

2020

A Phenomenological Study of Factors Influencing Senior Female United States Marine Corps Officer Retention Decisions

Angel Rae Smith
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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Angel R. Smith

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study of Factors Influencing Senior Female United States Marine
Corps Officer Retention Decisions

by

Angel R. Smith

MS, Troy University, 2007

BS, Park University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Walden University

July 2020

Abstract

The study showed factors that influenced senior female U.S. Marine Corps' (USMC) officer retention decisions. The qualitative study was based on the interpretivism research philosophy and Mobley's model of turnover and employed a phenomenological research design to identify themes regarding participants' perceptions of their lived experiences involving their professions and factors that affected their mandates to remain on active duty. The study included 11 women volunteers who had either earned membership in General Officer (GO) ranks or were competitive for within the USMC as a colonel (CV); they were recruited through purposive sampling, and data were collected through interviews. Data was analyzed using NVivo and based on Moustakas's phenomenological data-analyzing procedures, with emphasis on identifying overriding themes from the gathered data. Triangulation, peer-debriefing, and member checking strategies were employed. Both groups encountered the same barriers involving sexual harassment, discrimination, and isolation, but GOs perceived these barriers as manifestations of institutionalized gender inequities, and CVs did not. GOs experienced mentoring as a valuable source of practical career advice, and CVs did not. Finally, CVs perceived their careers as strongly conflicting with their families' interests, while GOs experienced no such conflict. The value of female marines and women requires more efforts in improving this field to ensure equity and allow these women to flourish, increasing the presence of senior female officers within the USMC, thus improving overall combat effectiveness.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the men and women who have challenging jobs, children who demand an exorbitant amount of attention, a significant other who requires emotional support, and a persistent and unforgiving 'to-do' list, but make the overly optimistic decision to pursue a doctorate degree. Although this process will take more time than you anticipated, cost significantly more money than you would've imagined and test the left and right lateral limits of your emotions, DO NOT QUIT. The negative voice inside your head telling you to give up is a jerk...ignore it.

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I would first like to thank my parents who taught me very early in life that, “Anything of value is hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it. If it were impossible, no one would.” You are the smartest, kindest, most considerate and hilarious people I have ever known. Thanks to you, my superpower is perseverance and my nemesis is time as I fear I will never have enough to do all of the things you have encouraged me to do. I would like to pay special thanks to my brothers, who I can always count on cracking me up, regardless of the obstacle I am facing. In time, I hope you can both learn to deal with the cruel reality that I am the favorite child. Thanks to Steve, who reminded me that I only have one life to live and it is up to me to decide how amazing it will be. I look forward to a lifetime of adventuring with you.

To my children, Kaelin and Kai, who are the motivation that drives everything I do in life. You have showed me that I am capable of experiencing the full spectrum of emotions, especially when you were teenagers. Although it drove me crazy when you were growing up, you must hold on to the defiant, bold, daring, stubborn and adventurous spirits inside your souls. Trust me when I say, the only thing scarier than trying something you don’t think you can accomplish, is the regret that will overtake you if you never try.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Since women were officially integrated into the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in 1948, they have met or exceeded the standards required of each open military occupational specialty (MOS). In January 2013, the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the Department of Defense (DoD, 2013) would remove gender-based restrictions on all previously closed MOSs. Later in March 2013, the Marine Corps Force Innovation Office conducted measured, deliberate, and responsible research to establish gender-neutral standards across all MOSs, with a focus on physically demanding combat MOSs. Subsequently, in July 2013, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James F. Amos, directed the Marine Corps to establish an experimental unit known as the Ground Combat Element Integrated Task Force, comprised partly of female Marines who would receive formal training in closed combat MOSs.

Since 1980, the number of women serving in the military has increased dramatically (Patten & Parker, 2011). Patten and Parker (2011) indicated that when the US military ended conscription and established an all-volunteer service in 1973, the number of women serving in the military proliferated substantially. Specifically, from 1973 to 2010, the number of women serving in the US military increased from 2% to 14% (Patten & Parker, 2011). Additionally, the number of female commissioned officers quadrupled from 4% to 16% of total military personnel during that same period (Patten & Parker, 2011). Although men continue to outnumber women in the military, women have

made gains in terms of roles of commissioned officers that are commensurate with those of men. As noted, 16% of women in the military currently serve in these roles, and for men it is 17% (Patten & Parker, 2011).

The role of women in the military has historically been contentious. Nicolas (2015) asserted that in recent years, the controversy associated with allowing women into combat roles and opening admittance of women to the Infantry Officer's Course in the USMC have led to deliberation over whether women should be allowed in these career fields. Nicolas contended that the debate typically focuses on the ability of women to handle physical and emotional demands of military service versus equal rights of women to serve in various military roles if they so choose. Although these debates remain, Nicolas argued that women are an important component of the military and a significant asset to building the military of the future.

Although female Marines have progressively gained access to closed career fields, they continue to remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions, for both officer and enlisted ranks (Sims, Drastow, & Fitzgerald, 2005). Since the nomination of the first female USMC General Officer (GO) in April 1978, nine women have served GOs in the USMC (Manpower & Reserve Affairs [M&RA], 2015). This figure is not surprising when retention deficits are considered, as attrition among junior female officers remains high with 68% departing the USMC service before completing 10 years of service (M&RA, 2013).

The 2013 U.S. Census reports that women make up 50.8% of the United States population, whereas they comprise just 6.7% of total active duty force structure (USMC,

2013). Similarly, among USMC active duty officers, women make up 6.1% of the population, they account for 0.8% of the GO population (USMC, 2013). According to Asch, Miller, and Malchiodi (2012), female officers have lower promotion and retention through all career milestones.

Chapter 1 briefly includes a summary of the research involving military efforts and challenges associated with female retention in the military while highlighting current gaps in the literature. Additionally, a description of the research problem is provided along with a brief description of the questions explored and the theoretical framework that served as the foundation for the study. Relevant definitions are provided along with some necessary assumptions. Chapter 1 concludes with a description of the scope, delimitations, limitations, and a discussion of potential contributions to the USMC.

Background

Researchers have conducted several studies concerning turnover among women in the military with specific emphasis on female service, member turnover and retention (Patten & Parker, 2011). Researchers primarily used the surveys to not only focus on the problems that women faced during their military service, but also problems faced prior to their service that may have affected them during their time in uniform (Pollack, Boyer, Betsinger, & Shafer, 2009). These problems are blamed for the high number of female officers leaving the service prematurely (Asch et al., 2012).

Gender-based discrimination is one of the most common problems faced by women in the U.S. military (Kamarack, 2016). According to Barry (2013), 14.5% of the total population in active duty military are women who have traditionally been assigned

less prestigious duties than their male counterparts. For example, prior to 2013, women were banned by law in the U.S. Constitution from assignment to units where the primary mission was to engage in ground combat (Kamarack, 2016). This was blamed for low rates of female military officer retention however the law was repealed January 23, 2013.

Women tend to have some demands on them that men generally do not face in terms of pregnancy and raising children (Bensahel, Barno, Kidder, & Sayler, 2015). The military has not put in place adequate measures to involve women who want to serve and also lead a normal home life (Bensahel et al., 2015). Prior to 2016, the maternity leave in the DoD was 6 weeks, but in January 2016, the DoD doubled the duration. Women returning from maternity leave often lack facilities that allow them to work without distractions such as child daycare (Bensahel et al., 2015).

Research indicated that some factors that affect female military retention are also faced in the civilian sector (Pollack et al., 2009). For example, sexual assault is attributed to some females leaving military service (Holtom et al., 2008). Those who are were victims of sexual assault prior to entering the service were more likely to leave before their initial obligations were completed. Holt et al. (2007) determined 83% of U.S. Air Force officers voluntary separated from active duty followed one of five paths unique to the service member's career stage.

The military has moved slowly to adopt an appropriate organizational structure that fits both men and women compared to other institutions both in the government and private sector (Bensahel et al., 2015). Negative organizational culture led to poor job satisfaction and higher rates of turnover. Tsai and Wu (2010) said that improvements in

an organizational culture supported by leadership can improve retention, thus improving cost reduction efforts critical to organizational survival.

Research in this area should identify common themes among women who have not only obtained but also sustained senior leadership positions within the USMC, thus providing a method to offer guidance and mentoring to those women who aspire to follow the same career path but would traditionally elect to leave active service. The overall focus of this research was to determine if decision-making used by female GOs could be reasonably duplicated by the average female USMC officer, thus improving long-term retention and increasing the presence of senior female officers and improving overall combat effectiveness.

Problem Statement

Since the USMC nominated its first female GO in April 1978, only nine women have held that rank (M&RA, 2015). Although women make up 6.1% of active duty USMC officers, they only account for 0.8% of the USMC GO population (USMC, 2013). Retention among female USMC officers on active duty remains low, with 68% leaving before completing 10 years of service with less than 5% of females reaching the rank of (M&RA, 2013; M&RA, 2015). Asch et al. (2012) indicated that female officers had lower promotion rates at each career milestone across the services, including the USMC, compared to their male counterparts.

Even though the USMC has studied why women leave the service early, researchers in their peer-reviewed studies highlighted the gap in literature focused on understanding why those who remain on active duty have chosen to stay (Asch, et al,

2012; Sims, et al., 2005). For instance, Asch et al. (2012) evaluated why there is an underrepresentation of women and of racial/ethnic minorities among senior military officers but claimed that they did not focus on why some stayed. Several researchers have called for future research to evaluate why female military stay; such studies can demonstrate the perceived benefits of remaining on active duty (Barry, 2013; Friedman & Schustack, 2012).

Friedman and Schustak (2012) found that in the military field, there is an emphasis on male behavior being correct and female behavior being wrong; therefore, female military members often leave. However, Friedman and Schustack claimed that future researchers should consider why some female servicemembers chose to stay. Doll (2007) highlighted that there are at least 4.3% female GOs serving the U.S. Army, yet limited research has been carried out to understand why. Doll (2007) found that seven factors influenced female army GOs and their abilities to be selected for the highest senior leadership positions in the U.S. Army: professional competence, interpersonal skills, good reputation, engaging in tough tasks, luck and timing, mentoring, and not aspiring to make GO. Women who aspired to be leaders often found themselves not being given the chance. However, despite these findings, Doll did not evaluate what transpired after female officers attained the GO position despite any hardships they endured.

According to Miller and Rosenthal (2012), a women's role in combat can no longer be denied for the nature of warfare has changed. Female servicemembers were in combat zones alongside their male counterparts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Further,

there are specific combat positions for which women can offer unique tactical advantages in counterinsurgency operations (Miller & Rosenthal, 2013). Moreover, the enemy does not discriminate according to gender, for at least 150 women have lost their lives during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Since women have served in ground combat, most have not received the same level of training as their male counterparts. In addition, when they return to their civilian lives, female veterans may not receive similar benefits after war because they are perceived as not having been engaged in the hard work of combat (Miller & Rosenthal, 2012). To date there is no appreciable research regarding why some female officers would decide to stay when most left. To address elevated attrition of USMC females, senior USMC leadership developed a task force to identify diversity-related issues and develop solutions to increase female retention, especially in the senior ranks. To date, all USMC efforts have focused on understanding why women leave the USMC with no emphasis on why some have chosen to stay.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and describe the perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. This involved looking at perceived risks, hardships, and sacrifices made throughout the careers of female USMC GOs with perceived experiences of competitive female colonels who elected to retire before being considered for a flag rank. USMC manpower managers have been unsuccessful in long-term retention of female senior leadership despite leadership's efforts to study personnel attrition. Given being a female GOs represents the

ultimate successful retention within the USMC, focusing research on that outcome is useful. The study also explored the perceptions of senior female colonels (O-6s) who are or were competitive for appointment to GO ranks but made the decision to leave active duty and retire. This information is critical to accurately identify thought processes among senior female USMC GOs who stayed compared to Colonels who left.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and describe the perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. To achieve this purpose, the main research question was: “What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?” Several sub-questions were raised to aid in answering the main question:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ3: How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs’ decision-making

to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on Mobley's model of turnover which provides a more complete understanding of turnover research and theories among women in the civilian as well as military services. Despite being decades old several researchers find this turnover model dominant in the field (DeConinck & Stilwell, 2015; Moy, 2015; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 2013). Mobley (1977) observed turnover can be categorized as either avoidance or unavoidable turnover; avoidance turnover involves the voluntary departure of an employee due to job dissatisfaction, whereas unavoidable turnover occurs when an employee departs an organization because of reasons outside the institution's control. These reasons may include a family member illness or spouse transfer to a new location. Avoidance turnover can be prevented if an employer understands the thought processes associated with an employee's decision to quit. Mobley's model of turnover demonstrates the complexity of decision-making connected to a female employee's decision to leave a job.

Mobley's (1977) model begins with a female employee's evaluation of her current position in which she determines whether she is satisfied or not with her job. Should the employee determine she is not satisfied, she begins to consider leaving the organization. This stage leads to an evaluation of skills and assessment of whether she can find job satisfaction elsewhere. If the employee feels she would achieve success outside her current position, she might begin planning to depart the organization. She

then transitions to searching for alternatives, analyzing each prospect to determine if it would serve as a positive alternative to her current situation. Once tangible offers are made to the employee, she begins a final assessment of her current job, reassessing her attitude towards her job while also considering the social consequences of leaving the organization. The final phase of this model occurs when the employee makes the decision to quit her job (Mobley, 1977).

Using Mobley's model of turnover, thought processes related to long-term service among both retained and retired female leaders within the USMC were identified. Institution leaders can use this information to gain valuable insights involving strategies or interventions that result in the successful retention of key leaders. These efforts might be reasonably duplicated to retain talented female colonels in the future.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to understand the lived experiences of female USMC GOs who have made the choice to remain on active duty. Hermeneutic phenomenology was employed, which according to Wilson and Hutchinson (2011), involves human experience as it is lived. This approach encompasses illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experiences that may be taken for granted in people's lives by creating meaning and sense of understanding of these experiences. It was also necessary to explore the perceptions of active duty female USMC colonels who are competing for promotion to GO ranks involving extended service. The two qualitative phenomenological designs are hermeneutic and empirical (Hein & Austin, 2001). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves interpretation and understanding of text while

empirical phenomenology explores lived experiences in the form of narratives, stories, anecdotes, and existed accounts (Hein & Austin, 2001). Interviews with senior female leaders were conducted to collect descriptions of lived experiences that are unique to each participant.

To obtain a thorough and accurate understanding of the problem and gain perspectives from the target group of female USMC officers, it was important to conduct face-to-face semistructured interviews using an interview guide. According to Bernard (1988), semistructured interviews are most appropriate when participants may only be available for a single interview. Open-ended interview questions allow participants the flexibility to provide responses that are informed by their feelings and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). The introduction of open-ended questions necessitates that interviews are recorded and then transcribed at a later date. The interview guide approach is a method that ensures the same general information is collected from each participant while also providing flexibility to alter questions based on participant tone, context of the conversation, and information delivered (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Upon completion of all interviews, it was possible to identify individual differences and similarities in terms of feelings and perceptions of participants, which may provide insight into the challenges involving extended service in the USMC.

USMC GOs were interviewed concerning specific motivations regarding their decisions to remain on active duty; they were also asked to describe any perceived sacrifices they made throughout their careers. Active duty and retired USMC colonels were interviewed concerning any perceived barriers or concerns related to continued

service in the USMC. This study involved women who have either earned or been competitive for membership into GO ranks within the USMC. All surviving female GOs were eligible to serve as participants; however, colonel volunteers were limited to those within the continental United States. No other demographic information was used to delimit participants in the study.

Understanding career decision-making is critical to understanding retention, therefore descriptions of real-life experiences proved pivotal as they offered valuable insight into this phenomenon. Although most participants shared some commonalities in terms of their perceptions concerning motivation and sacrifice, their individual opinions were unique and then documented independently in order to gain a thorough understanding of any common themes linked to long-term service retention. The phenomenological design not only assisted in the identification of common themes among the population, but also provided a foundation to thoroughly understand what it is like to be a woman who has successfully moved into senior USMC leadership ranks. Although a wealth of knowledge exists regarding female attrition within the military, a lack of research was identified regarding GO retention specifically within the USMC.

Definitions

The following terms are operationally defined for the purpose of this study:

Active duty: Anyone working for the military on full time basis.

Barriers: Those factors that prevent individuals from moving to the top of their organizations (Shepard, 2003).

Colonel: A commissioned officer in the USMC ranking above a lieutenant colonel

and below a brigadier general. Officers at this rank are seen as senior leaders (U. S. Office of Personnel Management, 2006).

General Officer (GO): Any officers in the USMC above the rank of colonel. Promotion to this rank is very rare, with the entire GO population comprising .06% of the USMC. Officers in this grade fill executive level positions within the military (U. S. Office of Personnel Management, 2006).

Glass Ceiling: A political term used to describe the unseen and unbreakable barriers that mostly keep women and minorities from reaching the upper ranks of their chosen fields (Naples, 2016).

Institutional Barriers: Something that blocks access or obstructs within an institution or organization (Chang & Wu, 2013).

Retention: In the context of the military, this term refers to reenlistment after the expiration of active obligated service (Kapp, 2020).

Military turnover: A term deriving from the term staff turnover, which defines the scenario to which military personnel leave from military organizations or pull out their services (Hosek,J. 2011).

Assumptions

A critical assumption made in this study was that each participant answered questions openly and honestly, and given participation was voluntary it increased the accuracy of responses provided. There were no consequences linked to their responses. Despite minimal risks associated with participation, ensuring the confidentiality of officers providing information was paramount. Another assumption was that participants

possessed adequate experience and sufficient memory to provide accurate responses to questions. Finally, it was assumed that female USMC colonel participants were representative of the entire population of female USMC colonels.

Scope and Limitations

To gain a thorough understanding of motivations connected with long-term service in the USMC, it was necessary to secure participation from female USMC GOs who are currently on active duty status as well as those who have retired from service. Female USMC colonels' participation was also solicited to gather their perspectives concerning decision-making processes associated with continued service in the USMC. This research was limited by two factors: 1) Data collected was primarily focused on gathering insight regarding variables that led to retention; and 2) Information concerning perceived risks, hardships, or sacrifices made throughout career progression that fostered turnover. Analysis of marital and maternal history as well as alternate lifestyle decisions were considered to identify any connections with career longevity and family dynamics.

Being a phenomenological study, this study specifically was conducted on senior female USMC officers, and therefore it was not possible to generalize research findings to the enlisted ranks or the other uniformed services. The population being fairly limited in size was a challenge, and the sample consistent of 11 participants. Generalizability was addressed in that half of the females who made GO in the USMC participated and a representative sample of competitive female USMC colonels.

Significance of the Study

The study showed that qualified women in senior ranks with the skills and

capabilities to improve USMC combat effectiveness have often chosen to depart active service. Although there has been considerable success in terms of talent retention among lower ranking female service members, disparities remain in the senior ranks, especially among GOs (Hosek et al., 2011). Although there is ample data to support why female service members chose to leave active duty, there has been no real research regarding why senior female leaders chose to stay.

The study results should serve to reduce turnover, improve retention, create a more diverse leadership base, and improve overall combat effectiveness. The data collected in this research should provide senior USMC leadership with insight regarding variables that influenced retention among female GOs. This research is critical to identify common themes among those women who have not only obtained but also sustained senior leadership positions within the USMC, thus providing a method to offer guidance and mentoring to women who aspire to follow the same career path but would traditionally elect to leave active service. This information can be used to affect turnover positively by offering those female leaders who contemplate leaving active service an alternative perspective that encourages extended service. The overall goal of this research was to determine if the decision-making used by female USMC GOs could be reasonably duplicated by the average female USMC officer, thus improving long-term retention, increasing the presence of senior officers and improving overall combat effectiveness.

Asch et al. (2012) found that military occupations involving combat open to women were in smaller direct ground units, which affected the availability of jobs at the junior officer level. Asch et al. also determined that further along the career path, at

higher levels in the organization, the female could gain better opportunities. Therefore, Asch et al. requested that future researchers should consider the careers of individual female officers to determine what factors had a negative impact on a women's career path. Moreover, researchers should also study female service members' career preferences and determine if a female officers' decisions to stay or leave are the same of different for males.

Summary and Transition

The study showed that qualified women with the skills and capabilities to improve USMC combat effectiveness often choose to depart active service. Although there has been significant success enjoyed in terms of talent retention among lower ranking service members, disparities remain in the senior ranks, especially among GOs.

Chapter 1 described the problem as well as the need for further research regarding the retention of senior leaders within the USMC. It looked at the effects of different forces, both organizational and nonorganizational, that affect women in general service in the United States military. The chapter also included information regarding the type of study and individuals who participated. The chapter discussed GO leadership within the USMC and a gap in the literature involving lived experiences of senior female leaders who chose to remain on active duty. Mobley's model of turnover was selected guide the research and research questions that address the purpose of this study were presented.

Chapter 2 includes an introduction and overview of available literature concerning the retention of senior female officers in the USMC. The chapter begins with a brief description of literature search strategies and theoretical framework used in this study. It

continues by reviewing and assessing literature about the history of women in the military, female representation in leadership positions in the military, and the retention of women in civilian organization and in the military.

Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the methodological framework used in the study as well as factors that influence retention of senior female USMC officers. A detailed description of the research philosophy, research design, sample and sampling technique, and data collection tools used is also provided. In addition, data analysis approaches and techniques used to promote reliability and credibility of data, as well as ethical considerations made during the course of conducting the study were discussed.

Chapter 4 includes results of this study regarding factors influencing senior female USMC officer retention decisions. It begins with a restatement of the research questions and description of the participant selection process, followed by methods used to enhance trustworthiness and data for this study. The chapter concludes with a summary of themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Chapter 5 includes discussion, interpretation, and implications of these results. It begins with a review and discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Next, Chapter 5 includes interpretation of the findings in terms of how they confirm, disconfirm, or extend conclusions of previous researchers. Chapter 5 then includes discussions of the limitations of the study, followed by recommendations based on findings for leaders, practitioners, and future researchers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Historically, males have been the dominant gender in top positions, especially in the military (Emmerik et al., 2010). For example, M&RA (2015) revealed that since the nomination of the first female GO in the USMC in April 1978, only nine women have held that rank. Much of this has been attributed to the low retention of female officers in the USMC, whereby the retention of junior female USMC officers in the service is significantly low, with 68% of them leaving before completing 10 years of service (Hoyle & Dudley, 1979). Promotion rates across the service have remained significantly lower among female officers than their male counterparts (Asch et al., 2012).

This chapter includes a critical analysis and evaluation of available literature concerning the retention of senior female officers in the USMC. The chapter starts with a brief description of the literature search strategy and theoretical framework used in this study. It is followed by reviews and evaluations of literature regarding the history of women in the military, female representation in leadership positions in the military, and retention of women in civilian organizations and in the military. A summary of the chapter and transition is provided at the conclusion of Chapter 2.

Literature Search Strategy

An extensive literature search was conducted to pinpoint knowledge gaps that exist concerning the retention of senior female officers in the USMC. In this case, leading databases containing information regarding employee retention and military operations and organizations were used, among them ProQuest, SAGE Premier, Scopus, Emerald

Insight, EBSCOHost, and Google Scholar. PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, the Walden University Research Library, and government and military websites were crucial sources of literature relevant to the research topic. Key search terms used in this case were *retention, female retention, female General officers in the USMC, military, and women in the military*. Combining the search terms, for example, *retention of female General officers in the military* played a leading role in narrowing down the literature search.

A hybrid of three core literature search techniques were used: manual searching, Boolean searches, and using queries of the databases. Manual involved screening predefined and preselected textbooks, peer-reviewed journals, magazines, conference proceedings, existing studies, and other publications. Boolean search encompassed combining the search terms and phrases using conjunctions or words, commonly known as Boolean operators, such as ‘AND’, ‘OR’, ‘NOT’. This technique, as Fink (2013) notes, helps in broadening, narrowing, defining, or limiting down the search. In this case, the search terms were combined using the above stated Boolean operators, for example: “Female retention in the USMC ” OR “retention of female General officers in the military”; “recruitment” AND “retention of female officers in the military”.

Relevant literature was also retrieved from databases using the query object, a tool that helps in extracting data from databases in a readable format based on user requests. The tool helps in defining or limiting searches to fields or materials with required information. An example of a query used in this case was “number of women who have served as General officers in the USMC”. Besides using the three mentioned literature search techniques, tracking referenced articles in Google Scholar in order to

identify and access more materials, using synonyms, and changing order of search terms proved to be effective and reliable strategies for accessing more reference materials.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employed Mobley's model of turnover (Mobley, 1977). He observed turnover can be categorized as either avoidance or unavoidable turnover; avoidance turnover involves the voluntary departure of an employee due to job dissatisfaction, whereas unavoidable turnover occurs when an employee departs an organization because of reasons outside the institution's control such as a family member illness or spouse transfer to a new location. Mobley said avoidance turnover can be prevented if an employer understands processes associated with an employee's decision to quit. While it is an older mode of turnover, researchers have continued to use it which underscores it still being current and viable (DeConinck & Stilwell, 2015; Moy, 2015; Mowday et al., 2013).

Mobley's model of the turnover demonstrates the complexity of decision-making connected to an employee's decision to leave a job. The model begins with a female employee's evaluation of her current position in which she determines whether or not she is satisfied with her job. Should the female employee determine that she is not satisfied, she will begin to consider leaving the organization. This stage leads to an evaluation of employee skills and assessment of whether she will be able to find job satisfaction elsewhere. If the female employee feels she would achieve success outside her current position, she will begin planning to depart the organization. The female employee then transitions to searching for alternatives, analyzing each prospect to determine if it would

serve as a positive alternative to her current situation. Once tangible offers are made to the employee, she begins a final assessment of her current job, reassessing her attitude towards her job while also considering social consequences of leaving the organization. The final phase of this model occurs when the female employee actually makes the decision to quit her job (Mobley, 1977).

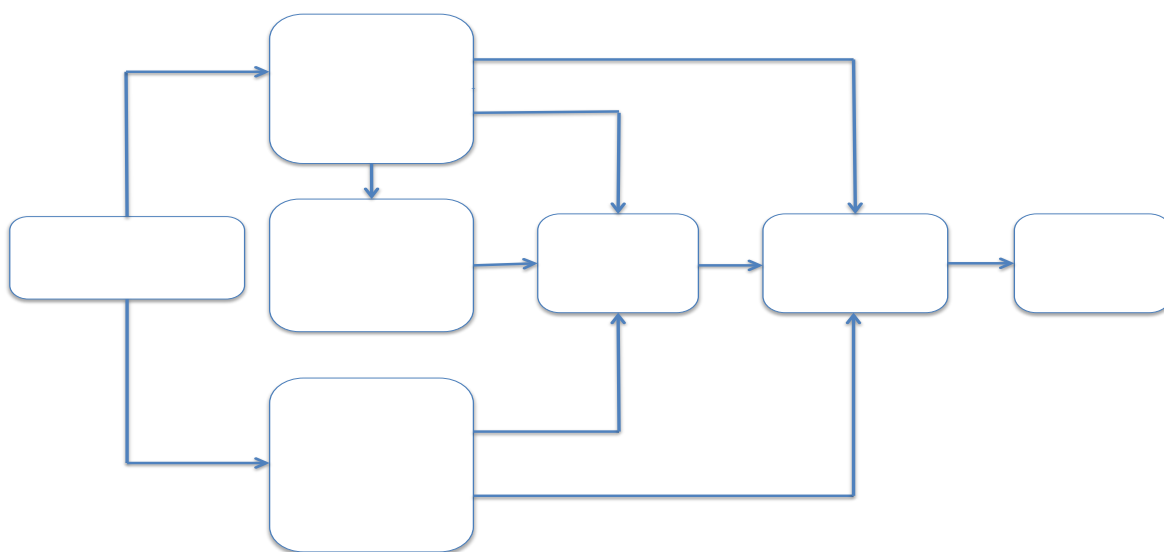


Figure 1. Adaptation of Mobley's (1977) turnover model.

Mobley indicated that there is a substantial and consistent relationship between employee satisfaction and turnover (Zimmerman, 2008). Mobley assessed a simplified heuristic model regarding the withdrawal decision process and discovered intention to quit comes before actual withdrawal behavior is developed (Zimmerman, 2008).

Although organizational commitment and job satisfaction are considered the main cause of employee turnover, other numerous factors have also been studied using the model (Lee et al., 2008). According to Friedman and Schustack (2012), Mobley's model allows the researcher to think about the process from the perspective of job satisfaction to

turnover instead of trying to constantly access the direct relationship between employee dissatisfaction and turnover. Mobley indicated the relationship between employee satisfaction and turnover is substantial and consistent, it is not that strong (Zimmerman, 2008). An investigation that goes beyond the reproduction of the satisfaction-turnover relationship is required in order to fully understand the withdrawal decision process (Friedman & Schustack, 2012). Using Mobley's model of turnover, it was possible to identify thought processes related to long-term service among both retained and retired female leaders within the USMC. This information may provide the USMC with valuable insight regarding strategies or interventions that result in the successful retention of key leaders and be reasonably duplicated to retain talented female colonels in the future.

Women in the Military

Women have contributed immensely to the history of the military service in the United States, and their contributions to the defense of the country started even before it was founded. According to Haring (2009), women have contributed their skills, talents, and courage to the military cause for more than 200 years with a tremendous record of achievements. The history of the contributions of women to the military was more formally recognized in the Spanish-American War when they were regarded as very important assets to the military after serving in the health care field (Evans, 2010). Although they were just playing a supplementary role to the military, nurses were officially recognized as part of the Army and Navy in 1908 (Sherrow, 2007).

The primary role of women during the First World War was to ease the severe shortage of personnel in order to allow men to go into battle (Hacker & Vining, 2012).

During this period, the Nurse Corps had already been established in both the army and the navy and therefore many women also served in the war as health care personnel (nurses) (Hacker & Vining, 2012). By the time the war stopped, the number of women in the Army Nurse Corps had already increased from 400 to 20,000 while that of the Navy Nurse Corps rose from 460 to 1,400 (Sherrow, 2007). Furthermore, women also took on some additional roles in the military such as clerical works and Signal Corps telephone operators to ensure the implementation of a secure telephone network for the military soldiers in England and France (Evans, 2010).

In mobilizing for war, the nation was once again faced with severe shortage of personnel, especially in the support roles due to overwhelming demand for large numbers of men in battle (Evans, 2010). As a result, women's contributions to the military effort during the war became vital as the number of the available men continued to be insufficient. Numerous efforts were therefore made to ensure that women were incorporated into the military ranks. For instance, in 1942, a bill was signed by the president to allow the establishment of the Women Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which was not an official part of the army, but simply a women's organization created to support the army (Sherrow, 2007).

Nevertheless, the establishment of this organization created some sort of inequality for the women in the organization as they never received equal pay and did not hold any military rank. As a result, numerous challenges and a lot of resistance emerged within the army as the auxiliary nature of the organization made it difficult to control the members. Furthermore, there was no contract that could keep women from leaving and

the benefits given to women were not proportional with those enjoyed by their male counterparts (Hosek et al., 2011). Thus, the Women Army Corps (WAC) in June 1943 was founded in order to solve the problem, and it was through the organization that women were officially recognized as part of the army and started receiving full military status.

Similar efforts to integrate women into the Navy Department were faced with various challenges with key among them being a law that prohibited women from serving outside the neighboring States (Hacker & Vining, 2012). However, although the law was later amended to allow women to serve in Alaska, Hawaii, Panama, and the Caribbean, it did not apply to the nurses or the WACs (Haring, 2009). Furthermore, the number of women that could serve as officers were limited due to the legislation that led to the establishment of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). Only a single woman was allowed to hold the position of lieutenant commander and at most 34 as lieutenants (Haring, 2009). This significantly stifled promotions.

The act was amended in 1943 to allow for one woman to be a captain and to ensure that the restrictions placed in the lower ranks were removed (Haring, 2009). Although women were considered as a crucial addition to the service, their roles in the military were limited as they were only allowed to serve ashore and their authority was only over their fellow women (Hacker & Vining, 2012). However, after proving themselves, they participated in specialized training, thus taking jobs such as communications watch officers, aviators, air transport officers, and radio-radar administrators (Sherrow, 2007).

Murnane (2007) stated one of the major breakthroughs that was realized during the World War II concerning women and the military, was the fact that women were allowed to be in the armed forces; could wear uniforms and hold military ranks. Their contributions to the military effort also became vital and continuing ones (Hacker & Vining, 2012). At least 350,000 women participated in the war as volunteers and had already served in various programs for three years except the nurses (Haring, 2009).

Despite their various contributions, the need for women to support the military reduced as the war stopped. However, after the war, the president still signed the Women Armed Service Integration Act in June 1948 to ensure that women had a permanent place in the reserve and regular components of the armed forces (Hacker & Vining, 2012). However, this move is believed to have been as a result of the existing military manpower philosophy rather than genuine concerns about the rights of women to serve (Sherrow, 2007). Evidence suggests that though the establishment of the integration act was meant to ensure that women had a permanent place in the military, there were still numerous restrictions hindering their participation in the services (Haring, 2009). For instance, the act limited the number of women allowed to serve on active duty in each of the regular component in the service to 2 percent, each service was limited to one captain or colonel with full exclusion from the flag rank, the number of women commandants and lieutenant colonels was limited to 10%, among others (Barry, 2013).

Although the demand for military forces was still overwhelming in the early sixties due to the war on communism, the opportunities for women in the services were still limited (Patten & Parker, 2011). However, their role gradually expanded as a result

of personnel shortages related to the Vietnam War and the aggressive feminism instigated by Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* (Asch et al., 2012). In addition, President Johnson signed a law in November 1967 that facilitated the removal of some of the restrictions placed on women, including the abolishment of a law that prevented women from being promoted to the flag rank, abolishment of a law that had put a 10 % limit on women promotion to lieutenant colonel and commandant, removal of the 2% limit on women in the services, and equalizing retirement (Barry, 2013).

According to Hacker and Vining (2012), the establishment of the all-volunteer force (AVF) in the early 1970s is regarded as one of the most influential factors that led to the increase in the number of women participating in the military services. The AVF ordered the establishment of contingency plans to facilitate the inclusion of women into the military services (Hacker & Vining, 2012). This led to a projected increase in the number of women participating in the service to almost 170% and by June 1977 the number of female line officers and those enlisted for active duty had already increased to over 110,000 (Sherrow, 2007).

Despite the increase in the number of the enlisted female officers, there was still wrangling debates about the meaning of the word combat due to the continued exclusion of women from battle units. As a result, the congress ordered that the Department of Defense (DoD) to define the term combat and come up with the necessary recommendations on the expansion of the roles to which women could perform. The recommendations made had a significant and lasting impact on the status of women in the

military as they were allowed access to jobs such as missile duty, flying, and seagoing assignments (Patten & Parker, 2011).

Throughout the early 1970s, numerous programs were designed by the military to facilitate the inclusion of women in all components of the military, thus ensuring that women were evenly distributed throughout the ranks. Furthermore, many restrictions and discriminative policies regarding family issues were amended during that period. Policies related to pregnant women were amended so that they could be accepted back to the service after being discharged (Sherrow, 2007). The DoD also abolished the mandatory separation of women for parenthood and replaced it with a voluntary one (Sherrow, 2007).

It is often believed that the federal courts played a key role towards the reforms witnessed in the military in the seventies (Asch et al., 2012). A series of lawsuits were brought to the courts by military women challenging the constitutionality of the exclusion policies established on the grounds of equality. In response to these lawsuits the court ordered the Navy to ensure that individual decisions are made regarding the capabilities of women with respect to their duties in the Navy. The court allowed the navy to use their own ways in ensuring that women are included, but warned them against blanket exclusions (Barry, 2013).

According to Barry (2013), by 1994 a huge progress in the incorporation of women into the battle units in the navy had been made. Key among the factors that led to these reforms are believed to be the incidents that happened at the 1991 Tailhook Convention, which forced the navy to examine the relevant opportunities for women, and

the Gulf War, which showed that women were also capable of serving in battle fields (Bensahel et al., 2015). One of the major achievements for women in the nineties was the abolishment of combat exclusions, thus allowing women in the Air Force, Marines and Navy to fly combat missions.

In recent past, the number of women serving in the DoD on active duty has significantly increased. According to Barry (2013), as of May 1999, the number of women serving in the DoD on active duty was 190,808. Nowadays, all of the ships in the Navy except for coastal patrol (PC) ships and submarines are open to females. As Haring (2009) stated, women have also taken up weapons, fought, and lost lives in almost every battle in the history of the nation and therefore their experiences, contributions and sacrifices have never been in doubt.

Retention

Parzinger et al. (2012) noted retention refers to the voluntary continuation of service by officers and enlisted personnel who successfully complete their initial contractual obligation. Employee turnover, on the other hand, in its broadest sense refers to a situation whereby employees cut their association with a particular organization. It can be classified into either voluntary or involuntary process. The dichotomous nature of the process means that it can have both positive and negative impact on the individual as well the employing organization. According to Hom et al. (2012), employee turnover always exists at certain levels and therefore should be viewed as a natural phenomenon for any organization.

Civilian Retention

Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the issue of employee turnover in civilian organizations (Hom et al., 2012; Holtom et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008). These studies are included in the review to show how women in general are faced with limitations in their careers, and in understanding the employee turnover of females in civilian organizations, the similar and unique factors affecting females in the Army can be highlighted. The main conclusion in all these studies is that factors predicting employee turnover falls into three major categories: internal work related; external work related, and personal factors (Hom et al., 2012; Holtom et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008). Although a wide variety of professionals and so many variables have been used in the studies of employee turnover in an attempt to explain the decision to quit or stay on the job, most of them have concentrated on work related variables (Hom et al., 2012; Holtom et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008). The most common finding in all these studies has been a clear indication of an inverse relationship between job satisfaction and employee turnover. Thus, the higher the satisfaction with the work environment the less cases of employee turnover (Hom et al., 2012; Holtom et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2008).

A study conducted by Lee et al. (2008) on the relationship between the perceived alternative employment opportunities and employee turnover indicated that the possibility of alternative employment has a negative impact on retention. The perceived benefits, job alternatives and individuals' perception their own marketability are significant factors in the turnover process (Holtom et al., 2008). Parzinger et al. (2012)

indicated that the perceived alternatives are positively related to the intention of quitting an organization, which in turn, is highly related to the actual turnover.

Numerous turnover/retention studies have included various kinds of bio-demographic variables such as age, sex, education, marital status, and tenure (Holtom et al., 2008). While these kinds of variables cannot predict or explain the turnover process on their own, their inclusion is very important in any multivariate turnover model (Hom et al., 2012). The inclusion of this type of explanatory variables ensures that the research is not limited and does not lead to omitted variable bias (Holtom et al., 2008).

A study conducted by Hom et al., (2012) indicated that age, gender, marital status, tenure, behavioral intentions, met expectation, and number of dependents are the most frequently used bio-demographic variables. However, findings from all these studies seem to concur that there is a negative relationship between both age and tenure and employee retention. Parzinger et al. (2012) indicated that with an increase in age and tenure, the individual's alternative employment opportunities become more limited. Therefore, an individual who has served in an organization for a long time is the least likely to leave the organization.

Many studies have also focused on the perceived expectations of an individual on the job and their impact on the retention process (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009; Parzinger et al., 2012). Parzinger et al. (2012) noted that employees who join an organization with realistic expectations have a higher likelihood of remaining in the organization than those with unrealistic expectations. The perceived expectations are directly associated with the organization's "realistic job previews", which are supposed to

provide the candidates with realistic expectations regarding the jobs they are applying (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). Thus, the better the match between these previews and the real experience the higher the probability that the expectations are met, and the more likely it is that an individual stay (Zimmerman, 2008). A recent study by Zimmerman and Darnold (2009) on the relationship between retention and the perceived expectations indicated that, if employees are able to meet the job expectations, their chances of being retained in the organization are high. However, the variables used in this study for analysis were limited, thus creating a possible cause of bias as they solely focused on the perceived expectations and disregarded the possible impacts of bio-demographic factors (Hom et al., 2012)

Military Retention

Mobley's Model of the Turnover Process demonstrates the complexity of decision-making connected to an employee's decision to leave a job (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). His model begins with a female employee's evaluation of her current position in which she determines whether or not she is satisfied with her job. Should the female employee determine that she is not satisfied, she will begin to consider leaving the organization. This stage leads to an evaluation of an employee skills and an assessment of whether she will be able to find job satisfaction elsewhere. If the female employee feels she would achieve success outside her current position, she will begin planning to depart the organization. The female employee then transitions to searching for alternatives, analyzing each prospect to determine if it would serve as a positive alternative to her current situation (Mobley, 1977). According to Messmer and Pizanti (2007), military

organizations have many unique characteristics that are not common in the civilian world, which can affect how army officers evaluate their jobs. For instance, military employee's family is probably the most affected by his/her employment than in most occupations. Military members are often subjected to frequent moves which in most cases can disrupt family life. Social development and education to the children can be affected, the military housings are often below standard, spouse' job may be disrupted, and the relationship with friends and the extended family may also be broken (Hosek, 2011). Other factors that complicate the military life and which may influence employment decisions include the requirement to be frequently away from home, obliged service, long working hours, living in the field, the loss of constitutional rights, and the possibility of laying down your life in case a situation demand (Hosek, 2011). All these factors are said to have considerable influence as far as the stay or leave decisions of military members are concerned.

Since the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), there has been great concern regarding the retention rates in the military. Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue, but most of them have focused mainly on the retention of the enlisted military personnel (Patten & Parker, 2011). There has been relatively limited research on military officer turnover and the existing models of the military officer turnover process have also been very few (Holt et al., 2007).

A study conducted by Holt et al. (2007) to determine the factors that influence the career decisions of military officers indicated that the overall satisfaction with life in the military was the most crucial factor influencing retention. Messmer and Pizanti (2007)

indicated that the marital status, extrinsic and intrinsic job satisfaction factors as well as the commissioning source are some of the most important factors influencing the male junior officers' decisions to remain on active duty. Hoyle and Dudley (1979) conducted a study to determine the kinds of rewards that the USMC officers and the army valued most and how these rewards affected retention. Findings from their study indicated that while extrinsic motivation factors such as financial security, pay, fringe benefits, promotion, and job security were very crucial to the military personnel, intrinsic factors such as trust from the superiors and subordinates, responsibility and authority, interesting job, self-pride, accomplishments supportive environment, among others were regarded as more important. Furthermore, the factors considered by the officers to be the most crucial were found to be the most important determinants of career intentions (Hoyle & Dudley, 1979).

In reviewing all these studies, it is evident that there are numerous factors that influence the career decisions of military officers. This implies that there are other factors out there that have been overlooked or have not been identified. However, all the crucial factors tend to fall into one of the three major categories: intrinsic, extrinsic, and personal factors. Organizing these factors into the three categories simplifies the process of determining the importance of each factor and assist in revealing other potential factors that have not been specifically established.

Retention of Women in the Military

Emmerik et al. (2010) determined women are very important to the effectiveness and the success of the military service. A study conducted by Harris (2009) on women

retention in the Air Force indicated that women are very beneficial to the military service in the following ways. First, the Air Force requires the help of women to fill the billets and get the job done. Secondly, their efficient leadership styles improve retention rates. Patten and Parker (2011) noted that the transformational and interactive leadership styles of leadership play an important role in encouraging participation, boosting other people's sense of worth and allowing continuous dialogue within an institution. Evidence suggests that this style of leadership promotes loyalty and enables the military personnel to listen and share relevant information to get the job done.

Evans (2010) established the kinds of styles employed by women are important for retention purposes as they help in promoting a favorable working environment and retention of the outstanding individuals in the organization for a long period. Women also promote diversity within the organization as the mixture of gender is mainly associated with improved productivity, quality of management, and the expansion and retention of market share (Emmerik et al., 2010). However, the retention of women into the service has been a major challenge affecting the USMC. Just like their male counterparts, professional women spend much of their time striving to succeed in a professional career. Married women who have got kids often find themselves with more responsibilities to take care of their children than their husband (Hosek, 2011). Furthermore, failure by the employers to accommodate women with a flexible schedule that could allow them to take care of their children or favorable workable hours to maintain their careers after childbirth has been a challenge to military women.

Family issues have huge influence on women's decisions to leave or stay in the military. The RAND study by Hosek et al. (2011) on wartime stress indicated that military women were more symptomatic in the early post deployment stage than men. The study did not focus on female officers in particular but was conducted in recognition of the effects of prolonged stress of America's all-volunteer force in light of the extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The study was conducted based on the concern about the effects and consequences of prolonged stress on the force as a whole and on individual service members and their families, and the researcher found that women's reliance on their husbands to take care of the children was cited as a major concern as most men are often unwilling to take on the primary role of caretaker in the family when the wife is a military member (Hosek et al., 2011). Most women are significantly affected by separation anxiety after leaving their children to be taken care by other people.

Job-related separation is not only common in the military but is also a common phenomenon in many other occupations. Navy families are constantly affected by frequent departures, absence and return throughout the obligated service time of a military member (Hosek, 2011). This experience affects people differently, especially if a woman is forced to leave her child under the responsibility of other people. However, separation anxiety and less family organization and cohesiveness were found to be more rampant among single mothers than married mothers (Hosek, 2011).

Pollack et al. (2009) found female officer retention in the Air Force indicated that the greatest attrition happened to the military women who had given birth between the start of the war and the time that the survey was being conducted. The society's

expectations that women are supposed to carry out their traditional responsibilities in their families and the continued unequal burden of taking care of the children has been highlighted as a major reason for women to leave the service (Emmerik et al., 2010). The main concerns for female officers include care of their children when they are away and their welfare rather than enlistment and deployment during the time of war.

Summary and Transition

It is evident that women have contributed immensely to the history of the military service in the United States. Therefore, understanding their history in the service is very important in understanding the reforms and policies that have had specific impact as far as the inclusion of women in the military is concerned. It is also important to understand the career paths of senior military women in the service. Regarding the retention of military personnel in the USMC, the Mobley's Model of Turnover provide a framework by which the issue of employee turnover and the decision process that every employee goes through when deciding to quit or remain in a job can be analyzed.

So many factors, whether professional or personal, influences the career decisions of military officers. However, despite numerous factors being consistent for women and men in the civilian world, the retention decisions for military officers differs in various aspects, including family roles, economic factors, and the impact of senior officers. Nevertheless, research about employee turnover/retention in both the military and the civilian world have been extensive and similar in the sense that the explanatory variables used seem to fall into one of the three major categories: external factors, internal factors, and personal.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus among researchers that conducting further research on the issue of retention of military personnel and more so retention of women in top military positions. In that regards, the present study examined the factors influencing the retention of women in the USMC as GOs. There is significant evidence to support the notion that there is a problem in the Navy as far as the retention of women in the service is concerned. However, there has been insufficient data about why the problem is persistent and what groups in the service is affected the most.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed description of the methodological framework used in the study that sought to explore the factors that influence retention of senior female USMC officers. A detailed description of key methodological components that were used in conducting the study such as the research philosophy, research design, the sample and the sampling technique, as well as the data collection tools used was provided. In addition, a description of the data analysis approach and techniques that were used to promote reliability and credibility of the data collected, as well as the ethical considerations that were made in the course of conducting the study are covered in this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents the description of the results of this study regarding the factors influencing senior female USMC Officer retention decisions. It begins with a restatement of the research questions and description of the participant selection process, methods used to enhance trustworthiness, and data gathering for this study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Chapter 5 includes discussion, interpretation, and implications of these results. It begins with a review and discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Next, Chapter 5 includes interpretation of the findings and of how they confirm, disconfirm, or extend the conclusions of previous researchers. Chapter 5 then includes discussion of the limitations of the study, followed by recommendations based on the findings for leaders, practitioners, and future researchers.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore and describe the perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. To achieve this purpose, the main question raised is, “What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?” Several research questions are raised to aid in answering the main question:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ3: How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

Although there is a great deal of data to support the various reasons why female service members choose to depart the service, there has been no research regarding why senior female leaders choose to endure. This results from should serve to reduce turnover,

improve retention, create a more diverse leadership base, and improve overall combat effectiveness. Data collected in this research provide senior USMC leadership insight regarding variables that influenced retention among female GOs. This information can be used to positively affect turnover by offering those female leaders who contemplate leaving active service an alternative perspective that encourages extended service. Ultimately, the overall goal of this research is to determine if decision-making used by female USMC GOs can be reasonably duplicated by the average female USMC officer, thus improving long-term retention, increasing the presence of senior officers, and improving overall combat effectiveness.

This chapter presents a detailed description of the methodological framework used in the study. Detailed descriptions of the research philosophy, research design, sample and the sampling technique, and data collection tools were provided. In addition, a description of the data analysis approach and techniques used to promote reliability and credibility of the data, as well as ethical considerations made during the course of conducting the study were discussed in this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

Mitchell and Jolley (2012) described a research design as the overall strategy employed by a researcher or a team of researchers to conduct a given study. They see the research design aligns data collection and analysis methods with the research objective to meet the research goal. Mitchell and Jolley (2012) also noted that the nature of the research design influences the accuracy, reliability, and effectiveness of data in a study. Consequently, the accuracy and reliability of study findings are affected by the study

design employed in research. According to Myers et al. (2010), the type of a research design that researcher can adopt is influenced by various factors such as objectives of the study, nature of the study, type of data required, and skills and knowledge of the researcher, among other factors. A qualitative phenomenology research design was used to address one overarching question and three associated research questions.

Phenomenology is a method of inquiry that allows the researcher to learn about a phenomenon by identifying the core of experiences as lived by participants (Sauro, 2015; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015), and was chosen design for this study. Phenomenological research is a form of inquiry involves comprehending human experience, exploring a particular phenomenon, and evaluating the perceptions and experiences of individuals in terms of this phenomenon (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) said that phenomenology is the most appropriate tool for exploring and describing shared experiences of a target population regarding a particular phenomenon.

Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology was employed, which according to Wilson and Hutchinson (2011) is concerned with human experience as it is lived. This approach involves seemingly trivial aspects within experiences that may be taken for granted in people's lives, by creating meaning and sense of understanding these experiences. It was consequently deemed to be best suited for this research to achieve the purpose of exploring and describing the perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. The method is also best for answering the main research question "What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who

elected to retire and not seek flag rank?” The three research questions raised to aid in answering the main question are qualitative in nature. According to Silverman (2013), qualitative research is a scientific approach involving investigating and examining unresolved social phenomena and e to produce themes, concepts, and patterns that reveal the nature of reality from participants’ perspectives. Lewis (2015) described qualitative research as a natural means of exploring and understanding the richness of human or social phenomena from the perspective of individuals or groups without attempting to control uncontrollable social variables. The phenomenon under focus in the study is female turnover and retention within the military.

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is comprised of five methods of inquiry: narrative research, phenomenology, ethnographies, grounded theory, and case study. Narrative research joins together a sequence of events from one or two individuals to form a story (Sauro, 2015). In brief, ethnography is a research design where the researchers immerse themselves in the targeted participants’ environments in order to understand the culture of the population under study (Rossman & Rallius, 2008). This research design is mostly used in cultural anthropology (Sauro, 2015) and therefore were not appropriate for the present study. Grounded theory, on the other hand, describes the essence of an event or activity and provides an explanation of theory behind that event based on the primary data collected (Rossman & Rallis, 2008). Although the purpose of the study was to provide an explanation of why some female military officers stay in the military and why some leave, the focus is not to explain the theory behind the

explanation, only to gain insight and provide recommendations towards reducing turnover and improving retention among female military officers.

Case study research is used when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer how and why questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context (Yin, 2014). Case study might have been appropriate for the study, however lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied provided the best insight toward retention and turnover among female military officers. Although the case study method focuses on a particular phenomenon, as this study entails capturing lived experiences it provides greater description than participant perceptions, which is characteristic of a case study (Yin, 2014). Phenomenology is a method of inquiry that allows the researcher to learn about a phenomenon by identifying the core of the experience as lived by the participants (Sauro, 2015; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015), and therefore the chosen design for this study.

In consideration of the set research questions, it emerged that using a phenomenological research design to explore factors influencing Senior Female USMC officer retention would be the most suitable research design. The rationale for this approach is that it helps to specifically identify phenomena through the respondent's perception of a given situation (Lester, 2014). This approach, according to Wilding, Curtin, and Whiteford (2012), helps to gather deep information and participants' perceptions through inductive qualitative methods such as interviews and observations.

Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology was employed, which according to Wilson and Hutchinson (2011), is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived. This approach focuses towards illuminating details seemingly trivial aspects within experiences that may be taken for granted in people's lives, by creating meaning and sense of understanding of these experiences. Through this approach, the lived experiences of female USMC GO in their profession as well as factors and barriers that affect their mandate to remain on active duty was captured.

Role of the Researcher

Since the study was phenomenological in nature, the researcher was an observant participant. This is because the research used phenomenological interview, which requires the researcher to be a component of the research process (Wimpenny & Gass, 2011). To minimize bias before interviewing participants and during the analysis of interview data, researcher perceptions, interpretations, and expectations of findings was noted in a journal, ensuring objectivity during the data collection process. The use of an interview protocol helped to ensure there is no bias. Setting aside bias protects the validity of interview data but also helps maintain awareness of expected findings and mindfulness of interpretations, especially if interpretations are similar to expected findings (Givens, 2008). Additionally, there were no professional or supervisory relationships with participants and therefore, no bias or conflict of interest between me and the respondents which might otherwise affect the objectivity of this study.

In this study, the participants were considered as 'co-researchers,' a term used by Moustakas (1994) because they were included in the meaning of the essence of the

phenomenon. The primary goal in this study was to make the participants aware of their status and role as co-researchers. Therefore, at the beginning of the study, participants were informed about how they fit into the research purposes and questions. Co-researchers were encouraged to be open and share rich data about their own experiences. It was necessary to facilitate the flow of communication and identify cues for the respondents during the study (Moustakas, 1994). In order to make participants feel more comfortable in sharing details about their experiences, amity was developed with the participants during the study by sharing experiences about the phenomenon. The researcher remained objective throughout the study in order to answer the research questions from the co-researcher's viewpoints. This act is referred to as 'epoché processes (Moustakas, 1994).

Methodology

Sampling Strategy

A research population refers to the number of research objects that a researcher targets or intends to use in a study (Ritchie et al., 2013). The research population for the study was women who have either earned or been competitive for membership in the GO ranks within the USMC. This is in line with Creswell (2012) who noted that a phenomenological framework works well with relatively homogenous respondents or population who has experience with the same phenomenon. A precondition for examining the essence of lived experience is choosing participants of the study who have significant and meaningful experiences of the phenomenon in question (Polkinghorne 1989). As a result, for phenomenological studies, criterion sampling, which refers to

selecting individuals who fulfill specific criteria was considered the best method to determine target participants (Creswell 2007). Furthermore, it is necessary that participants fulfill the capacity to reflect on and to provide full and sensitive descriptions of their lived experiences with regard the phenomenon (Creswell 2007; Polkinghorne 1989).

One important consideration for participant selection is the size of the sample. As generalizability is not the goal of phenomenological research study, participants' overall representativeness of the general population is not an issue to be considered (Creswell 2007). Instead, phenomenology requires a relatively homogenous group of participants to reveal their shared experiences of the phenomenon. This means also that sample sizes for phenomenological research do not necessarily have to be large. Instead, while recommendations vary, a sample of 3–10 participants are usually believed to be the most appropriate (Creswell 2007; Polkinghorne 1989). For this study, I planned to recruit 10 women who had served as GOs and Colonel Volunteers within the United States; the final sample size equated to 11 participants. The participants were selected to participate in the study because they had significant and meaningful experiences as GOs and Colonel Volunteers in the USMC. In addition, the sampling criteria were based on the research problem, the purpose of the research, and the research design (see Polit & Hungler, 2010). Regarding the research problem and the purpose, the study examined the lived experiences of women who have either earned or been competitive for membership into the GO and Colonel Volunteer ranks within the USMC. Therefore, all male officers and female officers among the junior ranks were excluded from this study. In addition, the

study excluded female Colonel Volunteers residing outside the United States but include all surviving female GOs. The following procedures were used to guide recruitment:

1. Build a list of female service members who meets the sampling criteria for the USMC system.
2. Send recruitment e-mail to all potential participants containing a project description letter and request for participation.
3. Those participants who responded to the recruitment email and met inclusion criteria were chosen on a first come first serve basis and contacted to schedule a face-to-face interview. An intended sample size of 10 participants were contacted for interviews.
4. During the scheduled interview, participants were first given a consent form and a detailed description of the study and participant rights to sign and return to the researcher.
5. It was the intent to reach data saturation, the point at which no new information or themes emerge from interview responses (Givens, 2008). Should new information continue to emerge during the interviews, additional participants who meet the inclusion criteria were recruited.

Recruitment and Participation

An intended sample of 10 women in or retired from GO and Colonel Volunteer ranks within the USMC were recruited for the study. Recruitment began with a list of female service members who meets the sampling criteria, accessed from the USMC system. A recruitment e-mail was sent to all potential participants, of which contained a

project description letter and request for participation. Those participants who responded to the recruitment email, and confirmed meeting inclusion criteria, were chosen on a first come first serve basis and contacted to schedule a face to face interview at a time and location convenient to the participant.

Instrumentation

Bogdan and DeVault (2015) defined research instrumentation as the various processes and methods applied by a researcher to collect data from the research participants. In the study, in-depth phenomenological interviews with participants were conducted (Creswell, 2012). Phenomenological interview is purposely meant to describe the meaning of a phenomenon that several individuals share (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). This form of interview is distinguished from other forms by the relationship between the philosophical tradition and the method. This distinction is clearly seen in the type of relationship that exists between researcher and participant.

In quantitative research, the relationship is observational, while the relationship is dialogue form in qualitative researches. However, in phenomenological research, the relationship between the researcher and the respondent becomes reflexive, whereby the researcher becomes a vital component of the research process (Wimpenny & Gass, 2011). Therefore, the researcher using this approach needs to develop specific research skills to enable them to get lived experiences without contaminating the data through bracketing (Creswell, 2013).

In general, phenomenological research, data collected refer to participants' descriptions of lived experience, which can be collected through interviews, observations,

or written self-descriptions (van Manen, 1990). Interviews and observations were used for the current study. In particular, Seidman's (2013) framework for in-depth phenomenological interviewing, which contains a series of three open-ended interviews with each participant were used. Under this framework, the first set of interviews established the context of participants' experience. On the second stage, the participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which they took place. Lastly, the third stage involves the participants reflecting on the meaning their experience (Seidman, 2013). Each stage lasted for 90 minutes (Seidman, 2006). According to Moustakas (1994), in the phenomenological interviewing, participants are deemed co-researchers. As co-researchers, they are asked to describe their experiences in their own terms and to give constant feedback with regard the interpretations that the researcher made. Appendix A provides the list of interview questions used in this study, which would satisfy the three stages.

To ensure reliability and validity of the questions, a field test of the interview questions was conducted prior to conducting interviews. The purpose of the field tests is to determine any limitations with regard to the interview instrument, the questions' wording, and the appropriateness; to ensure participants understand the interview questions as intended (Givens, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). For the current study, field test interviews were conducted with two USMC GOs who were not be part of the main study. After each interview, each field participant was asked to restate any questions or phrases needed to be clarified. Results from the field test were noted and changes made to the interview questions as needed.

Setting

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a public location where privacy was available. This was procedure was used to ensure participants would be comfortable and willing to answer the interview questions fully. Participants selected the date and time for their interview to ensure they had adequate time to answer all questions fully. To establish trust and rapport, each interview began with a social conversation, followed by interview questions guided by the interview protocol. No organizational conditions occurred that would influence the interpretation of the results.

Data Collection

During the scheduled interview, participants were first be given a consent form and a detailed description of the study and participant rights to sign and return to the researcher. At that point, the interview began. Creswell (2012) argued that in phenomenological studies, multiple studies are conducted with each research participant. This is further supported by Seidman (2011) who suggested that phenomenological studies require in-depth interviews with each of the informants to collect phenomenological data. During the interview, the female General or Senior USMC Officers' presented their previous experiences in the USMC. To create relaxing and trusting atmosphere, interviews started with a social conversation followed by interview questions guided by the interview protocol. The average duration of the interviews was 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in public locations where privacy was available. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 11 participants. Interviews for 10 of the participants were audio-recorded using a tape recorder. All recorded

interviews were done with the permission and knowledge of the interviewee. The one unrecorded interview was with a GO who preferred not to have her interview recorded. To ensure accurate reporting of the data, the researcher made detailed notes of direct quotations during the interview, verifying the wording at the end of the interview. The other 10 audio-recorded interviews were immediately transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant and their respective interview responses. There were no deviations from the data collection procedure described in Chapter 3, and no unusual or unexpected circumstances were encountered that might influence the interpretation of the study results.

Data Analysis

This is the process of data organization, data summarization, interpretation and presentation in a form that makes it easy to understand (Gelman et al., 2014). Considering the study is phenomenological in nature, the researcher transcribed tape recordings as soon as possible after the interviews. Interviews continued while the previous responses are being transcribed and analyzed to ascertain sufficient data to represent various dimensions of the phenomenon. Data was analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) which incorporates thematic analysis process. The general procedures followed include preparing data for the analyses, phenomenological reduction of data, imaginative variation of the data, and revealing the experience's essence.

The phenomenological analysis started with bracketing my subjectivity which refers to clarifying preconception throughout the study and setting aside the researcher's

judgments and dispositions towards the phenomenon prior the interviews (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The phenomenological analysis process with then begin by describing the phenomenon completely. The researcher used the modified van Kaam procedural steps (Moustakas, 1994) to analyze data.

Horizontalizing and listing all relevant expressions. During this stage of data analysis, the researcher looked at all data since every statement by the respondent has an equal value. Statements that are repetitive, overlapping or irrelevant to the investigating phenomena were ignored. After cleaning the data, the remaining parts of the data that have textural meaning to the studied phenomenon called horizons (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Subjection of invariant constituents to experience a reduction. During this stage, cluster horizons were grouped into themes with each theme having a single meaning thus describing phenomena in textural language (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Thematic clustering to generate key themes. During this step, clusters were formed to create themes for the invariant constituents (horizons) which formed the core themes of the participants' experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Comparison of diverse data sources to validate the constant constituents. In this stage, different themes were derived from the participants' experience to be compared with participants' body expressions and literature to ascertain the accuracy of the data sources. Interview responses were also compared among the participants.

Construction of participants' textural descriptions. The textual description explains participants' perceptions of a phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015, p.11). In

this step, the participants' experiences were described using verbatim excerpts from the interview. Moreover, a narrative format was used to explain participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Construction of individual structural descriptions. Using textural descriptions, it was imagined how experiences occurred and then create individual structures for each respondent.

Construction of composite structural descriptions. After writing the textual description for each participant, the textual description was incorporated into a structure explaining how the experience occurred. At the end of each paragraph, the structures were added to generate structural description. This process facilitated understanding a participant's experiences with the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Combining the texture and structure to form an expression. During this phase, two narratives were created for each co-researcher (participant), one for texture describing what happened during the interview and another to the structure describing how it happened. The meaning units for each participant were then listed. After that, meaning units common to all participants to generate composite textural and structural descriptions of the shared meaning units were created. To create the essence of the phenomenon, individual meaning units from the generated composite description were removed. Lastly, composite structural description with composite textural description were combined to create a universal description of the study phenomena (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

All the data for this study, both hard and soft copies is stored and kept in confidential places. For the hard copies, they are stored in a box only known to the researcher. The key to this box is held by the researcher while the soft copies are stored on the computer with password protection. Five years after the study is published, the data is slated for destruction, whether electronically or physically.

Theme Development

Member-checked interview data for all 11 participants were analyzed using the modified van Kaam procedure described by Moustakas (1994). In the first step of the analysis, the data were horizontalized. All excerpts that were relevant to any of the research questions were regarded as equally relevant and were highlighted. The second step of the analysis consisted of data reduction and elimination. In this step, the researcher reviewed the relevant transcript excerpts that were isolated in step 1 and asked two questions about each of them.

The first question was: Is this data excerpt important for describing the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon? In relation to this first question, it should be noted that redundant excerpts were not considered important to describing the experience, even though they might otherwise have been relevant. The second question was: Can the excerpt be reduced to a latent meaning? Excerpts for which the answers to both questions were affirmative were retained for further analysis and were identified as invariant constituents of the experience. Excerpts for which the answer to either question was negative were excluded from further analysis.

The third step of the analysis involved thematizing the invariant constituents. Invariant constituents with similar latent meanings were grouped together into larger themes that indicated patterns in participants' experiences. Themes were then checked against the data to confirm they were necessary to describing a participant's experience, and to confirm that each theme was either stated explicitly in the data or was completely compatible with what was stated in the data. Any theme that did not meet the criteria of necessity and full compatibility was excluded from further analysis.

Next, textural descriptions were created for the participants using verbatim excerpts from the transcripts. Textural descriptions were created by listing the themes for each participant side-by-side in a table with the direct quotes from the data that supported the themes. Structural descriptions were created by using imaginative variation to identify and isolate the essence of the experience. In imaginative variation, the researcher imagined changes to aspects of the thematized invariant constituents to determine whether or not changing a given theme would alter the essence and meaning of the experience. When imaginative variation indicated that a theme could not be altered without changing the underlying meanings and essence of the experience, the theme was identified as describing the essence of the experience. Thus, the creation of structural descriptions allowed the latent meanings associated with the thematized invariant constituents to be sorted into those that contributed to describing the essence of the experience and those that did not.

Themes that contributed to describing the essence of the experience were used to create a textural-structural description, in which the essence described in the structural

description was woven together with the relevant quotes that were isolated in formulating the textural description to create a comprehensive description of the essence of the lived experience. Next, the textural-structural descriptions were combined across participants to form a composite textural-structural description that indicated the essence of the experience across participants. Separate composite textural-structural descriptions were created for GOs and CVs to facilitate the comparisons required by the research questions. The themes to answer the research questions were derived from comparisons between the respective composite textural-structural descriptions created for the two groups of participants. The relevant portions of the composite descriptions are provided in the discussion of each theme.

Trustworthiness

The ultimate goal of any research is to present credible and reliable results that can be trusted by the reader. Therefore, to achieve this goal, the researcher used reproducible and consistent methods such as describing approach to and procedures for data analysis and methods to be used, clear documentation of the process of generating themes, concepts and theories (Lacey & Luff, 2014). Qualitative research can only be trustworthy if it represents the experience of the study participants (Cilesiz, 2011). Reproducible methods to enhance the four components of trustworthiness were utilized. The four components of trustworthiness include credibility, which is analogous to the quantitative construct of internal validity; transferability, which is analogous to external validity; dependability, which is analogous to reliability; and confirmability, which is analogous to objectivity.

Credibility

Credibility is demonstrated when participants recognize reported research findings as their own (Cilesiz, 2011). To promote credibility, the following techniques were employed: triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The researcher used member checks to test the credibility of data collected. In this process, interview transcriptions were sent to the participants to crosscheck and validate their responses. With peer debriefing, the researcher exposed the study to a colleague with phenomenological study knowledge for positive criticism (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation was done by comparing interview responses from different respondents to previous literature as well as my own notes during the interview to identify whether they present credible information.

Dependability

Dependability is a criterion used to measure the trustworthiness in qualitative research and it is met by ensuring that the findings are credible (Cilesiz, 2009). Stepwise replication and ‘inquiry auditing’ techniques were used to enhance dependability. Stepwise replication was conducted during the data analysis to establish whether the participants’ responses have any similarity or repetition in order to enhance the reliability of the research findings. In addition, the research was presented to the supervisor to perform inquiry auditing by examining the findings, interpretations and recommendations (Cilesiz, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

Confirmability is a strategy to neutrality (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). The bracketing (epoché) process was used to restrict her from making personal judgments and maintain neutrality during the research process (Ashworth, 2010). The researcher ensured the findings are reflexive to maintain validity of the research.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the possibility that the findings of a given study are meaningful to other people in similar situations (Streubert & Carpenter, 2010). However, phenomenological studies aim to get a detailed description of the experience of specific groups and, therefore, generalizability, which is the extension and transferability of the research findings to other contexts and situations, is not researcher's decision, but the decision of the potential user of the research (Cilesiz, 2009). In the present study, the researcher ensured transferability by describing data sufficient to allow comparison. In addition, the research was exposed to member checks by other senior female officers who did not participate in this study to ensure transferability.

Ethical Procedures

The researcher observed moral obligations by adhering to research ethics. This helped to develop trust between the myself and the respondents, and hence enable them to make sound decisions. First, the researcher obtained permission to conduct the study from the relevant authorities. These permissions include the permission to conduct the study, permission from the study site and written consent from the research participants. Based on Bailey's (2012) recommended items, the researcher developed an informed

consent agreement in order to gain informed consent from the participants. Some of the items included in the agreement are the purpose of the research, procedures of the research, risks and benefits of the research, voluntary nature of the research and, procedures to protect confidentiality.

The second aspect that the researcher promoted is confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents. Confidentiality helps to conceal participant's identity so that they cannot be linked with information provided in the research (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Anonymity on the other hand, helps to eliminate any possible link between the data and specific participant. Privacy refers to the right that all data collected during the study is kept in strictest confidence. It also means that individuals can behave or think without interference and no possible private behavior may be used to embarrass or demean them later (Polit & Hungler, 2010).

By signing the consent form, the researcher assured participants that anything that they do or say is treated with the strictest confidence to guarantee their privacy. In the study, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by identifying the respondents numerically (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). They were informed that the collected data was deidentified and is maintained for a period of seven years before it is destroyed. Thirdly, respondents were assured of their right to withdraw or terminate their participation without giving any explanation. Prior to the interview, the researcher reminded participants that their participation is voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the interview without being prejudiced.

Summary and Transition

This chapter provided a detailed description of the methodological framework that was employed in conducting the study where various components such as the research philosophy, research design, the sample and the sampling technique, research instrumentation, ethical considerations, and limitations are discussed. In brief, the interpretivism research philosophy used in the qualitative study. This is because this research philosophy advocates for a subjective approach of conducting a study, hence requires active participation and involvement of the researcher; an aspect that is highly significant in the study.

In consideration of the set research objectives, the phenomenology research design was used in order to help identify specific phenomena through the respondent's perception of the given experiences. That is, it captured the lived experiences of female USMC GOs in their profession as well as factors and barriers that affect their mandate to remain on active duty. Being a phenomenological study, a sample of nine respondents were recruited through purposive sampling technique and the intended data collected through interviews. Once the data collection exercise is over, the collected data was analyzed based on the Moustakas' phenomenological data-analyzing procedures, which emphasize on identifying the overriding themes.

Chapter 4 presents the description of the results of this study regarding the factors influencing senior female USMC Officer retention decisions. It begins with a restatement of the research questions and description of the participant selection process, methods

used to enhance trustworthiness, and data gathering for this study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Chapter 5 includes discussion, interpretation, and implications of these results. It begins with a review and discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4. Next, Chapter 5 includes interpretation of the findings and of how they confirm, disconfirm, or extend the conclusions of previous researchers. Chapter 5 then includes discussion of the limitations of the study, followed by recommendations based on the findings for leaders, practitioners, and future researchers.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and describe perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. This study was conducted to compare perceived risks, hardships, and sacrifices made throughout the career progression of female USMC GOs with perceived experiences of competitive female colonels who elected to retire before being considered for flag rank. To achieve this purpose, the main research question raised was: “What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?” Three sub-questions were raised to aid in answering the main question, including:

RQ1: What similarities and differences in perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ3: How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

Chapter 4 includes a description of demographic characteristics of study participants. Next, it includes descriptions of data analysis procedures described in Chapter 3, followed by a discussion of evidence of the trustworthiness of study results. Chapter 4 includes results of the data analysis, organized by research question. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Demographics

The sample included five female CVs and six female GOs who were in or retired from the USMC. To preserve confidentiality, participants' real names were replaced in interview transcripts and all subsequent work products associated with this study with alphanumeric codes. The five CVs were designated CV1 through CV5. The six GOs were designated GO1 through GO6.

Word Cloud

Figure 2 is a NVivo 12-generated word cloud indicating comparative word frequencies for the 100 most common words in the dataset with five or more letters, with forms of root words clustered or collapsed into the most frequent form of the root (e.g. *thinks, thinking, and thought* are clustered into *think*). The larger the font size in which a word appears, and the more centrally a word is positioned in the word cloud, the more frequently it appeared in the dataset. The word cloud is a visual representation of the prominence of different ideas and themes in the data, and it can serve to indicate preliminary patterns of meaning in the data.

As indicated in Figure 2, the two most frequently occurring words in the dataset were *think* and *really*. The frequent occurrence of these words indicated an insight into

the rhetorical tone of participants' responses, which often included qualifiers (e.g. prefacing a declarative statement with *I think*) as well as rhetorical intensifiers (e.g. *really*). It was noticeable across the dataset as a whole that participants often appeared reluctant to generalize their own opinions and perceptions and used qualifiers to foreground the contingent nature of their individual experiences. However, it was also notable across the data set that participants expressed themselves in strong terms. While taking ownership of the contingent nature of personal experiences and perceptions, participants emphasized that those experiences and perceptions produced consistent and intense impressions on them. As Figure 2 indicates, other significant words that were prominent in the dataset included *husband*, *women*, *family*, *married*, *career*, and *support*.



Figure 2. NVivo 12-word cloud: Auto coded themes.

Tree Map

Figure 3 is a NVivo 12-generated tree map indicating the prominence of and relationships among the 100 most frequent words of five or more letters in the dataset, with forms of root words clustered or collapsed into the most frequent form of the root. The size of the box in which a word appears indicates the word's frequency in comparison to other words that appear in the tree. Words in the left-hand column were the most frequently used, as indicated also in Figure 2. Words in the narrower column immediately to the right of the words in the left hand column were the words most commonly associated with the most frequent words. For example, *think* appeared most often in the dataset in relation to the words *cause* (as a colloquial contraction of *because*) and *getting*. This pattern of association continues, with words in the next and narrower column immediately to the right of *cause* and *getting* to be those most commonly associated with, but less frequent than, *cause* and *getting*, namely, *officer* and *active*.

think	cause	active	going	probably	worked	place	giving	perceive	first	school	talking		
		officer	things	knowing	wanted	especiall	helping	always	balance	drinking	married	times	
	getting					thank	wanna	whole	dealing	answer	finish	force	
		right	person	family	leadership								
really	gonna				people	continue	significant	interest	through	versus	young	learned	commi
		corps	happened	husband		something	decisio	lunch	found	never	psych	positio	reservi
	marine				demands			profession	another	retirem	undera	uniform	weapd
reserves		different	career	still		figure	joined	relations	interview	though	commab	babies	togeth
					intel	awesome	assault	squadro	least	though	switch	choos	alright
support	report	years	deployed	women	great	actually	every	strong	mentort	three	system	single	anythi

Figure 3. NVivo 12 tree map: Auto coded concepts.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The researcher used reproducible methods to enhance the four components of trustworthiness. The four components of trustworthiness are: credibility, which is analogous to the quantitative construct of internal validity, transferability, which is analogous to external validity, dependability, which is analogous to reliability, and confirmability, which is analogous to objectivity.

Credibility

The results of a study are credible to the extent that they accurately represent the reality they were intended to describe. Threats to credibility include errors in data transcription and reliance on the accuracy and honesty of participants' responses. To encourage participant honesty, participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential. To ensure data were accurately transcribed, the researcher asked participants to review the transcripts and indicate any needed corrections. This member-checking procedure also contributed to ensuring the accuracy of participants' responses, by giving participants a second opportunity to review and reflect on their answers without the pressure that might be associated with having to formulate responses during a recorded interview. The convergence of participants' responses on consistent meanings and essences during data analysis further contributed to verifying credibility.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results in a study would hold true for different populations or samples. To facilitate future researchers' assessments of transferability, rich descriptions of the data have been provided in the form of direct

quotes from the transcripts to allow comparison with the responses of other samples. Additionally, inclusion criteria for the sample have been described in detail and adhered to during participant recruitment, to ensure transparency about the population and sample used in this study.

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which results in a study would be reproducible in the same research context at a different time. Dependability in this study was ensured through the process of member-checking. Allowing participants to reflect on and correct their responses at a later time and in a different setting allowed any perceptions that might have changed since the interview to be identified. Participants did not choose to alter their responses, however, indicating that the experiences and perceptions they reported were stable.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which findings reflect the opinions and experiences of participants, rather than any researcher bias. To enhance confirmability in this study, direct quotes from the data have been included as evidence for all results presented in this chapter, so readers can independently assess confirmability. Additionally, the researcher practiced bracketing during data collection and data analysis. Bracketing involved becoming aware of and mindfully attempting to suspend any biases or preconceptions, in order to minimize their potential to distort the results.

Results

The primary question used to guide this study was: What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek Flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank? The primary question was answered by answering the three research questions that were derived from it. This presentation of the results of the data analysis is organized by research question.

As mentioned in the data analysis section of this chapter, results used to answer each research question are organized by theme. The discussion of each theme includes relevant portions of the composite textural-structural descriptions from each of the two participant groups, with each description given in a separate sub-section. The discussion of each theme concludes with a third sub-section, in which the composite descriptions from the two groups are compared to indicate how the theme emerged to answer the research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question was: *What similarities and differences in perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek Flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank?* One main theme emerged to address this research question.

Theme 1: Perceived institutionalized gender inequities. Data associated with this theme indicated that GOs and CVs encountered the same barriers. Barriers included having to work harder than their male colleagues to be treated with the same respect,

being ignored or rejected for being female, and being sexually assaulted and harassed, often by superior officers.

Composite textural-structural descriptions for General Officers. All GOs reported that they had been sexually harassed and discriminated against, and that they had experienced feelings of isolation at least once in their careers as a result of gender discrimination. They perceived themselves as needing to work to overcome these barriers, but they perceived the barriers themselves as manifestations of a pattern of institutionalized gender discrimination in the USMC.

GO1 was harassed by a series of commanding officers who made inappropriate remarks to her about how sexually appealing they found her appearance when she wore the uniform skirt. The comments made her uncomfortable enough that she stopped wearing skirts. Although she had enjoyed wearing the skirts initially, on later reflection she believed the different uniform for women itself constituted a barrier and a source of inequity for USMC women:

I don't like this skirt because I think, yes, I like being a woman and put on a little lipstick and makeup. But the uniform is that: "uni-," one, we're one, and the more that you have a differentiation in uniform, then you're differentiating between the genders. If you truly want one service, you should have one uniform.

GO1 was so badly mistreated by colleagues while she was pregnant that other women in her unit were appalled and independently reported the conditions she faced:

I was told by another female officer, "Look. I think I should tell you what's being said behind your back." How I was being treated was so bad that when it came

time for the climate assessment survey in the unit, there were five other women who had gone into these interviews and said, “This person over here is being mistreated.”

Notable in GO1’s response was her confidence that the harassment she experienced was not her fault. Some of this confidence emerged from her own reflections, and some was supported by validation of her perceptions by female. Most importantly, GO1 perceived the harassment she encountered as inequitable, institutional, and based solely on her being a woman.

When GO2 first entered the Basic School, she felt isolated because some officers were not accepting of female Marines. Peer support and a perception that the fault was with the outdated expectations of older officers allowed her to overcome her isolation:

I was one of the first women through there, and frankly, there were still some old heads there that just didn't quite believe that women had what it took to lead in the Marine Corps. That said, I had some real great peers that were with me in the class and they just said, “Blow that guy off because you're doing great.”

GO2 also perceived the fitness requirements for women in the USMC as an inequitable institutional barrier. She stated:

The Fit Reps are not fair, [but] how do you account for the biases? And you can't tell. So, in my way [of evaluating female Marines for promotion], yes, there is a process in place that seeks to be very fair and the Fit Reps seek to highlight those things about a Marine, but you can't have promotion be 100% based on Fit Reps.

GO3 reported that she experienced a pattern of gender discrimination throughout her career. She considered this a significant inequity, which she confidently attributed to a pattern of gender discrimination in the USMC. Her indignation over the institutional inequity became a significant motivation for her to succeed:

I think I experienced a ton of sexual discrimination throughout my career. I have been in so many meetings when they didn't even pay attention to me. Like I wasn't even in the room. It wasn't because I wasn't good at my job, it was literally because I was female. That is such an angering feeling. Humiliating. Frustrating. It just made me work harder. Speak louder. More aggressive.

GO4 perceived the discrimination and isolation she experienced during her career as verging on inevitable, because of the institutional pervasiveness of gender discrimination and the general need for male Marines to acclimate themselves through exposure to working with female colleagues: "I spent more time in isolation in the USMC than I did feeling like I fit in. It was so common for me to be the first woman anywhere I was, that I was often looked at in such contempt." GO4 reported that her sense of isolation persisted despite the supportiveness of her friends:

I did find friends, close friends who stuck by me and supported me throughout my career. But feeling isolated was a bit of a way of life for me. I guess it sounds a little sad, but it is what it is.

GO5 also perceived herself as being isolated and discriminated against because she was female in a male-dominated organization. Like other GOs, she was confident in her perception that this barrier was an institutional one:

[Gender discrimination] still happens, it's not only being the only woman at the table, sometimes the only woman in the unit, sometimes the only woman even at a conference . . . It's been isolating just by the virtue of being a woman. But also, as a leader, you have to be very comfortable in who you are, what you believe in, and you have to be at peace with the decisions you make, and sometimes that's a very lonely place as well. So, it's a combination of being a woman in a man's world, and being a leader, and now being a general officer, I can't just pal around with people here at the Pentagon.

GO6 was sexually assaulted by a flight surgeon during a routine medical examination. After the examination, the flight surgeon began to contact her regularly to make sexual overtures, threatening to declare her medically unfit for duty if she did not comply with his demands. GO6 reported the assault and harassment to her commanding officer, who contemptuously dismissed her claims. Later that evening, the commanding officer made fun of GO6's report to his wife, and, in doing so, referred to GO6 as "crazy."

The following day, the same commanding officer ordered GO6 to report to his office. He was apologetic. He admitted to ridiculing GO6 and her claims to his wife, and he added that his wife had shocked him by replying that the flight surgeon was, "doing it to everyone." GO6 said of the aftereffects of this incident:

That flight surgeon was removed in less than 90 days. [But] I did not [describe] that as a sexual assault until I was probed [24 years later]. I never would have described it as a sexual assault. I was conditioned and believed that it was my

fault that the Doc did anything to me, [so] I felt much better when the wife said, “No, he's doing it to everyone.” . . . I don't think we do a good job of unconscious bias training or awareness in society, let alone the military.

GO6 experienced the corroboration of her commanding officer's wife, and the subsequent removal of the flight surgeon from duty, as a vindication that exposed her inculcated sense of responsibility for men's behavior as false. As with other GOs, GO6 attributed her most negative experience as a woman in the USMC to institutional patterns of gender discrimination. When GOs resisted those discriminatory patterns, they perceived themselves as resisting and overcoming an inequity for which they themselves bore no responsibility.

Composite textural-structural descriptions for Colonel Volunteers. The five CVs in this study encountered the same institutional barriers as the GOs, with all CVs reporting experiences of sexual harassment and/or assault, gender discrimination, and isolation. However, the CVs perceived it as fair that women should have to prove themselves according to the same standards applied to men, and, more implicitly, that female Marines were responsible for creating a space for themselves in a masculinized institution by adopting and meeting the same standards to which their male colleagues were held.

CV1 stated that her most significant challenge as a female Marine was her self-imposed goal of meeting the physical standards applied to men. She described herself as thankful for this challenge, though, because it compelled her to exceed her own expectations:

I think I did have to work harder . . . Biggest thing is the physical, like I said, is just pushing myself extra hard, which actually, I think I'm thankful that I've been in environments that have pushed me. I think it's awesome to see what you're able to accomplish, when you don't think it's possible.

CV1 encountered signs of disrespect from subordinates, such as failure to salute her. She accepted responsibility for addressing this insubordination by demonstrating that she could excel according to the standards of physical fitness applied to men:

I do a push-up challenge [when subordinates fail to salute me]. I said, "Let us go for a run. Let's talk about this. Why is it that you don't respect—" And at the time I was running sub sixes [i.e., one mile in less than six minutes], I could handle it. So, I said, "Okay, it's obvious you're judging, you're judging this," and the respect came from the physical. And so, I think as a woman I pushed to be out front, and I said I will always come in the top three of the run. I'll come in the top three in a ruck march, and I come in the top three the number of push-ups, sit-ups . . . I've always said I'm gonna max, to this day my PT test on the male scale. There should be no different standards. So, I've held myself to that standard, in order not to feel so isolated.

Notable in CV1's response was the association of gendered fitness standards with women's experiences of isolation in the masculinized Marine Corps. CV1 believed the different physical standards perpetuated gender inequality by making it unnecessary for women to prove themselves the physical equals of men.

Like CV1, CV2 accepted responsibility for her own negative experiences as a female officer. Of having to alter her behavior to be accepted, she stated that this was an inevitable condition that applied equally to all Marines who took their duties seriously:

I'm definitely different outside the uniform than I am in uniform, but I would hope that most people were, cause when we're in uniform, we're professionals . . . I think definitely, as you go up in rank, that your behavior in uniform has to be a lot more subdued than perhaps you would be out of uniform, and that's just growing up and being an adult. (CV2)

CV2 reported that she was sexually assaulted by a superior officer. When she reported the incident, there were no consequences for the superior officer, but she (being under the age of 21 and having consumed alcohol at the time of incident) was formally charged with underage drinking. She stated that the effect of this incident was to make her more vigilant in monitoring her surroundings. Thus, she perceived the lesson of the incident as a need for personal rather than institutional improvement:

I learned from it, it took me a long time, but I learned from it, I grew from it. I am completely aware of my surroundings at all times, in every interview, in every meeting I will look around at the start and figure out who's there and why they're there.

When CV3's subordinates questioned her placement as their superior, she regarded it as a childlike pushing of boundaries that was natural in all subordinates, regardless of the superior's sex, rather than as gender discrimination:

[Direct subordinates would] look at you and they're like, "I can do your job." [I'd reply,] "I know you can do my job. I know you could absolutely do my job but I'm here to do the job." And it's almost like having a--I can't believe I'm saying this, it's almost like dealing with children when they start pushing boundaries. And they want to see your reaction and far they can push it.

CV4 described her experience of a pattern of sexual harassment from a superior officer and her judgment that it was not significant, even though it made her uncomfortable, and even though the superior officer was eventually fired for similar behavior:

[I've experienced] plenty of sexual harassment. But I don't think that's unique . . . I worked for a guy who was just a weird dude. Anyways, he eventually got fired from the Marine Corps for a foot fetish. He was a General Officer, who liked to tell young women—he would come by and he would say, "You know, [name redacted], you should wear black pantyhose instead of brown pantyhose; they're sexier. You should wear better makeup. You should wear better shoes," whatever. And I would always, in general, [give] the opposite response, "Okay, you don't like those shoes, I'll wear worse shoes if you want. I'm never wearing a skirt again. I'll always wear pants. Whatever. I mean, you think I should wear better makeup, I'll wear no make-up." That was sort of my response. And we went on business trips and he did offer to rub my feet once, and I declined, and we moved forward, and it was fine. No harm, no foul. It was a little awkward, but we moved forward.

Notable in CV4's response was her perception that the pervasiveness of the experience of sexual harassment among female Marines made her own experience less, rather than more, significant. Also notable was her perceived that she had not suffered any harm from her superior's behavior, and that the behavior was therefore not culpable ("no harm, no foul"), even though it had made her uncomfortable enough to react defiantly ("I would always, in general, [give] the opposite response").

CV5 perceived gender discrimination as pervasive in the USMC, but she believed it gave her a personal advantage because, like CV1, she perceived herself as performing according to a male standard and thereby enforcing the respect of male colleagues:

If you're a male, and you're doing well, it's expected. If you're female and you're doing well, you stand out more. And so, I think almost [gender discrimination] gave me a leg up in some situations.

CV5 had been denied the combat post she wanted because such posts were not available to women at the time, but she perceived her resulting frustration as a consequence of the pressure all Marines felt to obtain combat postings, rather than of the gender-based barrier that prevented female Marines from doing so. She said of the current availability of combat postings to female Marines that it was a positive development, but she implied that the pressure on all Marines to strive for those postings was the real problem:

I understand that it's a great thing that females who are capable of meeting the standards can go into combat arms [now], but we shouldn't pressure them to do that. I don't think we should pressure anybody to do that.

Summary results for Research Question 1. GOs perceived themselves as experiencing barriers associated with institutionalized discrimination against women. All GOs reported that they had been sexually harassed and discriminated against, and that they had experienced a sense of isolation at least once in their careers as a result of gender discrimination. They perceived themselves as needing to work to overcome these barriers, but, significantly, they perceived the barriers as inequitable and beyond their control.

The five CVs in this study experienced the same barriers as the GOs, with all CVs reporting experiences of sexual harassment and/or assault, gender discrimination, and isolation. However, the CVs perceived the barriers they encountered as universal (in applying equally to men and women), as equitable (as with those CVs who perceived it as fair that women should succeed according to the standards applied to men), or as personal (as with CV2's perception of her victimization in a sexual assault as primarily a consequence of her own inadequate vigilance). The key difference between the essence of the experience of institutional barriers for CVs versus GOs was therefore that CVs interpreted the barriers they encountered as something other than manifestations of institutionalized gender discrimination, while GOs were clear and confident in attributing the same barriers to gender discrimination.

Research Question 2

The second research question was: *What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek Flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to*

retire and not seek Flag rank? One main theme emerged during data analysis to address this research question.

Theme 2: Experienced mentoring as practical career advice. All six GOs reported that they had had at least one positive experience of long-term mentoring which they had valued as a source of practical career advice. Of the CVs, one out of five had primarily negative experiences of mentoring, three experienced mentoring as a source of encouragement and opportunities, rather than of practical career advice, and one reported having no significant mentors.

Composite textural-structural description for General Officers. All six GOs reported significant, positive, long-term experiences of mentoring, although only two out of six experienced significant experiences of mentoring from a female superior. The GOs perceived the advice they received from their mentors as focused primarily on improving their performance of their duties and on navigating the promotional pathways in the USMC. GO1's first mentor was male. Beginning with their first meeting, he consistently challenged and empowered her to improve as a leader:

I did have one very good CO, and right up until then I had commanders who really were very hands-off. He was brand new to the unit and he said, "So what are you doing?" I told him. I said, "Sir, I've got this, I've got this, and I've got this, and I just wish I could take care of these." He looked at me and he said, "Isn't 'Commander' in your duty title?" 'Cause I was a Flight Commander. I said, "Yes, sir." He says, "Well then, do it." That was the first time where I had a commander who empowered me to make decisions. I've been very fortunate.

GO2 was directly influenced in her decision-making to seek Flag rank by mentors who helped her to see how her specific talents suited her for such a position:

The first GO I really ever talked to was a boss here at the Pentagon, and he talked to me quite a bit about staying in the Marine Corps for 20, making it a career, and provided me some insights into where my talents might fit best for command . . . [When I was considering retirement,] I spoke to my commanding officer, at the time, about opportunities and what was left for me in the Marine Corps. I really hadn't thought much beyond Captain. And he kind of talked to me a little bit about leadership and how well I had done next to my peers and how I articulated myself and how there might be a really good opportunity for me to lead as a commanding officer. And that sold me and so I decided to stay.

GO3's most positive experience of mentoring was with a female officer with whom she communicated only by telephone. GO3 perceived this mentor as highly effective in helping her to navigate difficult obstacles by providing practical, procedural advice:

I would say the one mentor I had that helped me through my toughest time and the most impact is a retired Colonel [name redacted]. I've never met her in person . . . Anyways, she had helped me through those things that I didn't know that I needed to know, what steps I should take and all those things that I needed to do to make sure that I could put my best foot forward for the promotion.

GO4's positive experience of mentoring as a source of practical advice began with a commanding officer who impressed on her that being male or female did not

matter, and that she should focus solely on performance. GO4 said of this mentor, who was male:

He was awesome. From day one it re-solidified in my mind, "If you do well if you work really hard, you don't have to point out that you're male or female, you just get the job done." He was instrumental to me. That was really unusual at the time.

GO5 experienced mentoring as a source of valuable, practical advice when a female superior officer coached in on how to navigate the promotional pathways in the USMC:

She saw something in me that she thought she valued, she thought was worth mentoring. And so, she's the one who first kind of taught me how the Marine Corps really works. Meaning basically this is how promotions work, these are the types of jobs you should be doing. You should be setting a goal right now of what you wanna go do and then align the jobs as much as you can to get there. So, she taught me a lot about the real Marine Corps. Or maybe I should say Marine Corps leadership from a senior-type perspective.

GO6's most significant, positive experience of mentoring as a source of practical advice when she was appointed to a position of significant responsibility, and a male senior officer guided her while she learned her new duties: "[I] got a relationship with [my superior officer] where he was like, 'I will be your wingman in the Marine Corps.' He was phenomenal, helped me tremendously."

Composite textural-structural description for Colonel Volunteers. One out of five CVs had primarily negative experiences of mentoring, three experienced mentoring as a source of encouragement and opportunities rather than of practical career advice, and one reported having no significant mentors. CV3 had a negative experience of mentoring under a series of White, male commanding officers who invalidated her by expressing that she had nothing to contribute. Thus, she experienced mentoring primarily as an obstacle and a source of invalidation:

I had five captains, all white males. Three of them were single, two were married, and they just looked at it as, “You have nothing to share with me.” Pretty much, “I’m the senior here.” And I’m like thinking to myself, “I’m over 22 years in!” You know? So, I get a little butthurt on that. But seeing them, where they don’t think they can get absolutely anything from you, and you still have to show up every day and figure out, “How am I gonna crack this nut again?”

CV1 experienced mentoring as a source of validation for her prioritization of work-life balance over career advancement. She considered the experiences of her two most significant mentors to be positive ones, in part because her mentors shared her prioritization of work-life balance over an exclusive focus on career advancement. She reported that her mentors reinforced her decision to retire:

The bottom line [from my mentors when I decided to retire] was, “You’re making the right decision at the right time, for the right reasons, and the best is yet to come.” So again, I don’t wanna say there was disappointment on their end, but what I appreciated was they didn’t try and talk me out of it, because they

understood my values and having been geographically separated for 16 months during our last assignment, they saw a lot of the struggle with being a mom, and making it work, but they knew it pulled at my heartstrings.

CV2 perceived her two significant male mentors as sources of encouragement that played no decisive role in her decision to retire: “I had two significant male mentors, they were both wing commanders when I was on active duty, and really saw potential in me and really pushed me, but even with that, it didn't make me wanna stay in.” CV4 had a positive experience with a male mentor, which she experienced as a source of opportunities rather than of advice. CV4 reported that her mentor assisted her in advancing primarily by giving her opportunities to perform, but she made no statement to the effect that he ever coached her on how to take advantage of those opportunities:

He was a colonel . . . within six months of working for him, he had me briefing the Chief and the Secretary on promotion board analysis. And so, I'm six months out of college and I'm briefing senior leaders. He just always gave me a great opportunity.

CV5 reported that she had no significant mentors. Although she had served under commanding officers who were committed to developing subordinates, none had taken a specific interest in her:

I can't honestly say that I've had a mentor throughout my career. I've had some bosses I liked, some bosses I didn't. Some that tried to develop all of their subordinates, never one singled me out, and I'm actually okay with that.

Summary results for Research Question 2. There was a high level of convergence in the data provided by GOs about their experiences of mentoring. All six GOs reported significant, positive experiences of long-term mentoring from at least one superior officer. Only two out of six had significant experiences of mentoring from a female superior, suggesting that mentoring from male superiors can be significantly beneficial to rising female officers. However, all six GOs valued their mentoring experiences primarily as a source of practical career advice, focused primarily on improving their performance of their duties and on navigating the promotional pathways in the USMC.

There was little convergence in the data provided by CVs about their mentoring experiences. Four of the CVs experienced mentoring as a source of encouragement, of opportunities (but without guidance on how to exploit them), of validation of lifestyle choices, or of invalidation, respectively. One CV reported no significant experiences of mentoring at any time during her career. CVs' data related to mentoring only converged on the negative finding, that none of them experienced mentoring as a source of practical career advice. Thus, the important distinction between GOs' and CVs' respective perceptions of the value of mentoring was that GOs experienced it as a source of valuable, practical career advice, and CVs did not. Although most participants in either group reported that their experiences of mentoring did not significantly influence their decision to remain in or retire from the USMC, the emergence of this clear distinction between the two groups suggested that experiencing mentoring as a source of valuable, practical career advice was significant.

Research Question 3

The third research question was: *How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek Flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank?* One theme emerged to answer this research question.

Theme 3: Perception that careers strongly conflict with family interests. Data associated with this theme indicated that GOs were consistently confident that, on balance, the effects of their careers on their spouses and children were either positive or negligible. Four out of six GOs in this study did not have biological children, and the other two perceived their children as thriving during and benefitting from their careers. The five out of six GOs who were married also expressed unqualified confidence in their spouses' immediate or eventual support for their career goals. In contrast, all five CVs spoke of their families as making what CV1 described in a representative response as "incredible sacrifices" to facilitate the CVs' pursuit of their career goals.

Composite textural-structural description for General Officers. Of the six GOs who participated in this study, four did not have biological children, and the five who were married expressed satisfaction with their spouses' support of their careers. GO5 reported that she wanted children at one point in her life, but that circumstances prevented it. Later, when circumstances were favorable to her having children, she made a conscious decision with her partner not to do so. GO5 stated that she made this decision so she could focus on her career: "I never looked back on the decision not to

have kids. I couldn't have done it. Right or wrong, I put way too much time into my job. I could not have given [that time] to the children.” GO5 also stated that her husband had willingly prioritized her career over his, so she had no conflicts with her husband about her pursuit of her career goals: “We got married so late, I was already on my way, and he was 100% supportive of my career over his.”

GO6 did not find a partner with whom she would consider having children until she was 44 years old. Like GO5, she stated that her husband had willingly prioritized her career over his own: “He took a backseat career-wise.” At that time (15 years before time of study), she believed she was too old to have children, and she was unaware of the option of in-vitro fertilization. Thus, like GO5, she did not have to balance childcare and career responsibilities. She said of her initial reasons for and present contentment with not having children:

I was 44 when I got married; [having children] just didn't work out for me. I was not aware of in-vitro or any of what's [available] now I don't think . . . So that was 15 years ago, [technology to treat infertility] was not to the same level and I just thought I was too old. So, [my husband and I] have four-legged children, and they're awesome.

GO2 had stepchildren who were raised primarily by their birth mother, and she had no biological children. She expressed satisfaction that she had not needed to undergo physiological aftereffects of childbirth that might have negatively affected her career, stating:

I am not a birth mother, and I have four stepchildren. My husband was married, a previous marriage, and so three stepchildren, actually, and one is adopted. So, I did not go through the experience of giving birth and all the different physiological changes, especially when I can look at my peers who were having children and then trying to get back into their units. So, I didn't have that, and the children were older when I got married. They were mainly with their birth mother.

GO2 also described her husband as a willing supporter of her career who sympathized with her ambitions: "My husband's retired military, and so he was very supportive of my career and very flexible on moving and changing jobs."

GO4 said of her conscious decision not to have children, "I am not the mother type." GO4 also reported that she had never married. She said of her decision not to marry, "I was so focused on my career that I just couldn't divert much attention anywhere else." For GO3, GO4, GO5, and GO6, then, the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities with career goals was greatly simplified. They did not have to worry about spending time with their children, making their children frequently change schools, or persuading a spouse to assume sole responsibility for childcare when they needed to deploy.

GO3 went on deployments when her children were young, but she expressed unqualified confidence in her husband's willingness to be their children's sole caregiver and in her certainty that her absence had no negative effects on her children: "I knew my husband would support me. And the fact that the kids were still little, they were younger,

that was the time to do [deployments]. And honestly, I missed them more than they missed me.” When GO3’s children were older, she accepted domestic assignments. Her longest post was only two miles from her home, but she reported that she rarely saw her children, stating at one point during her interview, “There are many days and nights where I might see [my children] for 30 minutes,” and at another point stating, “I see them on the weekends.” However, she expressed unqualified confidence that her pursuit of her career goals did not damage her relationship with her children: “I didn't see the kids that much, and they understood.” Asked what she would say to other military women about achieving a work-life balance, GO3 said work-life balance was easily achieved, “If you're lucky enough to marry the right man, I guess. [My husband's] been at home with the kids for 17 years.”

GO1’s husband was also in the USMC, so he was unable to become the primary caregiver for their children. GO1 described the resulting childcare arrangements as unstable and unpredictable:

The kids had to constantly adjust to, “Who's gonna watch us when mom's out of town? Is it gonna be Aunt [name redacted]? Is it gonna be Grandma? Is it gonna be the neighbor?” I missed my daughter's birthday. And my husband too, he’s missed birthdays too. The kids had to pick up and move at one point [so] the girls lived with me, my son lived with my husband, so even the siblings were separated from each other. Yeah, they've definitely had to adjust as military brats.

Like GO3, GO1 described the effects of her absences on her children with satisfaction, indicating that the result had validated her decisions:

The good thing is, I've asked [my children] about it in retrospect, "Do you wish Mom had just stayed at home or Mom had a different job?" And my oldest daughter was like, "You know what? I didn't like it when I was going through it, but I'm glad that I have that experience." And she is very independent. The other two are pretty independent. (GO1)

GO1 reported that her husband had not intended to prioritize her career over his, but that when she was promoted over him, he went through a grieving process but ultimately decided to support her. After he went through that adjustment process, GO1 consoled him for any reluctance he might experience in celebrating her subsequent promotions by purchasing luxuries for him, a system of token bribery that became a joke between them: "We used to kid around that I had to buy him off every time I got a new job. New watch, new leather jacket."

Composite textural-structural description for Colonel Volunteers. CVs

perceived significant conflicts between their careers and their families' interests. All five CVs in this study referred to their families as needing to make significant sacrifices while the CV was pursuing her career goals. It is important to note that all CVs perceived their careers and lifestyles as conferring some benefits on their families (e.g. CV1's statement, "The benefit, obviously, with military children is that they tend to be more resilient), but the theme of families making painful sacrifices predominated in CVs' responses.

CV spoke with evident guilt and empathetic pain about the incredible sacrifices her children were forced to make while she pursued her career goals:

[The children] didn't really have choices, I think, when it came to sacrifice. They made sacrifices because [my spouse and I] defined for them where they were going, what they did. The biggest sacrifice is when our son, the youngest son, was medevaced from Germany. Our oldest was 15, our youngest was 10. This was the 14th move for our 15-year-old, and the 10th move for our 10-year-old [and] the two in between. Incredible sacrifice when it comes to stability.

Unlike GO participants, who described their husbands' enthusiasm or acquiescence in supporting their career goals as voluntary and as having no negative effects, CV1 described her husband's departure from his own career to support hers as a sacrifice that involved a check to his pride as a man. She said of his departure from his job, "He sacrificed his career in order to raise our four children." She said of his decision to be a stay-at-home father that it caused her male colleagues to question his masculinity: "He put his ego aside, put his pride aside, and he decided to put family first and to be a supportive husband in a world [where] military men looked at him like, 'Oh my gosh' [in surprise and disapproval]." CV1 also described her husband as curbing her own career ambitions in favor of family interests at some junctures, although she saw this as positive: "He held me back, and he put his foot down on certain decisions, because I tend to run, I need somebody to hold the reins back in order to help keep me focused and recognize [work-life] balance."

CV2's relationship with her husband was such that she perceived herself as their children's primary caregiver, and this influenced her decision to retire: "I was the one that said, 'Nope' [to deployments] because I felt I was the primary caregiver for our

children.” CV2 believed that if she did not accept deployments, and thereby became less competitive for promotions, she should retire: “My thing was, if you don't wanna play [i.e., fully commit to competing for promotions], then you should get out.” CV2 also reported that she joined the reserves so she could spend more time with her spouse: “I joined the reserves to balance the [work-life] relationship so I could spend time with him.” CV2’s vivid descriptions of the sacrifices she perceived her children as making for her career expressed her feelings of inadequacy as a mother:

[My kids are] home by themselves, before school, and they're home by themselves after school, to a degree. I have a nanny in the afternoons now, but mostly just to drive them to the practices. But, yeah, I would say they sacrifice, they don't get that one-on-one time with mom for an hour in the morning or two hours in the afternoon, and I come home and I'm tired. I have to like, “Let's get dinner, let's get homework, let's get showers, let's get bedtime. Love you. Kiss kiss. Bye. I'll make you a sandwich maybe.”

CV3 experienced strong spousal support through most of her career, but a conflict developed when her husband wanted to live near his aging parents. The conflict was sufficiently unreconcilable that CV3 and her husband separated, although they intended for the separation to be temporary:

The last year of command was really tough, and it just timed up to make sense to send him home to help his parents out, but we always kind of had the plan to get back together and keep the family unit together.

CV3 reported that her perception of her career's negative effects on her children was the impetus for her decision to retire, stating:

I'm entirely [retired] because of that. My daughter is 13. She's lived in nine places. It's gonna be 10 places. My six-year-old has lived in four different places. To have them pick up and move. When you talk to your kid and you go with schools that she's absolutely hated, never fitted in. You're just trying to make it a home for them with roots, and it's really hard on them . . . I wish I'd never had them as transient as they are . . . So they've sacrificed a lot.

CV4 was a single mother of three children, so spousal conflict did not enter into her experience at time of study. She described her ex-husband's attitude toward her career as "maybe not very supportive" in a tone of voice that signaled understatement. She also reported, unlike other CVs, that her career did not at present conflict with her children's interests. She perceived the reason for this lack of conflict as her conscious decision to manage her time and curb her ambitions in order to prioritize work-life balance and her children's interests above her career goals. She accomplished this balance by declining deployments, which all CVs perceived as critical to earning promotions, and by working as a staff officer. CV4 stated: "I didn't have a heavy deployment career, and I didn't have a heavy ops career. It was really staff work." CV4 also stated that she partitioned her work from her family life to ensure her career did not interfere with her care for her children: "When I'm at work, it's work-time and I should focus there and I should deliver as much as I can. And when it's home, then it's time to be with the kids." Like other CVs, CV4 perceived a full commitment to advancing in her

career as incompatible with her children's interests, and she opted to take a less competitive career track so she could fulfill her perceived obligations as a mother.

CV5 expressed the perception that deployments were beneficial to military careers but harmful to the soldier's family. Like CV3, CV5 expressed that her perception of the conflict between her career goals and her family's interests had been her impetus to retire:

The deployments cut both ways. They take a toll on your family, but they're probably the most rewarding thing that you do. As soon as you are not competitive [for promotions because you're no longer accepting deployments], you're cannon fodder for the assignment system. So, I knew that I had to make the decision [between family and career,] and I absolutely know now that I made the right decision [when I chose to retire].

CV5 reported that deployments were the reason her second marriage ended, indicating that her career goals conflicted significantly with her spouse's interests: "I did back-to-back deployments. and that had a huge play in the divorce, because he expected me to be at home."

Summary results for Research Question 3. Comparison of the composite textural-structural descriptions of CVs versus GOs indicated important differences in the ways the demographic characteristics of being married and having children influenced their decision-making. GOs conveyed that being married and having children did not influence their decision-making in relation to their careers (although two GOs reported that their careers influenced either the decision not to have children, in the case of GO5,

or the decision not to get married or have children, in the case of GO4). The five out of six GOs who were married perceived their spouses as supportive and as not suffering any negative consequences from wholeheartedly backing the GOs' career ambitions. Four out of six GOs did not have any biological children, and the remaining two expressed confidently that their careers did not negatively affect their children.

CVs, in contrast, reported their perception of their obligations as married women with children was their primary impetus for retiring. While only four out of six GOs had biological children, all five CVs had more than one child, and all five CVs expressed the perception that their commitment to pursuing their career goals either had been or would have been very harmful to their children. While all six GOs reported that their spouses were currently supporters of their military career goals, all five CVs reported that their current or most recent spouses had either curbed or attempted to curb their career ambitions. The key difference between the essence of the decision-making experience for CVs versus GOs, in relation to the demographic variables of marriage and children, was therefore that CVs perceived their career goals as strongly conflicting with their families' interests, while GOs experienced no such conflict.

Table 1

RQs and Corresponding Themes

RQ	Theme	General Officers	Colonel Volunteers
1	1	Inequitable barriers were exclusive to women and were beyond their control	Barriers were universally experienced by men and women
2	2	Significant long-term mentoring from at least one superior officer. Mentoring was viewed as a source of practical career advice rather than emotional support.	Little convergence concerning CVs and mentoring experience. None experienced mentoring as a source of practical career advice.
3	3	Viewed the effects of their career on family members as either positive or negligible.	Viewed the effects of their career on family members as significant sacrifice.

Summary and Transition

Three research questions were used to guide this study. The first question was: What similarities and differences in perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank? Findings indicated that both groups encountered the same barriers of sexual harassment, discrimination, and isolation, but that GOs perceived these barriers as manifestations of institutionalized gender inequities, and CVs did not. The second research question was: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank? Findings also indicated that GOs experienced mentoring as a valuable source of practical career advice, and CVs did not. The third research question was: How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank? Finally, findings also indicated that CVs perceived their careers as strongly conflicting with their families' interests, while GOs experienced no such conflict.

Chapter 5 includes discussions, interpretations, and implications of these results. It begins with a review and discussion of the findings presented in this chapter. Next, Chapter 5 includes interpretation of the findings and how they confirm, disconfirm, or extend conclusions of previous researchers. Chapter 5 then includes discussion of the

limitations of the study, followed by recommendations based on findings for leaders, practitioners, and future researchers. A brief summary and closing remarks conclude the study.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Retention and turnover rates of women are among the most prevalent issues in the military, particularly in the USMC. Only 13,677 out of 201,157 Marines were female in 2011, demonstrating the large gender discrepancy in the USMC (Archer, 2012). Women only make up 8.6% of the Marines, whereas they represent 17% of the Army and 20% of both the Navy and Air Force (Allen, 2018). These rates lead to the small number of women in higher ranks in the USMC, as potential female officers tend to leave the force before they can get promoted. Nine female Marines have been promoted to the position of GO in the USMC since 1978 (M&RA, 2015). While female underrepresentation is a problem for all branches of the military, this issue is pronounced in the USMC.

The modern era recognizes the value of having women in predominantly male workplaces, which is why it is vital to examine factors related to retention of women in military settings. The purpose of this present study was to explore and describe the perceptions of USMC female GOs and their reasons for staying in the military. The main objective of this study was to reveal perceived risks, hardships, and sacrifices made throughout the career progression of female USMC GOs as compared to perceived experiences of competitive female colonels who elected to retire before being considered for flag rank.

This chapter contains a discussion of findings presented in Chapter 4. After a reiteration of the research questions, this chapter includes interpretations of findings juxtaposed with existing literature. Limitations encountered during the course of the study are presented in this chapter as well, followed by recommendations to leaders and

practitioners and for future research. A brief summary and closing remarks then conclude Chapter 5 and the study.

Research Questions

For this qualitative phenomenological study, a central research question was established to achieve its purpose. The central question asked, “What are the lived experiences described by female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank versus those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?” To elicit more comprehensive findings, three sub-questions were also raised, which were:

RQ1: What similarities and differences in perceived institutional barriers did female USMC GOs who remained on active duty to seek flag rank encounter versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences in the perceived value of mentoring between female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

RQ3: How did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC GOs’ decision-making to remain on active duty and seek flag rank versus retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek flag rank?

Discussion of Findings

This section elaborates on the findings in Chapter 4 and juxtaposes them with findings from existing literature. Studies regarding this topic are limited. As such, some seminal works published in 2014 or earlier were also included. Similar to Chapter 4, discussions is arranged by theme, in which subthemes include descriptions for GOs and CVs as well as overall findings regarding the central research question.

Theme 1: Perceived Institutionalized Gender Inequities

The first theme generated from the findings was participants' perceptions of institutionalized gender inequities within the USMC and their possible influence on decisions to stay or leave the force. GOs who had persisted and stayed in the USMC perceived these barriers more as gender discrimination. CVs, who had decided to leave the force perceived these barriers as more universal and not significantly influential on their decision to leave. The following sub-sections elaborates on these perceptions.

General officers' perceptions of institutionalized gender inequities. The GOs in this study shared their experiences involving isolation, discrimination, and sexual harassment or assault within the USMC. They believed that barriers existed for them solely due to their gender. As they are minorities within the USMC, the isolation felt by these GOs is plausible. Similar findings have been noted in previous studies on women in the military or in predominantly male settings (Allen, 2018; Germain, Herzog, & Hamilton, 2012; McGraw, Koehlmoos, & Ritchie, 2016). Women in the USMC are prone to feelings of loneliness or that they do not belong in their unit (Allen, 2018). Germain et al. (2012) asserted a commonly identified barriers for female pilots, including female

military pilots, was the feeling of being an outsider. This is similar to GO4 and GO5's difficulties fitting in with their male colleagues. While GO4 and GO5 were able to overcome these barriers and persist to become GOs, Germain et al. (2012) cited these exact same reasons as instrumental in their decisions to quit. Feelings and perceptions of isolation may represent a major barrier for women in predominantly male settings, which they must overcome to persist in their respective fields.

In addition to being minorities in predominantly male settings, other factors may also affect women's feelings of isolation. Female combatants rely more on social support in dealing with their stressors compared to male combatants (McGraw et al., 2016). This may help explain why GO4 still felt isolated despite having close friends in the USMC. Germain et al. (2012) stated that lack of available support groups or social resources for women further escalated participants' feelings of isolation. In this present study, GO2 emphasized how peer support helped her overcome feelings of isolation within the USMC. These findings suggest that additional social support may be necessary for female Marines who navigate in the predominantly male USMC.

It should be noted that not all of recent existing literature share this finding, for example several women in a Canadian study felt the opposite, even going as far as to consider their military units as their families (Mota, Medved, Hiebert-Murphy, Whitney, & Sareen, 2018). The findings from revealed that feelings of belongingness or isolation could still be contextual in the military (Mota et al.'s, 2018). One participant shared how she felt extremely lonely in her first squadron, to the point that she would question her initial decision to join the military. When she was transferred to another squadron,

however, she felt a sense of belongingness. stating how the other members were like older brothers to her (Mota et al., 2018). While the GOs in the present study agreed that isolation was a salient issue in the USMC, some of their references to peer support showed that this issue may indeed be contextual, and that belongingness is not impossible in the USMC.

Another well-supported finding of the present study is the perception of gender-based discrimination and the additional pressure of being a woman in the military. The GOs in the present study noted the double standards in the USMC in terms of clothing, fitness requirements, and overall expectations. In a focus group discussion of military servicewomen from the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy, participants also cited the issue of clothing and how tight-fitting and other feminine types of clothes increases servicewomen's risk of being sexually harassed or assaulted (Cheney et al., 2014). These servicewomen thus shared how they would intentionally wear loose physical training uniforms or battle dress uniforms all the time to mask their femininity while in their respective units (Cheney et al., 2014), similar to how GO1 had stopped wearing uniform skirts due to the inappropriate remarks she had received while wearing them. While seemingly a minor issue, these findings on female clothing in the military further reinforce the perception of institutionalized gender inequities in the military.

The issues of unfair fitness requirements and promotions have also been cited in past studies. In the UK, the Equality Act of 2010 was supposed to eliminate gender discrimination in the process of promoting within the military; however, a major case by a senior Royal Air Force female officer was won with the verdict that she had been

unfairly overlooked for a position due to her gender (McAvoy & Burgess, 2017). A member of the Swedish Armed Forces likewise told an anecdote of how, after being offered a promotion, three colleagues had approached her and told her to decline the promotion because it was “no job for a woman” (Alvinus, Krekula, & Larsson, 2016, p. 541). These double standards have laid additional pressure for servicewomen, as they are constantly being scrutinized for their every move, and only those that over-perform may be considered as equals of their male counterparts (Archer, 2012; Kiven & Sone, 2015). Women in the U.S. Air Force also felt like they had to put in more effort to prove themselves within the predominantly male setting (Keller, Hall, & Matthews, 2018). Furthermore, roles for women in the military are also limited. A female Marine in Archer’s (2012) study shared how their senior sergeant instructor explicitly told them that they are inevitably one of the feminine stereotypes and nothing else. These findings support the present study’s GOs’ perception that there remains to be deeply institutionalized gender inequities within the military setting that may limit the promotion and career advancements of servicewomen.

Perhaps the most troublesome finding in the present study is the prevalence of sexual harassment or assault in the USMC, although similar cases were reported in previous studies. Issues of sexual assault and violence against women in the military have been reported even in the Austrian Armed Forces (Koeszegi, Zedlacher, & Hudribusch, 2013). Strong, Crowe, and Bolton’s (2018) meta-synthesis of qualitative research on servicewomen’s perceived challenges revealed that incidents of sexual harassment occur often, beginning with simple joking around, but possibly escalating to more severe forms

of harassment. Fox et al. (2016) corroborated this finding, showing how servicewomen reported more sexual harassment, as well as general harassment than servicemen. Although less severe than sexual assault, incidents of sexual harassment could also be a major stressor for servicewomen (Fox et al., 2016). For servicewomen who experienced sexual assault and subsequent lack of support regarding the incident, this traumatic incident could lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Dichter & True, 2014; Pless Kaiser et al., 2017). Contrary to the present study's finding, however, Pless Kaiser et al. (2017) found that more experienced servicewomen reported less sexual harassment incidents and PTSD symptoms than those who served shorter terms. In the present study, both GOs and CVs shared similar experiences of sexual harassment but differed only in their perspectives surrounding it.

Generally, the findings from the present study as well as in previous studies showed how servicewomen's issues of isolation, discrimination, and sexual harassment or assault were prevalent in the military setting and could be major sources of stress and even trauma for these servicewomen. While GOs perceived these issues as significant barriers in their career development, they were still able to persist and stay within the USMC. Perhaps, as GO3 suggested, these incidents served to motivate them to work even harder and achieve flag rank. Servicewomen may perceive that reaching a higher status would enable them to change the atmosphere in the military and promote gender equity so that other women would not have to face similar barriers in the future (Dichter & True, 2014). It is possible that these perceived inequities provided just enough pressure on the GOs to prove themselves and attain higher positions within the USMC.

Colonel volunteers' perceptions of institutionalized gender inequities. Similar barriers were reported by the CVs in this present study; however, these CVs believed that the barriers they encountered were universal and equitable, and that it was only fair that women should have to prove themselves according to the same standards applied to men in the predominantly male USMC. As CV1 stated, these challenges compelled her to perform well and exceed her own expectations. As for cases of disrespect and sexual harassment or assault, the CVs attributed these incidents to their own actions and believed that such incidents were normal in the military if one was not careful. CV4, who had experienced sexual harassment from her superiors, even stated that it was no harm, no foul for her. As opposed to the GOs' perception that gender inequities and its consequences were inevitable and out of their control, the CVs' perception regarding these matters were more optimistic.

Some participants in past studies have shared similar perspectives. Participants in both Brownson's (2014) and Kiven and Sone's (2015) studies shared that being proactive in setting boundaries and establishing their positions in the military alleviated problems of disrespect and sexual harassment. Kiven and Sone's (2015) study on military women in Cameroon, determined the women endorsed the strategy of blending in with their male counterparts. These strategies included treating the servicemen as they treated the women and establishing their value in the unit. Once the servicemen saw their value and realized that they were assets in the unit, they were treated with more equity and respect (Kiven & Sone, 2015). A similar strategy was revealed by the present study's CV1, where she

would challenge the men who disrespected her in physical activities and show them that she was more or as capable as any of them.

In the present study, perceived gender differences in physical standards were believed to reinforce the gender inequity instead of alleviating it. The female Marines in Brownson's (2014) study acknowledged that the female biology set them apart from their male counterparts but generally believed that this difference was often exaggerated by some. Similar to the present study's CVs, instead of complaining about these differences, the female Marines did not consider them to be a major issue in their service (Brownson, 2014). As one female Marine stated, physicality also differed by age but was not often cited as an issue in the military. These female Marines noted that one need not be equal to men, but equivalent to them in the USMC (Brownson, 2014). Further, Alvinus et al.'s (2016) determined that gender discrepancies were often over-emphasized in the Swedish Air Force. They noted that the attitude of focusing on gender inequity often led to quitting the force. Instead, these servicewomen emphasized the value of adapting or adjusting to the predetermined standards and culture established within the military (Alvinus et al., 2016). As a predominantly male setting, the masculinity and rigid hierarchy within the military are to be expected and should not pose too much influence on women's persistence in it (Smith & Rosenstein, 2016). This perspective is highly reflective of the present study's CVs' perspectives, as they chose to leave the USMC despite their more optimistic outlook on institutionalized gender inequities.

In terms of sexual harassment or assault, the present study's CVs believed such incidents to be insignificant, and that these were consequences of their own actions.

Similarly, Mota et al.'s (2018) had a participant emphasize the strategy of "choosing your battles" for choosing not to report her experience of sexual trauma, stating that doing so would only jeopardize her place in the military. Mota et al. (2018) noted that their participants appeared to outweigh, account for, and make sense of their experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the military. Weatherhill et al. (2011), who examined the egalitarianism of female Marines, noted that egalitarian women tended to report significantly less sexual harassment victimizations. These findings thus reflect how issues of gender discrimination and sexual harassment, or even sexual assault, may not be substantial to all military servicewomen or not influential enough to affect their decisions to stay or leave the military.

Summary of perceptions of institutionalized gender inequities. Findings from the present study revealed that GOs who persisted and stayed in the USMC perceived more inevitable and unfair gender inequities in the USMC than the CVs who chose to leave the USMC. These findings, while surprising, may reflect the actual influence, or lack thereof, of gender attitudes and perceptions on retention. Smith and Rosenstein's (2016) found in the U.S. Navy likewise there was no significant relationship between the gender attitudes of service members and their years of intended service. Few evidences exist in the literature to confirm or disconfirm these findings, but one cannot discount the possibility that perceived institutional gender inequities may not be as vital a factor in female Marines' retention as other possible factors.

Another possible explanation for the present study's findings is that the perceived institutionalized gender inequities served as motivation instead of barriers to persist in the

military. Servicewomen may feel the need to work harder and prove that they can persist despite the inevitable and uncontrollable challenges that they encounter in the military (Strong et al., 2018). Achieving rank may be a perceived solution to such inequities that may serve to motivate those who are more affected by these inequities such as the GOs in this present study, as opposed to those who are not as affected by them such as the CVs in the present study. Higher ranks would indeed provide more power not just to protect themselves from such inequities, but also to promote an environment that minimizes these inequities for other women as well (Cheney et al., 2014). The perspective in most studies is that strong perceptions of gender inequities may discourage servicewomen, ultimately leading them to quit (Alvinus et al., 2016; Dichter & True, 2014; Weatherhill et al., 2011). Southwell and MacDermid Wadsworth (2016) said that military husbands shared the fear of these gender inequities in the military, causing them to worry about their wives in the military. This finding is tied to the present study's third theme, which will be discussed further on, and supports the notion that perceived gender inequities are a cause for concern that may influence servicewomen's decisions to stay or leave the military. It also opens up possibilities of other factors that may be more influential regarding this decision. The following section discusses one of these possible factors, the mentoring of servicewomen.

Theme 2: Experienced Mentoring as Practical Career Advice

The second theme found in this present study showed the importance of receiving practical career advice from mentors in the USMC. This theme clearly delineated the difference between the GOs and the CVs in terms of the type of mentoring they had

received, if any. All of the GOs who had persisted in the USMC had received practical career advice from their mentors, while the CVs reported mixed experiences regarding mentoring, most of them unrelated to career advice. In the following sub-sections, the delineation between the two groups' perceptions of mentoring is discussed and dissected.

General officers' experiences of mentoring. All GOs in the present study shared significant, positive, and long-term experiences of mentoring, even from male mentors. This finding showed how influential mentors, regardless of their gender, could be in terms of their female mentees' retention in the USMC. Notably, all GOs stated that their mentors provided practical career advice, such as how to best utilize their skills and talents and navigate the obstacles within the USMC career. The USMC has a mentoring program called the Marine Leader Development Program, which focuses on six areas including focus are fidelity, fighter, fitness, family, finance, and future (Allen, 2018). The area involving future suggests that mentors are indeed encouraged to provide career advice for their mentees (Allen, 2018). In the hierarchical structure of the military, good leadership is indeed important in maintaining the course of servicewomen's careers and ensuring that they persist in their own paths (Keller et al., 2018). The present study's findings that mentoring can be highly influential for the retention of female Marines is thus supported by the literature.

The finding that mentors' gender did not matter in the provision of practical career advice was also reported in past studies. Johnson's (2017) determined in the U.S. Army female soldiers attributed their success with career progression and promotions to their male mentors. Allen's (2018) in studying female Marines found that they seek both

male and female mentors for sound career advice; however, their perceived experiences of mentoring mostly involved encouragement and support, rather than practical career advice. They did note that these supportive mentors played a huge role in their decisions to stay in the USMC (Allen, 2018). The irrelevance of mentors' gender also applies to low quality mentors. Rich (2013) found that poor quality of mentoring led to higher intentions to leave the Air Force regardless of the mentors' gender. While mentors' gender irrelevance was highly supported in the literature, both GO3 and GO5 in this present study shared how their female mentors were sources of valuable practical advice as these female mentors were more familiar with the situation. Similarly, Kiven and Sone's (2015) determined that senior servicewomen not only provided practical advice, but also served as motivations in the fact that achieving such ranks was possible. Overall, these findings revealed how influential good mentoring could be for the career progression, and subsequent retention, of female Marines.

Colonel volunteers' experiences of mentoring. Not all female Marines were fortunate enough to have good mentors, as observed in this particular sub-theme. None of the CVs in this present study had reported receiving practical career advice from their mentors during their time in the USMC. Of those who reported positive experiences with their mentors, these experiences mostly involved support and encouragement rather than practical career advice. While this support may be important for reducing work-related stress in the military (Hsieh & Tsai, 2019), it may be insufficient in influencing servicewomen to stay. In Allen's (2018) study, while the female Marines appreciated the support they received from their mentors, they also reported not receiving enough career

advice and guidance. Participants were all high-performing officers who persisted in the USMC despite their reports of inadequate guidance, they did express their frustrations regarding the matter and noted that mentoring within the USMC needed more improvement regarding career-related support in addition to psychosocial support (Allen, 2018). Smith and Rosenstein's (2016) in studying U.S. Navy servicewomen found they perceived psychosocial support from military officers as not particularly influential in their intentions to stay. The present study's findings that mentors' support and encouragement without practical career advice may not be enough to encourage female Marines to persist and progress within the USMC is thus supported by the literature.

Finding a good mentor who can provide practical career advice may be quite challenging for servicewomen. CV3 stated that all her experiences with mentoring had been negative, while CV5 never considered anyone to be a mentor. Female Air Force members shared similar problems, as many of them did not have mentors or did not know how to find a mentor (Keller et al., 2018). Previous researchers have purported that this difficulty was related to their gender as females (Archer, 2012; Segal, Smith, Segal, & Canuso, 2016). As they are the minority within the military, available mentors were often male. Although the previous sub-theme discussed how male mentors could also be great mentors for servicewomen, past studies have shown that they might be more reluctant to take on female mentees (Archer, 2012; Segal et al., 2016). Male superiors may be uncomfortable with female mentees, especially in light of issues regarding sexual harassment or fear of their wives becoming jealous (Segal et al., 2016). Archer (2012), who also studied female Marines, also purported that male superiors may avoid female

mentees because they do not wish to be accused of providing special attention to a particular female Marine. Furthermore, even female mentors may avoid female mentees as military women can be competitive and territorial with their positions in their units (Johnson, 2017). The lack of mentors for servicewomen may demoralize them and cause them to feel that the military community does not want them to flourish (Archer, 2012), similar to how CV5 noted that none of her commanding officers had ever taken special interest in developing her. This feeling may then influence their decisions to leave the military, as they lack the guidance and support to progress in their careers (Archer, 2012). Together, these findings support the notion that the absence of good mentoring and practical career advice in servicewomen may influence their decisions to stay or leave the military.

Summary of experiences of mentoring. In this theme, there was a clear discrepancy between the experiences of GOs and CVs regarding mentoring. The GOs all had positive experiences with their mentors who had provided practical career advice that allowed them to persist and progress in their military career paths. On the contrary, CVs' experiences of mentoring were more diverse, with some sharing positive experiences of encouragement and opportunities and some sharing negative or no experiences of mentoring at all. Notably, none of the CVs reported receiving practical career advice from their mentors, which may have limited their persistence to stay in the USMC. Although the GOs and CVs did not explicitly state that their experiences of mentoring was influential in their decisions, the clear delineation between the two groups' experiences showed that receiving practical career advice from mentors may actually be a

vital factor in the career progression of female Marines, and subsequently, in their decisions to remain in the USMC.

Findings from the literature support the notion that mentoring is a vital factor in servicewomen's military experiences. Mentoring, in general, was found to reduce turnover intentions by raising affective commitment within Air Force members (Rich, 2013). At the same time, career-related support was purported to raise continuance commitment, which is also related to turnover intentions (Rich, 2013). Alvinus et al.'s (2016) determined participants perceived mentoring to be vital and noted a need for further development of mentoring in the Swedish Armed Forces. Servicewomen in any setting or location may indeed benefit greatly from receiving career advice from mentors.

The gendered perspective of mentoring, while not significantly influential for the present study's participants, was highlighted in some previous studies. Segal et al.'s (2016) determined female mentors were influential in positive outcomes for both career and family dimensions of servicewomen's experiences. Specifically, female mentors who provided guidance regarding the roles of wife and mother in conjunction with being a servicewoman were highly valued (Segal et al., 2016). This particular finding is crucial, considering how family matters could also influence servicewomen's decisions to stay or leave the military, as will be discussed in the following section. In relation to the first theme of the present study, Cheney et al. (2014) also noted that female mentors can provide practical advice regarding issues of gender inequities and, particularly, sexual harassment or assault. As aforementioned, some of the GOs in the present study alluded to their experiences with female mentors as highly effective in advancing their careers.

Based on these findings, while male mentors may also be valuable sources of support and practical career advice, female mentors who also experienced similar career paths may provide more informed advice based on their own experiences, and may thus aid in motivating female Marines to persist and attain Flag rank in the USMC.

Theme 3: Perceived Career Conflicts with Family Interests

Of the demographic factors included in the present study, the only influential factors were those related to family and the female Marines' perceptions of familial conflict. Majority of the GOs in the present study who had persisted and stayed in the USMC had supportive spouses and no biological children. On the contrary, all the CVs who decided to leave the USMC cited some form of conflict regarding either their spouse or their children. The following sub-sections contain discussions of each group's perception regarding family matters and how these perceptions influenced their decisions to stay or leave the USMC.

General Officers' perceptions of career conflicts with their family interests.

Among the GOs who had a husband and children, all of them reported strong support from their families regarding their career advancement. They noted that their families were willing to move with her during times of deployment, and that their husbands were willing to take on the responsibility of childcare during these hectic times. The decisions of their husbands to prioritize the GOs' career progression allowed them to attain Flag rank without worrying about conflicts within their families. In GO1's case, it took some time for her husband, who was also in the USMC, to adjust to their setup, but he eventually adjusted and supported her promotion. Keller et al. (2018) said that joint

couples who both served in the military had more difficulty with childcare arrangements. Despite requests for similar or closer assignments, these couples were often separately deployed, which not only caused one parent to be separated from their child, but also influenced the couples' decision to start a family (Keller et al., 2018). In GO1's case, she made up for her husband's sacrifice by giving him luxury items. Similarly, military husbands acknowledged that their wives' earnings allowed for better financial security (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Prioritizing female officers' careers over theirs may indeed be difficult for husbands, particularly those who are also serving in the military; however, servicewomen who attain Flag rank have more financial stability and may thus allow their husbands to become more supportive of their careers.

Aside from financial benefits, the GOs in the present study stated that they were simply fortunate to have husbands were very much willing to take on the role of primary caregiver for their children. GO2, whose husband was also a veteran, shared how understanding he was in her pursuit of Flag rank. Similarly, Southwell and MacDermid Wadsworth's (2016) ascertained that some military husbands, who were also veterans, recognized the importance of their wives' work in the military, and believed that they were vicariously serving the nation by supporting their wives. Pless Kaiser et al. (2017) noted that career military women who served longer appeared to receive more familial support regarding their careers as opposed to those who only served for a shorter period of time. These findings show how husbands may perceive the value of their wives' work in the military and lend their support not just for financial gains but also to support the military in their own ways.

Notably, four out of the six GOs did not have biological children. As GO2 stated, this was advantageous for them as they did not have to worry about the physiological aftereffects of childbirth, and also allowed them to focus on their careers. Smith and Rosenstein (2016) noted that while intentions to marry and have more children were not related to years of intended service, the intention to delay having a family was positively and significantly related to years of intended service. McAvoy and Burgess's (2017) determined participants did not have access to support systems for childcare likewise shared their strategies of delaying childbirth to assure that they did not jeopardize their chances of promotion. Overall, these findings suggest that servicewomen who had persisted and remained in the USMC generally had supportive husbands who appreciated their wives' service and the financial stability that came with it, and that many of them chose to delay or forego childbirth. These findings thus revealed the importance of sacrifice of the husbands' in prioritizing their wives' careers over theirs, and of the servicewomen in prioritizing their careers over having children.

Colonel Volunteers' perceptions of career conflicts with their family interests. The CVs in the present study also reported the benefits as well as the sacrifices their families made while they were pursuing their career goals. The CVs, however, felt more guilty over these sacrifices and made less references to their husbands' support for their careers. It should be noted that more CVs had children as compared to the GOs. These CVs sought more work-life balance, which may be difficult to achieve when one is in the running for Flag rank. The CVs thus cited these family-related conflicts as the main reason for their retirement.

Military servicewomen who choose to prioritize their families may find it hard to aim for promotion. As women, rather than men, are still viewed as primary caregivers for their children, military servicewomen may indeed feel guilty in prioritizing their careers over taking care of their families, ultimately leading their decisions to leave the military (McAvoy & Burgess, 2017). CV2 and CV4 both explicitly cited their responsibilities as a mother as taking precedence over their career goals. Family issues were commonly cited in several studies where servicewomen had to deploy and leave their children (Keller et al., 2018; Strong et al., 2018; Wolf, Eliseo-Arras, Brenner, & Nochajski, 2016). Servicewomen are pressured to find caregivers for their children if their husbands were not willing to take the role (Strong et al., 2018). This problem was notably absent in male service members who automatically relied on their wives to take care of their children while they were away on deployment. Keller et al.'s (2018) found participants criticized the Childcare Development Centers in the military for their inflexible work hours, inconsistent service quality, and long waitlists. Single mothers such as CV4 are more affected by this problem, as they solely struggle with childcare matters (Segal et al., 2016). Dichter and True's (2014) found some single mothers cited these difficulties as the reason for retiring from service. The traditional view of women as primary caregivers for their children may serve as a barrier for servicewomen, as they struggle to find caregivers while they are away on deployment and face the guilt of not taking care of their children themselves.

Wolf et al. (2016) cited the psychological costs of deployment on the servicewomen's families, similar to CV3's concerns of constantly switching schools and

CV2's concerns over the lack of time spent with her children. Similarly, Keller et al. (2018) noted how frequent moves and switching schools can contribute to the child's stress. Interestingly, both the present study's CVs and servicewomen from Cozza, Lerner, and Haskins's (2014) as well as Keller et al.'s (2018) research acknowledged the resilience that their children had developed from these experiences. Learning to adapt to new environments due to frequent moves was a resiliency skill that military children benefited from (Cozza et al., 2014). These findings show both positive and negative psychological effects of servicewomen's deployment on their children, and how the negative effects may outweigh the benefits, leading to the servicewomen's decisions to simply retire and focus on their families.

While the present study's CVs focused on the negative effects of their careers on their children, some also stated that their husbands were also negatively affected or were not fully supportive of their careers. Past studies have cited servicewomen's husbands' pride over having their nontraditional role of primary caregiver and secondary breadwinner due to their wives' careers as a major issue for couples (Keller et al., 2018; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Taking on these roles caused military husbands to feel emasculated and face stigma over these traditionally feminine roles (Keller et al., 2018; Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Additionally, military husbands themselves admitted to missing their wives due to the military's work-life imbalance (Southwell & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2016). Military spouse groups and programs were also reported to be primarily focused on military wives, and thus, failed to

support military husbands (Keller et al., 2018). These issues experienced by military husbands may thus influence their wives' decisions to stay or leave the military.

Summary of perceptions of General Officers' and Colonel Volunteers' families' interests in relation to their careers. Responses of each group of participants in this present study highlighted the important aspects of family in relation to their decisions to stay or leave the USMC. Generally, the GOs had less children and more supportive husbands, while the CVs had more children and subscribed more to traditional gender roles that placed them as the primary caregiver of their children. Hosek et al. (2011) cited issues of children's education, spouses' careers, traditional gender roles, and being a single mother as major concerns of servicewomen. Based on these findings in conjunction with previous findings, servicewomen may indeed struggle with childcare if not fully supported by their husbands, which could thus influence their career decisions.

Childcare may be the main issue for CVs in the present study, but the role of military husbands in their wives' career decisions can also be influential as it would determine their willingness to be responsible for childcare. The constant moving of servicewomen with their families due to deployment could cost military husbands their own careers, a consequence that they may not be willing to face (Cozza et al., 2014). Southwell and MacDermid Wadsworth's (2016) determined diverse results were presented with some husbands reporting these roles as negatively affecting their pride, while some actually took pride in their wives' service and were thus comfortable in accepting their nontraditional roles. This discrepancy is reflective of the present study's findings in which the GOs' husbands were supportive and took pride in their wives'

careers, while the CVs' husbands were less supportive. Overall, findings in this theme revealed that family-related issues could be largely influential on female Marines' decisions to stay or leave the USMC, as those with more supportive families or less familial obligations did not consider it as a source of conflict, while those with less supportive husbands and more familial obligations mainly attributed their decision to leave the USMC to these familial conflicts.

Limitations

In addition to the limitations cited in Chapter 1, the qualitative nature of this study also limits its findings. Although the participants provided much depth and detail regarding their experiences, no correlations or causality were established from these results, which means that mentoring or familial concerns may not necessarily cause or be correlated to female Marine retention. Also, while past studies on different branches of the military or different locations may have shared similar findings with the present study, these findings may not be generalizable to all branches and groups of the military. Certain nuances between military groups and branches may lead to different experiences for servicewomen and different reasons for their retention.

Recommendations to Leaders and Practitioners

The findings of the present study elicit several recommendations for practice and policy. First, regarding issues of institutionalized gender inequities, the finding that these issues still exist in the USMC despite the policies that have been put to place suggest that it is a matter of culture instead of policy. Leaders should ensure that these policies are not just put to place, but also followed by all members of the USMC. Leaders of training and

development may consider including sessions on gender equity and promoting belongingness in the USMC while avoiding incidents of sexual harassment and assault. Leaders should also ensure that incident reports regarding these issues are followed up and taken seriously. The finding that female Marines who perceived greater influence of gender inequities were the ones who persisted and stayed in the USMC suggest that female Marines may use such perspectives to fuel their ambition and motivate them to attain Flag rank and have more power to prevent such inequities.

Second, the clear delineation of GOs and CVs in mentoring revealed that proper mentoring involving practical career advice may be influential in female Marines' retention. Leaders should once again ensure that the policies and programs they have set, such as the Marine Leader Development Program are followed. Senior service members in the USMC, regardless of their gender, should do their best to provide sound practical career advice to their mentees, not just psychosocial support. Female Marines are also recommended to proactively seek out mentoring, as it may be beneficial for their career progressions.

Lastly, family-related issues cited in this study suggest that husbands' support and childcare are major concerns and highly influential of female Marines' decisions to stay or leave the USMC. As such, programs and establishments within the military, such as Childcare Development Centers and other work-life balance programs should be improved and promoted for female Marines who have trouble seeking caregivers for their children and balancing their home and work responsibilities. Military spouse groups and support systems should also give more attention to military husbands rather than solely

focusing on military wives (Keller et al., 2018). Focusing on the needs of military husbands may allow them to give more support for their wives' careers. The USMC should also consider joint deployments for couple who are both in the USMC to avoid separating the family. Female Marines who have more experiences with such issues may form their own support groups to provide guidance on how to handle them. Senior servicewomen such as GO1 and GO3, who successfully managed to attain Flag rank while having children may serve as role models for other female Marines who wish to start a family while still pursuing their careers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations may also be made for future research. The in-depth qualitative findings of the present study presented several possibilities for quantitative exploration. For instance, large scale surveys could include majority of the female Marines, not just the GOs and CVs, in determining their perceived factors influencing their decisions to stay or leave the USMC. The three themes identified in the present study could serve as dimensions for the potential survey instrument, with items related to the findings.

While experimental studies may not be possible to achieve causality, utilizing a longitudinal study, wherein female Marines are studied from the point of their enlistment until they achieve Flag rank, could provide solid empirical evidence regarding influential factors for their persistence. Ethnographic observation, while costly and difficult, may also provide more in-depth information regarding the female Marines' experiences in the USMC.

Lastly, future researchers could seek to find out more about the specific factors identified in this study. For instance, Southwell and MacDermid Wadsworth's (2016) found military husbands could be replicated in the USMC and include husbands of high-ranking female Marines, to discover the reasons behind their support, or lack thereof, of their wives' careers over theirs. A qualitative study focusing solely on career advice for female Marines could also be conducted to alleviate the problem of poor mentoring. In terms of institutionalized gender inequities, more investigation is necessary considering the surprising findings of this study. As the GOs reported more perceived inevitable and uncontrollable barriers surrounding gender inequities, future researchers could specifically inquire about how these barriers influenced their career progression and how they overcame these barriers.

Summary

Overall, the findings of the present study provided several insights regarding the possible factors influencing female Marines' decision to stay or leave the USMC. Strong perceptions of institutionalized gender inequities appeared to motivate GOs in attaining Flag rank, as compared to retired CVs who simply brushed off these inequities. Mentors appeared to be influential in the GOs' and CVs' career decisions as well, although they did not explicitly say so. The notable difference in the reception of practical career advice between GOs and CVs from their mentors revealed how these pieces of career-related advice were more beneficial than psychosocial advice in encouraging female Marines' persistence. Finally, the most salient issue for CVs, notably not experienced by most of the GOs, was the issue of family conflicts. All the GOs reported having supportive

husbands and less children, which eased the burden of family conflicts for them. On the contrary, CVs experienced more conflicts with their less supportive husbands and perceived guilt over not being the primary caregiver of their children. These issues, along with work-life imbalance were cited as the main reason for the CVs' leaving the USMC. These findings revealed that the USMC still has a long way to go from its current position in gender-related issues. Recommendations were made in this chapter to hopefully aid the USMC and female Marines in fostering a more female-friendly workplace and improving the retention and promotion of female Marines. The value of female Marines and women in general calls for more efforts in improving this field to ensure equity and to allow these women to flourish and provide their best efforts in serving the nation.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

Series 1. Establishing the Context

1. What motivated you to join the Marine Corps?
2. What was your primary Military Occupational Specialty?
3. Did you have any mentors?
 - a. Who were your most significant mentors and why?
 - b. Did those mentors influence your decision to remain in the Marine Corps?
4. Did you ever feel isolated?
 - a. How did you overcome the feeling of isolation?
5. Were you ever married?
 - a. If not, why did you choose to never marry?
 - b. If you did, how did you balance family/professional demands?
 - c. Did you perceive the demands upon your husband/wife to be different than those of your male active duty counterparts?
 - d. Did getting married change your career goals or professional priorities?
6. Did you have children?
 - a. If not, why did you choose not to have children?
 - b. If you did, how did you balance family/professional demands? Did having children change your career goals or professional priorities?
 - c. Did you feel your family made sacrifices that helped you succeed professionally?

Series 2. Reconstruct experience Within the Context

1. Describe your leadership philosophy.
2. What do you feel made you stand out from your male and female counterparts?
3. How do you perceive the position of Flag rank?
4. What advice would you offer to other women who aspire to follow in your footsteps?
5. What did you choose to pursue flag rank?
6. Did you feel that being a woman required you to behave differently than your male counterparts to be successful?
7. What were some of the challenges you had to overcome as a female Marine (sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual orientation, family demands)?
8. If retired, why did you make the decision?

Series 3. Reflection of experiences

1. Described the experience of remaining on active duty to seek Flag rank?
2. Did you ever feel like retiring instead?
3. Did you ever feel like you made the wrong decision?
4. What institutional barriers have you experienced in seeking the flag rank?
5. What kind of mentoring did you experience in seeking the flag rank? How valuable was the experience?
6. Was there a particular event that changed your decision to stay in the Marine Corps?

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear _____:

My name is Angel Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting research in partial fulfillment of my doctorate degree in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. The purpose of my research is to explore and understand the thoughts and feelings regarding senior female United States Marine Corps Officer retention decisions. While traditional studies have focused on identifying the reasons why women leave the Marine Corps, the study gained insight into the variables that have influenced retention, specifically among female General Officers. Research in this area will be critical to identify common themes among those women who have not only obtained, but sustained, senior leadership positions within the USMC, thus providing a method to offer guidance and mentoring to those women who aspire to follow the same career path but would traditionally elect to leave active service. This information can be used to positively affect turnover by offering those female leaders who contemplate leaving active service an alternative perspective that will encourage extended service. Ultimately, the overall focus of this research is to determine if the decision-making utilized by female USMC GOs can be reasonably duplicated by the average female USMC officer, thus improving long-term retention, increasing the presence of senior officers and improving overall combat effectiveness.

I know your time is important and would appreciate your participation in this study. To fully understand your thoughts and feelings regarding this topic, it will take approximately 1 to 1.5-hours of your time to complete the interview questions. If there are any further questions regarding your input, the researcher will schedule a time to conduct a telephonic conversation for any clarifying factors. You are not required to do or answer anything associated to the interview

questions that causes you discomfort. The questions of the interview are intended to explore the thoughts and feelings associated your decision to continue your service in the USMC. All information gathered during the interview will be held strictly confidential and you are free to discontinue participation at any time with no adverse repercussions. Your name will not be included in the final product or be associated with the end result of this research in any way.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time to complete the interview questions. My telephone number is (XXX) XXX-XXXX. My e-mail address is angel.smith3@waldenu.edu

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Angel Smith

Doctoral Candidate

Walden University

Appendix C: Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement

During the course of my activity in transcribing interviews for this study, “A Phenomenological Study of Factors Influencing Senior Female United States Marine Corps Officer Retention Decisions,” I will have access to information that is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I will keep research data in a manner that protects the privacy of participants and ensures that individual participants are identifiable by outside parties.
6. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
7. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.

In signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above. For e-mail agreement, please reply to the e-mail with the words, “I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions.”

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Project Description Letter

The purpose of my proposed research is to explore and understand the thoughts and feelings regarding senior female United States Marine Corps Officer retention decisions. The qualitative research study is chiefly guided by four central questions; what are the lived experiences described by female USMC General Officers who remained on active duty to seek Flag rank vs. those of female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank, what perceived institutional barriers did female USMC General Officers who remained on active duty to seek Flag rank encounter vs. retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank, and were they similar, did the presence of a mentor influence female USMC General Officers' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek Flag rank vs. retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank, and did demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or having dependent children influence female USMC General Officers' decision-making to remain on active duty and seek Flag rank vs. retired female USMC Colonels who elected to retire and not seek Flag rank?

The data generated from 14 semi-structured interview questions based on the conceptual framework will be examined for themes, concepts, and patterns using the procedures of the phenomenological research method to answer the research questions. Nine female USMC General Officers will be interviewed in order to gather the needed data for this qualitative study. The interview questions are estimated to take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours to complete. A consent form will be provided to ensure each participant understands the details of the study, to include background information, procedures, nature of the study, risks, and benefits of participation, compensation, confidentiality, and contact information. The resulting data will be examined for emerging themes, concepts, and patterns.

This study holds potential for positive social impact implications as the information collected can be used to positively affect turnover by offering those female leaders who contemplate leaving active service an alternative perspective that will encourage extended service. Ultimately, the overall focus of this research is to determine if the decision-making utilized by female USMC General Officers can be reasonably duplicated by the average female USMC officer, thus improving long-term retention, increasing the presence of senior officers and improving overall combat effectiveness. By examining the lived experiences regarding female USMC General officers and their feelings associated with extended service, the results of this study can help discover factors that can positively influence retention among this rare population.