

**Phenomenological Study of Lived Experiences of Leaders in a Women's Fitness Program**

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### **Abstract**

The problem was women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men. Women are identified as leaders less often than men due to gender biases in society. The gap which exists in the literature is an exploration of how leadership development combined with physical fitness could address self-efficacy and leadership skills among women. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to identify the perceptions of participants in a women-focused, fitness-based, leadership development program. Understanding the impact of such a program on leadership skills and self-efficacy, which women could apply in professional and personal lives, was the goal of the study. Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Cognitive Theory were used to investigate how transformational leadership helped women learn leadership skills and self-efficacy from other women. The research questions guided the exploration of participants' lived experiences, changed leadership capabilities and self-efficacy, and leadership impacts outside the program. Sixteen adult program participants located in the United States volunteered to participate in the study. Data collection was triangulated using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. Data analysis was conducted by coding and analysis of questionnaires and transcripts to identify common themes. Study results revealed the program participants gained or improved leadership skills and self-efficacy, which participants leveraged in personal and professional environments outside the organization. Other organizations could adopt similar leadership development programs to benefit women who seek leadership positions.

*Keywords:* leadership, gender gap, women's leadership development, women's self-efficacy, leadership self-efficacy, physical fitness, youth sports development

**Dedication**

To my wife Nancy, who supported this and all of my sometimes-quixotic adventures

To my late mother, who instilled a love of learning which I carry with me to this day

To my father, who through his hard work ensured we always had food on the table

And to my departed grandmother Thelma, who, for as far back as I remember, set the  
expectation that I would be the first in the family to go to college.

### **Acknowledgments**

A completed dissertation features the name of a single individual but is the result of a team effort. While this dissertation represents my original research and composition, I would like to thank those who contributed to its completion.

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Some individuals cannot be mentioned by name, but I want them all to know how much their contributions are appreciated. These include the five leadership experts who assisted by validating my research instruments. Also included are the leaders of the non-profit organization at the heart of this study who allowed my research. I also want to recognize the 16 individuals who agreed to participate in this study. Every conversation with these women was enjoyable, often fun, and always educational and insightful. My thanks to each of you for providing a couple of hours of your valuable time to help me achieve this life goal.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Women in the United States have made tremendous progress in gender equality in the 20th and 21st centuries. At the dawn of the 1900s, American women did not have the right to vote in elections (McKeown, 2020). By 2020, women had achieved much parity with men, due to the work of attorney and later Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg among others (Joslin, 2018; Lapidus, 2019). While women are equal to men in theory and in law, in practice such equity falls short. Men are more likely to fill corporate management leadership positions in the United States business world (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Lack of access to such financially lucrative roles has a detrimental effect on the earning potential of women (Wodon & de la Brière, 2018).

Women might not have access to such roles due to an absence of leadership capabilities resulting from a lack of training or opportunities (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; McGowan & Stokes, 2019). Alternately, women who have leadership potential might not have a sense of empowerment to demonstrate leadership skills (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Sheppard, 2018). The phenomenological study intended to determine the impact of a specific type of women's leadership development program to improve women's leadership skills and self-efficacy.

The leadership development program of interest is offered by a global women-focused, fitness-based organization. The organization uses physical activity to bring women together for empowerment and education while seeking equality for women around the world. The organization offers the leadership development program to women who then take leadership roles in local chapters of the organization. Completion of the study provides insight into the impact of such a program on women's leadership skills and ability to apply leadership skills.

Effective programs could be implemented more broadly, leading to increased opportunities for women to undertake leadership roles in the workforce.

The introduction to the study provides a Background of the Problem which explains the study's context. The Statement of the Problem provides a summary of current issues in the leadership development gender gap as revealed in the literature review. The Purpose of the Study explains the need for the research to be completed while the Significance of the Study explains how the findings of the research could benefit individuals and society. Guiding the study were the three Research Questions documented in the relevant section. The Theoretical Framework documents how the study was grounded and the dissertation structured. Important concepts are listed in the Definitions of Terms section while critical assumptions for the study are listed in the Assumptions section. The Scope and Delimitations section covers the boundaries of the research and in what manner the results could be transferable to other contexts. The trustworthiness of study results is addressed in the Limitations section. The final Chapter Summary recaps Chapter 1 and previews the concepts addressed in Chapter 2.

### **Background of the Problem**

The background of the problem was women are not identified as leaders as often as men are due to gender-based biases in society (Badura et al., 2018) even though women score higher than men in desirable leadership skills (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). The importance of the problem was (1) women might be seen as less capable than men when with proper development women could be just as capable as men who received leadership training; and (2) failing to empower and provide women with leadership opportunities leaves untapped a large potential source of skilled labor which could serve as a capable, positive force in society.

The extent of the problem was evident in the corporate world, where men are 50% more likely to be offered a leadership position (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Individuals impacted by the problem are (1) women who lack leadership capabilities due to a lack of training or opportunities; and (2) women who might have leadership potential but do not have a sense of empowerment to exercise any leadership skills or pursue leadership opportunities. The literature highlights participation in sports brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy (Fuller et al., 2018) yet girls and young women do not have the same opportunity to participate in sports (Pantzer et al., 2018). The gap in the literature is a lack of information exists regarding the efficacy of women-focused programs designed to empower women by improving fitness and athletic capabilities while building leadership skills among participants.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem was women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world (Graham et al., 2017) as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men (Pantzer et al., 2018). The study investigated whether a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program could improve women's leadership skills and self-efficacy. Women who gain skills and self-efficacy would be more likely to seek out management leadership roles (Ali et al., 2018; Murphy & Johnson, 2016). Participants in the study were selected from among women who participated in the leadership development program. While participants in the program come from around the world, individuals who participated in the program and reside in the United States were the target population for the study.

Substantial research has been completed regarding the gender leadership gap. Recent literature in the fields of gender and leadership suggested women are less likely than men to



obtain leadership positions (Badura et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Tinsley & Ely, 2018).

Women who fill leadership positions have the skills to execute those roles and are more likely to demonstrate desirable transformational leadership skills than men (Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Addressing the gender leadership gap is important, as the gap affects women's earning potential (Wodon & de la Brière, 2018).

While much has been researched regarding the gender leadership gap, a lack of information exists regarding the efficacy of women-focused fitness-based leadership development programs which might address the gap. The literature does not identify or evaluate any such programs. Completion of the study filled a gap and provided information about the efficacy of this leadership development program. Knowledge gained from the study could be used to improve women's leadership development programs in other contexts.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to interview a minimum of 15 volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program to find the commonalities in lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply such skills professionally. The study was necessary because a literature review did not uncover any studies which explored the efficacy of such programs. In particular, no studies were identified which investigated if such programs are useful in developing leadership skills which could be applied broadly or in developing women's self-confidence in applying such skills. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group were used to explore the participants' lived experiences regarding the program, leadership skills, and leadership self-efficacy. The target population for the study was women who participated in

leadership development activities for a global women-focused, fitness-based, non-profit organization. Participants were geographically dispersed throughout the United States.

The study contributed to the knowledgebase by providing insight into the impact of women-focused, fitness-based programs in developing women's leadership capabilities and empowerment to apply those capabilities. An effective women's leadership development program could be expanded to other organizations. An ineffective program could be revised, replaced, or discontinued. Information gained from the study could be used in future quantitative studies to determine the measurable impact of such programs on leadership capabilities, self-esteem, and sense of empowerment. The research report is to be shared openly via ProQuest and LinkedIn.

### **Significance of the Study**

The gender gap of leadership skills and self-efficacy has been documented extensively in the literature (Edwards, 2019; Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017; Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Somerset & Hoare, 2018; Van Der Roest et al., 2017). The significance of the study was documenting the impact of women-focused programs designed to empower women by improving fitness and athletic capabilities while building leadership skills and self-efficacy among participants. While studies have documented the impact of leadership development through youth sports (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Kniffin et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Pantzer et al., 2018), a literature review did not reveal whether a similar fitness-related approach could develop leadership among adult women. The research conducted for the study addressed the gap in the literature.

With knowledge of the research results, the organization at the center of the study could know the effectiveness of the leadership development approach. Women have different

leadership development needs than men; validating the studied organization's program or documenting the need for improvement could benefit both the organization and women participants in the program (Brue & Brue, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Other organizations which seek to empower women could use the findings of the study to adopt similar leadership development programs. While the studied organization is a non-profit, fitness-based leadership development programs could be adopted by for-profit organizations, leading to broader acceptance of programs in practice.

Organizations with women in leadership positions reported greater returns on equity, innovation, and social responsiveness (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). For example, fewer instances of regulatory violations, fraud, and embezzlement were reported (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Increased leadership skills and self-efficacy among women could open opportunities to obtain more leadership positions with positive results for those organizations. Many companies seek to incent employee physical fitness through health promotion programs (Rose, 2018). Organizations could broadly incorporate physical fitness and leadership into a combined development program for women, realizing the initial goal of improved employee wellness and achieving an additional goal of improving women's access to leadership roles.

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenological study was the structure for the investigation of the lived experiences of women who participated in the non-profit organization's leadership program. The research questions guided the exploration of participants' lived experiences. Explored during the study was if women gained leadership capabilities and self-efficacy and the application of such skills outside the program. Through interviews and other interactions, insights about the participants' lived experiences were revealed. The following research questions guided the study:

**Research Question One:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to leadership capabilities gained?

**Research Question Two:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to applying any new leadership skills to careers or other activities outside of the non-profit fitness organization?

**Research Question Three:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to any sense of personal empowerment or self-efficacy gained?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) combined with the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) was used in the study to guide the identification of perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. Application of the dimensions of the Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) and dimensions of the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) supported the purpose of the study as the developers of the non-profit's leadership program wished to model behavior for the leader trainees to imitate, in alignment with SCT. Further, the program developers wished to create a nurturing, supportive environment. As individuals could change behavior in response to environmental inputs, the desire to create a supportive environment additionally supports SCT (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Transformational leadership is generally seen as a supportive leadership style (Cetin & Kinik, 2015). Women leaders are more likely to be transformational leaders (Suranga Silva & Mendis,

2017). The study results include insights regarding the transformational nature of skills gained by the program participants and participants' sense of empowerment to use the skills gained.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following definitions are provided to ensure clarity of the terminology used. Some terms are used imprecisely or have multiple meanings in the wider world. The list is intended to aid understanding of these terms when used in the context of the study.

***Fitness.*** A shortened form of the term *physical fitness*, defined as the components of health including cardiovascular endurance, body composition, strength, and flexibility (Guazzi & Adami, 2019).

***Imposter Syndrome.*** A condition in which a woman has a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness for the position achieved, has fooled others into believing the woman is up to the challenges and responsibilities, and does not belong among the woman's peers (Edwards, 2019).

***Leadership self-efficacy.*** An individual's belief regarding one's ability to perform as necessary to bring about desired outcomes (Ali et al., 2018).

***Networking.*** The process of creating or maintaining a group of colleagues with whom to communicate regularly for mutual advantage (Iyengar, 2017).

***Self-efficacy.*** An individual's belief regarding one's ability to perform at the level required to influence events which occur to or around the individual (Marsh et al., 2019).

***Self-esteem.*** An individual's evaluation of personal value or worth (Ahmed et al., 2019).

***Social contagion.*** A construct in which individuals take action based on the beliefs or actions of other individuals within networks of contacts (Canossa et al., 2019).

***Vicarious learning.*** A form of education in which an individual learns from the experiences of others (Yeadon-Lee, 2018).

**Youth sports.** Organized athletic activities which involve physical activity, practiced among children and adolescents up to age 19, not including activities which occur in physical education classes (Lee et al., 2018).

### **Assumptions**

Phenomenology requires an individual to make assumptions regarding a study and participants. Different schools of thought in phenomenology make different assumptions about both ontology, defined as the nature of reality, and epistemology, defined as the nature of knowledge (Neubauer et al., 2019). In transcendental or descriptive phenomenology, the focus is on understanding and describing reality as such reality is known from participants' descriptions of lived experiences. As a result, such studies seek to remove all personal bias and merely describe what is learned from participants (Neubauer et al., 2019). In hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology, the assumption is personal bias could never be removed (Neubauer et al., 2019). As a result, the phenomenological process is understood to be interpretive, applying knowledge of an individual participant's background to interpret how the individual participant views the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). Consistent with the interpretive approach, interpretive phenomenology allows the application of personal knowledge to the interpretation, which could allow personal bias to enter into research analysis.

For the study, data collection and analysis processes included personal knowledge of leadership and fitness. Such knowledge could be applied to interpret participants' responses during the study's interviews or focus group. Observation occurred from a male perspective while the study participants all were female. The study's purpose was to understand the female perspective of leadership and fitness, a perspective which was not available to anyone involved except the participants. The primary assumption applied in the study was data collection and

analysis were to remain unbiased, applying a transcendental or descriptive phenomenological approach.

Additional assumptions were applied during the study. Collection and analysis of data were to be conducted objectively. Participants were to respond to questions asked with honesty which reflected personal lived experiences. While bias could enter a study due to inaccurate participant recollection of events or to participants' perception of a desired outcome (Correia et al., 2016), an assumption for the study was no bias of this type would be introduced. The instruments used for data collection were reliable and valid. Benefits of participation in the fitness-based leadership program were to be identified through analysis of participants' responses.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The focus of the study was the leadership program for a women's fitness organization which seeks to use physical activity as a mechanism to empower women in the women's personal lives. The non-profit organization developed and delivered a leadership program to members of the organization who become leaders of local clubs. The leaders of the organization wish to inspire volunteer local leaders to achieve athletically, gain a sense of self-efficacy, and become better leaders overall. The trained local leaders use skills and knowledge gained to instill self-confidence and self-efficacy in women participants in local clubs.

The scope of the study was restricted to participants in the leadership program of the organization. The study collected information from the participants via questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. The intent of collecting data in such a fashion was to allow participants to share personal experiences regarding the leadership program with a particular focus on personal growth in leadership skills and self-efficacy.

Participants were individuals who volunteered to participate in the study. Volunteers could be located anywhere within the United States. As these individuals were geographically dispersed within the U.S., no face-to-face interactions could occur. Responses to questionnaires were collected via web-based forms. Interviews and the focus group were conducted using Zoom videoconferencing technology. The use of multiple data collection methods allowed for the triangulation of collected data (Flick, 2018). Data collection began once Institutional Review Board approval was received and was completed over 11 weeks.

Several issues could have occurred during the study. Failure to utilize an effective web-based tool could have affected questionnaire data collection. To address the issue, the web-based tool selected was tested in advance to ensure stability and ease of use. Focus group scheduling could have been an issue as finding a common time for multiple individuals to attend the focus group videoconference could be challenging. As all focus group participants quickly agreed to a scheduled time, no backup or alternate participants needed to be identified.

Participant technology challenges could have been an issue. Lack of access to videoconference technology could have affected the ability of some individuals to participate. Such lack of access could have included lack of a computer or lack of sufficient Internet bandwidth. To ensure the issue did not arise during the study, volunteers were asked to validate adequate access to necessary technology before selection into the study. Lack of familiarity with videoconference technology by participants could have been an issue even when individuals had adequate access. To alleviate the concern, participants were queried to ensure comfort using Zoom. Because Zoom technology came into common use during the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants knew how to use the tool and no instructions for accessing Zoom were required to be provided to participants.



*Transferability* in qualitative methods such as phenomenology refers to the usefulness of a study's findings and whether the findings could be applied in a different or broader context (Sundler et al., 2019). The study was limited to a specific leadership program in a specific women's fitness organization. Transferability could be impacted by the specific aspects of the program and organization which could differ from other programs and organizations with similar goals. Depending on the results, the knowledge gained from the study could influence other women's fitness organizations to undertake or modify the organizations' own programs to provide leadership skills and self-efficacy to members.

### **Limitations**

When compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods such as phenomenology have several limitations (Anderson, 2010). The quality of the research is profoundly dependent on the skill of the individual conducting the research. The rigor of a study's execution and analysis might be difficult to assess. Participants could be influenced by the individual conducting the study. The amount of data to be collected and analyzed might make the process time-consuming. Unaddressed limitations could impact the trustworthiness of a study.

The trustworthiness of qualitative research such as phenomenology should be evaluated using four criteria. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Webb & Welsh, 2019). Each criterion was addressed in the study.

Credibility refers to how accurately a phenomenon is described and is similar to internal validity in quantitative studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Webb & Welsh, 2019). One method of addressing credibility is the use of triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The study used three data collection instruments – questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group – for

triangulation. Member checking is a process used to support credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), and was used in the interviews and focus group of the study to address such credibility.

Transferability addresses whether a study's results could be applied to other contexts (Sundler et al., 2019; Webb & Welsh, 2019). The key to ensuring transferability is to use *thick description*, a technique in which not only the participants' comments and behaviors are described, but the context and methods are documented fully and transparently (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Such rich descriptions allow another scholar to have sufficient information to determine whether the study's findings could be applied to another context. The study results incorporated thick descriptions to address transferability.

Dependability describes how accurately a different practitioner could follow the original research decision-making process (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability describes how likely conclusions are based on actual research results rather than observer biases (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Webb & Welsh, 2019). To ensure dependability and confirmability, the steps of conducting data collection and analysis were rigorously documented, including how conclusions were derived from the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

A well-documented audit trail was maintained throughout the study's data collection and analysis phases to demonstrate dependability and confirmability to outside observers, including the dissertation committee. Bias could have been a concern for the study, as personal knowledge of leadership and fitness inadvertently could influence research conclusions. The audit trail as well as discussions with the dissertation committee served to identify and prevent biases from influencing study results.

Other limitations of phenomenology – certain research factors, conditions, or features – could exist beyond those which are evaluated by the four criteria of trustworthiness. The

phenomenological approach allows for an understanding of the lived experiences of participants (Frechette et al., 2020). The process of explanation of one's experiences might differ from the reality of such experiences, leaving an *explanatory gap* between the subjective and objective reality of such experiences (Conaill, 2017). For the study, the subjective view was desired, as the intent was to draw out the feelings from the participants regarding the leadership training results in terms of skills and self-efficacy gained.

Data collection instruments might have limitations or disadvantages. Questionnaire reliability was dependent on the structure of the questionnaire and the honesty of responses (Queirós et al., 2017). Interviews have the potential to be time-consuming to administer and require time to extract meaning via coding and thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Queirós et al., 2017). Focus groups could be difficult to schedule as multiple individuals need to attend at the same time and might be difficult to manage as multiple individuals move the conversation in different directions (Queirós et al., 2017).

### **Chapter Summary**

On paper, women have the same opportunities as men. In practice, women do not have the same prospects (Engeli & Mazur, 2018). In particular, women do not fill corporate leadership roles to the same extent as men (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). To address the gap, women could improve leadership capabilities and self-efficacy. The phenomenological study intended to discover the impact of a leadership development program incorporating physical fitness activities in a women-only environment, serving as a tool to improve leadership skills and self-efficacy which women could utilize in personal and professional lives. Completing the research allowed the lived experiences of the program participants to increase knowledge regarding the utility of such programs. The dissertation continues in the next chapter with the Literature Review of

current scholarly articles regarding gender differences in how leadership skills are acquired and exercised.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Women are underrepresented in corporate leadership positions in the United States (Graham et al., 2017). As management roles tend to pay more than non-management roles, the gap affects women's earning potential (Wodon & de la Brière, 2018). While Title IX legislation has had some positive impact, girls continue to lag in opportunities to participate in athletic endeavors (Sabo & Veliz, 2011). Participation in sports brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy which could be applied in non-sports settings (Fuller et al., 2018) yet girls and young women rarely have the same opportunity to participate in sports to learn those skills. Women continue to be less physically active than men in adulthood (Bennie et al., 2019; National Center for Health Statistics, 2018), further limiting opportunities to grow leadership skills to apply in non-sports settings.

The problem was women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world (Graham et al., 2017) as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men (Pantzer et al., 2018). The background of the problem was women are rarely identified as leaders as often as men due to gender-based biases in society (Badura et al., 2018) even though women score higher than men in desirable leadership skills (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to interview at least 15 volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program to find the commonalities in lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply such skills professionally. Adult women could benefit from opportunities to participate in athletic activities which grow leadership capabilities. The study aimed to discover meanings through the participants' lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply the skills

professionally. The goal was to understand if such a program could enhance women's leadership skills and self-efficacy about those skills, which women could apply in professional and personal lives. The study was necessary because a literature review did not uncover any studies which explored the efficacy of such programs. In particular, no studies were identified which investigated if such programs are useful in developing leadership skills which could be applied broadly or in developing women's self-confidence in applying such skills.

The chapter reviews the relevant and recent scholarly literature related to women's leadership and the role of fitness activities in developing leadership skills. The content is presented in major sections to further describe the literature review. The Literature Search Strategy section documents the databases, keywords, and processes used to search for relevant articles. Relevant theories are discussed and a framework is constructed in the Theoretical Framework section. Within the research literature review section, the findings from relevant articles are synthesized to highlight related findings. Major themes are recapped and gaps in the literature are identified in the summary and conclusion section.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The search strategies, databases, and search terms used to find and cite relevant articles are documented in the following section. The purpose of the search was to find articles related to women's leadership skills, how women learn leadership skills, women leaders' self-efficacy regarding such skills, and how sports and fitness activities could help women learn or improve leadership skills. The academic discovery tools and databases used in the study were noted. The keywords used in the search are identified.

The Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO) Discovery Service database and Google Scholar were the primary sources used to find articles for the literature review. Access to the

EBSCO database was provided by the American College of Education for the course of study and has proven useful in finding recent peer-reviewed articles relevant to the program. The EBSCO database provided access to 3.7 billion entries from 11,000 different publishers (EBSCO Industries, 2020). Google Scholar was used to identify additional articles or to find the full text of articles when such was not available in EBSCO. Google Scholar provided access to over 389 million entries (Gusenbauer, 2019). A benefit of Google Scholar is the ease of use of the search functionality compared to academic discovery systems such as EBSCO (Oh & Colón-Aguirre, 2019). A drawback of Google Scholar is the lack of filters to show only peer-reviewed articles or to search for only certain authors.

With millions and billions of entries available in databases, the use of search terms allowed for a narrowing of focus to the articles which were relevant to the subject of interest. Search terms used in the literature review were *women's leadership, female leadership, gender leadership, men vs. women leadership, women's self-efficacy, leadership self-efficacy, leadership mentors, professional networking, leader networking, youth sports development, sports leadership, imposter syndrome, women's sports, women's physical fitness, girls sports barriers to participation, female sports role models, Transformational Leadership Theory, Social Cognitive Theory*, and combinations of those terms. Dozens of potential articles were identified with these search terms. Full-text, peer-reviewed articles published within the past four years were prioritized using filters when possible.

The articles selected for the literature review included material on how participation in high school or college sports could instill leadership skills, how women could miss out on opportunities to develop leadership skills due to fewer opportunities to participate in high school or collegiate sports, and how gender differences lead to different opportunities for leadership

mentoring for women in the corporate world. In addition, articles selected included details regarding how women might internalize a sense of being less empowered to demonstrate leadership skills or less confident about the strength of leadership skills, and how women might have less confidence than men in general. Information regarding gender differences in physical activity and fitness in adulthood was identified and included from relevant articles.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) combined with the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) was used in the study to guide the identification of perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. A theoretical framework provides the structure for dissertations, providing the blueprint for how each such document should be constructed (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). An effective theoretical framework is composed of and summarizes multiple theories which are relevant to a dissertation (Kivunja, 2018). The theoretical framework for the study included two relevant theories.

#### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

The term *transformational leadership* was first coined by Burns (1978) but the concept was formalized into a theory by Bass (1985; Fourie & Höhne, 2019). Transformational leadership operates through the use of four attributes to impact others: by encouraging intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence in personal interactions (Castillo et al., 2020). The Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) builds on the precepts of transformational leadership by positing leadership as a process in which leaders act as positive role models for others. More specifically, transformational leaders model the use of the four attributes of transformational leadership for others (Castillo et al., 2020).



The leaders of the women-focused, fitness-based leadership program at the heart of the study wish to inspire volunteer leaders to achieve athletically, gain a sense of self-efficacy, and become better leaders. The organizational leaders seek to influence and stimulate participants by sharing personal inspirational stories, consistent with transformational leadership (Castillo et al., 2020). Further, the leaders seek to influence participants to become volunteer leaders in the organization and become the next round of transformational leaders to influence and inspire future participants.

Transformational Leadership Theory has utility in a variety of fields. The theory has informed several sports leadership models, including the Multidimensional Model for Leadership in Sport and the Pursuit of Excellence in Sport Behavior model (McDowell et al., 2018). Corporations have adopted transformational leadership and the precepts of TLT with positive results (Kovach, 2018). The application of TLT has been established to be useful in academic environments as well (Brown et al., 2019; Connolly et al., 2019). The non-profit leadership program is based on the use of sports and physical fitness as the basis for imparting leadership skills to women from varied backgrounds. Usage of TLT for sports activities and varied other backgrounds speaks to the applicability of the theory for the non-profit's leadership program.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

The second theory in the framework is Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986). SCT hypothesizes individuals learn behavior through interaction with and observation of the environment, and individual behavior could modify the environment and others' behaviors (Harinie et al., 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). SCT is built upon the precepts of Social Learning Theory (SLT). SLT's primary characteristic is the premise individuals learn behavior primarily from interactions with others (Akers & Jennings, 2016). SCT expanded upon SLT by

noting the environment in which an individual operates influences the individual in return (Bandura, 1986). Additionally, SCT posits an individual's self-efficacy – an individual's belief in the ability to learn and execute a skill or activity – influences outcomes as well (Bandura, 1999).

The participants in the women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program at the heart of the study likely are learning from each other as well as from the program's leaders, as suggested by SCT (Harinie et al., 2017). The volunteer leaders of the non-profit program are charged with influencing and leading other women in the non-profit organization's efforts to help women gain a sense of empowerment. Participants are brought together for group sessions to participate in fitness activities, while volunteer leaders are invited to group educational sessions to learn about leadership. The group sessions establish learning environments, which further influence participants consistent with SCT (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In the study, participants shared information regarding if participation in the development program improved leadership skills and behaviors, and how those participants then influenced the self-efficacy and empowerment of non-leader members of the non-profit organization.

### **The Theories in Concert**

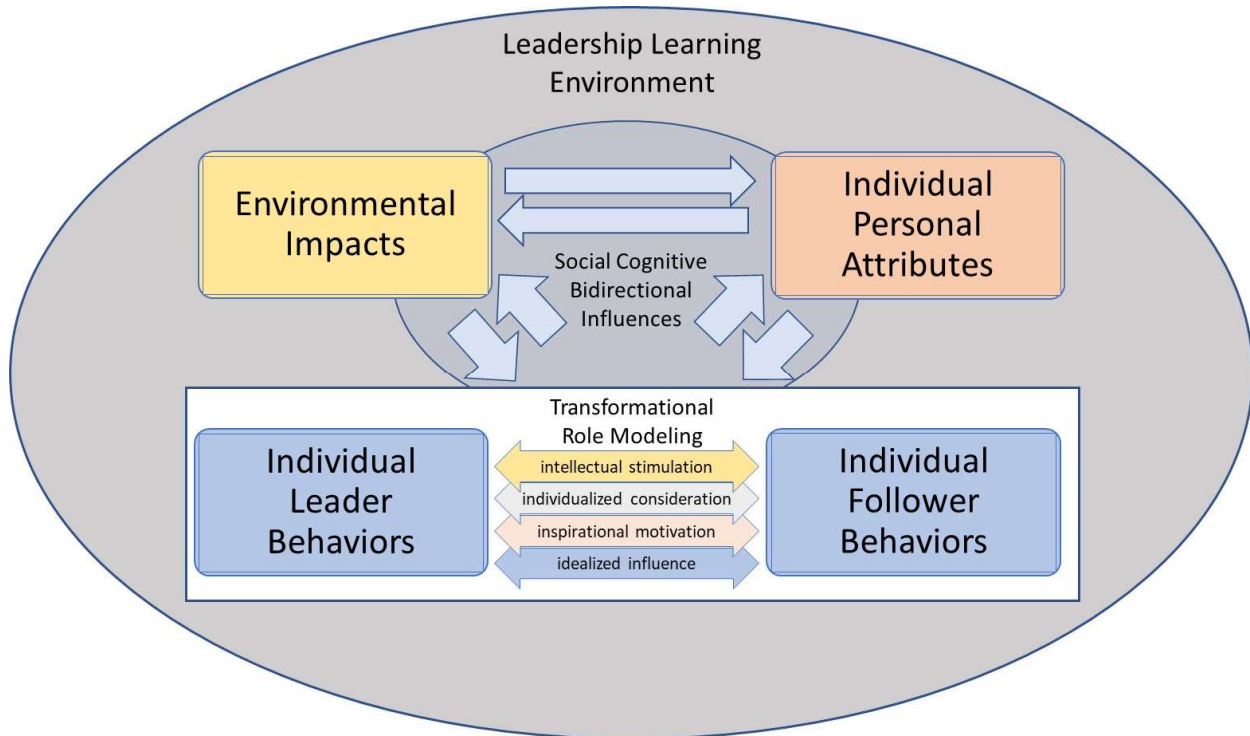
Application of the dimensions of the Transformational Leadership Theory and dimensions of the Social Cognitive Theory supported the purpose of the study as the developers of the non-profit's leadership program wished to model behavior for the leader trainees to imitate, in alignment with SCT. Further, the program developers wished to create a nurturing, supportive environment. As individuals could change behavior in response to environmental inputs, the desire to create a supportive environment additionally supports SCT (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Transformational leadership is generally seen as a supportive leadership style

(Cetin & Kinik, 2015). Additionally, women leaders are more likely to be transformational leaders (Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). The study results include insights regarding if the skills gained by the program participants were more transformational and if the participants felt empowered to use those skills.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the theoretical framework for the study. The leadership learning environment established by the non-profit organization supported the role modeling of transformational leadership skills for followers. Such role modeling could be bidirectional as leaders learn from followers too. Individuals' behaviors are affected by individual personal characteristics and beliefs. Additionally, individuals' behaviors likely are affected by the environmental factors established by the non-profit organization through group sessions and training materials (Harinie et al., 2017). Individuals' leadership behaviors could be influenced by environmental factors outside the non-profit organization such as career and family situations (Harinie et al., 2017).

**Figure 1**

*The theoretical framework of Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Cognitive Theory*



*Note:* Based on the concepts of Bass (1985) and Bandura (1986).

### Research Literature Review

The literature in the fields of gender and leadership suggested women are less likely than men to obtain leadership positions (Badura et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Women who fill leadership positions have the skills to execute those roles and are more likely to demonstrate desirable transformational leadership skills than men (Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Counterintuitively, women have lower self-efficacy about leadership skills than men (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2019; Sheppard, 2018). For a complete depiction of the current state of research in the area, the review of literature begins with a general overview of the gender leadership gap then addresses gender differences in leadership skills and self-efficacy followed

by differences in leadership development opportunities available to men and women. The literature review includes concepts of how missed opportunities for girls in youth sports resonate into adulthood and could be partly responsible for a gender leadership gap. The review concludes with counterarguments found in the literature, a definition of a gap in the literature, and a summary of findings from the literature.

### **Leadership and Self-Efficacy**

Effective leadership involves a wide variety of individual skills. Such skills belong to four broad categories: cognitive, business, interpersonal, and strategic (Guzmán et al., 2020). Different roles require different combinations of such skills and different individuals embody different competencies of such skills. Regardless of the set of skills required for a role or available within a leader, an additional critical attribute for effective leadership is self-efficacy (Ali et al., 2018). *Self-efficacy* is an individual's belief regarding one's ability to perform at the level required to influence events which occur to or around the individual (Marsh et al., 2019). *Leadership self-efficacy* is an individual's belief regarding one's ability to perform as necessary to bring about desired outcomes (Ali et al., 2018).

Social Cognitive Theory applies to the development of leadership self-efficacy. An individual's leadership self-efficacy is an important predictor of an individual's leadership effectiveness (Ali et al., 2018). As self-efficacy is critical to the development of leadership skills, groups which seek to develop self-efficacy through training or other means should incorporate self-efficacy development as part of such leadership development (McCormick, 2001). Such training is part of the environment provided to the individual to influence the individual's characteristics and behaviors, consistent with SCT (Harinie et al., 2017).

Gender issues related to leadership might begin in childhood, which is an important stage in setting expectations for leadership development. For example, young girls aged 3-6 were more likely to choose a boy than a girl to lead a team (Mandalaywala & Rhodes, 2020). Such gender-based differences in leadership expectations might be imprinted upon young girls from the environment in which the girls see adults living out gender-based roles or completing gender-based tasks (Mandalaywala & Rhodes, 2020). Women are less likely to self-select for leadership roles (Epitropaki, 2018).

### **The Gender Leadership Gap**

Women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world (Graham et al., 2017). While women are assuming more corporate leadership positions than previously, a gender gap remains (Badura et al., 2018). An example of the gender gap is evident in the corporate world, where men are 50% more likely to be offered a leadership position (Tinsley & Ely, 2018).

### ***Women and Leadership***

Women in the workplace could have lower general self-efficacy than men in similar roles (Van Der Roest et al., 2017). Lack of confidence in women could date to childhood events or childhood differences between genders in societal socialization (Van Der Roest et al., 2017). Physiological differences between men and women could impact self-efficacy, as the male hormone testosterone impacts the growth of serotonin, which is linked to enhanced confidence (Van Der Roest et al., 2017). Women are paid less than men in the workplace (Abendroth et al., 2017; Cahn et al., 2018) which could have an impact on women's self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017).

As with men, women who are confident about leadership skills are more likely to be effective leaders, making leadership self-efficacy an important attribute for women to obtain and exhibit (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Unfortunately, women frequently discount personal successes and contributions, which could affect demonstrations of self-confidence (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Women's lower confidence regarding leadership skills could result in women failing to seek out or actively avoiding strong leadership roles, limiting the opportunity to gain experience which would increase confidence, resulting in a self-perpetuating cycle of lowered expectations (Sheppard, 2018).

Women who undervalue leadership abilities or contributions could suffer from a form of low self-efficacy referred to as imposter syndrome. *Imposter syndrome* is a condition in which a woman has a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness for the position achieved, has fooled others into believing the woman is up to the challenges and responsibilities, and does not belong among the woman's peers (Edwards, 2019). Microaggressions in the workplace – verbal slights regarding someone's capabilities due to race or gender – could exacerbate such feelings of inadequacy (Harris et al., 2019).

### ***Gender Differences in Leadership***

Women, as a group, often have different leadership skills or a different approach to leadership than men (Begum et al., 2018; Zbihlejšová et al., 2018). The result could present challenges for women leaders, as men have frequently been seen as more effective leaders (McDonald et al., 2018; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Such gender-based leadership differences and challenges have been frequent topics for research.

One incorrect conclusion about the gender leadership gap could be women lag in leadership skills necessary to fill such roles. On the contrary, women who fill leadership roles are

more likely to demonstrate transformational leadership skills than men (Begum et al., 2018; Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Consistent with the finding is women are more likely to lead by sharing information and control, while men are more likely to lean upon authoritarian leadership skills to achieve results (Zbihlejová et al., 2018). As transformational leadership skills lead toward greater team member engagement and innovation (Li et al., 2019) and improved business performance (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018; Edward & Kaban, 2020), employers are likely to desire more leaders with transformational skills in the workplace (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017).

Even though transformational skills might be more desirable, women's leadership styles could harm perceived leadership abilities when compared to men. Due to societal norms and expectations, women appeared less self-confident than men, even when women were not less self-confident than men (Guillén et al., 2018). Women who are competent but who suffer from imposter syndrome or have low leadership self-efficacy could avoid displays of confidence (Edwards, 2019). In this case, the failure to display confidence in one's abilities could be perceived by others as lacking in leadership abilities.

Perceptions of specific women leaders as transformational might exist even when such leaders are not transformational leaders. A comparison of women leaders who self-described as having less transformational, more stereotypically masculine traits such as competitiveness and assertiveness were still viewed as more transformational leaders than men (Saint-Michel, 2018). Women suffer a penalty when failing to demonstrate a motivation to benefit others and were viewed as less effective leaders than men who similarly lacked such motivation (Guillén et al., 2018).



Female leaders could face challenges gaining commitment from followers which male leaders do not face. While transformational leadership is effective in gaining organizational commitment from followers, female leaders are less successful in gaining such commitment than male leaders (Triana et al., 2017). Furthermore, the hiring process introduces challenges for female leaders. Individuals who make hiring decisions value male candidates who have leadership potential more than men who have leadership experience, while the opposite is true for female candidates (Player et al., 2019). The value discrepancy places a burden on women candidates who need to demonstrate experience which male candidates are not required to demonstrate.

### **Opportunities for Leadership Growth**

Within the context of the study, leadership development refers to the personal development of leadership rather than organizational or collective development. Personal development of leadership extends beyond developing skills within one's current role to include skills which could be applied outside the role (Kjellström et al., 2020). Such personal leadership growth could be applied to both professional and private domains for the individual. For example, personal development as a leader could improve the self-esteem of an individual. Improved confidence as a result of leader development could be applied by the individual outside of the environment such as the workplace where the development is formally provided (Kjellström et al., 2020). In addition to formal leadership development training programs, other forms of leadership development activities include mentoring and networking (Seibert et al., 2017).

Mentorship, networking, and formal leadership training programs are forms of *vicarious learning*, in which an individual learns from the experiences of others (Yeadon-Lee, 2018).

Vicarious learning is consistent with the precepts of SCT. Individuals participating in mentoring and networking are in an environment to learn from others and change behavior accordingly (Myers, 2017). Understanding how to respond to future situations based on others' experiences could enhance a leader's self-efficacy, which is consistent with SCT as well (Myers, 2017).

### ***Leadership Development for Women***

As women have different leadership development needs than men, women would benefit from leadership programs which focus on women (Brue & Brue, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Such programs recognize women typically have different roles within families and need leadership development programs structured to recognize those differences (Debebe et al., 2016). Women could benefit from participating in mixed-gender development programs as well, and participation in both women-only and mixed-gender programs could add the greatest value (Ely et al., 2011).

Women have less access to formal leadership education than men, which could affect the growth of a leadership mindset (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; McGowan & Stokes, 2019). Leadership programs which focus on or include only women could provide a safe learning environment for female leaders (Frkal, 2018). A further challenge for women is lower self-efficacy regarding capacity or capability for leadership, which might cause women to fail to seek out development opportunities in the first place (Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). One area of focus for women's leadership development should be to help women develop a personal identity as a leader which could improve an individual's leadership self-efficacy (Ely et al., 2011).

### ***The Value of Leader Mentorship***

Mentorship is important in the growth of leadership skills. Mentorship could include formal or informal assignment of a senior leader to a more junior one to provide knowledge and

guidance (Becker & Bish, 2017), a coaching program (Bhimani et al., 2021), a formal training program (Coleman et al., 2019), or a combination. Mentorship programs are successful in promoting leader effectiveness supporting career success (McDonald et al., 2018; Walker & Yip, 2018). A reason for the success of mentorship programs is due to leaders being able to reach out to other leaders for assistance with specific tasks (McDonald et al., 2018).

### ***Mentorship for Women***

Once in the workforce, women continue to lag in leadership opportunities. A reason for the lag in opportunities could be because women have fewer informal mentorship opportunities (Humberstone, 2017; McGowan & Stokes, 2019). Men's relationships with mentors are more likely to lead to promotion (Ely et al., 2011). Formal mentorship programs which include women have value to the organization, as such programs help women gain feelings of being valued by the organization, which could increase confidence and a sense of belonging (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). In a mentorship program for women, a mentor could assist the mentee further in gaining confidence through positive reinforcement (Steele Flippin, 2017; Turner-Moffatt, 2019). In choosing mentors, women could be conflicted regarding whether choosing a male or female mentor is more advantageous. Mentees reported having shared values with a mentor was more important than having a demographic match with the mentor (Hernandez et al., 2017), which could lead women to choose men over women as mentors in some cases. Yet, mentors who could serve as role models have value as well. In particular, women could emulate the empowering body postures of other women through mimicry (Latu et al., 2019).

### ***The Value of Leader Networking***

Networking is the process of creating or maintaining a group of colleagues with whom to communicate regularly for mutual advantage (Iyengar, 2017). Effective leaders leverage

networks to obtain information, determine priorities, and obtain support and resources for organizational efforts (Hassan et al., 2018). Networking might provide an opportunity for leaders to learn and practice leadership skills through participation in community-based activities (Strawn et al., 2017).

### ***Networking for Women***

An initial challenge for women versus men in networking is the different mindset women have regarding the concept. Women see networking as seeking emotional support from other women, while men see networking as an opportunity for career advancement (Andrić & Slobodanka, 2017). Furthermore, women might see networking as an extracurricular activity which is difficult to schedule due to constraints outside of work, such as family commitments (Ely et al., 2011).

Individuals have a propensity to develop networks with those of the same gender (Ely et al., 2011). As a result, women build networks primarily with other women. The approach could leave men out of women's networks which could lead to less desirable results, as men are more likely to hold positions of authority (Ely et al., 2011).

### **Leadership Development in Youth Sports**

Much of the literature on leadership development focused on the development of leadership skills in adults with minimal focus on youth leadership development (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017). Childhood is a period of substantial development opportunities, as children spend 12 or more years acquiring skills through schooling (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017). Additionally, childhood is a period of initial introduction to organizations where opportunities to demonstrate or observe leadership abound (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Liu et al., 2020). Youth-focused organizations which specifically seek to build leadership skills include Boy and

Girl Scouts, 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the YMCA (Hailey & Fazio-Brunson, 2020; Rehm & Selznick, 2019). Consistent with the triadic interaction of environment, attributes, and behaviors envisioned by SCT (Harinie et al., 2017), the environmental and other stimuli of childhood might influence personal characteristics and behaviors, establishing the seeds of future leadership (Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Sports play a prominent and important role in childhood development (Brown et al., 2017). Youth sports participation has positive impacts on physical fitness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and mental health (Howie et al., 2020; Reverdito et al., 2017). Many of the skills practiced or developed in youth sports apply to leadership. Such skills include envisioning the result, developing self-efficacy, focusing on a goal, and executing tasks to achieve the goal (Chelladurai, 2012; Murphy & Johnson, 2011).

Organized sports provide opportunities for leadership development and for youth to learn many of the necessary lessons required for effective leadership (Liu et al., 2020; Murphy & Johnson, 2011). Individuals who participate in middle or high school sports activities tend to acquire leadership skills when compared to non-participants (Kniffin et al., 2015; Pantzer et al., 2018). Sports-focused leadership development programs go even further than simple participation in building such skills (Taylor, 2016).

### ***Youth Sports and the Theoretical Framework***

Social Cognitive Theory applies to leader development within youth sports (Connolly, 2017). Youth are exposed to environmental influences, specifically role models such as coaches and fellow athletes (Connolly, 2017). Role models are part of the learning environment for young athletes and could help youth in the leadership development process (Liu et al., 2020).

Consistent with the theoretical framework, the behaviors of role models could influence the leadership attributes and behaviors of youth in sports (Liu et al., 2020).

Transformational Leadership Theory applies to leader development within youth sports as well. Consistent with SCT, coaches could model transformational leadership for young athletes (Gould & Voelker, 2012). Such role modeling could establish an environment of transformational leadership behaviors. The environment could influence the coaches' athletes to learn and adopt transformational leadership attributes and behaviors (Gould & Voelker, 2012). The modeling could be occurring already, as findings in one study highlighted young athletes demonstrated greater transformational leadership skills than non-athletes (Mak & Kim, 2017). The value of transformational leadership in such a learning environment is young athletes who demonstrate transformational leadership attributes are seen as more effective leaders by coaches and peers (Zacharatos et al., 2000).

### ***Girls and Youth Sports***

Girls are less likely to participate in sports than boys (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019; Pantzer et al., 2018; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). The lack of participation could negatively affect girls' opportunities to learn leadership skills before adulthood. Women in the workforce in 2020 attended high school in the 1990s and early 2000s when girls' sports participation rate was even lower (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2019).

The reasons vary for such a lack of sports participation by girls. Gender stereotypes are a barrier to participation, as girls were conditioned to believe girls should only perform traditionally feminine activities, especially if boys were present (Somerset & Hoare, 2018). Male sports figures and coaches provide role models for boys to emulate, while fewer female sports

figures or female coaches exist to serve as role models for girls (Bevan et al., 2020; Ekholm et al., 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2018).

Another barrier for girls' sports participation is a lack of access to athletic facilities or opportunities on par with access granted to boys (Eckes, 2017; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). In one case, a boys' softball team was provided with a playing field when the girls' team was not (Eckes, 2017). In another case, boys' basketball games were scheduled on weekends when more fans could attend, while girls' basketball games were scheduled on weekdays, requiring girls to finish homework during the brief time before game time (Eckes, 2017). A third example revealed girls were permitted substantially less time to access the ice rink for hockey team practice than boys and often had to share the ice with another girls' team (Adams & Leavitt, 2018).

### **Youth Gender Gap Impacts Adulthood**

Gender-based differences in youth sports opportunities have effects which might last into adulthood. Women generally might not have developed the same leadership skills and self-efficacy through youth sports as men (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Somerset & Hoare, 2018). As physical activity during youth is a predictor of adult physical activity, women who participate in youth sports are more likely to remain physically active as adults (Logan et al., 2020; Zanin et al., 2021).

### ***Leadership Impacts***

Individuals who participate in middle or high school sports activities tend to acquire leadership skills when compared to non-participants (Kniffin et al., 2015; Pantzer et al., 2018). Even as such participation brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy, girls and young women do not have the same opportunity to participate in sports to learn those skills (Fuller et al., 2018; Harinie et al., 2017; Zanin et al., 2021). As women participated less frequently than

men in youth sports, adult women might not have had the same opportunity to learn leadership skills in the formative years (Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Somerset & Hoare, 2018).

Outside of youth sports, girls have not had the same opportunities to grow leadership skills. Girls benefit from having leadership development programs tailored specifically to girls (Bailey et al., 2017; Fulton et al., 2019). Such gender-specific leadership development programs are not available in the majority of American school districts (Fulton et al., 2019). Youth participation in sports leads to a positive attitude toward physical activity as an adult (Bendíková & Dobay, 2017; Howie et al., 2020; Zanin et al., 2021). Since girls do not have the same opportunities to participate in youth sports (Harinie et al., 2017), women might not have had the opportunity to develop a positive attitude from such participation.

### ***Physical Activity and Fitness Impacts***

Women who participated in sports as girls have an increased likelihood of participating in physical activity as an adult (Logan et al., 2020; Zanin et al., 2021). If girls participated in sports to the same degree as boys, the possibility exists the gender difference in physical activity among adults might diminish or disappear. The lack of physical activity in adulthood could continue to limit opportunities for women to grow leadership skills. Participating in physical activity or sports as an adult provides an additional outlet to develop leadership skills (Hambrick et al., 2018). An additional benefit of physical activity is merely participating in athletic activities causes women to appear to others to have more leadership qualities (Burton et al., 2016).

### **Adult Women and Physical Fitness**

Women benefit from physical activity. Such physical activity has the possibility of addressing at least a portion of the self-efficacy gap. Women remain less physically active than



men (Bennie et al., 2019; National Center for Health Statistics, 2018). Adult fitness opportunities exist for women. Multiple reasons exist for why women do not pursue such opportunities.

### ***Adult Fitness Opportunities***

Opportunities for adult (post-college age) women to become physically active and improve leadership skills or self-confidence exist. Organizations providing group fitness activities for adult women could build a sense of community for those women, who become more self-confident (Wegner et al., 2016). Such organizations could provide workout partners or leaders to provide social support. Social support motivates women to restart physical activity after any lapses (Schumacher et al., 2017), allowing women to continue to build self-confidence through participation.

### ***Women and Physical Inactivity***

Three primary reasons exist for why women do not pursue opportunities for physical activity. Women might have less opportunity for leisure activities compared to men (Kamp Dush et al., 2018). Issues related to self-esteem could cause women to have less internal motivation for physical activity (Zervou et al., 2017). Lack of peers who are physically active might leave women with little external motivation to pursue exercise (Bennie et al., 2019).

**Lack of Opportunity.** Women generally have less time to spend on leisure activities than men. For example, when a married heterosexual couple has children, the childcare burden as measured by time increased for both the man and the woman – but the burden increases more for the woman, by a factor of three (Yavorsky et al., 2015). Men used the extra available time on leisure activities, time which was unavailable to women (Kamp Dush et al., 2018).

Women bear a greater share of housework than men (Thébaud et al., 2021). While the gender gap in the housework burden has diminished over time, the greater burden for women

still exists, again leading to less time for women to spend on other activities. As women mature, childcare and related housework requirements diminish, allowing women who choose to become more active with additional time available (Zimmermann et al., 2016). In such cases, women might seek out group exercise as an opportunity for social interaction (Zimmermann et al., 2016).

**Lack of Internal Motivation.** Women reported lower general levels of self-esteem than men (Kogler et al., 2017). Lower self-esteem affects the desire to participate in physical activity (Zervou et al., 2017). Furthermore, being overweight led to lower exercise participation (Zervou et al., 2017). Encountering weight stigma during daily activities leads to lower motivation to exercise, especially among women (Vartanian et al., 2018). Two-thirds of U.S. women are overweight (National Institutes of Health, 2017). The combination of lower self-esteem and weight-related factors could act as de-motivators which drive a lack of internal motivation to complete physical activity among women.

**Lack of External Motivation.** An additional reason why adult women might not participate in sports or physical exercise is the concept of social contagion. *Social contagion* is a construct in which individuals take action based on the beliefs or actions of other individuals within networks of contacts (Canossa et al., 2019). Such networks could include peers or influencers as might be found on Facebook (Aral & Nicolaides, 2017; Canossa et al., 2019). In a study of social contagion, runners influenced other runners to continue exercising, an indirect form of peer pressure (Aral & Nicolaides, 2017). Male runners were influenced by both male and female runners, but female runners were influenced only by other female runners (Aral & Nicolaides, 2017).

As adult women are less physically active than men, the possibility exists fewer women than men are runners to provide influence to other women (Bennie et al., 2019). The combined result could be substantially less peer influence to encourage women to remain physically active. Such a result would be consistent with SCT, as the network forms the environment which influences runners to continue exercising.

### **Continuing Impacts of Physical Inactivity**

Self-confidence and self-efficacy are not static and might change over time. Exercise is a physical activity which could positively influence both self-esteem and self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017; Zamani Sani et al., 2016). Multiple methods of improving women's leadership self-efficacy exist, including training, mentorship, and experience (McCormick, 2001; Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Physical activity such as exercise is yet another tool to improve leadership self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017). Continued lack of physical activity among adult women leaves the particular tool unused.

### **Counterargument**

The majority of literature reviewed supported the connections between youth sports and adult leadership, gender differences in youth sports access, and gender differences in adult leadership self-efficacy. A few studies did not align with those connections. These studies are discussed further.

### ***Gender Gap in Youth Sports***

The premise of the study is lesser participation opportunities for girls versus boys in youth sports led to lesser self-efficacy for adult women (Sabo & Veliz, 2011). While the gap in participation levels remains, girls' sports participation has been increasing year by year (Simon

& Uddin, 2018). A gender participation gap remains, but the decline in the participation gap could lead to a decline in the adult self-efficacy gender gap over time.

### ***Leaders in Youth Sports***

While sports participation might provide a training ground for leadership (Kniffin et al., 2015), not all research supported the contention. Certain types of sports might be more efficacious in providing such opportunities. Participation in team sports could create more followers than leaders due to herd mindset among participants (Huntrods et al., 2017).

### ***Gender and Transformational Leadership***

The executive leaders of the non-profit organization to be studied seek to create a supportive environment to grow leadership skills and self-efficacy among program participants. Transformational leadership is generally seen as a supportive leadership style (Cetin & Kinik, 2015). Women leaders are more likely to be transformational leaders (Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Yet no gender differences in transformational leadership behaviors were observed in one study of secondary school principals and teachers (Munir & Aboidullah, 2018).

### ***Women-Only Leadership Programs***

Women benefit from leadership programs which focus on women (Brue & Brue, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Such programs need to be structured appropriately to be successful. Programs which focus on gender inequality and provide resources to make women competitive with male leaders are ineffective (Peterson, 2019). Women-only mentorship programs allow male-dominated conversations which occur within the rest of the organization to proceed unchallenged and uninfluenced by female perspectives (Dashper, 2019).

### ***Self-Esteem Gender Gap***

Women generally have lower levels of self-esteem than men (Kogler et al., 2017). The lower levels of self-esteem are not universal. Women have higher self-esteem in some specific domains or categories (Gentile et al., 2009). Women scored higher in measures of behavioral conduct self-esteem and moral-ethical self-esteem. Behavioral conduct self-esteem assesses how socially acceptable one's conduct is, while moral-ethical self-esteem assesses one's satisfaction with one's ethical and religious beliefs (Gentile et al., 2009).

### ***Self-Esteem and Exercise***

Exercise positively influences both self-esteem and self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017; Zamani Sani et al., 2016). A counterexample was provided in a study of women who participated in sports compared to women who did not (Srivastava & Kaur, 2018). The women who participated in sports did not have higher self-efficacy in the study, although the active women had better mental health. The counterexample might not be representative, as the active women evaluated practiced karate for 18 hours or more each week, a sizable time commitment (Srivastava & Kaur, 2018).

### **Gap in the Literature**

The current literature highlights a leadership gender gap exists and possible reasons for the existence of the gender gap (Graham et al., 2017; Pantzer et al., 2018). Studies addressed avenues women could pursue to build skills and efficacy to close the gap, including leadership development and physical activity (Brue & Brue, 2018; Hambrick et al., 2018). The literature further describes the barriers women face in pursuing both leadership development and physical activity (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Kamp Dush et al., 2018). The gap which exists in the literature is an exploration of how a combination of leadership development and physical fitness

could address self-efficacy and leadership skills among women. The study is necessary to fill the gap regarding how women-focused, fitness-based leadership development programs could build leadership skills and a sense of empowerment among adult women.

### **Chapter Summary**

Women are less likely than men to obtain leadership positions (Badura et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Women who do have leadership positions have the skills to execute those roles and are more likely to demonstrate desirable transformational leadership skills than men (Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Women in the workplace do not have the same leadership development opportunities as men, further constraining the ability to progress to positions of greater authority and responsibility (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; McGowan & Stokes, 2019).

A critical trait for effective leadership is self-efficacy (Ali et al., 2018). Women could benefit from improved self-efficacy, as individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to seek out leadership positions (Murphy & Johnson, 2016). Self-efficacy is a byproduct of participation in youth sports (Fuller et al., 2018; Harinie et al., 2017; Zanin et al., 2021). Girls do not have the same opportunities to learn self-efficacy or other leadership skills as boys (Fulton et al., 2019; Pantzer et al., 2018) which could affect girls' opportunity to learn such skills before adulthood.

Physical activity programs for adult women could lead to improved self-confidence or self-efficacy (Wegner et al., 2016). Adult women are less physically active than men (Bennie et al., 2019) resulting in fewer opportunities for women to build self-confidence through physical activity. Pursuing opportunities for physical activity in adulthood could help women improve self-efficacy to support leadership.

Women-focused group fitness organizations provide a sense of community and self-confidence among women participants (Schumacher et al., 2017; Wegner et al., 2016). Such women-focused organizations could provide leadership development and mentoring opportunities combined with fitness activities. The combination of leadership development and fitness activities could help women close leadership skills and self-efficacy gaps.

The chapter contained a summary of the current literature regarding gender gaps in leadership opportunities which are related to participation in youth sports. The search strategies and tools for finding relevant scholarly articles were described. Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Cognitive Theory were described and combined to form the theoretical framework for the study. The research literature review explored background information and described the results of other studies, establishing a connection to the purpose and methods of the study. Chapter 3 addresses the specifics of the phenomenological approach used to identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world (Graham et al., 2017). As management roles tend to pay more than non-management roles, the gap affects women's earning potential (Wodon & de la Brière, 2018). While Title IX legislation has had some positive impact, girls continue to lag in opportunities to participate in athletic endeavors (Sabo & Veliz, 2011). Participation in sports brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy which could be applied in non-sports settings (Fuller et al., 2018) yet girls and young women rarely have the same opportunity to participate in sports to learn those skills. Women continue to be less physically active than men in adulthood (Bennie et al., 2019; National Center for Health Statistics, 2018), further limiting opportunities to grow leadership skills to apply in non-sports settings. Adult women might benefit from opportunities to participate in athletic activities which grow leadership capabilities. The phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of volunteer leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. The goal was to understand if such a program could enhance women's leadership skills and self-efficacy about those skills, which women could apply in professional and personal lives.

The following major sections are presented to further describe the research methodology. The Problem Statement, Purpose of the Study, and Research Questions are restated. The Research Design and Rationale section outlines the basics of the phenomenology method, how the method was applied for the study, and why the method was selected. The Role of the Researcher section describes interactions and relationships between the investigator and participants. The Research Procedures, Data Analysis, and Reliability and Validity sections summarize how data were collected, analyzed, and confirmed accurate. The Ethical Procedures



section describes how the rights of study participants were protected. The Summary recaps the methodology and previews Chapter 4.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem was women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world (Graham et al., 2017) as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men (Pantzer et al., 2018). The background of the problem was women are rarely identified as leaders as often as men due to gender-based biases in society (Badura et al., 2018) even though women score higher than men in desirable leadership skills (Zenger & Folkman, 2019). The importance of the problem was (1) women might be seen as less capable than men, when with proper development women could be just as capable as men who received leadership training; and (2) failing to empower and provide women with leadership opportunities leaves untapped a large potential source of skilled labor which could serve as a capable positive force in society.

The extent of the problem was evident in the corporate world, where men are 50% more likely to be offered a leadership position (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Participation in sports brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy (Fuller et al., 2018) yet girls and young women rarely have the same opportunity to participate in sports (Pantzer et al., 2018). Those impacted by the problem are (1) women who lack leadership capabilities due to a lack of training or opportunities; and (2) women who might have leadership potential but lack a sense of empowerment to exercise any leadership skills or to pursue leadership opportunities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to interview a minimum of 15 volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development

program to find the commonalities in lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply such skills professionally. The study aimed to discover meanings through the participants' lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply the skills professionally. The study was necessary because a literature review did not uncover any studies which explored the efficacy of such programs. In particular, no studies were identified which investigated if such programs are useful in developing leadership skills which could be applied broadly or in developing women's self-confidence in applying such skills. The target population for the study was women who participated in leadership development activities for a global fitness-based women's empowerment non-profit organization. Participants could be geographically dispersed throughout the United States.

The study contributes to the knowledgebase by providing insight into whether such women-focused, fitness-based programs actually develop women's leadership capabilities and empower women to apply those capabilities. If such leadership development programs are effective, then the opportunity to expand or build upon such programs to develop women's leadership capabilities to the women's potential could be missed if the research is not completed. If such programs are ineffective, then the opportunity to revise the programs for improvement or to explore alternative approaches to develop women's leadership capabilities might fail to occur. Information gained from the study could be used in future quantitative studies as a next phase of study (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018) to determine which particular leadership capabilities have increased, the degree to which self-esteem and feelings of empowerment have improved, and what percentage of women who participate in such programs have seen improvement in leadership capabilities and feelings of empowerment. The research report is to be shared openly via ProQuest and LinkedIn.

### **Research Questions**

The phenomenological study investigated the lived experiences of women who participated in the non-profit organization's leadership program. The goal of the study was to understand if the participants in the leadership program gain leadership skills and if the participants gain confidence about leadership abilities. Through interviews and other interactions, insights about the participants' lived experiences were revealed. The following research questions guided the study:

**Research Question One:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to leadership capabilities gained?

**Research Question Two:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to applying any new leadership skills to careers or other activities outside of the non-profit fitness organization?

**Research Question Three:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to any sense of personal empowerment or self-efficacy gained?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research context for the study were women who participated in leadership development activities to become volunteer leaders for a global fitness-based women's empowerment non-profit organization. Women considered for inclusion in the study were geographically dispersed across the United States, participating in and acting as leaders for local clubs which are part of the global organization. The research questions documented the desire to

understand if and how the women gained and utilized leadership capabilities and self-efficacy through participation in the program. By using interviews with the leaders plus online questionnaires completed by the leaders, the research was designed to gain an understanding about such capabilities and self-efficacy. Insights gained provided insight into the efficacy of the organization's program.

In considering the rationale for the research design, two research designs which use personal interviews for data collection were evaluated: grounded theory and phenomenology. Grounded theory seeks to understand the connections and processes which exist in social situations (Reiter et al., 2011). Phenomenology is recommended when the goal of a study is to understand the meaning of participants' lived experiences or to investigate concepts from a new point of view (Brue & Brue, 2016; Lin, 2017).

The research study explored the lived experiences of the female program participants in the study of leadership and enhanced leadership skills. Phenomenology allows participants to share personal stories without judgment (Alase, 2017). As a result of the phenomenological approach, the shared lived experiences drive the research findings (Alase, 2017). The objective of the study was to learn if and how participants experienced growth in the leadership development program through sharing of lived experiences regarding skills gained from the program and application of such skills after. As a phenomenological approach was recommended for investigation of the meaning of participants' lived experiences (Brue & Brue, 2016; Lin, 2017), phenomenology was the qualitative research method chosen for the study.

An alternate research design which could be considered is a longitudinal study. A longitudinal study investigates a phenomenon through repeated observations over a sufficiently long period of time for the purpose of detecting and evaluating change (Wang et al., 2017). A

longitudinal study of women participating in the leadership program would be insightful, to analyze and measure the women's leadership skills and self-efficacy before the program and at multiple points after. Conducting such a longitudinal study would likely need to occur over a period of at least a year, exceeding the time available for research for the dissertation (Díaz-Méndez & Adams, 2020).

A benefit of phenomenology is the method provides views into others' experiences, in some cases experiences the investigator likely is unable to ever personally be involved in (Beck, 2019). A further benefit is phenomenology allows an investigator to consider why certain things occur, whereas quantitative research is often more focused on measuring what occurred (Beck, 2019). An advantage of phenomenological research is its objectivity, where an investigator's bias is set aside to avoid influencing the results. A disadvantage of phenomenology which the study avoided is *method slurring*, where different research methods such as phenomenology and grounded theory are combined in a single research study, invalidating the rigor of the applied methods and of the study (Beck, 2019).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher was an outside observer for the non-profit fitness organization which is the subject of the research and lacked any power to compel any member of the organization to participate in the study. The participants in the study were asked to participate by a senior leader of the organization but on a strictly volunteer basis. As a man interviewing women, the researcher was aware and respectful of the ethical challenges of ensuring women's voices were heard without interpreting responses from a male perspective (Hassan et al., 2017). Incentives were not provided to participants as providing rewards could incent some potential participants to deceive regarding eligibility for a study (Fernandez Lynch et al., 2019). No conflicts of

interest were known or expected. The only ethical considerations foreseen are described in the Ethical Procedures section below.

Some traditions of phenomenology permit a scholar to be a participant in the research (Johnston et al., 2017). For the study, only leaders from the organization were selected as participants primarily to maintain independence and secondarily because only these individuals meet the selection criteria of being a woman and a volunteer leader in the organization under study. Hermeneutic phenomenology posits a scholar is necessarily biased due to the scholar's own experiences and such bias cannot be excluded from the research results (Neubauer et al., 2019). Alternately, transcendental phenomenology promotes the view one should constantly evaluate one's biases with a goal of excluding those biases from analysis and results (Neubauer et al., 2019). For the study, the transcendental approach was followed with the goal of maintaining objectivity. The fact the female participants' lived experiences were influenced by gender in a manner substantially different from the male researcher's own lived experience assisted in maintaining objectivity.

An additional measure to ensure objectivity was the use of member checking. The technique was used to ensure the participants' thoughts and experiences are accurately captured and represented (Birt et al., 2016). One form of member checking was sharing interview transcripts back to participants to ensure conversations were captured correctly. A second form of member checking was sharing themes which were found during data analysis to confirm concurrence with the results. Sharing results with participants fosters trust between the researcher and participants (Purvis et al., 2017).

### **Research Procedures**

The research procedures were designed to explore the lived experiences of participants via a phenomenological study (Neubauer et al., 2019). The steps were intended to understand the focus on the experiences from the participants' perspective without interpretation at this point (Qutoshi, 2018). Participants were selected from the ranks of the non-profit organization, as described in Population and Sample Selection. Three instruments documented in the Instrumentation section provided triangulation of results. Data Collection highlights the specific methods used to ensure rigor, confidentiality, and security throughout the data-related processes. Reliability and Validity define the procedures implemented to ensure the quality of results.

### **Population and Sample Selection**

The target population for the study was women who participated in leadership development activities for a global fitness-based women's empowerment non-profit organization. Purposive sampling, a technique most commonly associated with qualitative research (Etikan, 2016), was to be used to select women who completed the leadership development program at least six months before the study begins to allow time for personal growth and reflection by participants. All participants selected were adults, aged 18 or older, who reside in the United States. The participants could be located anywhere within the United States. The estimated total size of the population was 67 women, per the point of contact within the organization. Phenomenological studies are suggested to have between five and 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). At least 15 total participants were to be selected for the study.

Initial contact with potential participants came from the Director of Education of the non-profit organization or his designate. The Director of Education's designate is the point of contact

for site permission for the organization. The site permission letter was forwarded to the designate by email, who responded with approval by email. An email describing the research and actions participants would complete as part of the research was drafted and shared with members of the target population by the point of contact. Sending the recruitment email from a leader of the organization established the legitimacy of the research and provided access to potential participants (Greene, 2014). In the email, potential participants were encouraged to volunteer for the research. Voluntary participation was preferred as those who participate voluntarily were more likely to provide honest responses than those who participated involuntarily (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017). Access to organizational records of selected participants was unnecessary for the study.

Volunteers were instructed whom to contact by email if interested in participating. Email was valuable as a communication tool due to its low cost and ability to reach a large number of potential participants quickly (Hokke et al., 2018). Each volunteer was asked to provide basic contact and demographic information such as email address, phone number, geographic location, age, length of participation with the non-profit organization, current leadership roles, and previous leadership experience. If additional volunteers were needed after the initial email, the organization's point of contact was asked to access potential participants again by sending reminder emails (Greene, 2014). The email recruitment process occurred over a period of several weeks.

As the potential participants volunteered for the study, contact and demographic information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet which was stored securely on an encrypted, password-protected laptop (Czechowski et al., 2019). Volunteers were to be considered for selection primarily on a first-come basis. Through the application of purposive sampling, some



volunteers who responded quickly could have been bypassed in favor of other volunteers to ensure demographic diversity, if sufficient response occurred to allow such selection. Purposive sampling allows for judgment in selecting candidates who best serve the needs of the study (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The limited number of volunteers did not require purposive sampling to be implemented, as all volunteers were able to participate. Validating the candidates from responses received took about 11 weeks.

A link to an Informed Consent document was sent along with the initial Invitation to Participate email. Copies of the Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent documents are included in Appendix A and Appendix B of the dissertation. Once the initial set of participant candidates was identified, the selected candidates were notified by email or phone. A Google Form was used to collect electronic signatures from participants and ensure a full understanding of what the Informed Consent document means. Google Forms is effective in collecting information from individuals, including those who are widely dispersed geographically (Beletsky et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017).

### **Instrumentation**

Three instruments were used for the study. New instruments were developed as an existing instrument which addressed all facets of leadership improvement, self-efficacy, and athletic/fitness activities was unavailable. Each of the instruments used open-ended questions to allow participants to share lived experiences with regard to the research questions. The new instruments were constructed by reviewing existing questionnaires from peer-reviewed journals and dissertations which are relevant to the research topic. The three instruments are shown in Appendices C through E.

### ***Pre-Questionnaire***

The initial instrument was a questionnaire provided to the target population as part of the email recruitment process, referred to as the *pre-questionnaire*. The pre-questionnaire included a number of open-ended questions asking individuals in the leadership program about lived experiences before and after completing the program. A link to the pre-questionnaire was included in the recruitment email sent to the target population, which included the Invitation to Participate document and the Informed Consent document. For ease of data collection, the pre-questionnaire was presented as a link to a Google Form which contained the questions. Individuals who volunteered to participate in the study were asked to complete the pre-questionnaire when completing the Informed Consent document. Sixteen pre-questionnaires were collected.

By providing an additional source of data, the pre-questionnaire provided data triangulation for the primary instrument (Flick, 2018). A questionnaire used in the manner described should have face validity, in which the questionnaire should appear to an average person to measure what was intended to be measured (Singh, 2017). Such a questionnaire should have content validity, in which the questionnaire is an accurate gauge of what is intended to be measured. The subject matter expert (SME) review of the questionnaire supported content validity (Singh, 2017). Using the pre-questionnaire for triangulation addressed reliability via internal consistency, by determining if similar questions about leadership experience and self-efficacy collected through different mechanisms gave similar responses (Singh, 2017).

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Each of the 16 participants was randomly selected to complete one of the two remaining instruments. The second and primary instrument was an interview guide, with a list of questions

asked of 11 participants during a semi-structured interview to gain insight into the lived experiences of the participants. The semi-structured interview consisted of questions designed to reveal the participants' leadership experiences and self-efficacy both before and after participation in the leadership development program of the non-profit organization. A new instrument was developed as an existing instrument which addressed all facets of leadership improvement, self-efficacy, and athletic/fitness activities was unavailable. Semi-structured interviews are considered reliable for qualitative research (Dikko, 2016). One manner in which reliability is achieved is by constant comparison of results (Leung, 2015). In the study, one method of ensuring such constant comparison is through comparing thematic findings across multiple interviews. A second method was through triangulation with the other instruments of the study.

Member checking was used to improve transactional validity (Birt et al., 2016). The member checking process allowed participants to review and provide feedback on research analysis (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). For the interview instrument, participants were asked to review individual interview transcripts to ensure comments were captured accurately. Transcripts were provided to participants by email within three days. Participants were asked to review themes which emerged during data analysis to confirm agreement with the results.

### ***Focus Group***

The third instrument was a focus group discussion using open-ended questions. The focus group consisted of five participants selected from those who completed pre-questionnaires. The focus group participants were distinct from the participants in the primary instrument, the open-ended interview. The focus group was conducted with all participants at one time via the Zoom videoconferencing tool which has been established as an effective tool for qualitative research

(Archibald et al., 2019). The focus group questions were designed to reveal the participants' leadership experiences and self-efficacy both before and after participation in the leadership development program of the non-profit organization. As with the pre-questionnaire, the purpose of the focus group was to provide data triangulation for the interview instrument (Flick, 2018).

Focus groups generally are considered valid and reliable (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017). While focus groups could be used as a standalone data collection tool, focus groups combined with interviews could provide different insights in a phenomenological study. Because focus groups take a collective view of lived experiences when compared to one-on-one interviews, new insights could be revealed rather than remain hidden (Caillaud & Flick, 2017). As with the semi-structured interviews, member checking was used with the focus group.

### ***Field Testing***

Prior to using the instruments to collect data, a field test for content validation of the instruments occurred by asking five SMEs on leadership to review and provide feedback on the questions in the instruments. A field test for content validation is the process of assessing the appropriateness of an instrument for measuring what the instrument is intended to measure (Shek et al., 2018). Engaging SMEs to review and provide feedback on such instruments with subsequent revisions is a common and accepted practice (Shek et al., 2018). As women are the focus of the study, four of the five SME reviewers were women. The feedback received was used to revise and improve the questions of all three instruments. Documentation of the field test for content validation process, in particular the communications to and from the SMEs during the review, is in Appendix F.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred digitally for each of the three instruments. One individual was responsible for all data collection, including conducting interviews and hosting the focus group session. Digital data collection is an accepted practice in academic research (Herreid et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2018; Taber et al., 2020). The use of digital data collection tools and approaches could provide insights during a study, insights which might otherwise be overlooked (Boivin & CohenMiller, 2018). Research which uses digital data collection needs to be concerned with data security (Cobb et al., 2018), and such security was an important consideration for the study.

To begin data collection, an Informed Consent document was sent along with the initial Invitation to Participate email to the target population. An additional Google Form was used to collect electronic signatures from participants and ensure a full understanding of what the Informed Consent document means. A link to the pre-questionnaire was included in the recruitment email.

Data collection for the pre-questionnaire occurred using Google Forms (Hsu & Wang, 2017). Google Forms is effective in collecting information from individuals, including those who are widely dispersed geographically (Beletsky et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017). Additionally, web-based questionnaires have better response rates than paper-based questionnaires (Ebert et al., 2018). Data collected via Google Forms was downloaded into Microsoft Word or Excel for later thematic analysis. The exit procedure for the pre-questionnaire was a thank-you email to all individuals who completed the pre-questionnaire, and a notification email to those individuals selected to participate in the semi-structured interview or the focus group.

Data collection continued with semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Zoom videoconferencing tool was used for both interviews and the focus group. Such tools have

proven useful for geographically dispersed focus groups (Matthews et al., 2018) and were useful for interview subjects who were geographically distant. Zoom has become an accepted tool for qualitative data collection due to its ease of use and low cost (Archibald et al., 2019). Audio tools such as telephone calls or audioconferencing could have been if videoconferencing was unavailable for certain participants, but was not required. Zoom videoconferences were scheduled via email.

Eleven semi-structured interviews occurred with 11 different participants and one focus group occurred with five participants. The 16 participants were those who completed pre-questionnaires. Interviews and the focus group occurred over a period of 11 weeks once research began, dependent on availability of participants. The Informed Consent document disclosed the fact the conversations would be recorded and participants were notified again at the beginning of recording (Archibald et al., 2019). Recording a conference allowed for later transcription and analysis while minimizing selective observation which could result in researcher bias (Cypress, 2017). Recordings were transcribed for later thematic analysis.

At the beginning of each conference call, participants were notified recording was occurring and given an opportunity to decline to participate. The exit procedure for both interviews and the focus group was a thank-you email to all participants. Each participant had an opportunity to review transcripts as part of member checking, as described in Data Analysis.

To ensure confidentiality, actual names were not recorded on any written or recorded interview transcripts or notes. Digital documents including pre-questionnaires, recordings, and transcripts are kept on an encrypted, password-secured laptop computer (Czechowski et al., 2019). Data is to be retained securely for three years post-study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began where data collection ended. The six-step process suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018) for qualitative research was used. Step 1 of the process organized the downloaded questionnaire responses and the recordings from interviews and the focus group into computer file folders. Also stored in the computer file folders were verbatim recording transcripts. Participants received and reviewed the transcripts as part of the member checking process.

In the second step, collected data were reviewed manually to increase familiarity. The review provided insights into the depth and substance of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Insights into the participants' lived experiences began to materialize. Observations and reflections were documented and stored with the data collected in Step 1 (Babchuk, 2019).

Step 3 began with the coding of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collected questionnaire, interview, and focus group transcripts were loaded into a qualitative analysis software tool called NVivo which was designed to store, query, and analyze textual information (QSR International, n.d.). NVivo provides transparency and an audit trail by providing the capability to record decisions made during the coding procedure (Houghton et al., 2017). Transparency is useful for demonstrating validity in qualitative research. The meanings revealed in the text were captured as codes in NVivo during the axial coding process (Allen, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To ensure the participants' lived experiences were driving the findings of the coding process, emergent rather than predetermined codes were used. The coding process was recursive as the texts were read several times and the codes refined upon each reading (Babchuk, 2019).

Categories were used to organize the set of codes during Step 4 (Creswell & Creswell,

2018). First, redundant and irrelevant codes were removed (Babchuk, 2019). Next, codes were grouped based on common meaning via an interpretative analysis process (Babchuk, 2019). Themes representing the introductory set of findings were generated from the categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The data analysis process continued in Step 5 with the creation of a narrative of lived experiences from identified themes (Babchuk, 2019). Tables and figures were created to support the narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An additional form of member checking occurred when Participants were allowed to review the narrative findings (Babchuk, 2019).

The learned insights from the research process were documented in Step 6 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The themes were shared again along with a discussion of those themes and how the themes represent insights into the lived experiences of participants (Babchuk, 2019). Also presented were lessons learned from the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Step 6 was completed with suggestions for future research.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The three instruments to be used in the research have been created specifically for the research study and have been reviewed and validated by a group of five SMEs in leadership. Three instruments were used to provide triangulation as an additional level of validation beyond SME review and to support the internal validity and credibility of the research process (da Silva Santos et al., 2020). Member checking was used to support credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). External validity and transferability were supported through the use of thick description, by describing the context of participants' lived experiences to demonstrate meaning to an outside observer (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability and confirmability were demonstrated by following the research steps documented here and by using the



capabilities of NVivo to capture an audit trail of coding decisions made (Houghton et al., 2017). Confirmability was demonstrated by taking all necessary steps to avoid introducing selective bias into study findings and results, consistent with the precepts of transcendental phenomenology (Cypress, 2017; Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The precepts of ethical research as defined by the Belmont Report are rights, health, and privacy of participants are protected through application of the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). These precepts apply to Internet-based research of the type utilized for the study, which used Internet-based tools such as Google Forms and Zoom (Anabo et al., 2019). As required by the Belmont Report, participants were provided an Informed Consent document for review as part of the Invitation to Participate process to ensure potential participants understood the minimal risks of the research. The Informed Consent document included information regarding the confidentiality of data collected and how anonymity was to be protected. Participants were recorded during interviews and the focus group for later transcription, and participants were informed such recording is occurring. Participants were informed pseudonyms would be used and participants could withdraw from the research at any time.

A copy of the Invitation to Participate is included in Appendix A. Appendix B has a copy of the Informed Consent document. Other documents included in the appendices relevant to the methodology are the three instruments which include questions to be asked of participants (Appendices C, D, and E), the SME validation emails and commentary (Appendix F), and the site approval form (Appendix G).

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. No supervisory relationship exists with members of the target population. Incentives were not provided to participants and participants self-selected to ensure the risk of disproportionately affecting disadvantaged populations was minimal (Dickert, 2009). Actual names were not recorded on any written or recorded interview transcripts or notes to ensure confidentiality. Pre-questionnaire, interview, and focus group documentation was stored electronically on an encrypted, password-secured laptop computer (Czechowski et al., 2019). Digital documents including recordings also are kept on a password-secured laptop computer. Data is to be retained securely for three years post-study.

### **Chapter Summary**

The following major sections were presented to describe the research methodology. The Problem Statement, Purpose of the Study, and Research Questions were restated. The Research Design and Rationale section outlined the basics of the phenomenology method, how the method was to be applied for the study, and why the method was selected. The Role of the Researcher section described interactions and relationships between the investigator and participants. The Research Procedures, Data Analysis, and Reliability and Validity sections summarized how data were collected, analyzed, and confirmed accurate. The Ethical Procedures section described how the rights of study participants were protected. Chapter 4 follows and documents the results of the study.

#### **Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results**

Men fill more management leadership roles than women do in United States businesses (Graham et al., 2017). Similarly, girls lack the same opportunities to participate in athletic endeavors as boys (Sabo & Veliz, 2011). Leadership skills and self-efficacy are often discovered or practiced during youth sports activities, skills which could be applied in non-sports settings (Fuller et al., 2018). Lack of equitable access to sports for girls and young women could result in a lack of equitable opportunities to learn leadership skills. Since adult women are less physically active than men (Bennie et al., 2019; National Center for Health Statistics, 2018), opportunities to learn or practice leadership skills in sports settings might not be available for adult women either.

The phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of volunteer leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program (Brue & Brue, 2016; Lin, 2017). The intent of the study was to determine if adult women benefit from opportunities to participate in athletic activities which grow leadership capabilities (Wegner et al., 2016). The goal was to understand if such a program could enhance women's leadership skills and self-efficacy about those skills, which women could apply in professional and personal lives. The results of the study are documented in this chapter, including thematic scrutiny of patterns which emerged during content analysis. The following three research questions were the focus of the study.

**Research Question One:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to leadership capabilities gained?

**Research Question Two:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to applying

any new leadership skills to careers or other activities outside of the non-profit fitness organization?

**Research Question Three:** What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to any sense of personal empowerment or self-efficacy gained?

This qualitative study of lived experiences of volunteer leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program was accomplished using a descriptive phenomenological approach (Neubauer et al., 2019). The first portion of the chapter includes details of the data collection process, including the number of participants, duration of the collection process, and additional collection procedures. The following section describes how the collected data were protected, prepared, coded, and analyzed to identify themes and arrive at conclusions. The patterns and themes uncovered in the analysis are framed against each of the research questions in the Results section. The Reliability and Validity section describes how credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were addressed in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The final section concludes the chapter with a summary of the research data analysis and findings.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred between December 2020 and February 2021. The primary tools used for data collection were Google Forms and Zoom. Google Forms was used to create an Internet-based questionnaire while Zoom was used to conduct interviews and a focus group via videoconference. Google Forms is useful to collect information from study participants, particularly in this study where participants were dispersed across the United States (Beletsky et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2017). The duration of data collection likely was impacted by participants'

commitments during the year-end holiday season and by the small pool of potential participants to recruit from. All data collection occurred remotely using the Internet tools described above allowing individuals to participate from any location. All participants are members of the non-profit organization who completed the leadership development program and have served as volunteer leaders in the organization for at least six months.

### **The Collection Process**

An Invitation to Participate email message was drafted and shared with the non-profit organization's site coordinator, who in turn passed the message to the pool of potential participants. The email described an overview of the data collection process and included a link to the Google Form which included both the Informed Consent document and the initial questionnaire. Participants could not complete the questionnaire without first reviewing and acknowledging the Informed Consent document. The Google Form included space for volunteer participants to provide contact information including email addresses and phone numbers as well as basic demographic information including age and duration of leadership experience with the organization. All information collected was secured on an encrypted, password-protected laptop (Czechowski et al., 2019) and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

One week was initially allocated to collect initial questionnaires. The initial Invitation to Participate (Appendix A) was emailed to potential participants on December 3, 2020. Due to the year-end holidays and the many commitments during the timeframe, initial study enrollment was slow. The first response was received the day after the invitation was emailed and additional responses were received over the subsequent ten-week period. Participants were able to complete the Informed Consent and questionnaire at any convenient time using any Internet-connected device which provided web browser support.

Sixteen individuals completed the Informed Consent document (Appendix B) and the initial questionnaire (Appendix C). The original study proposal called for a minimum of 15 participants using purposive sampling to select the 15 from all responses. As the total number of responses was only one more than the 15 planned, all 16 were included, which provided additional richness to the collected data. Five of these individuals participated in a focus group conducted using the Zoom videoconference tool, and the remaining 11 individuals participated in one-on-one interviews, also using Zoom. Individuals were randomly selected to participate in an interview vs. the focus group. The interviews and focus group were expected to take place over four weeks (28 days) and actually occurred over 30 days. Interviews ranged in length from 28 to 53 minutes, while the focus group was 49 minutes long. Zoom calls were recorded and transcribed. All participants were notified Zoom calls were recorded at the beginning of each call and all agreed to be recorded.

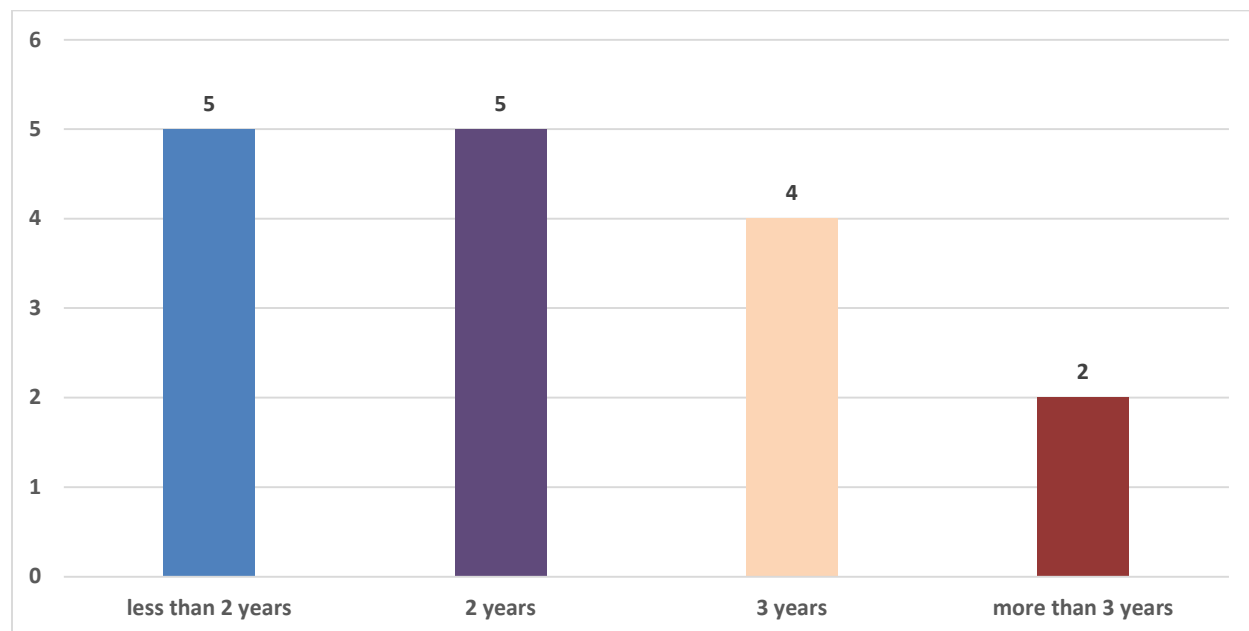
Exit procedures included member checking of transcripts. Copies of interview and focus group transcripts were shared by email with appropriate participants to allow the individuals the opportunity to suggest changes to incorrect transcriptions. Fourteen out of the 16 participants responded. Of the 14 who responded, 13 noted the transcripts were acceptable, while the 14th individual noted only spelling errors. No additional follow-up was required with study participants for this process.

In summary, the size of the target population was 67 women. The Invitation to Participate was sent to members of the target population, 16 volunteers acknowledged the Informed Consent, and all 16 of the volunteers participated fully in the study. The original study proposal called for a minimum of 15 participants using purposive sampling to select the 15 from all responses. As the total number of responses was only one more than the 15 planned, all 16 were

included, which provided additional richness to the collected data. Initial data collection took longer than expected due to year-end holidays, but the extended data collection period did not affect the results or validity of the study. No other deviations from the original data collection plan occurred. The data collection process was not materially affected by any events or circumstances.

### **The Participants**

Individuals selected for this study were women who participated in leadership development activities for a global fitness-based women's empowerment non-profit organization. An additional criterion was participants should have completed the leadership development program at least six months before the study. Candidates were asked to volunteer to participate, as more honest responses are expected from volunteers compared to those who participate involuntarily (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017). Members of the target population were invited to participate with a goal of at least 15 participants, and 16 women volunteered (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Rather than exclude one individual to reach the target sample size of 15, all 16 responses were included for analysis.

**Figure 2***Participants' Tenure with the Non-Profit Organization*

Limited demographic information was collected due to the desire to ensure anonymity for participants selected from the small target population. Participants' tenure with the non-profit organization is shown in Figure 2. Most participants had two or fewer years with the organization. A primary reason for this tilt is the organization is actively seeking to expand and to grow new leaders to serve the new membership. As required in the participant selection and identification process, each participant completed the leadership development program at least six months before the data collection period. Some individuals entered the leadership development program soon after beginning participation with the non-profit organization as shared by some participants in interviews.

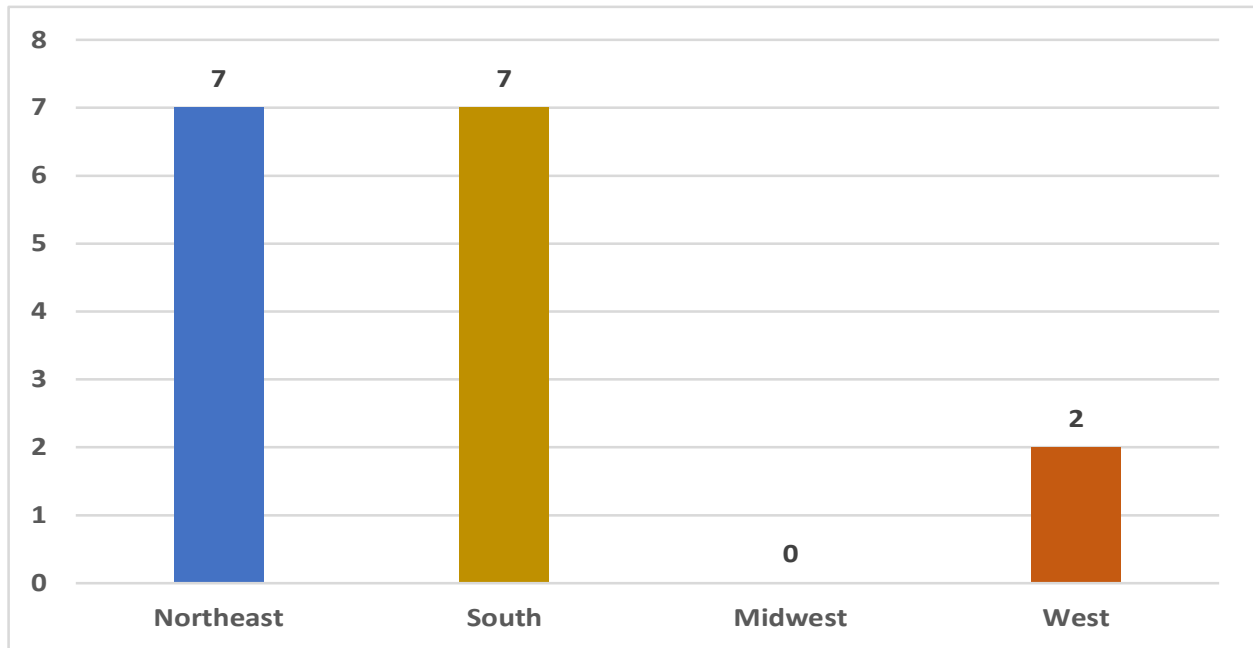
The non-profit organization is international in reach. Within the United States, the organization has members within each of the four major geographic regions. Participants for the study volunteered from three of the four regions, as shown in Figure 3. The greater participation



from the eastern portion of the United States could reflect the organization's beginnings on the eastern seaboard with later expansion westward.

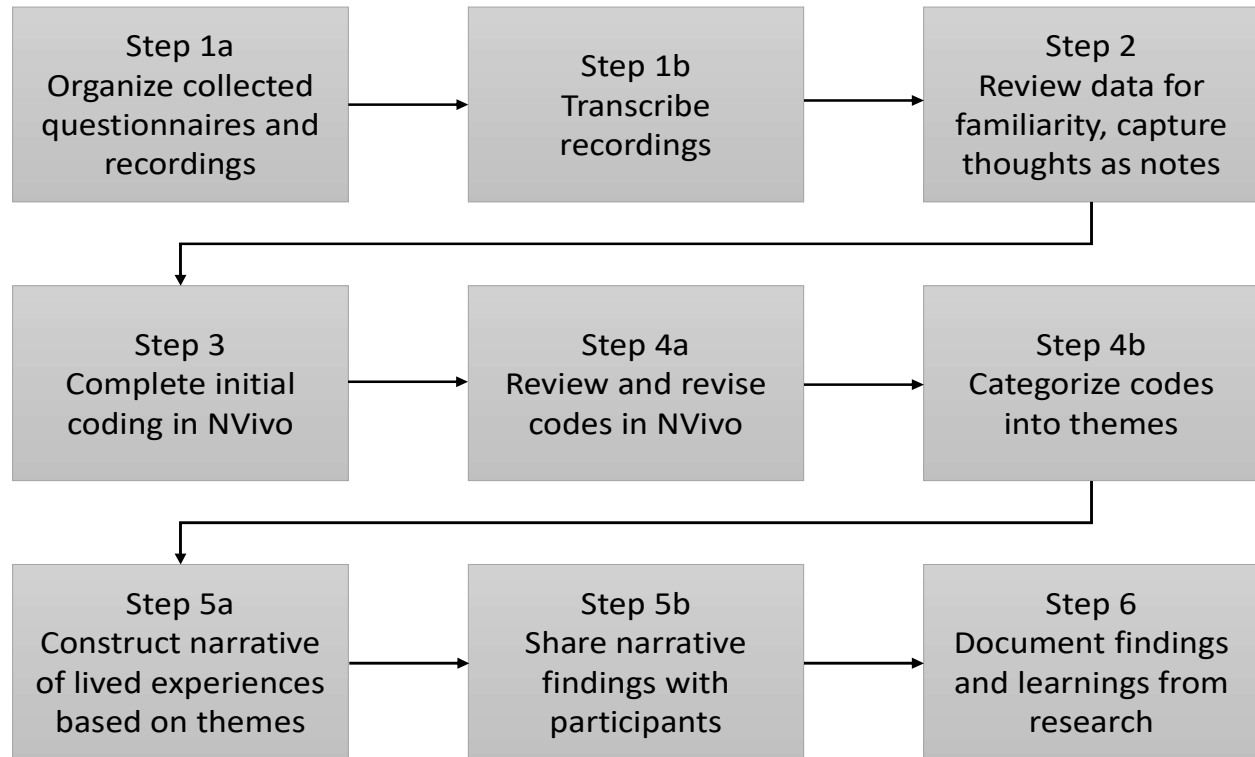
**Figure 3**

*Participants' Location by Geographic Region*



### **Data Analysis and Results**

An inductive approach was used for data analysis as such an approach allows participants' experiences to drive the process of analysis (Azungah, 2018). The analysis followed the six-step process for qualitative research promulgated by Creswell and Creswell (2018) as shown in Figure 4. A detailed diary of activities was maintained during the data analysis process.

**Figure 4***Researcher's Qualitative Analysis Process*

*Note.* Process based on a six-step process for qualitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Step 1 organized the downloaded questionnaire responses and the Zoom recordings from interviews and the focus group into computer file folders on a password-protected laptop. Step 1 continued with verbatim transcription of recordings, with the transcriptions stored in the same computer file folders. Transcripts were shared with participants for member checking.

In Step 2, all data in written form were reviewed two to three times manually to become familiar with the data. The initial review provided a general impression of the depth and meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Initial insights about the lived experiences of participants began to take shape.

Coding of data began in Step 3 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questionnaire responses

and written transcripts were loaded into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software tool designed to store, query, and analyze information (QSR International, n.d.). NVivo provides the ability to document decisions made during the coding process which provides transparency and an audit trail (Houghton et al., 2017) which is useful for demonstrating validity of the research process. In the axial coding process, keywords were captured as codes in NVivo about the meanings revealed in the text (Allen, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Emergent codes were used to ensure the participants' lived experiences were driving the findings of the coding process.

The codes were organized into categories in Step 4 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, codes were combined to eliminate redundancy and winnowed to eliminate codes which were irrelevant to the research questions (Babchuk, 2019). Next, codes were grouped into themes based on common meaning via an interpretative analysis process (Babchuk, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Step 5 continued the data analysis by constructing a narrative of lived experiences from identified themes (Babchuk, 2019). Participants were given the opportunity to review the narrative findings as part of member checking (Babchuk, 2019). Finally, in Step 6, the learnings from the research process and suggestions for future research were documented (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Codes Identified from Data Analysis of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire completed by each participant provided an introduction to the topics which would be asked in the later interviews and focus group. The content of the questionnaire is documented in Appendix C. As the questionnaire was a static Google Form, no opportunity existed to ask follow-up questions of the participant during the process. Conversely, participants

had no opportunity to ask clarifying questions before completing answers in the Google Form. Many common themes emerged within and across questionnaire responses.

### **Codes Identified from Data Analysis of the Interviews**

The second instrument was an interview (Appendix D) conducted with most of the participants. The intent of the interview in relation to the questionnaire was to ask similar but different questions of participants to gain greater insights into lived experiences before, during, and after participation in the development program for the purpose of triangulation (Flick, 2018). The interactive nature of the interview process allowed for follow-up questions to drill down in specific areas where the static questionnaire format did not. Because individuals could be more comfortable having an interview conversation than completing short written essays in an online form, more questions could be asked (Bloch et al., 2011). The format allowed the interviewer and interviewee to form a brief personal connection which could have allowed participants to provide more reflective answers and share emotions related to experiences.

### **Codes Identified from Data Analysis of the Focus Group**

The number of codes identified in the focus group was fewer than in the questionnaires or interviews. The smaller number of codes was a result of the one focus group being a single input to the coding process rather than 11 interviews or 16 questionnaires. The focus group included five participants and the interviewer on a Zoom videoconference call. The questions discussed in the focus group are shared in Appendix E. Because of the greater number of participants, fewer questions were asked than in the individual interviews. Participation by multiple individuals generated conversation among the individuals, adding to the richness of data collected and providing an additional form of triangulation.

**Emergent Themes from Identified Codes**

Significant themes were revealed during the review of the identified codes of each instrument. The identified themes relate to what participants gained through the leadership program or through experience with the non-profit organization as revealed in thoughts and words shared in the research instruments. Each of the revealed themes was discussed below in the context of the three research questions.

**Results**

Figure 5 is a matrix which summarizes the themes identified within each instrument. Themes are ordered in each column to demonstrate how prominent the theme was for the instrument. Color-coding is used to highlight the same theme appearing across multiple instruments.

**Figure 5***Summary of Themes Identified by Instrument*

Questionnaires	Interviews	Focus Group
Improved personal self-efficacy	Improved personal self-efficacy	Enjoyed culture of warmth and belonging
Learned new skills or improved existing skills	Learned new skills or improved existing skills	Improved personal self-efficacy
Applied new or improved skills in another setting	Enjoyed culture of warmth and belonging	Learned new skills or improved existing skills
Enjoyed culture of warmth and belonging	Relationship between fitness and leadership competencies	Applied new or improved skills in another setting
	Applied new or improved skills in another setting	
	Quality of training program and materials	

Figure 6 is a matrix which summarizes which themes uncovered during analysis support which research questions and uses the same color-coding as Figure 5 (Stuckey, 2015). The results of this study are organized by the research questions with supporting themes and relevant analysis included with each question in the following sections. Some details and participant commentary are omitted to ensure conciseness and readability of the results. Where participants are quoted to demonstrate the findings from the data analysis, names are changed to protect confidentiality (Surmiak, 2018).

**Figure 6***Summary of Research Questions and Associated Themes*

Research Question One	Research Question Two	Research Question Three
Learned new skills or improved existing skills	Applied new or improved skills in another setting	Improved personal self-efficacy
Enjoyed culture of warmth and belonging	Improved personal self-efficacy	Relationship between fitness and leadership competencies
Quality of training program and materials		

**Findings Connected to Research Question One**

The first question of the study asked, “What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to leadership capabilities gained?” Participants largely concurred leadership capabilities had been acquired or improved due to the leadership development program. Two additional themes emerged which supported the effectiveness of the particular development program: the quality of the program and materials and the feeling of warmth and belonging experienced by participants which enhanced learning effectiveness.

***Learned New Skills or Improved Existing Skills***

Research Question One was closely aligned with the theme of new skills acquired or existing skills improved via participation in the leadership development program. Participants reported gaining or improving a wide variety of leadership skills via the program.

Communication was one of the most frequently mentioned skills acquired. Melanie tied communication to empathy, stating, “Empathy and listening are key to successfully managing a group of people that are pursuing goals that are often life-changing and very emotional.”

Enhanced mentoring skills were also brought forth by participants. Stacy shared, "Being a leader of leaders was most beneficial to me in my development. It helps me to practice the art of delegation to and mentoring others to help them grow themselves. I find this very rewarding."

A few participants believed the program had merely confirmed or reinforced existing knowledge or skills. Danielle stated, "I felt that it reinforced all that I knew about leadership. The leadership skills needed for [the non-profit organization] were parallel and compatible with the leadership skills I had acquired through teaching, coaching, etc." Among all participants, only Lisa noted, "I felt that it did not enhance my leadership skills very much."

### ***Enjoyed Culture of Warmth and Belonging***

Multiple participants expressed sentiments which indicated feelings of warmth and belonging both in the leadership development program specifically and the non-profit organization in general. One aspect of the culture of warmth and belonging expressed by multiple participants was a feeling of camaraderie of women within the program. Participant Becky stated, "Now I'm in this circle of women that I am so happy to be here. Yeah. And it's very different. It is so nurturing and positive."

### ***Quality of Training Program and Materials***

No question in any of the three instruments asked about the quality of the leadership development program or the materials used in leadership instruction. Yet participants brought up the quality of materials used in the program independently and multiple times to the extent the topic emerged as a theme during data analysis of the interviews. Participants also frequently mentioned specific instructors from the program in a positive light. Grace stated, "I was surprised how high caliber the materials and training were. I felt my knowledge base was enhanced."



**Findings Connected to Research Question Two**

The second research question of the study posited, “What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to applying any new leadership skills to careers or other activities outside of the non-profit fitness organization?” The theme of applying new or improved skills emerged as a theme in all three instruments, most strongly in the questionnaires. The ability to apply skills in other settings is supported by improved self-efficacy regarding leadership abilities, a theme which also emerged strongly in all three instruments.

***Applied New or Improved Skills in Another Setting***

Participants shared a wide range of new or improved skills applied and environments in which skills were used outside the non-profit organization. Danielle’s comment might have captured the sentiment most succinctly. “I think that any enhanced skills work toward improving results no matter the situation.” Such usage was applied both in work and non-work environments. Faith shared a work-environment example, “I wanted to form a subgroup in [my male-dominated industry] where women could unofficially mentor and work with other women and learn from their experiences. [...The leadership development program is] what actually inspired me to do that.” For non-work environments, Danielle might have summarized the feelings of many by noting, “Any situation in family, job, life is more manageable when I use the leadership skills that I have honed my entire life, enhanced by the [non-profit organization] training.”

***Improved Personal Self-Efficacy***

The theme of improved personal self-efficacy emerged strongly in all three instruments. This theme supports Research Question Two because as individuals gained confidence in new or

improved skills offered via the leadership development program, the individuals gained self-efficacy or confidence of ability to perform leadership skills in other settings. As this theme is supportive of Research Question Three as well, personal self-efficacy is reviewed further below.

### **Findings Connected to Research Question Three**

The final question of the research study asked, “What is the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to any sense of personal empowerment or self-efficacy gained?” Increased self-confidence resulting in improved personal self-efficacy was the strongest theme to emerge from the analysis of questionnaires and interviews and was strongly emergent in the analysis of the focus group. A relationship between fitness and leadership competency or self-efficacy was a supporting theme which emerged.

#### ***Improved Personal Self-Efficacy***

Improved self-confidence and self-efficacy were mentioned in nearly every discussion of the leadership development program and by nearly every participant in the study. Lisa provided a clear assessment of belief in her ability to lead, stating, “I see myself as a much more confident leader.” Natalie shared a career perspective regarding self-efficacy gained, stating, “I definitely feel like it helped me be more confident in the role I already had at work.” Stacy shared her view on how the program and organization’s mission and programs impacted her, “By leading this nonprofit organization and personally observing the empowerment and growth of the coaches and members, I have found that my confidence has strengthened; and I, myself have been empowered to do more.”

***Relationship Between Fitness and Leadership Competencies***

When asked to comment on how personal leadership skills had changed as a result of the program, Carol stated, "I feel like my confidence has been totally boosted and I tend to be shy and standoffish and quiet and intimidated easily." When asked about the impact of fitness activities on her confidence, Hope shared her sentiment, "Well, I think being able to accomplish certain things and pushing yourself makes you feel confident whether you're running a 12-minute mile or an eight-minute mile. So, yeah, definitely." Melanie described plans to apply enhanced leadership self-efficacy by sharing, "I think that being involved with [the non-profit organization] and just the whole running experience has given me so much more confidence to actually take that step to run for [public] office."

**Reliability and Validity**

The data collection methods used were appropriate for the phenomenological study. The questionnaire was implemented using Google Forms, allowing the collection of participant viewpoints without influence from others. The three instruments used in the study were created specifically for the conducted research and were reviewed and validated by five leadership SMEs. Collected and analyzed data were constantly reviewed and compared to ensure results accurately reflected the true findings of the study. Thick description, describing the setting of participants' lived experiences to establish meaning to an external observer, was used to support external validity and transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Following the planning research steps and using the features of NVivo to capture an audit trail of coding choices demonstrated dependability and confirmability (Houghton et al., 2017).

**Triangulation**

Triangulation was provided through the use of three instruments as an additional level of validation in support of the internal validity and credibility of the investigatory process (da Silva Santos et al., 2020). Such methodological triangulation supports the mitigation of introduced bias (Fusch et al., 2018). Each instrument revealed the same three themes in which participants in the leadership program improved personal self-efficacy, learned new skills or improved existing skills, and applied new or improved skills in another setting.

**Member Checking**

Two levels of member checking with participants were completed to support credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checking via the sharing of transcripts with participants ensured the participants' lived experiences were reflected in their own words. Sharing study results after data analysis confirmed findings were consistent with participants' points of view. Member checking supports the precepts of transcendental phenomenology, in which all necessary steps were to be taken to avoid introducing selective bias into study findings and results, thereby demonstrating confirmability (Cypress, 2017; Neubauer et al., 2019).

**Data Saturation**

In qualitative research, data saturation occurs when thematic analysis reveals no additional meaning to be gleaned from further scrutiny of the data (Saunders et al., 2018). Empirical studies demonstrate data saturation could occur with as few as five or six individuals, with 12 interviews typically resulting in the highest levels of saturation (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation was achieved in this study as no new thematic codes were revealed after eight individual conversations plus the focus group, with the remaining conversations only confirming previously revealed codes.

### **Chapter Summary**

The preceding chapter shared the findings of a phenomenological study to explore the lived experiences of volunteer leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. Data for the study was collected through a questionnaire using Google Forms, via a series of interviews conducted using the Zoom videoconference tool, and a focus group also using the Zoom videoconference tool. Three instruments were used to support validity and reliability. Collected data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to complete coding and identify themes in participant responses.

For Research Question One, participants largely confirmed the acquisition of new or improved leadership skills resulting from participation in the women-focused, fitness-based leadership program. Participants in general also confirmed opportunities to utilize new or improved leadership skills in situations outside of the non-profit organization which provided the leadership development program, in support of Research Question Two. Participants largely confirmed an increase in personal self-efficacy and empowerment as a result of participating in the program, as asked in Research Question Three. Tables and figures were used to illustrate results and participants' own words were used to support conclusions. A summary of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions is included in the following chapter. Also included in the following chapter are discussions of limitations, recommendations, and implications for leadership. A summary of the research study concludes the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to interview at least 15 volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program to find the commonalities in lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply such skills professionally. The goal was to understand if such a leadership development program could enhance women's leadership skills and self-efficacy about those skills, which women could apply outside the organization. The intent was to discover meanings through the participants' lived experiences related to such improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply the skills personally and professionally. As 16 individuals volunteered, rather than exclude one individual to reach the target sample size of 15, all 16 responses were included for the study.

Multiple data collection instruments were used to explore the participants' lived experiences regarding the program, leadership skills, and leadership self-efficacy. Data collected through the instruments demonstrated the value gained by participants in the leadership program. The findings addressed the gap in the literature regarding how a combination of leadership development and physical fitness could address self-efficacy and leadership skills among women. The findings are summarized with reference to the research questions as follows.

**Research Question One:** The intent of the first research question was to explore the experience of volunteer leaders who participated in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program, with regards to leadership capabilities gained. Volunteer leaders reported learning new skills or improving existing skills as a result of participation in the program. Program participants also enjoyed an organizational culture of warmth and belonging. The quality of the training program and materials used in the program was frequently mentioned.

**Research Question Two:** The purpose of the next question was to ask volunteer leaders who participated in the leadership development program if any new leadership skills were applied to careers or other activities outside of the non-profit fitness organization. Research participants described instances of applying new or improved skills in settings outside the non-profit organization, both personally and professionally. Improved personal self-efficacy regarding leadership skills as a result of the program was also reported.

**Research Question Three:** With the final research question, the objective was to learn if program participants experienced a sense of personal empowerment or self-efficacy gained. As with Research Question Two, volunteer leaders described a sense of improved personal self-efficacy after participation in the leadership program. Participants also reported a relationship between personal fitness confidence and leadership confidence.

Detailed discussions of the findings, interpretations, conclusions of the research are provided. The limitations of the study are addressed including transferability, reliability, credibility, and validity. Possible actions to provide additional leadership learning opportunities for women which could have implications for leadership capabilities in society are presented followed by recommendations for future research. The conclusion reflects on knowledge gained and critical outcomes of the research.

### **Findings, Interpretations, Conclusions**

Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group to understand participants' perspectives on participation in the leadership development program of the non-profit organization were used in the study. The instruments were reviewed by subject matter experts to ensure each was appropriate to gain desired insights into participants' lived experiences. Sixteen individuals who had completed the leadership program volunteered to participate in the research

study. All 16 individuals met the selection criteria. Rather than exclude one individual to reach the target sample size of 15, all 16 responses were included in the study.

The questionnaire was created in Google Forms and completed by 16 participants. Interviews and the focus group were conducted using Zoom videoconferencing software. Questionnaire responses and transcripts of the interviews and focus group were analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The data analysis process revealed six themes common among the participants. The revealed themes were organized according to the research questions. Other insights which were not relevant to the research questions are not included here.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theories provided the framework for the study. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT) posits leadership as a process in which leaders act as positive role models for others (Bass, 1985; Castillo et al., 2020). Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) hypothesizes individuals learn behavior through interaction with and observation of the environment, and individual behavior modifies the environment and others' behaviors (Bandura, 1986; Harinie et al., 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Aspects of TLT and SCT permeate both the women-focused organization and the leadership development program.

Applying TLT, the leaders of the women-focused, fitness-based leadership program at the heart of the proposed study wished to act as role models and inspire volunteer leaders to achieve athletically, gain a sense of self-efficacy, and become better leaders. Multiple participants reported learning new skills or improving existing skills, consistent with the revealed theme. Communication and empathy were commonly mentioned as acquired or enhanced skills. Carol noted, "I have learned to overcome my fear of speaking in a group, and sharing my thoughts and ideas," while Hope stated, "I've learned that leadership is about listening." Empathy



and communication are linked to servant leadership and authentic leadership styles which are viewed positively as ethical and moral (Hoch et al., 2018; Kock et al., 2019). Participants also mentioned mentoring skills, including Grace who shared, "I have a pretty high degree of confidence generally but [the non-profit organization] has given me more confidence in my ability to mentor members and convey information to people in different places in their lives."

Consistent with SCT, the designers and instructors of the women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program at the heart of the study intended to establish an environment where participants could learn from each other as well as from the program's instructors. The established learning environment allowed participants to enjoy a culture of warmth and belonging, a revealed theme of the study. The established culture is an example of the environment influencing individuals, consistent with SCT (Harinie et al., 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Participant Amy described the environment as a "sisterhood" and added, "It is different, and for some people, that difference can make all the difference. It's the difference between being intimidated and overwhelmed and scared, and not."

Multiple connections between TLT, SCT, and the revealed themes were established. The organization and program were built to provide a welcoming, empowering environment for all women who participate. Discussions with the participants of the study showcased the success of the approach as the sense of belonging focused on the needs of the participants (Bashir & Khalil, 2017). The following section further explores and highlights the connections between the six themes and the two theories of the theoretical framework, TLT and SCT.

### **Revealed Themes**

Personal reflections of lived experiences were gathered from leadership program participants to understand what individuals did or did not gain from the program, to understand

how individuals applied learnings outside of the non-profit organization which provided the development program, and to recognize if and how individuals' self-confidence and self-efficacy improved. Questions in all instruments were open-ended to allow participants to provide a full response. Themes were not identified in advance; data analysis allowed themes to emerge. The responses from the 16 study participants revealed six themes regarding how the leadership program and training environment benefited attendees.

### ***Learned New Skills or Improved Existing Skills***

As women have different leadership development needs than men, women benefit from leadership programs which focus on women (Brue & Brue, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Such programs recognize women typically have different roles within families and need leadership development programs structured to recognize those differences (Debebe, 2011). Women have less access to formal leadership education than men, which affects the growth of a leadership mindset (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; McGowan & Stokes, 2019). Leadership programs that focus on or include only women provide a safe learning environment for female leaders (Frkal, 2018). Establishing such a safe learning environment with supportive instructors is consistent with the goals of the leadership development program for women.

The theme extends knowledge by demonstrating a women's leadership program framed within a fitness lens is an effective approach to teaching new or updated leadership skills for women. The executive leaders of the non-profit organization sought to create a supportive environment to grow leadership skills through personal empowerment, using a transformational leadership approach, consistent with both SCT and TLT. Transformational leadership operates through the use of four attributes to impact others: by encouraging intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence in personal

interactions (Castillo et al., 2020). The four attributes are consistent with the new or improved skills frequently mentioned by participants, including communication, empathy, and mentoring. Additionally, participating in physical activity or sports as an adult provides an additional outlet to develop leadership skills (Hambrick et al., 2018). After completing the development program, participants engaged in activities leading others in the broader non-profit organization. Leading such activities exercised and strengthened the new and improved leadership skills, opportunities which possibly did not exist elsewhere for the participants, as adult women do not have the same sports-based leadership opportunities as men (Bennie et al., 2019; National Center for Health Statistics, 2018).

### ***Enjoyed Culture of Warmth and Belonging***

Leadership programs that focus on or include only women provide a safe learning environment for female leaders (Frkal, 2018). Multiple participants expressed sentiments that indicated feelings of warmth and belonging both in the leadership development program specifically and the non-profit organization in general. Feelings of belonging engender greater commitment to the learning process (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). Consistent with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, individuals need feelings of belonging and a safe space for learning before moving on to self-actualization and full potential (Booker & Campbell-Whatley, 2018; Maslow, 1943). Women-only training sessions provide safe learning environments (Debebe, 2011).

The non-profit leadership program established a warm, supportive environment conducive to learning. The revealed theme confirms the findings of the literature review where a supportive environment based on transformational leadership supports personal change and growth (Cetin & Kinik, 2015; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). The designers and instructors of the leadership program influenced the program participants and established a learning environment

to further influence the participants. The influences were consistent with SCT which posits individuals are influenced by other individuals and the surrounding environment. The program instructors also sought to model behavior for program participants, as the participants become organization leaders who are warm and welcoming to new and existing members of the organization. Such role modeling was consistent with TLT. Establishing a culture of warmth and belonging enabled a safe space for learning, consistent with both SCT and TLT, allowing participants to learn new or improve existing skills effectively.

### ***Quality of Training Program and Materials***

Although no specific questions were asked regarding the format of the leadership development program, the instructors teaching the program, or the materials used in the program, the topic surfaced multiple times in conversations with program participants. Attendees described the program as well-developed and well-organized. Participant Grace stated, "I was surprised how high caliber the materials and training were. I felt my knowledge base was enhanced."

Participants' experience with specific instructors served as an example of benefitting from role models, or TLT (Castillo et al., 2020). Experience with high-quality materials is an example of benefitting from the environment, or SCT (Harinie et al., 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The literature regarding SCT, how individuals are influenced by both other individuals and the environment, is confirmed by this theme. Further, the quality of the materials

allowed program attendees to begin using acquired skills immediately, which supports the next revealed theme of Applied New or Improved Skills in Another Setting.

### ***Applied New or Improved Skills in Another Setting***

This theme emerged from all three instruments, most prominently from the questionnaire (Appendix C). Leadership skills which an individual develops in support of one role could be applied by the individual in other roles (Kjellström et al., 2020). This premise applies to skills learned in volunteer roles, which are transferrable to full-time professional roles (Gordon & Gordon, 2017). Individuals might seek out volunteer leadership roles with the intent of using skills learned in the workplace or gaining employer approval for learning leadership skills (Fuller & Friedel, 2017). Participants shared a wide range of skills applied and environments where such skills were applied. Examples included both work and non-work environments. Delegation, empowerment, communication, organizational, and mentorship skills were mentioned.

The referenced studies from the literature are confirmed by the revealed theme. The program participants benefitted from SCT. The participants were influenced by the instructors and the learning environment as leadership skills were developed and enhanced. In daily lives, the program attendees are now influencing the work and non-work environments with updated skills gained from the leadership program.

### ***Improved Personal Self-Efficacy***

Substantial support for improved self-efficacy was provided by discussions of improved self-confidence. Improved self-confidence was mentioned in nearly every discussion of the leadership development program and by nearly every participant in the study, supporting Research Question Three. This theme also supports Research Question Two because as individuals gained confidence in new or improved skills offered via the leadership development

program, the individuals gained self-efficacy or confidence of ability to perform leadership skills in other settings.

The experiences of participants in gaining self-confidence were an example of the application of TLT due to the benefit received from the role modeling of desired behaviors by more senior leaders or instructors (Castillo et al., 2020). The experiences were also an example of SCT. Behaviors of other members of the organization influenced participants in beliefs regarding personal efficacy (Harinie et al., 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The revealed theme confirms the literature where skills gained in one setting could be applied in other settings.

### ***Relationship Between Fitness and Leadership Competencies***

Physical fitness is not a requirement for leadership competency or efficacy. Still, many participants shared how personal improvements or confidence in physical fitness resulted in improvements in personal leadership confidence and competency. When asked about the connection between personal fitness and leadership skills, Melanie's perspective represented the viewpoint of many participants, stating, "It's just the confidence that you get when you train for something and you complete something. It's a huge ego boost and confidence boost and it just makes you feel really good about yourself." Hope shared a similar sentiment, "When you're feeling confident in one aspect of your life and you're making goals and you're meeting goals, it streams into other parts."

The theme extends knowledge by demonstrating how positive results could be obtained for adult women by combining leadership training with fitness activities. Physical activity improves individuals' self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017; Zamani Sani et al., 2016). The non-profit organization utilized physical activity as a mechanism to provide a welcoming, empowering environment to enhance such attributes among women.

Social Cognitive Theory applied to the leadership program as the instructors and the training environment focused on building physical fitness and leadership among program participants. Transformational Leadership Theory is also relevant as the theory has utility in both business and sports environments in instilling confidence in followers (Kovach, 2018). TLT centers activities on others – in this case, the participants of the leadership program – to develop capabilities and competency among others. The combination of leadership training for adult women combined with fitness activities is innovative and was not identified elsewhere in the literature review.

### **Limitations**

The phenomenological study concentrated on the lived experiences of 16 volunteer participants in a non-profit organization's women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program to gain an understanding of how the program influenced personal leadership skills and self-efficacy. Phenomenological studies develop a rich understanding of phenomena through insights developed from the lived experiences of individuals. Such studies typically have small sample sizes, a limitation of such research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The same study completed with a different set of 16 individuals might provide different results, limiting the generalizability of results. External validity and transferability could be a challenge in qualitative studies but were preserved via thick descriptions of the setting of participants' lived experiences to establish meaning to an external observer (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). While the study design and method were intended to maximize transferability to other settings, such transference might not occur in all cases.

Reliability in the study was supported through the use of three instruments to triangulate results and by rigorously following the research methodology defined in Chapter 3 (Cypress, 2017; da Silva Santos et al., 2020). Similar results obtained from multiple participants across

three instruments support the reliability of findings expressed in the revealed themes. Credibility was maintained through member checking by sharing transcripts and study results with participants (Birt et al., 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability was also supported by the member checking process and by meticulously following the steps defined in the research plan to avoid introducing personal bias to study results (Cypress, 2017). Participants who responded confirmed the accuracy of transcripts and concurred with the results; no participants objected, supporting credibility and confirmability for the study. Data saturation was achieved in this study as no new thematic codes were revealed after eight individual conversations plus the focus group, with the remaining conversations only confirming previously revealed codes.

### **Recommendations**

While women are equal to men in theory and law, in practice such equity falls short. The extent of the problem was evident in the corporate world, where men are 50% more likely to be offered a leadership position (Tinsley & Ely, 2018). Individuals impacted by the problem are (1) women who lack leadership capabilities due to a lack of training or opportunities; and (2) women who have leadership potential but do not have a sense of empowerment to exercise any leadership skills or to pursue leadership opportunities. The literature highlighted participation in sports brings forth leadership skills and self-efficacy (Fuller et al., 2018) yet girls and young women do not have the same opportunity to participate in sports (Pantzer et al., 2018).

### **Leadership Development Opportunities for Women**

Women benefit from leadership programs that focus on women (Brue & Brue, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2019). Such programs should be structured appropriately to be successful. Women seeking to improve personal leadership capabilities should seek out such programs to learn from other women in a safe learning environment, consistent with SCT (Frkal, 2018).



Businesses and other organizations which seek to improve and expand leadership capabilities among staff should make women-only leadership training available.

Employer costs of providing healthcare insurance to employees continue to increase (Buchmueller & Valletta, 2017). Employers seeking to reduce the costs of providing healthcare insurance to employees could see benefits from workplace wellness programs which could, in turn, reduce the cost of providing insurance (Rezai et al., 2020). Separately, organizations that provide for the physical fitness of employees are frequently rated among the best places to work (McGinley, 2020). Progressive organizations should seek to follow the model established by the non-profit organization of the study and combine leadership development training with physical fitness activities or workplace wellness programs. The confidence achieved through improved fitness could carry over to improved confidence in leadership capabilities from such a combined program.

### **Future Research**

The small number of participants in the completed qualitative study prevents the results from being generalizable. Completing a quantitative study with a larger number of study participants from such women-focused, fitness-based leadership development programs would provide for formal statistical analysis and generalizable results. The non-profit organization in the completed study does not have sufficient numbers to support a quantitative study of this type. Such a quantitative study either needs to draw from multiple organizations with comparable leadership development programs or be deferred until the target population increases sufficiently.

While the completed study focused on leadership skills, the non-profit organization seeks to empower all women, not just leaders. Participants in the leadership development program constitute a fraction of all members of the organization. A follow-up study should focus on the

remaining members of the organization. Understanding how improved physical fitness and a sense of belonging to a women-focused, fitness-based organization improve self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy among women who are not seeking leadership roles would demonstrate if organizations seeking to empower women through physical fitness activities such as running are successful.

### **Implications for Leadership**

Two important opportunities exist for leaders in our society to address the leadership gender equity gap. The first opportunity is to address the gap at the source, by providing the same leadership development opportunities for girls as for boys through youth sports. The second opportunity is to provide adult women who missed the chance to learn leadership skills as girls to address the gap through women-focused, fitness-based leadership development programs.

### **Leadership Development Opportunities for Girls**

For recent generations, Title IX legislation has had a positive effect in providing opportunities for girls to participate in youth sports and gain leadership skills to apply in non-sports settings (Fuller et al., 2018; Sabo & Veliz, 2011). Conversations with participants of this study highlighted a shortage of youth sports opportunities still exists. For previous generations, opportunities for girls to participate in sports did not exist at all or only in a limited fashion, constraining opportunities to learn leadership skills in such settings. Organizational and societal leaders should seek equity for girls in youth sports and other leadership training opportunities to allow more girls to reach adulthood on par with boys in terms of leadership skill acquisition and practice.

### **Leadership Development Opportunities for Women**

Women who missed the opportunity to learn leadership skills in youth sports or other activities could still leverage physical fitness to learn or improve leadership skills as an adult. Physical fitness alone improves self-esteem and self-efficacy (Van Der Roest et al., 2017; Zamani Sani et al., 2016). Organizations providing group fitness activities for adult women build a sense of community for those women, who become more self-confident (Wegner et al., 2016). The results of the completed study demonstrated adult women still benefit from opportunities to participate in athletic activities which grow leadership capabilities. Organizational and societal leaders should seek to develop and promote effective leadership development programs such as the one which was the focus of the completed study. Such an effort would address historical gender inequities while deepening the pool of competent leaders to address future challenges.

### **Conclusion**

Given the opportunity, women are more likely than men to demonstrate transformational leadership skills (Begum et al., 2018; Suranga Silva & Mendis, 2017). Such transformational skills are desirable and result in improved business performance (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018; Edward & Kaban, 2020; Haber-Curran & Sulpizio, 2017). Organizations should look for opportunities to build or improve transformational leadership skills among women in the ranks. Women-only leadership training programs are one mechanism that could be leveraged for this purpose.

Physical fitness activities combined with leadership development training provided an opportunity for improving self-esteem and self-efficacy for participants of a program that included both fitness and leadership opportunities. The participants also gained or improved leadership skills which were leveraged outside of the organization where the training occurred.

The designers and instructors of the leadership development program focused on building a safe learning environment, consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory and Social Cognitive Theory (Frkal, 2018). A focus on providing high-quality instruction and materials was also part of the program. Women who participated in the program achieved new levels of personal empowerment. Providing opportunities for women to improve both physical and mental skills allows progress in addressing the leadership gender gap on both a personal and societal level. Individuals, organizations, and society should consider the leadership development program of the study as a model for development programs for a wider audience of potential women leaders.

In the study, the non-profit organization has taken on a mission to empower women using fitness as a lens through which women could recognize and enhance personal strengths and capabilities. The mission includes using fitness combined with high-quality internally-developed leadership training to build or find women leaders who could assist with the empowerment mission. A combination of leadership training and fitness to support women's empowerment, to help women understand and embrace personal identity and self-worth and become agents of change, is an innovative and potent approach. The non-profit organization's approach based on both mental and physical stimuli should receive further study to determine how the methods could be more broadly utilized and the processes scaled to a wider audience of women.

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**Appendix A: Invitation to Participate**

[Date]

Dear -----

I am a doctoral student at the American College of Education. I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a dissertation research study.

My study is entitled *Phenomenological Study of Lived Experiences of Leaders in a Women's Fitness Program*. The intent of the study is to understand how women who participate in your non-profit organization's leadership development program benefit from the program, specifically regarding improved leadership skills and personal self-confidence. The study will involve collecting basic demographic information about you, plus completion of a written online questionnaire. The study will ask you to complete either a one-on-one interview with me or to participate in a small focus group. Both the interview and focus group will be completed using an online videoconferencing tool such as Zoom.

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a woman who has completed the leadership development program in the non-profit organization I am researching. Additional criteria for selection are as follows:

- Participants must be at least 18 years old.
- Participants should have completed the leadership development program at least six months ago.
- Participants will need Internet access to complete the initial questionnaire and to participate in video interviews or a focus group.

Your participation in the study will be voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, you may do so by contacting me using the information below.

I may publish the results of this study; however, I will not use your name nor share identifiable data you provided. Your information will remain confidential. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact the following.

- Dissertation Candidate:
  - Jerry L Canterbury, [jerrylcanterbury@yahoo.com](mailto:jerrylcanterbury@yahoo.com), 919-710-3559
- Dissertation Chair:
  - Dr. Imani Akin, [Imani.Akin@ace.edu](mailto:Imani.Akin@ace.edu), 708-612-3795

If you meet the criteria above, are interested in participating in the study, and would like to be included in the potential participant pool, please use the link below to access, review, and accept the informed consent.

[Link to approved IRB Informed consent]

Thank you again for considering this dissertation research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Jerry L Canterbury  
Doctoral Candidate, American College of Education

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

The following Informed Consent Form will be converted to a Google Form which can be reviewed online, signed electronically, and emailed to both the researcher and participant.

**Prospective Research Participant:** Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

### **Project Information**

**Project Title:** Phenomenological Study of Lived Experiences of Leaders in a Women's Fitness Program

**Researcher:** Jerry L Canterbury

**Organization:** American College of Education

**Email:** jerry.l.canterbury@yahoo.com      **Telephone:** 919-710-3559

**Researcher's Faculty Member:** Dr. Imani Akin

**Organization and Position:** American College of Education, Dissertation chair

**Email:** Imani.Akin@ace.edu

### **Introduction**

I am Jerry Canterbury and I am a doctoral candidate student at the American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Akin. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

### **Purpose of the Research**

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will assist with understanding identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. The study aims to discover meanings through the participants' lived experiences related to improved leadership skills and the confidence to apply the skills professionally. Through the investigation of women's experiences before and after participation in the development program, research findings may lend credence to the organization's position regarding empowerment of female participants.

### **Research Design and Procedures**

The study will use a qualitative methodology and phenomenological research design. The study will comprise of 15 participants, randomly selected, who will participate by completing a written questionnaire. Participants will meet with me in either a one-on-one interview or in a focus group with me and four other individuals. The interviews and focus group will be conducted using an

online videoconferencing tool such as Zoom, so you will need Internet access to participate. No travel is required on your part. Participants will be randomly selected.

### **Participant Selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as a woman who has completed the leadership development program in the non-profit organization I am researching. Additional criteria for selection:

- Participants must be at least 18 years old.
- Participants should have completed the leadership development program at least six months ago.
- Participants will need Internet access to complete the initial questionnaire and to participate in video interviews or a focus group.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

### **Procedures**

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked:

- To sign this Informed Consent document electronically.
- To complete a written questionnaire electronically.
- To participate in a one-on-one interview OR in a small focus group via Zoom.
- To review transcripts of your interview OR the focus group via email.
- To review my analysis of the questionnaires, the interviews, and focus group via email.

The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of and your experience with personal leadership.

### **Duration**

The questionnaire portion of the research study will require approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you are selected to participate in an interview the time expected will be a maximum of 30 minutes. If you are chosen to be in the focus group, the time allotted for the focus group will be 45 minutes. Reviews of transcripts and analysis should take no more than an additional 30-45 minutes.

### **Risks**

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

### **Benefits**

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about how the non-profit organization's development program benefits women's leadership skills and self-confidence. The potential benefits of this study will aid the organization in enhancing its program if needed.

**Confidentiality**

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

**Sharing the Results**

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participation is voluntary. At any time, you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

**Questions About the Study**

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email [IRB@ace.edu](mailto:IRB@ace.edu).

**Certificate of Consent**

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I confirm the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

I have accurately read or witnessed the accurate reading of the assent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm the individual has freely given assent.

Print or type name of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of lead researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of faculty member: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.**



**Appendix C: Instrument 1: Pre-Questionnaire**

1. What does leadership mean to you? Is it a title? A group of specific skills? Or an attitude?
2. In what types of sports or fitness activities did you participate growing up, including middle school, high school, or college? In what types of sports or fitness activities did you participate after reaching adulthood but before joining this organization?
3. Please tell me about leadership roles you may have engaged in as an adult before you joined the non-profit's volunteer leadership program. For example, perhaps you had a leadership role at your job or in a community organization.
4. The club coach and director program you participated in has a stated purpose of teaching leadership skills. Please describe three things you learned in the program about leadership.
5. After you completed the program, how did you feel about the leadership knowledge you had gained? Please explain.
6. Beyond leadership, have you learned anything new about yourself, either through participation in the leadership program or participation in club activities?
7. What activities or content of the program did you find most beneficial in your development as a leader?
8. Please describe a situation where you used your new or enhanced leadership knowledge within the context of this non-profit organization.
9. Please describe a situation where you used your new or enhanced leadership knowledge outside the context of this non-profit organization. For example, reflect on the three new things you learned as mentioned in #3 above and describe a situation where you used one or more of those. Did you achieve better results than you would have before participating in the program?

10. Please describe a situation where you solved a problem using skills you gained which you believe might have been more challenging for you without these new or improved skills.
11. Please describe your confidence level in your own leadership skills now. Do you have increased confidence now? Please list three reasons why or why not.
12. What has changed (if at all) since before completing the leadership program? What personal sense of empowerment do you have now when compared to before completing the program?

**Appendix D: Instrument 2: Semi-Structured Interview**

1. I am curious about any sports or fitness activities you participated in before joining this organization. Did you participate in sports as a teenager or in college? How about as an adult before joining this program?
2. Think back to when you signed up for the volunteer leadership program. Can you tell me how you felt about your leadership skills at the time, before you showed up for the first day of the program? What would you have considered your strengths before the program? Your weaknesses? How likely is it you would put yourself forth for a role in your organization which was a stretch for you?
3. Why did you choose to participate in this leadership development program?
4. How do you feel about yourself in general now compared to before completing this program? Is there something you've done differently in your role which is an example of how the program impacted your leadership?
5. The non-profit's program is about leadership, but it is also about fitness. How has the running or fitness aspect of the organization and its program helped with your self-confidence? Do you see any parallels between fitness and leadership competency?
6. How do you feel about your leadership skills now when compared to before you completed the volunteer leadership program?
  - If so, please describe a situation in which you used your greater self-confidence effectively in a situation outside the non-profit organization.
  - If not, please describe why you do not feel more confident now than previously.
7. An important aspect of the non-profit organization and the volunteer leadership program is the concept of women helping other women. Do you feel you have been mentored by

others in the non-profit organization or program in improving your leadership skills? If so, how has mentorship occurred? Were those mentors national leaders, local club leaders, or other participants in the organization? Is any mentorship received in the program different than mentorship you've received from men?

8. Since you are now a leader in the non-profit organization yourself, do you feel a responsibility to mentor other members of the organization? If so, how are you mentoring others in the program, either formally or informally? Has the leadership program informed or changed the way you mentor others?
9. How about outside the program? Do you find you are able to mentor other women outside the program, in your personal or professional life? If so, can you describe a situation where this mentorship occurred? How has the program caused you to become more of a mentor? What do you think the value is of being a mentor yourself?
10. If you were recruiting someone else to participate in the leadership program, what would you say to her to encourage her to participate?
11. During your participation in the leadership program, you were presented with many ways of demonstrating leadership. Please think about how you have applied any skills you learned since then. Are there any skills or techniques you wish you had learned which weren't included in the program? How about additional content you wish had been covered by wasn't?
12. How would learning such additional information have helped you in a real-world situation you encountered?
13. Has the program in any way changed the way you see leadership as a role or yourself as a leader?

**Appendix E: Instrument 3: Focus Group**

1. Think back to when you showed up for the first day of volunteer leadership program training.  
You met other women who were there for the first day as well. How did you feel about your leadership skills at the time in comparison with the other women you met your first day?
2. Do you think the comparisons you made between yourself and others motivated you?  
Intimidated you? Caused you to take more or less risk? Participate more or less?
3. The non-profit's program is about leadership, but it is also about fitness. Please share how the group fitness aspect of the organization has affected your self-confidence. Does the self-confidence extend beyond fitness activities? If so, in what ways?
4. Please describe a situation where you used your new leadership skills to mentor other women in the non-profit organization?
5. Are there any leadership skills or techniques you wish you had learned which weren't included in the program? How would you use those skills if you had learned them?
6. How do you see your leadership skills compared to those of male leaders you interact with?  
Is your approach to leadership the same or different? Has the approach changed or do you see your approach differently now when compared to before you completed the volunteer leader training program?

**Appendix F: Subject Matter Expert Field Test for Content Validation**

Prior to using the instruments to collect data, a field test for content validation of the instruments occurred by asking five subject matter experts (SMEs) on leadership to review and provide feedback on the questions in the instruments. As women were the focus of the study, four of the five SME reviewers were women. The feedback received was used to revise and improve the questions of all three instruments. Copies of email communications are below.

The five experts consulted were:

- University faculty of Doctorate of Interdisciplinary Leadership program (Ph.D.)
- Executive leadership coach
- University director of Professional Development and Student Engagement (Ph.D.)
- Physician and care team leader (M.D.)
- University associate director of marketing and chair of staff senate (Ed.D.)

## Email from University Faculty of Doctorate of Interdisciplinary Leadership Program

Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**Subject:** Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** 5/28/2020, 11:07 AM

**To:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

Okay Jerry.... see the attached..... most comments are in the methods document. In a couple of places I've dropped a question/comment that you've answered later in the paper... so keep that in mind as you go through my comments.

I hope this is helpful.... and Good Luck!

P.S. I hear every grad of ACE gets free football tickets for life!!!

On Sun, May 24, 2020 at 12:08 PM Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED] wrote:

Dear Dr. [REDACTED]

Thank you for agreeing to assist my doctoral dissertation effort. I am pursuing my Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Leadership at the American College of Education. Because of my personal interest in physical fitness, the focus of my studies is Health and Wellness.

As discussed, I will be conducting a study to identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. I believe the problem is women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men. I wish to explore if women in this program feel participation in the leadership development program helps them close the gap on leadership skills or self-confidence about those skills.

As you have extensive leadership experience and expertise in the field, I am asking you to validate the questionnaires I will be using in my study. There are three such questionnaires, or instruments as they are called in academia. I will be connecting with women leaders in the development program and asking them to complete the questionnaires in writing, in one-on-one interviews, and in a focus group.

I am requesting your input to review the questions and determine if in your opinion the questions (and participants' responses) will help achieve the goal of understand in the experiences and perspectives the women leaders in the program. I seek your input to learn the following:

- If you believe the questions would be better if restated or reworded.
- If you believe different questions would better serve the purpose.
- If you think the questions are fine as they are.

I believe this review will take about an hour of your time. To aid in the review, I have included two documents.

## Email from Executive Leadership Coach

RE: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**Subject:** RE: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** 5/28/2020, 6:03 PM

**To:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

Hi Jerry,

This looks like a fun project. It's a complex issue. Attached you'll find my comments. They are likely worth what you paid for them. 😊 Use what is valuable to you and pitch the rest.

I do think there is an opportunity for you to go into more depth than you have, especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> rounds. I'd be prepared with secondary questions as you are likely to get a lot of vague answers around what you've asked initially.

I'm happy to talk through this if you'd like.

Warm regards,



---

**From:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

**Sent:** Sunday, May 24, 2020 12:16 PM

**To:** [REDACTED]

**Subject:** Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for agreeing to assist my doctoral dissertation effort. I am pursuing my Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Leadership at the American College of Education. Because of my personal interest in physical fitness, the focus of my studies is Health and Wellness.

As discussed, I will be conducting a study to identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. I believe the problem is women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men. I wish to explore if women in this program feel participation in the leadership development program helps them close the gap on leadership skills or self-confidence about those skills.



## Email from University Director of Professional Development and Student Engagement

Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**Subject:** Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** 6/1/2020, 3:20 PM

**To:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

Thanks so much for your patience, Jerry! I have attached both your concept document and your questions/instrument document with questions/comments. If I am off track or confusing, please just ask. I just worked on a study with a student that used a phenomenological design, so still very fresh in my mind. One of the downsides with involving too many external people is that we often have a lot of questions about construct in order to properly evaluate the questionnaire! Hopefully, not too frustrating. One thing that I learned is to keep my chair happy...so keep your chair happy...I am peripheral.

I think that your study sounds very interesting and that you are off to a good start! I look forward to seeing the results!



---

**From:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

**Sent:** Monday, June 1, 2020 12:14 PM

**To:** [REDACTED]

**Subject:** Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

I'm glad everything was resolved well!

These are crazy times, even crazier than they were just a week ago!



Jerry

On 6/1/2020 12:12 PM, [REDACTED] wrote:

Hi Jerry! You are on my list today. Apologies for the delay...my life got overwhelmed last week with some student issues that are now thankfully resolved! I'll have some feedback to you later today.



## Email from Physician and Care Team Leader

---

Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**Subject:** Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** 6/3/2020, 3:33 PM

**To:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

Hi Jerry!

I just took the time to review your proposal and the associated questionnaires. I love your topic and ideas and I thank you for addressing the lack of female leadership we see in corporate America (and elsewhere) today!

Overall I think the questions are insightful and will answer your research questions well. One thought I had would be to include not just prior leadership training/experience, but also to get a baseline for participants prior athletic experience. You mentioned the importance of athletics several times in your proposal so it would be interesting to see how this might affect the participants responses (for example did those without prior athletic experience gain more from the program than those who had already been exposed? Did prior athletic experience draw these women to seek this type of leadership role/program? Does that confound the influence of this being an athletic program?). Participants may not identify prior sports/athletics experience as prior leadership experience as it is not typically framed in that light (specifically in reference to question 1 of the prequestionnarre)

Hope that makes sense and is helpful for you. Happy to discuss further if needed and look forward to seeing the outcome of your work!

Best,  
[REDACTED]

On Sun, May 24, 2020 at 12:09 PM Jerry L Canterbury <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Dear Dr. [REDACTED]

Thank you for agreeing to assist my doctoral dissertation effort. I am pursuing my Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Leadership at the American College of Education. Because of my personal interest in physical fitness, the focus of my studies is Health and Wellness.

As discussed, I will be conducting a study to identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program. I believe the problem is women lag behind men in filling management leadership roles in the United States business world as women have fewer opportunities to learn leadership skills through athletic activities than men. I wish to explore if women in this program feel participation in the leadership development program helps them close the gap on leadership skills or self-confidence about those skills.

As you have extensive leadership experience and expertise in the field, I am asking you to validate the questionnaires I will be using in my study. There are three such questionnaires, or instruments as they are called in academia. I will be connecting with women leaders in the development program and asking them to complete the questionnaires in writing, in one-on-one interviews, and

## Email from University Associate Director of Marketing and Chair of Staff Senate

Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**Subject:** Re: Subject Matter Expert Validation of Research Instruments

**From:** [REDACTED]

**Date:** 6/6/2020, 5:39 PM

**To:** Jerry L Canterbury [REDACTED]

Jerry, here are my thoughts--let me know if you have any questions or want to talk anything through. (I may not have a clear understanding of your study or may have misinterpreted your questions.)

[REDACTED]

In your Three Instruments document (if this is being submitted/used outside this current use), I would change "The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study is to identify the perceptions of female leaders in a women-focused, fitness-based leadership development program." to reflect that they were participants/have completed, rather than "in."

Pre-questionnaire:

- For question 1, Please tell me about leadership activities you may have engaged in before you joined the non-profit organization. For example, perhaps you had a leadership role at your job or in a community organization.

How far back do you want them to go in their memory (to make it relevant--or doesn't it matter)? For example, I am almost 58; if I was filling out the questionnaire, should I include leadership activities I did in junior high school or high school? Are you only looking for while a working adult?

- For question 3, After you completed the program, how did you feel about the leadership knowledge you had gained? For example, did you feel energized and ready to apply new knowledge or did you find the training covered things you already knew? Please explain.

I am not sure if energized and ready to apply new knowledge are the same construct; you could be energized after not learning new things--you got motivated. "...apply new knowledge" denotes that you thought you learned new things; "training covered things you already knew" denotes that you didn't learn new things. They belong together. Energized is more of an emotion/outlook. I would say you could learn new constructs/strategies, reinforced/enhanced existing knowledge, or no new knowledge gained. The emotion is something separate. Make sense?

- Question 7. Can you ask multiple questions in one question or do they need to be separate?

One-on-One Interviews:

- Question 3: How do you feel about yourself in general now compared to before completing the program? Do you feel more empowered or self-confident? If so, in what ways?

Any chance they could feel less empowered or self-confident? If so, would you want

**Appendix G: Signed Site Approval Form**

Women's Health Lead & Master Coach

April 16, 2020

Jerry L. Canterbury

E-mail:

Phone:

Dear Jerry,

On behalf of [REDACTED] I am writing to formally give you permission to interview volunteer women leaders within our organization.

I understand that our leaders will all have given informed consent and be interviewed using video communication tools or by phone. The information is to be used to further your research dissertation entitled *A Phenomenological Study of Lived Experiences of Leaders in a Women's Fitness Program* and will not be used outside of this remit. Participants contributions will remain anonymous.

We are happy to accept your request and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,



Women's Health Lead and Master Coach