not focused on the body as whole, the body in a social context, or the body in connection with self” (p. 419). As a response, this study aims to add to embodiment research to further understand the lived embodied experience of female amateur boxers. Exploring embodiment can help us better understand how female amateur boxers experience their bodies in various ways. Bodily experiences may open up new pathways to wellbeing if efforts are made to reorient attention on what the body does and how it feels as opposed to how it looks (Shiffmann, 1996).

6.4 Method

Ethical approval was obtained from the City University Ethics Committee and the names of participants referred to in this paper are pseudonyms.

6.4.1 Participants

This study recruited 8 Participants from local Amateur Boxing clubs in the UK. Head coaches from local amateur boxing clubs in England were contacted via email with an attachment of a recruitment flyer. All England boxing clubs have head coaches

contact details on their website. The recruitment flyer was circulated and was also displayed in the boxing clubs. Participants who had identified themselves as female amateur boxers who were interested in taking part had volunteered by getting in touch through the contact details on recruitment flyer.

This research describes the experiences of eight female amateur boxers aged between 18 and 40, who have had over 2 years of competing in amateur boxing. The participants were all female and living in the UK. Seven participants first language was English while one participants' first language was Polish. The table below outlines the demographic information (collected during the telephone screening) that was given to me by the participants to contextualise them. All names and other personally identifying information have been modified or omitted, and participants have been given pseudonyms, in order to maintain anonymity. It is also important to note that given the female amateur boxing scene in the UK is still relatively small, I will maintain anonymity by providing some of the information within a range or category.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Competing	Number of bouts	Occupation	Family Status
Sarah	Early 30s	White British	4 years	15	Academics	Living with partner (also boxer)
Priya	Early 30s	Asian British	9 years	13	Healthcare	Living alone

Melissa	Early 30s	White American	10 years	70-80	PhD Student	Living with a friend
Amanda	19	White British	4 years	8	Student	Living with family
Sabrina	Mid 20s	White Canadian	2 years	2	Community Development Coordinator	Living with partner (also boxer)
Lola	Late 20s	White British	5 years	2	Manager	Living with partner
Jessica	Early 40s	White Polish	2 years	2	Office role	Living with her two children
Rebecca	19	White British	3 years	3	Student	Living with family

6.4.2 Procedure

This research is situated within the ethical framework of The British Psychology Society, Health Care Professions Council and the City university ethical guidance. This is aimed at lessening the psychological distress that might be associated with the study as well as reducing the exposure of participants to any further risk as evident in everyday life.

Nine individuals expressed an interest in participating in the study. I sent a pre-written email in response to each possible participant, taking advantage of the chance to evaluate each one's eligibility for the study and to confirm their location in the country. In order to further determine each respondent's eligibility and preparedness to participate in the study, a screening telephone call was set up with those who were still interested in taking part.

Initially I went through the screening questions to check if the participant was eligible, discussed consent with each participant and gave participants an information sheet. However, in the event of people being unable to read it then I could go over details on the phone too. Participants were given 24 hours at a minimum to consider their participation once they had all the information. All participants signed a well-written and informed consent after a brief on the nature of the research to ensure the participation is without coercion (Jackson, 2018). Participants were also be given some time before the interview to address any issues or questions. In addition, before the study, participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and conducted via secured online platform (Zoom). With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded. The most popular form of data collecting for IPA research are semi-structured interviews because they are adaptable and individually focused instruments that enable a conversation inviting thoughts, feelings and stories from participants (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2001). Dearnley (2005) discovered that the questions' openness generated depth and vigour, which aided in the emergence of new concepts. By helping to gather rich data for analysis, this can improve the validity of the study. Therefore, it was determined that semi-structured interviews were a good technique to access the lived experiences of the female amateur boxers in this study. Following the interview, 15 minutes was allocated for participants to be debriefed where a debrief form was also given to all participants.

An interview schedule was created to help direct and facilitate the interview process, but it was not adhered too rigidly, so I was allowed to respect the participants' narrative and follow the way their stories naturally developed (Eatough & Smith, 2008). In order to enable participants to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the main questions were purposefully left neutral and open-ended. Prompts were then utilised to elicit more specific and in-depth responses. The duration of each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

6.5 Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen for this study because there is a large emphasis placed on constructing a detailed picture of how individuals see and make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, 2017). IPA is deep-rooted in

phenomenology, which explores how people experience and learn about the world around them (Willig, 2001). This commitment to phenomenology aims to provide an opportunity for the participants stories to be told while interpretation allows the researcher to “make sense” of these experiences and for this interpretation to be made explicit (Larkin et al., 2006). Therefore, IPA is most suited to the research aims of this project by looking to build a detailed exploration of how female amateur boxers experience their world and their bodies.

One advantage of utilising IPA as an analysis tool is that Smith et al. (2009) have clearly outlined six steps for the analysis process. The first step involved reading and re-reading the transcripts. This also allowed me to note down any reflections and observations of the data in my research diary as recommended by Willig (2001). The second stage of analysis involved making detailed comments in the right hand column of the text. These exploratory comments were separated into three distinct types that are descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. The third step of the analysis was to use these initial exploratory comments to start capturing emergent themes. The emergent themes were typed in the left-hand column of the text and was often written as a brief statement or phrase. The fourth step of the analysis was to list these themes chronologically separately in a spreadsheet with the aim of finding connections between them. The spreadsheet was printed out, cut out and placed onto a large table where I started to observe the themes together and think about how they may link. This then led to a creation of a summary table in a spreadsheet containing the superordinate themes and subthemes. The fifth step of the analysis involved repeating the steps one to four (as shown above) for each participant’s transcript. The sixth step of the analysis involved integrating the data by looking for

connections across cases in order to create a master list of themes that mirrored the overall experience of the participants.

6.6 Results

This superordinate theme, 'Mind-Body Dualism', explores the embodied lived experiences of female amateur boxers, looking closely at the relationship between body and mind. This insight explores the participants' mind-body dualism where two entities are experienced at times in conflict and separated but other times as complementary and together as one. In the first subtheme, 'Body as performance', participants spoke about maintaining their body to perform at an optimal level and reflect on how their lives are impacted by this. In the second subtheme, 'Control and restriction', participants describe their turbulent relationship around restricting, controlling their weight and overtraining. In the final subtheme, 'Mind and Body Alignment vs Misalignment', participants describe the relationship between body and mind through having 'out of body experiences', being reactive to their opponent and difficulties when there is physical exhaustion in both training and during their bouts.

6.6.1 Subtheme theme 1: Body as performance

All eight participants described how they view their body as a tool that needs to be well taken care of in order to perform well in boxing. Jessica highlights this by suggesting that the whole body needs to be worked on:

“You know, it's not just punching a bag. It's fitness, it's eating, you know, parts and you know, so you work on your whole body.” (Jessica: 63-65)

Her description of boxing as not “just punching a bag” suggests a larger commitment to thinking about fitness in relation to eating and to other aspects of life that involve the “whole body”. Jessica’s use of words such as “parts” and “work” implies an emotive distance from the body, perhaps indicating how she perceives the body as a machine or tool to perform in a certain way. However, Lola may have experienced how others perceive the body similarly during a bout:

“They put your mouthguard, then they put the Vaseline on—and what have you—and your headguard on. And you kind of pampered a little bit. They make you feel quite special. And then, and then, they kind of just shove you in the ring and then go there you go [laughs]. And then you come back for like thirty seconds and they are pampering you again.” (Lola: 611-615)

Lola reveals how others “pamper” her for a bout, suggesting that there is a feeling of indulgence, with the attention being paid and comfort implied, while they are preparing her to fight well in the ring. This can be interpreted that the body is viewed by others as a sort of tool to support and enhance in order to perform at the best of its abilities. In the extract below, Sabrina’s observation of developing a “precious feeling” towards her body caused her to want her body to consistently be at an “optimal level” for performance:

“I started having this...like kind of like precious feeling about my body, where I was like, because I knew, like, the optimal feeling in my body of like when I’m treating myself the most optimally for performance, anything below that felt

like...like I felt kind of almost like...not scared...but like uncomfortable with the idea of being at anything less than that.” (Sabrina: 456-460)

This extract suggests that when amateur boxers view and train their bodies only for performance, there may be a pressure or fixation on making sure that their body is always performing at its best. Sarah echoes this and reflects on the extent to which boxing influences how much she takes care of herself:

“...maybe makes me feel a little bit like my ability to look after myself is very tied to boxing, so, like when I'm competing, I have training on and stuff I want to eat well and not drink and get enough sleep and like emotionally stable for boxing. But I think what I found about lockdown, like without boxing and stuff on. I felt a bit like oh it doesn't matter then.” (Sarah: 400-404)

Sarah describes not only taking care of her body physically through diet and “sleep” but also in a way to ensure her body is “emotionally stable for boxing”. This indicates that both the mind and body need to be actively cared for, suggesting a clear sense that both need to be “looked after” in order to be able to perform. Sarah later appears to be struck by the realisation that, during “lockdown”, that taking care of both her body and her mind “[didn't] matter” were it not for boxing. This suggests that, for her, the body and mind are seen purely as instruments for boxing, and, without boxing, difficulties may arise when navigate through this.

This view is shared with Rebecca, who highlights how it can be unsettling when not knowing how much training is enough:

“Normally, I think it's, I think guilt has a lot to do with. Like guilt of not, not training enough or training too much. I feel bad. I'm like, oh, I shouldn't have done that because I'm going to burn out.” (Rebecca: 476-479)

Rebecca emphasises the feelings of “guilt” associated with balancing “training enough or training too much”, which could be linked to not feeling good enough. Amanda also expressed difficulties when she feels that training is not going well, expressing anxiety around underperforming in boxing:

Priya describes her difficult relationship with injuries and portrays injuries as a big inconvenience:

“...So that's like annoying [talking about injuries] because then it feels like that's kind of impacting you to train. But obviously you need to take like a few weeks of training off to, like, fully recover. But you just know you can't do that. Like, you physically can't do that. [...] [L]ike I couldn't, I couldn't afford to take that much rest off, I feel like I would be set back, like I would be. It would be too detrimental on myself.” (Priya: 323-333)

Priya describes injuries as “annoying”; she sees them as negatively affecting her training. It could be interpreted that an injured body is perceived as an inconvenience, and that injuries are to be ignored, rather than taking a “few weeks” to “fully recover”. Her broken speech appears to reflect the way she was making meaning of, while being conflict with, the prospect of taking time to recover from

injuries. Priya's description of possibly taking time off from injuries can be interpreted as anxiety and fear, that it will be so harmful to her ability to box that she will not be able to recover from it. Contrastingly, Melissa talks about injuries in terms of 'acceptance', as something that is a fundamental part of being an amateur boxer:

“Ummm the nose. I just lived with it because I am not done competing yet, and I might need surgery when I stop, but it seems pointless to do it now in case it happens again, because it might.” (Melissa: 42-44)

Interestingly, Melissa talks about surgery being “pointless” now as it “might” get injured again, which suggests that she views her body as an instrument that has to go through pain and imbalance to compete competitively in boxing.

3.3.2 Subtheme theme 2: Control and restriction

Seven participants spoke about their experiences of restricting and controlling their bodies for boxing, with Sarah implies the sense that the body gaining weight is tantamount to failure:

“When I think you put a pressure on yourself to be a certain weight for fighting, any weight that is higher than that you feel you're failing.” (Sarah: 763-765)

Lola echoes this feeling, expressing her constant anxiety of gaining weight, so much so that she would restrict her body and exercise even when sick:

“I had, like, a sickness bug a while back. And I worked out. I actually only had one rest day, and it lasted a few days because I would drag myself downstairs and I'd be like, oh, I can do weights sat down [laughs]. I was doing these weights because I was so desperate to think, you know, ‘if I miss a day, then it's all going to just pile on’. And it's just, like, a constant panic.” (Lola: 351-362)

Lola speaks about over-exercising and not being able to listen to her body to rest and recover. This is driven by her “desperation” to not gain any weight. It could be interpreted that Lola has a certain distrust towards her body as it risks failing her and, therefore, needs to be externalised, restricted and controlled. Lola goes on to talk about how this has impacted her mental health:

“It's so tiring, but I don't know what else I can do. And yeah. So that gets me down sometimes, because sometimes I just want to blow it all off and be, like, I just want to eat what I want. I want to be able to do a work out, come home and eat a chocolate bar. That's all I want to do. And it's, just, it's tiring.” (Lola: 342-347)

Lola's repetition of it being “tiring” emphasises this constant battle with her weight, and when she claims that she “[doesn't] know what else” she can do, there is an a sense of powerlessness in her words. She expresses with a sense of sadness and frustration a longing to be free of the restriction to be able to eat whatever she wants.

Sabrina shared her history of suffering from an eating disorder, describing how being in a weight orientated sport makes sense to her:

“...is a different mentality to dieting for me, like, I feel, like, because it...there's the goal of performance and, like, there's a goal that's external to the way I look. It's easier mentally for and, like, especially with, like, a history of eating disorder, it's hard to justify doing that. But I think because it's got, like, that external goal: it felt okay.” (Sabrina: 124-129)

Sabrina highlights how the intense training and strict can diet provide a different meaning when associated with boxing. She expresses that this restriction and control over her body is easier for her “mentally” because the motivation behind it is different; instead there is a “goal of performance” that is “external” to physical appearance. Perhaps finding it difficult to disentangle between disordered eating motivation versus boxing motivation.

There appears to be a pressure on boxers to regain their fighting weight through restricted diet and overtraining. This is evidenced by four participants who all talk about losing their period. Rebecca reflects on training and dieting as being too “restrictive”, explaining how her menstrual cycle was interrupted when she was overtraining and restricting her food intake:

“I was being very restrictive with, like, calories and stuff, like, started counting calories, etc. And I was also upping my training massively because I'd just

started a new sport... So I actually ended up losing my period for I think it was over a year.” (Rebecca: 109-112)

Rebecca’s description gives a strong sense of how easily it may be for amateur boxers to be overly restrictive and controlling of their bodies to the point where the female body is physically affected.

It is worth noting a peculiarity of this study’s timing. As mentioned earlier, the interviews took place during a pandemic. Six participants in this study commented about taking a break from the restrictions and controls they placed on their bodies during lockdown. Priya shares her experience highlighting this enjoyment:

“...I’ve enjoyed it, like being able to eat whatever I want and not care about my weight or well, initially, and to, like, you know, have late nights, go out and all, that kind of things. So now, now I’m, like, enjoying not having the discipline. But, like, I guess physically, I’m missing it because I liked that and I like the effect it had on me, so I’m just feeling really, really conflicted. (Priya: 1145-1150)”

Because boxing gyms being closed during lockdown, Priya explains how she enjoyed being able to “eat whatever” and “not care” about weight, even being able to have “late nights”. This implies that she felt a new sense of freedom when she was able to indulge more, rather than being consistently restricted and “having the discipline”. However, she continues to talk about missing this discipline from boxing and how she feels “conflicted”.

3.3.3 Subtheme theme 3: Mind and Body Alignment vs Misalignment

Participants described the relationship between body and mind through their out-of-body experiences. Indeed, all eight participants spoke about having an out-of-body experience during the actual fight, demonstrated in this extract from Rebecca below:

“...[I]t’s like an out of body experience. You completely lose, I completely lose any thought process. It’s like that’s the odd moment where I’m able to consciously think about what I’m doing. But you get out the ring afterwards and I could be, I can’t, I can’t even remember that. That was a complete blur because adrenaline just completely takes over.” (Rebecca: 715-719)

Rebecca reports an intense experience in which she loses all “thought process”, despite limited moments during which she is able to “consciously think”. This suggests an absence of cognitive involvement but instead suggests a more reactive and unconscious process. This gives the sense of the mind and body coming together and focusing on the opponent in front of them. When Rebecca describes the “adrenaline just completely [taking] over”, she refers to a primal state where the fight-or-flight response is activated for survival. Priya shares more about how she experiences emotion in the ring:

“Like the nerves go, the excitement goes. So like I’m just totally calm and just, like, ready, erm, and, like, yeah, I guess I’m just really focused. I want to, I want to do good, I want to get the win...” (Priya: 950-956)

Priya talks further about how anxiety and excitement are replaced with a feeling of being “calm” and “ready” as soon as the bell goes in the ring. This evokes an image of an animal prowling, about to spring on it’s prey. Priya seemed to experience the process of controlling and regulating her emotions in order to perform well. Melissa echoes this and shares her experience of her emotional state straight after a fight:

“It can be overwhelming. [...] because you’re fighting through the fatigue for so long and it’s such a physically, mentally taxing affair that, when it stops, you just sometimes lose it.” (Melissa: 801-809)

Melissa describes how “overwhelming” it can be in the ring during a fight, how this is due to trying to fight the physical exhaustion. She gives us an insight into how incredibly “taxing”, physically and mentally, fighting is, describing how she fights “through the fatigue” for so long. This suggests how a strong level of control and perseverance is required to push through physically and mentally, which is followed by a huge sense of relief “when it stops”. Melissa’s use of the phrase “lose it” illustrates a transition from being in control to being out of control.

It appears that there is a strong relationship between the body and mind in boxing, but six participants describe when this relationship changes and the body is externalised instead. The extract below from Sarah highlights how she experiences a “disconnect” between body and mind when she is tired:

“I am thinking oh I am really tired and I need to be moving more. But I can’t because I am tired. And that’s kind of that’s frustrating and interesting to

experience that disconnect between what you want your body to be doing and what you're actually doing. And you're, like, 'no, I want to move forward now', but your legs are like 'nah, you're not going anywhere' [laughs]." (Sarah: 268-272)

Sarah shares her "frustration" about a split between what the mind wants her "body to be doing" and what the body is "actually doing". Her use of the word "disconnect" stresses the conflict and separation she experiences between her mind and her body. Jessica echoes this and describes her experience of her mind overriding her body when tired:

"I was tired, but my brain told my body, you know, 'go for it!', you know, so there is like kind of emergency energy, you know, somewhere, always, and when you get hit, does that make you feel you want to hit back?" (Jessica: 573-576)

As with Sarah, Jessica shares a dialogue between her "brain" and her body in which she encourages her body to "go for it". Jessica's mind appears to be overriding to control the body to enable her to continue pushing through the fatigue. She seemingly goes on to entice her body, asking "does that make you feel you want to hit back?" This is maybe an attempt to convince her body to continue fighting, by invoking this "emergency energy".

6.7 Discussion

Participants shared their experiences of mind-body dualism, in which the two entities are sometimes perceived as competing and apart from one another and other times as complimentary and joined as one. Participants describe externalising their bodies as an instrument for boxing. Consistent with the literature, many female athletes expressed experiencing their bodies as instruments of physical power and aggression (Paul et al., 2015; Kane & Snyder, 1989). Participants spoke about needing to look after their bodies through diet, sleep and social life. This is similar to Paradis (2012) findings, she notes the way boxers make sense of and take care of their bodies, and describes the body of a boxer as a learning tool, instrument, weapon, and, most importantly, something they invest in.

Furthermore, participants gave us an understanding of the difficulties that come with viewing the body as purely an instrument for performance. Rebecca spoke about feeling “guilty” for either not training enough or overtraining. Bar & Markser’s (2013) paper argue that athletes face a fundamental dilemma between knowing when exercise is supportive of their mental and physical health versus when it can become harmful and, in some instances, addictive. Bar & Markser (2013) note that exercise addiction/dependency can lead to feelings of guilt, discomfort and anxiety.

Additionally, participants shared having a difficult relationship with injuries.

Richardson and colleague’s (2008) present The Overtraining Risks and Outcome Model to explain the causation of overuse injuries and overtraining. This model's central idea is divided into four levels that are hierarchically organised and explain how stress, recovery, and overtraining in athletes are related. The model attempts to answer the following issue: What occurred “in an athlete's past that led to the development of overtraining behaviors, and what is going on in the present to drive

or maintain such behaviors” (pp. 170). When working with athletes who experience these challenges, psychologists and other healthcare professionals may find this framework to be helpful in aiding formulation and providing support.

The subtheme “control and restriction” captured how participants engaged in restricting and controlling their bodies for boxing. Participants build on this by expressing that demands of training and pressure to be a certain weight led to the development of disordered eating behaviours. This supports Oftadeh-Moghadam et al. (2020) study findings that female amateur boxers developed an unhealthy relationship with food and adopted unhealthy weight maintenance strategies, such as starvation and dieting. This also supports the wider current literature of female athletes being at higher risk of eating disorders (Smolak et al., 2000). Coelho et al. (2014) found that psychological factors include attachment, body image dissatisfaction, depression, stress, perfectionism, low self-esteem, and sociocultural factors include influence of the media to conform to an unrealistic standard of thinness and bullying. This is supported by Greenleaf et al. (2009), arguing that female athletes “not only face the typical social pressures to be thin, which all women in Western culture are exposed to, but they are also immersed in a social context that focuses on their bodies’ appearance and performance” (p. 489).

Disordered eating is also commonly known as part of the “female athlete triad” (FAT), as well as amenorrhea and bone demineralization (Stand, 2007). The morbidity of each condition varies, but the combined effects of the three can be detrimental for long-term health. Thomas et al. (2021) found that 38% of female combat sport athletes were likely to be in risk of developing FAT due to commonly

engaging in rapid weight reduction strategies. FAT is a recurring theme in the current findings with 4 participants stating how boxing linked to their absence of menstruation (amenorrhea). In support of this, Ko et al. (2017) stated that there was a severe lack of available specialist help, such as psychologist, nurse and nutritionist, even though extreme weight loss and intense exercise have found to make an impact on the physiology and irregularity of female reproduction. Overall, the results show that, despite the positive feelings that female amateur boxers express about how boxing motivates them to take care of their bodies and minds for performance, there are still many difficulties that they encounter in terms of overtraining, difficulty handling injuries, and risks of developing FAT. These challenges may have an impact on the mental and physical health of female amateur boxers. This information would be helpful for psychologists, as well as other professionals and policy makers involved in understanding and improving the wellbeing of female amateur boxers.

The subtheme “mind and body alignment vs misalignment” provides a unique insight into the relationship between body and mind during boxing. Participants described how, at times, the mind and body feel aligned, while at other times they can feel disconnected. All of the participants spoke about having experiences of their mind and body integrating during their bouts. This is consistent with the concept of a specific type of mind-body integration state observed in athletes called “flow” (Menzel & Levine, 2011). Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) describe this as a phenomenological embodied state whereby the mind and body are working in unison (merging in action and awareness) to experience the world together. This merge results in experiencing a loss of time, loss of self-perception and a transcendent form

of bodily awareness (Hopkinson, 2015). The findings also support Menzel & Levine's (2007) Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image, the model claims that embodying activities lead to individuals being in a "flow" state which promotes mind-body integration, boost body awareness and response, and generate a sense of physical empowerment and competence (Menzel & Levine, 2011).

In contrast, participants describe experiences of when the body and mind become misaligned. Participants describe that when their body is physiologically worn out, the body becomes externalised as a separate entity with the mind wanting to take control by overriding the body. This can be seen through the mind having a dialogue with the body. Velija et al. (2013) reported this as indication of empowerment rising beyond physical power. On the whole, the findings suggest that boxing not only promotes mind-body integration but also seems to have advantages in emotional regulation and producing a sense of physical empowerment and competence. This exploration of bodily experiences can be useful for counselling psychologists by helping clients understand the potential effects that boxing may have on their daily interactions.

6.8 Implications for Practice

This study sheds some light on the lived embodied experiences of female amateur boxers. It is hoped that the current study findings will enrich the work of counselling psychologists, as well as other professionals and policy makers involved in understanding and improving the wellbeing of female amateur boxers, by broadening their understandings and being better equipped.

An important outcome of this research is that it allowed the opportunity to illuminate the difficulties that female amateur boxers may face. In particular, the female amateur boxers interviewed experienced disordered eating behaviours (e.g participants reported overtraining, restricting food and anxiety regards to gaining weight) and the “female athlete triad” (Nazem & Ackerman, 2012). Although this qualitative research does not allow us to generalise to the entire UK population, we can draw conclusions about the importance for practitioner counselling psychologists working with this community to consider issues of disordered eating behaviours and the “female athlete triad” in therapeutic formulation.

One suggestion made by participants from this research is the need for additional spaces where women can discuss their experiences in an environment of mutual support. Participants expressed a lack of understanding and knowledge of female specific boxing matters from male coaches, including the influence of training on the menstrual cycle, weight management techniques, female athlete triad and physiological differences between female and male boxers. Female amateur boxers may be encouraged to talk about female boxing related difficulties more openly and the impact it has on their sense of self, by normalising a space for them to talk about their various experiences.

6.9 Ideas for Future Research

There is a clear lack of research in this area that explores the lived experiences of female amateur boxers and therefore calls for further research in this area.

Interviewed female amateurs faced disordered eating behaviours and experienced the 'female athlete triad'. It would be important to explore this further to give us a fuller picture of the impact of boxing on these difficulties. Additionally, this study has only focused on the experiences and views of female amateur boxers. Future research would benefit from looking at multiples' views from those close to female amateur boxers, such as coach, partner and parents. This would assist in triangulating the findings gained from this study and offer important insight into useful ways to best support female amateur boxers. Although this study was open to females of any ethnical background, mostly Caucasian females participated in this research. It would be valuable for future research to replicate this study with participants from different ethnic backgrounds to explore their embodied experience of amateur boxing and to see if any cultural differences were to emerge.

6.10 Conclusion

This present study has set out to develop our understanding of the embodiment experience of female amateur boxers in the UK. The study offered in-depth insight into how boxing influenced female amateur boxers' self-perceptions, including the ways in which their body exist in and interacts with the world. I hope the findings will enhance the knowledge of counselling psychologists and other experts involved in understanding and enhancing the wellbeing of female amateur boxers. I hope I have done the participants justice by making sure that their voices were heard throughout the research process. Lastly, I hope this study will inspire others to continue to pursue research in this area.

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