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Learning Experiences of Women Student Veterans

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Abstract

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B.A. Economics, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1984

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The nature and significance of women student veterans' learning experiences are largely unknown. The purpose of this qualitative basic design study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college using Belenky et al.'s framework of women's ways of knowing. Data were collected from 12 participants using a semi-structured interview process and four themes emerged through open coding analysis. Findings showed that participants were motivated by perseverance and aspects of self-perception and guided by elements of the learning environments, most directly by the structure of the military; participants applied methods and strategies learned in military settings to their learning in college settings with increased independence; participants identified and negotiated challenges to their learning specific to the male-dominated environment of the military; and participants identified their purpose for learning as practical application of the content toward the goal of making a difference. Learning experience descriptions evidenced all five epistemological perspectives of the women's ways of knowing conceptual framework. The findings may have implications for positive social change in the field of adult education both in the military and in postsecondary education settings. Increased and improved understanding of women student veterans' learning experiences could guide development of program evaluation in both military and academic settings, as well as in other veteran service organizations. Study findings make evident the varied abilities and the notable capabilities of the participants and serve as a promise of what lies unknown among this unique population of adult learners.

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Dedication

I dedicate my educational journey to my mother, Maureen. She introduced me very early to the concepts of feminism and voice, and we return to these topics again and again in our discussions and experience. My mother has been a powerful example of an adult woman learner who overcame obstacles to attain her goals. It is because of her influence that I have maintained my focus on women learners and I keep her own graduation picture at my desk for inspiration.

I dedicate this work to the women student veterans who generously and graciously shared their experiences and, in doing so, created a soul for this project. Their willingness to contribute their reflections on their own learning experiences has facilitated my contribution to the greater body of literature on women student veterans. It is my hope that our work together will make a difference.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge and thank my committee members, Dr. Patricia Brewer, Dr. Cheryl Keen, and Dr. Alice Eichholz, for their expertise, guidance, and patience. I appreciate their time, energy, and insight, as well as their creative and caring ways of communicating the direction that steered my project. Without their rigorous review and continual challenges of my writing, I would not have meaningful results that matter.

I acknowledge and thank Chue Vang, the advisor to whom I was fortunate to be assigned in the most critical stage of my program. Chue has a sense of purpose and a wealth of compassion that facilitate positive, productive progress. He has been a great support.

My deep thanks and love to my family and friends who have sustained me through many years of school, and especially through these long years to the PhD. I am grateful for the confidence in me they have shown and the encouragement they have provided. Most especially, my sister Tara has been my greatest collaborator, providing immeasurable support and weathering the brainstorms with humor and grace.

Finally, I salute the women of the United States military—past, present, and future. The commitment to serve is honorable and admirable, particularly for women who choose to serve in an institution that is well-steeped in male-dominated traditions and practices. I am grateful for their presence and their perseverance, and I am appreciative of their innumerable accomplishments. It is my hope that my work might be of service to them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Student veterans are a small but unique subpopulation of the U.S. adult learner and postsecondary student population, and women student veterans are an even smaller but still distinctive subgroup of that subpopulation. Student veterans represent approximately 5% of the 16.8 million students in the national undergraduate population (Holian & Adam, 2020; McFarland & Hussar, 2019) and although women veterans enroll in college-level studies at rates higher than their male counterparts, women student veterans represent only slightly more than 20% of the student veteran population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019a). Research on the post-9/11 veteran population evidences the unique characteristics, needs, and challenges of student veterans (Barry et al., 2014; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011) but the current body of research lacks sufficient information on the learning experiences of student veterans in general, and of women student veterans more specifically (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Without additional exploration and investigation focused specifically on the learning experiences of women student veterans, there is limited understanding of what the important aspects of their learning experiences are. In this study, I explored women student veterans' learning experiences both while they were in the military and while they were in college to gain understanding of those learning experiences.

Women student veterans possess the unique combination of being women who have been trained and schooled in the military and who subsequently have added to their learning experiences by enrolling in college-level studies. Meaningful data on women student veteran learning experiences could inform both military and college personnel

about this distinctive group of learners. The information could be used to enhance or improve training and instructional approaches to better serve this subgroup of the adult learner population. I intended to use this study to produce such data. This chapter includes a brief background for the study, followed by a discussion of the research problem and the purpose and description of the composition of the study.

Background

The low number of women student veterans is reflective of the relatively small number of women who serve in the military and subsequently become veterans. Neither the number of women who serve in the military nor the number of women who hold military veteran status corresponds with the relatively greater presence of women in the population at large. Women comprise over 50% of the total general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) but they comprise only 17% of the total active-duty military population (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020) and only 10% of the total military veteran population (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019a). The numbers of women on active military duty and women in the military veteran population consequently are much lower than the numbers of men on active duty and in the veteran population.

Since 1948 when the U.S. Congress passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act, women have had an increasing presence in the military (Kamarck, 2016). Despite allowing women to serve as permanent members of the armed forces, this legislation still limited the overall population of women to a very low percentage of both the enlisted and the officer corps. In 1973, when the draft ended and the military became

an all-volunteer force, the need to fill the ranks formerly occupied by drafted men increased and the constraint on the number of women permitted to serve in the armed forces was eased (Warner & Asch, 2001). The number of women serving on active duty eventually increased to current levels (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020) and women's representation in the veteran population is predicted to increase even higher in the next several years (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019b).

Current research on student veterans is rooted most directly in the work that began in earnest in the post-9/11 era of the late 2000s as large numbers of service members began to separate and retire from military service and enroll in college-level studies (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The bulk of the research is focused mostly on issues other than aspects of student veteran learning experiences. Research topics include transition issues (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; DiRamio et al., 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015), understanding student veterans' disabilities and delivering services for student veterans with disabilities (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016), mental health and substance abuse issues that affect student veterans in school (Fortney et al., 2016; Grossbard et al., 2014), and faculty perceptions of student veterans (Gonzalez & Elliott, 2016). This body of research supports the assertion that student veterans are a unique subgroup of the student population, but the evidence to support that assertion is based almost entirely on affective aspects of the student veteran experience. Evidence supported by research on aspects of student veteran learning experiences is scarce (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011), and evidence supported by research on aspects of female student veteran learning experiences is limited. This study to discover and explore the learning

experiences of women student veterans is needed because it provides information on how women student veterans view their own learning in two relevant settings, in the military and in college. In this study, I directly addressed the literature gap by providing focused research on the learning experiences of this specific subgroup of adult learners.

Problem Statement

The nature and the significance of women veterans' learning experiences are largely unknown. In particular, it is not known how women student veterans perceive their own learning, whether in the military or in a postsecondary education environment, whether there are similarities or differences between women student veteran learning experiences in the military and in college, what can be learned about these experiences, or how what we learn about these experiences could be used by those who design and implement military and educational training or instruction programs and related services. Women student veterans constitute a distinctive and growing subgroup of the adult learner population enrolled in college-level studies (Heineman, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019b), yet the current body of research does not reflect adequate evidence of understanding of their learning experiences. Research focused principally on the experiences of student veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) is limited but has become more prevalent as an increasing number of military veterans transition from military service to varied academic settings. That emerging research, however, includes scant investigation of learning experiences of student veterans and none that focuses exclusively on the learning experiences of women student veterans.

Many of the women currently serving on active duty joined the military in the years after the Vietnam era and especially post-9/11 (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019a) and they have not yet attained veteran status. As these women separate or retire from active-duty status, they will contribute to the expected growing number of women veterans over the next several years. Considering that approximately 11% of all female veterans enroll in college as compared to approximately 4% of all male veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019a), the number of women student veterans also can be expected to increase. This increased number of women veterans enrolling in college should be met with current understanding of their unique learning experiences which at present does not exist.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. I conducted this study using a basic qualitative approach with interviews to examine the experiences as described by the women student veterans. The resultant data provided understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans.

Research Question

How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences in both military and college settings?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

This project, which I designed to explore the learning experiences of women

veterans who have become college students, was anchored in the conceptual framework of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). The women's ways of knowing (WWK) conceptual framework characterizes five epistemological perspectives from which women experience and perceive reality and make meaning of their learning: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing. Each perspective represents a position from which knowledge is received and how knowledge is processed into meaning. The WWK framework and the five epistemological perspectives are described in depth in Chapter 2.

WWK uses a metaphor of voice (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 17) to facilitate the authors' discussion of the shared experiences of women as those women described their own intellectual and ethical development. The metaphor of voice was apt for this study because my goal was to give voice to the experiences of women student veterans which currently are mostly absent from the literature. Through interviews with the study participants about their learning experiences in the military and in college, I developed a collection of voices. Themes emerged through the data analysis process and then I discussed the themes within the context of the WWK framework.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative approach (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to investigate the learning experiences of women student veterans. In the basic qualitative approach, the goal is to collect and analyze the individual experiences of the study's participants in an effort to ascertain the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the participants themselves (Creswell, 2013). I sought to gain understanding of the learning experiences

of women student veterans by interviewing participants about their learning both in the military and in college. I recruited 12 women student veterans for participation in the study by posting an electronic notice on a university research participant site and through snowball recruiting by participants.

The interview process, including the interview questions, was informed by the process and questions developed in the WWK (Belenky et al., 1986/1997) project. Through the interview process, I sought to discover how the women student veterans perceived their own learning in the distinct settings. I conducted the interviews using open-ended questions to allow the information to be communicated by the participants without fixed or defined parameters (Patton, 2015). The inductive analysis of emerging themes and patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) reflected and described what participants experienced and the ways in which participants made meaning of what they experienced.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

Learning experience: Occurrence of formal learning or informal learning.

Learning path: Progression or collection of learning experiences, either in the military or in college-level studies, that influences and results from the objectives and goals of the woman student veteran.

Military veteran or veteran: Service member who has separated or retired from active-duty military service.

Separated: Left military service after completing any length of commitment, but not having met specific criteria for retirement.

Service member: Individual serving in any of the six branches of the United States military: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force.

Student veteran: Military veteran who is enrolled in an education program.

Women student veteran: Compound noun term used to refer to military veterans who are both women and students.

Assumptions

I assumed that women student veterans would embrace the opportunity to be heard as the minority gender military members. I also assumed that while student veterans and especially women student veterans might have been reticent to discuss aspects of their military experience, because this study focused specifically on learning experiences the participants would be able to differentiate their learning experiences among other experiences they may have had in the military. Finally, I assumed that my personal experience and interest in the military community and military veterans would be positively received by the study participants and would allow for productive and meaningful discourse that would result in rich data to inform the study, while I continually sought to maintain objectivity.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I focused on women's learning in both in the military and in college. My goal for the study was to provide data that would contribute to the understanding of the women student veteran experience. Thus, the study included only female service members who had separated or retired from the military and subsequently had attended college for at least three terms; male student veterans were excluded. The participant

sample of women student veterans was not restricted by other demographic considerations such as age, ethnicity, marital or parental status, or residential status.

Student veterans experience significant challenges and barriers as they transition from military to civilian life and college studies (Auguste et al., 2018; Olenick et al., 2015; Parks et al., 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Among these challenges and barriers are issues related to health, such as physical disabilities, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress, and substance abuse, and issues related to readjustment such as unemployment, homelessness, and relationship complications. These difficulties and other aspects resultant from military service and transition to civilian life inform the female student veteran experience but were not within the primary focus of this study and would only have been addressed as they arose within participant responses to interview questions. While the design of this study may be useful to investigate experiences of women learners in settings other than in the military or in college, the findings of this study may not be applicable to those other contexts or populations.

Limitations

Limitations of the study resulted mainly from the methods design, particularly sample size and technique. I interviewed 12 women student veterans from a population of over 177,000 women veterans enrolled in higher education (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019a). Because of this small sample size, the study findings are not generalizable to the larger population either of women student veterans particularly or of all student veterans. The potential to generalize the findings is further limited by the qualitative sampling method used for this study. The purposeful sampling technique was

intended to garner participants who fit the study criteria rather than participants who would be representative of the female student veteran population altogether.

Significance

This exploration of the learning experiences of women student veterans constitutes an original contribution to the body of literature on women learners and on student veterans. The existing research on student veterans focuses mostly or exclusively on male student veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Currier et al., 2016; Hammond, 2016; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Parks et al., 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). In addition, the current research literature reflects an emphasis on issues of transition and adjustment (Heineman, 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015) and on the effects of the influence of the military on the student veteran (DiRamio et al., 2015; Iverson et al., 2016; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). I discovered only one current research study (Broding, 2020) that examined elements of women student veterans' learning both in the military and in college. My study may be significant because it focuses on learning experiences rather than affective elements of the women's experiences both in the military and in college.

Furthermore, I used a female-centered framework to analyze and interpret the data in this study. The framework I used, Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) WWK, is a model of how women learn that was crafted outside of the male-centered tradition. The women student veteran perspectives thus are presented through a female-centered lens that further distinguishes the experiences of this unique adult learner subpopulation.

The findings of the study may contribute to positive social change by increasing and improving understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans. The

findings may be of use to military personnel involved in the administration of military training and education programs and to administrators, faculty, and staff who serve student veterans in academic settings. Further, the findings also may be of use to individuals associated with other organizations who work with military veterans. Finally, the findings may be of value to the women student veteran participants themselves as they realize the importance and power of their own voices of experience.

Summary

In this chapter I introduced the topic of this study: the learning experiences of women student veterans both in the military and in college. I also provided a brief background on the existing research related to the topic, which led to the identification of the research problem: the absence of information on the learning experiences of women student veterans, a growing subgroup of the adult learner population. I identified the purpose of the study as an exploration of those learning experiences through interviews with women student veterans using the WWK conceptual framework. My goal for the study was to capture the voices of women student veterans as they described their own learning from their own perspectives.

Chapter 2 includes a detailed description of the conceptual framework for the study and a review of selected current literature describing studies related to the research topic. The literature review includes examination of topics relevant to the influence of the military on student veterans and to women learners in college. The chapter concludes with review of literature on studies that utilized the WWK conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. As such, I focused on aspects of epistemological development in women student veterans rather than aspects of affective experiences either in the military or in civilian life as a college student. In my review of existing literature related to women student veterans, I found there was more research focused on the affective aspects of the education and military experiences of student veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; DiRamio et al., 2015; Heineman, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) than research focused on learning experience aspects of student veterans (Broding, 2020; Stone, 2017). I also found there was more research weighted on the experiences of male student veterans (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Currier et al., 2016; Hammond, 2016; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Parks et al., 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) than research focused on female student veterans (Heineman, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; Lundberg et al., 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). In addition, I found the limited amount of current research on the learning experiences of women learners in college contained few studies of U.S. students (Davis et al., 2015; Diamond, 2018) and thus I expanded the search to include several studies of students in other countries (Alshebou, 2019; Jiménez-Cortés et al., 2017; Peñaloza & Guarnizo, 2019; Rocks & Lavender, 2018; Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017). Studies of women learners in college were distinct from studies connected with military and veteran education issues as none of them included or identified student veterans in the participant pools. Lastly, I found Belenky et al.'s

(1986/1997) WWK model had been utilized as a conceptual framework only minimally in research on adult women learners (Aldegether, 2017; Galotti et al., 2018; McCarthey & Kang, 2017; Pruitt, 2017) and I did not find any such research on women student veterans.

Chapter 2 includes a description of the strategy used to search for current literature related to the study topic, a discussion of the conceptual framework as it relates to the literature, and a review of selected current literature pertinent to the study of women student veterans.

Literature Search Strategy

For this project to investigate the learning experiences of women student veterans, I used one central formative work, WWK (Belenky et al., 1986/1997), to support the conceptual framework of the project. In addition, I conducted an extensive review of current literature in three main topics to collect a selection of representative research to further frame the study: the influence of the military on service members, military veterans in college, and women learners in college. These topics were the source of the key search terms that I used in the attempt to locate literature germane to the study. The key search terms were: *women* and *learning*, *women* and *college*, *women* and *military* and *education*, *student veterans*, and *women* and *student veterans*. Additional search terms included *women's ways of knowing, Belenky,* and *women* and *military training.* When I found no relevant current research on the topic of women learners in college, I widened the search by including additional terms (i.e. *women* and *adult learners* or *adult students* and *research* or *study)*.

I utilized several databases to conduct the literature review. EBSCOhost provided access to databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Military and Government Collection, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX, and I widened the search by using ProQuest Central and SAGE Journals databases. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website provided access to reports on education statistics and education services relating to military service members and veterans. Further internet resources to access information specifically about the military included websites for U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. From this search, I collected research that represented a comprehensive review of the existing literature on the topic of women student veterans.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research project was the WWK framework as explained in the book *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). The WWK framework encompasses a spectrum of development that provides a contextual lens through which women's learning perspectives could be viewed and discussed. In this project, I used WWK as a framework to guide the literature review, the development of the interview protocol, the interviewing of participants, data analysis, and the reporting of findings as I sought to explore the learning experiences of women student veterans.

Connecting Framework to Previous Research

Research on women's learning is a thread pulled through previous research and strengthened by the focused work of the WWK project (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). The WWK model of distinct epistemological perspectives that women move through as they

make meaning of their learning and their lives stands on its own based on the WWK project's research findings. However, when describing development of the model, the WWK researchers gave mention to the essential role of Perry's (1970/1999) work as an influence on their own conception of how to organize the model. They referred to Perry's positions of intellectual development as offering insight into an approach they could conceptualize for how to sort out the findings on women's learning experiences and thus develop the WWK model.

Perry (1970/1999) presented a model of sequential movement through four stages in cognitive development: dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. In Perry's scheme, the process was as important as was the content of the learning and the process encompassed both cognitive and ethical development. Perry's model of cognitive development was assumed to apply to learners in general despite the homogeneity of the study participants who not only were all male college students at an elite institution but also were racially and culturally similar. The study did not include learners who were not in college or who had diverse racial or cultural characteristics, nor did the study provide any avenue to discover ways of learning associated more specifically with women learners. Subsequent researchers (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986/1997; Gilligan, 1982/2016) asserted the lack of consideration for gender rendered Perry's scheme of cognitive and ethical development inadequate to describe how women perceive reality and make meaning of their learning and their lives.

The WWK project originated from the authors' shared recognition that many women did not consider traditional education experiences to be of great value and women

often did not feel engaged in academic settings (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). As they designed the WWK project specifically to investigate the experiences of women, Belenky et al. utilized Perry's (1970/1999) scheme in a foundational construct to extend his idea that both the content and the process of learning are important. In an earlier parallel study of ethical development theory, Gilligan (1982/2016) had responded to Kohlberg's (1963/2008) model of ethical development which focused only on men with her study of women's views and beliefs of morality. Gilligan's assertion that women approached ethical issues differently than did men thus provided a foundation for gender specific research to follow, including Belenky et al.'s WWK research. Within the WWK project, Belenky et al. stated although it could not be ruled out that men did not experience learning in the described ways of knowing, it could be asserted that women did experience learning in these ways, based on the large sample size. Further research conducted by Baxter Magolda (1992) examined ways of knowing involving both women and men. Baxter Magolda's work showed ways of knowing in college-aged learners were gender-related but not gender specific.

Women's Ways of Knowing

Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) WWK described a research project undertaken by a group of four women who were made aware of and were inspired to investigate the challenges female students had regarding schooling experiences. In the course of their studies on student development, Belenky et al. found female adult learners experienced doubt about their abilities and capabilities, alienation in educational settings, and awareness of gaps in their learning. Further development of the project was driven by the

authors' recognition of the lack of research on how women learn as distinguished from how men learn. As a result, they designed the project to explore women's learning exclusively. In addition, the project purposefully included women of "diverse ages, circumstances, and outlooks" (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 13) which widened the strength of the project's findings.

In the effort to learn about how women interpreted their own lives and learning, the WWK researchers interviewed 135 women from varying social, racial, and economic backgrounds. In addition, they purposefully included women who experienced learning opportunities through informal education agencies which the authors referred to as "invisible colleges" (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, p. 12). The broad range of participants strengthened the efforts of the study intended to encompass diversity as a means of offsetting the researchers' own assumptions and bias and allow a diverse representation of women's experiences to emerge. During the analysis process the researchers realized the model they had chosen to organize the data, Perry's (1970/1999) scheme of cognitive and ethical development, did not serve well because the scheme's specified positions were too narrow and too linear. The WWK researchers realized the data would be better organized and interpreted in a framework that allowed for the meaningful differences they found in the interview data. The result was the WWK model, organized into five categories representing perspectives, rather than stages, in a spectrum of development for women learners. Each of the ways of knowing describes the information processing and understanding of the women themselves, their relationship to others, and their perceptions and beliefs about the truth, based on how the women expressed themselves in

interviews with the project's researchers. None of the five perspectives are meant to stand alone as single identifiers of a woman's experience with reality and learning; that is, any woman's individual learning experiences can be located within any of the perspectives as they are not linear.

Key Elements of Women's Ways of Knowing

The five ways of knowing described in the WWK model are silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing (Belenky et al., 1986/1997). Briefly, the characteristics of each of the five ways are as follows:

- Silence: This perspective is characterized by a sense of isolation and disconnection from others. Women experiencing silence generally do not have their own voice or much, if any, internal dialog or independent thought. Women in silence are subject to authority; they do not interact with those in power but rather are subordinate to the direction and pressures of authority.
- Received knowing: This perspective is characterized by a dependence on others for knowledge and the perception that one cannot create knowledge by oneself. Knowledge comes from external sources of authority and without question is understood to be truth. In received knowing, women's voice is echoing the voice of the authority from whence the knowledge was transmitted.
- Subjective knowing: This perspective is characterized by independence in thought and personalization of experience. Outside sources of information and evidence are not utilized to interpret truth and create one's knowledge, except

in cases where the information supports the learner's own perspective. In subjective knowing, women's voice is a narrator of personal experience separate from outside input.

- Procedural knowing: This perspective is characterized by the idea that perception is individualized. Knowledge comes through consideration and evaluation of information and evidence from both external sources of knowledge and internal subjective knowledge. Procedural knowing is further classified into separate knowing and connected knowing. With separate knowing, truth and knowledge are evaluated through consideration and judgment of external viewpoints while with connected knowing, truth and knowledge are discerned through consideration and acceptance of external viewpoints. In procedural knowing, women's voice is a means of conveying a message of both external and internal origins.
- Constructed knowing: This perspective is characterized by the effective incorporation of knowledge from external and internal sources, as well as the consideration of the context of the learning. This perspective allows the learner to connect with others while at the same time retaining her own voice and continuing to develop through new learning.

The WWK model includes description of transition from one perspective to another, which can be attributed to the effect of the woman learner's increased exposure to various types and degrees of experiences. Belenky et al. (1986/1997) suggested experiences of events and occurrences resulting in increased self-awareness and self-

knowledge are the impetus for such transition. These experiences include different education experiences, life changes such as having a child or going through trauma, participating in relationships with others, and exposure to diversity of culture and thought. With varied personal experiences and increased recognition of the learner's own sense of certainty about her own experiences, the way of perceiving and making meaning of the experiences also changes. Personal feelings and beliefs are incorporated as the learner's self-awareness develops and becomes a working part of the knowing process.

Literature Review

The following literature review is organized into three sections. In the first section, I present discussion of current literature relating to experiences of women in the military and student veterans. In the second section, I present discussion of current literature relating to experiences of women learners irrespective of military or veteran status. In the third section, I present discussion of literature on how the WWK concept has been used in current research studies.

Military Influence on Student Veterans

The articles from the literature review on the topics of the military and student veterans served to inform the current study on women student veterans' learning experiences. Analysis of the literature related to military influence on student veterans is organized around six topics. The first two topics, the underrepresentation of women in studies of student veterans and transition and identity theories in women student veteran experience, focus on research pertaining to women student veterans in particular. The remaining four topics, military structure's influence on student veterans, student veterans

and identity, student veterans and relationships, and student veterans and help seeking, focus on research pertaining to student veterans in general.

Underrepresentation of Women in Studies of Student Veterans

Although women make up approximately 17% of the total active-duty military force (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020), the military remains principally a male culture. The pervasive male milieu has fostered and strengthened the presence of masculine characteristics and norms taken to be standards (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) and the predominance of the military's masculine culture extends to the body of current literature related to research on student veterans. Most of the literature focused on affective aspects rather than epistemological aspects of the student veteran experience. In the literature review I found only two articles on cognitive aspects of the student veteran experience (Broding, 2020; Stone, 2017), and only five articles reporting research with all women student veteran participants (Broding, 2020; Heineman, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; Lundberg et al., 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). A mixed methods study included all female student veteran participants in the qualitative interview section, but only 26% female student veteran participants for the quantitative survey section (DiRamio et al., 2015). Six more articles focused on student veterans in general included female participants at an average of fewer than 20% of the total participants (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Hammond, 2016; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Parks et al., 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Three of the studies focused on nontraditional students, of which student veterans are a subset (Auguste et al., 2018; Donaldson et al., 2019) and two focused exclusively on administrators and school personnel who work with student

veterans (Arminio et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2016).

The two studies in the literature review that focused on learning aspects of the student veteran experience were Broding's (2020) research on women student veteran identity, voice, and belonging in writing courses and Stone's (2017) research on student veteran development of self-authorship and the role of the military in that development. Broding's study participants all were female and the study findings detailed how military experience, peer connections, and instructors influenced how and what women student veterans wrote in college writing courses and assignments. Stone's findings detailed attributes and behaviors military members developed during military service that allowed them to increase their capacity to act independently with an internal belief system. Stone specifically discussed the contradictory nature of the development of self-authorship within a military structure that does not encourage individualistic thinking and action. Stone's study participants were both male and female, but gender was not articulated as a factor in the findings.

Transition and Identity Theories in Women Student Veteran Experience

The four studies that included only women student veterans did not focus on learning or epistemological aspects of the student veteran experience, but rather used transition theory (Heineman, 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015) and identity theory (Iverson et al., 2016; Lundberg et al., 2016) to frame the research. Heineman (2016) used transition theory and a discussion of dimensions of identity to frame a study of 19 female student veterans at two community colleges. The study findings indicated the participants developed focus and maturity because of their experiences in the male-dominated

military which contributed to their independence within the college environment. In addition, the study suggested that the unique experiences of women student veterans contributed to their capacity for resilience.

Transition theory framed another study designed to increase understanding of the experiences of female student veterans (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). The case study of two women student veterans attending community college focused on coping factors. Both women perceived their enrollment in a positive way, although one had some negative feelings about her military service experience. Both women expressed that military training was a positive influence on organization skills and in meeting deadlines. Both women received support from spouses but differed in how they perceived being supported by instructors. The authors suggested the negative perception was connected to one participant's expectation that the military and college would function more similarly.

Another study of women student veterans focused on the identity development of the women as they left the military and began attending university (Iverson et al., 2016). In this mixed-methods study, the participants described experiences on campus and the ensuing shifts in identity they experienced as they moved from military to civilian and academic experiences. The women indicated they felt they had to work harder than men to show themselves capable within the military's male-dominated environment and they brought that perception to the academic environment. The women also said it was not easy for them to identify themselves as veterans on campus or to feel fully entitled to veteran benefits because they believed veteran status should be accorded to those veterans who had been in combat. These elements made it difficult for the women

veterans to make full use of the services offered to student veterans on campus. Recommendations included training for student veteran services personnel including awareness of and strategies for working with female veterans.

Lundberg et al. (2016) also studied female veterans exclusively to explore how recreation opportunities outside of a college setting affected the female veteran participants. Through involvement in the activities, the women veterans developed physical and emotional abilities, and experienced a shift in self-identity as they came to view themselves as more accomplished and competent than when they began in the project. Although the study findings pertained to the experiences of women veterans, none of the participants were identified as being student veterans.

Finally, in a mixed-methods study of female student veterans and help-seeking (DiRamio et al., 2015), both male and female student veterans provided quantitative data, but only female student veterans provided qualitative data. The quantitative findings showed help-seeking attitudes did not vary by gender while the qualitative interview data showed the influence of the male-centric military culture to be a main contributor to female student veteran reluctance to seek help in the academic setting. The authors suggested the findings supported development of programs aimed specifically at serving women student veterans.

Military Structure's Influence on Student Veterans

Military service has a strong and enduring impact on the individuals who experience it. Foremost, the military provides an environment in which discipline, perseverance and resilience become internalized and actualized (Blaauw-Hara, 2016;

DiRamio et al., 2015; Heineman, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Stone, 2017; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Military life propagates and promotes these qualities that have lasting influence on veterans as they complete military commitment and transition to civilian life and enrollment in college-level studies.

In studies of student veterans and their perceptions of the shift from active-duty service to college, student veterans indicated they believed military experience allowed them to develop internal control in the form of a strong work ethic evidenced by their determination to complete school assignments (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). The student veterans attributed this "drive to complete the mission" (Blaauw-Hara, 2016, p. 812) directly to military training that stressed the importance of doing one's best on any task or duty. Similarly, in an investigation of military members' reintegration into civilian life and college studies (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016), student veterans indicated they specifically attributed the development of personal internal control to the strong influence the military experience had over their lives overall. Research evidenced student veterans in general had developed an "ethos of accountability" (DiRamio et al., 2015, p. 54) while on active-duty service. This ethos strengthened development of self-discipline and responsibility, and female student veterans in transition believed military training provided them with skills of organization and the ability to meet deadlines throughout the course of an assignment or mission (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). Furthermore, research showed that female service members had a quality of resilience attributed to both the lack of strong female role models in an intensely male military culture (Iverson et al., 2016) and combat experience. The resilience contributed to an ability to adjust to challenges

and to develop persistence that supported academic pursuits (Heineman, 2016) and showed in the capacity to adapt to or rebound from challenging circumstances through both “figuring it out” and “working harder” (Iverson et al., 2016, p. 164). Finally, while common belief often suggests military structure could be restrictive of personal growth, the structure of the military was found to be instrumental in supporting the development of internal foundations that allowed service members to attain self-authorship (Stone, 2017). The structure allowed service members to take risks in decision making because they were secure in their military job positions.

Student Veterans and Identity

Military life also influences how student veterans meet circumstances involving issues of identity. There are marked differences between the role of the individual within the military and the role of the individual in the civilian realm. Student veterans experience identity issues that can be categorized as follows: identity as part of a collective contrasted with identity as part of an individualistic culture; intersection of identities, such as veteran, civilian, and student, and extending to other identities such as partner, parent, or worker as they might apply to the veteran; and self-identification as a veteran (Auguste et al., 2018; Hammond, 2016; Iverson et al., 2016; Lundberg et al., 2016; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). The military experience creates a new identity by and for the individual, separate from the individual’s civilian identity.

Military culture is collective, which fosters an awareness and importance of service to others that student veterans bring into civilian life (Suzuki & Kawakami,

2016). In the military, the service member undergoes a deconstructive process that transforms the individual into a member of a larger unit in which common objectives and goals become the focus, allowing the group to function well as a unit (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). The collective nature of the military allows for the successful building of esprit de corps and a strong foundation for teamwork.

Although some intersectional identities remain with the student veteran after separation from the military, the identity of active-duty service member eventually no longer applies. Naphan and Elliott (2015) described the role shift when the former identity associated with the active-duty role is replaced with the new identity of veteran associated with the civilian role. Hammond (2016) found when the active-duty element was removed from the identity, the military association was not: the core identity for student veterans was "veteran," particularly for those active-duty members who had served in combat. In addition, even with a propensity to self-identify as a veteran, there was reluctance on the part of the student veterans to identify themselves as such on campus. Veterans, whether or not they had served in combat, perceived others as having a limited understanding of veteran status and thus that the others believed that anyone with veteran status would have served in combat. Veterans without combat experience had a preference not to explain that they were veterans even without having served in combat and veterans who had served in combat had a preference not to have to engage in conversation about combat experiences (Iverson et al., 2016).

Student veterans have described experiencing multiple identities at the same time. Intersectional identities occurred when veterans transitioned from military status to

veteran status to civilian status and to student veteran status, affecting how veterans interacted with work, school, general environment, and other people (Iverson et al., 2016). In a discussion of female student veterans as a subgroup of non-traditional students, Auguste et al. (2018) described the female student veterans as having identities affected by many, if not all, of the following identity characteristics: military role, gender, partner or single, parent or not a parent, worker or not working, and member of particular socioeconomic group and race. Some aspects of identity that developed during or as a result of military service completely redefined the individual. Disabled women veterans were described as seeing themselves foremost as disabled persons after leaving military service; it was not until a specific experience connected them with each other around outdoor activities that they began to see themselves as other than disabled (Lundberg et al., 2016).

Student Veterans and Relationships

Military structure and veteran sense of identity are elements in the relationships that form both during a service member's active duty and after transition to civilian life and college. Military relationships are structured within a chain of command and the military experience promotes a sense of camaraderie among military members, especially among others in the same unit (DiRamio et al., 2015; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Stone, 2017; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). The chain of command not only distinguishes authority (DiRamio et al., 2015) but also provides clear guidance on how to communicate with those in authority (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) and the camaraderie among military members fosters responsibility, connection, and mutual reliance, particularly for those

who serve together in combat (Naphan & Elliott, 2015). The structure allows service members to form and conduct strong relationships. In a study focused on development within the military environment (Stone, 2017) the findings showed strong relationships were a support in the development of self-authorship. In turn, self-authorship was a strong factor in the development of the skills the military seeks in leaders, who then participate in relationships within the chain of command.

The experiences of forming and conducting relationships with others change when the military member leaves active-duty service. Once the service member makes the transition to civilian life and becomes a student, relationships with others are not as clearly defined as they had been within the military structure. The ways in which veterans see themselves and the ways in which veterans feel they are seen by others affect how student veterans interact with school administrators, faculty, and other students (Auguste et al., 2018; Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Morales et al., 2019; Parks et al., 2015; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015).

Relationships with College Personnel. Student veteran education experiences are influenced by relationships and interactions with school personnel including administrators, faculty, and staff. Student veterans have found connections with school personnel to be both an asset and a challenge in school experiences, reporting interactions with faculty added to a feeling of support (Broding, 2020; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015) and verbal feedback from faculty had a positive influence on the student veterans' academic performance (Broding, 2020). In addition, student veterans have indicated interactions with administrators and faculty members have contributed positively to

willingness to participate in on-campus veteran organizations (DiRamio et al., 2015). Furthermore, in one study that surveyed and interviewed student veterans about experiences with academic advisors (Parks et al., 2015) a majority of the student veteran responses indicated they believed the advisors did not understand military experience and the advisors did not have the essential skills to advise them.

The perception of those who work with student veterans is shaped by the information and training they are provided in addition to personal experiences with the military and with veterans. For the institutions providing information and training on student veteran issues, much of the information and training is designed from the perspective of a "deficit mindset" (Blaauw-Hara, 2016, p. 810). The training centers on the difficulties, challenges, and disabilities associated with veterans of military service, especially including the difficulties associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental health issues (Morales et al., 2019) such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and aggression (Taylor et al., 2016). In-depth examination of PTSD and other veteran mental health issues is outside the scope of this discussion. However, it is important to note that when training at a more universal level is weighted on these issues, the stereotypical view of veterans as mentally unstable and prone to various negative behaviors related to PTSD diagnoses is effectively defined and reinforced. These stereotypes persist despite evidence such as that from a study of higher education personnel who worked with student veterans (Taylor et al., 2016) in which administrators and staff observed over a 5-year period the student veteran population did not display noticeable increases in negative behaviors but did display marked increases in positive behaviors such as confidence,

motivation, and persistence.

Another stereotype affecting how school personnel perceive and interact with student veterans is student veteran deference to authority which they presume to result from military experiences of established order defined in the chain of command (Morales et al, 2019). Student veterans have expressed desire to escape deference to authority once they have left the military environment; they do not respond to school-based authority without question because the school environment lacks the military elements that supported the practice (Arminio et al., 2018). In addition, as members of the student population subgroup of nontraditional students (Remenick, 2019), individual student veterans experience marginalization by school advisors and mentors. Remenick found that stereotypical views resulting from deficit mindset information and from a presumed deference to authority contributed to how school personnel related with student veterans individually and as a group.

The stereotypical perceptions held by school administration and faculty can affect relationships with student veterans and they may impede the progress of student veterans both as a group and as individuals (Auguste et al., 2018; Morales et al., 2019; Parks et al., 2015). School personnel may employ gatekeeping practices that restrict access to the student veteran subgroup (Morales et al., 2019); attempts to gain understanding and knowledge of student veterans and their unique issues through research efforts are made difficult based on personnel's perceptions of student veteran vulnerability and need for protection. By this gatekeeping practice, the benefits of what might be learned from interacting directly with student veterans in a research setting are foregone as the student

veteran voice is prevented from being heard. Furthermore, individual student veterans experience a lack of support or even outright opposition to opportunities for progress by gatekeeping actions of school personnel such as advisors or mentors (Auguste et al., 2018; Parks et al., 2015), including being marginalized and directed toward less challenging academic paths. Both types of gatekeeping may weaken, limit, and deprive student veterans of agency through the silencing of the student veteran voice.

Relationships with Non-Veteran Students. Student veterans have described feeling a sense of isolation and being different from classmates due to their military background (Blaauw-Hara, 2017; Iverson et al., 2016; Naphan & Elliott, 2015; Parks et al., 2015). In particular, student veterans have described classmates as lacking discipline, maturity, experience, and appreciation for the opportunity to be in school (Hammond, 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016), as well as lacking in knowledge about the military and military veterans (Parks et al., 2015). In addition, student veterans have reported they feel others hold a stereotypical view of them as military veterans, reducing them to just one aspect of their identity (Auguste et al., 2018).

While the unique status of the student veteran has been cited as a major factor in separating the student veteran from other students, some positive aspects exist. In one study (Blaauw-Hara, 2016), student veterans attributed their willingness to seek connections with others on the college campus to the practice they had building relationships and participating in teamwork during active-duty military service. This type of positive impact in student veteran relationships with non-veteran students, however, was not reported as frequently as the drawbacks identified by student veterans.

Student Veterans and Help Seeking.

The enduring impact of the military environment extends to the help-seeking behaviors of military members after they have transitioned out of active-duty service even in situations where they could benefit from assistance services. Student veteran help-seeking rates and practices are affected by the male-influenced standards and norms of military culture that dissuade such practices (Currier et al., 2016; DiRamio et al., 2015; Iverson et al., 2016). However, there are circumstances in which student veterans respond positively to assistance and interaction initiated by school advisors, and especially when the advisors were knowledgeable about the military and about resources available for student veterans (Auguste et al., 2016; Parks et al., 2015). The findings of a study on student veteran transition from military to college (Iverson et al., 2016) showed female veterans were reluctant to seek help outside their specific unit, if they sought help at all, because help-seeking was seen to conflict with the practice of self-reliance developed in the military. Female veterans viewed asking for help as a weakness and considered it inconsistent with behaviors and practices associated with military success (DiRamio et al., 2015). Female military members faced additional barriers that decreased their willingness to seek help. The women reported having to continually work to be seen as competent in the male-dominated military culture (Iverson et al., 2016). They were deterred from seeking help and they felt undeserving of benefits entitled to veterans, especially when they had not experienced combat (DiRamio et al., 2015). Even when student veterans sought help, they did so at rates lower than the anticipated need for veteran services (Currier et al., 2016).

School personnel can create conditions in which student veterans could be more receptive to seeking help and receiving assistance. In a study to explore nontraditional female student experiences with advising (Auguste et al., 2018), participants reported being more receptive to advisors when they perceived the advisors recognized the unique aspects of their identity as nontraditional students. In another study to examine the experiences of first year students at a community college and their perceptions of advising (Donaldson et al., 2016), researchers concluded an intrusive advising model had beneficial aspects for this nontraditional subgroup of the college population. In a study to research the challenges of student veterans with academic advising (Parks et al., 2015), student veteran participants said their needs would be better met by advisors who were more knowledgeable about veterans' issues or by advisors who were veterans themselves. The findings of these studies suggest there are actions that could be taken by school personnel to encourage and support help-seeking behaviors of student veterans.

Women Learners in College

Women learners comprise over one-half of total enrollments at both undergraduate and graduate levels of U.S. postsecondary education (McFarland & Hussar, 2019). Despite women being the majority gender of learners, I did not find many examples of current research on the learning experiences of women learners in the United States. However, I found studies on issues related to the learning experiences of women in U.S. postsecondary institutions among studies from a variety of countries other than the United States. Among the seven research reports selected for this review, two of the studies were conducted in the United States (Davis et al., 2015; Diamond, 2018) and one

study (Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017) was conducted in both the United States and South Africa. The remaining four studies (Alshebou, 2019; Jiménez-Cortés et al., 2017; Peñaloza & Guarnizo, 2019; Rocks & Lavender, 2018) were conducted in Kuwait, Spain, Colombia, and United Kingdom. The research setting does not bear on the relevance of the findings as they apply to this study's discussion, but the variety of settings reflects a universal aspect of this topic that supports potential connections to this study.

Among the seven studies, there were two main topics pertaining to the learning experiences of women learners: learning within a male-influenced environment and learning in cooperation or collaboration with others. These two topics align with two of the aspects of military experience identified by student veterans as strong influences: the masculine culture of the military and the sense of camaraderie among military service members. I have organized the following discussion around these two main topics.

Women Learners in a Male-Influenced Environment

The environments in which women study can prove to be an important factor in the women's overall learning experiences. In two studies (Alshebou, 2019; Diamond, 2018), the authors discussed the male-dominated settings as being influential in the women's education process. In an investigation of women college seniors approaching graduation, Diamond (2018) sought to determine whether a difference existed between male and female learners with respect to the ideals each gender values in the learning process. The findings were expressed as voices through which the participants spoke to and about themselves and their prospects upon completing courses of university study. Diamond asserted that little had changed in the 35 years since Gilligan (1982/2016)

questioned the accepted belief that success was predicated on autonomous and separate experiences, citing Gilligan's foundational idea that women value understanding relationships and responsibilities through interdependent processes rather than the separate and self-sufficient processes common in a traditional male-influenced environment. Diamond also related the degrees to which the women indicated they participated in learning experiences to the WWK epistemological perspectives as described in Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) work, demonstrating the importance of voice in the seeking of women's perspectives on their own learning. Diamond concluded the women's use of voice supported the development of thinking with set principles that might not be flexible enough to respond to possible challenges beyond the institution and graduation.

In a study on the impact of the male-influenced environment on women's learning, Alshebou (2019) explored adult female participation in higher education in Kuwait. Alshebou used a feminist perspective to frame an investigation into characteristics and motivation of female adult learners, the difficulties in their learning experiences, and how demographics and academic factors affected their perspectives. The author specifically discussed feminism within Islamic culture as an effort to challenge the male-centered tradition while remaining within the greater social structure, toward the goal of attaining equality within the existing structure. The study findings revealed the increased presence of Kuwaiti women in higher education did not have a significant impact on the dominant hold of the masculine norms. These findings paralleled a similar relationship between the growing numbers of women in the military (Kamarck, 2016)

and the enduring male-dominated culture of the military (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). Alshebou further discussed the finding that within the existing male-influenced social structure, the women learners actually were contributing to making decisions and taking actions in contrast to the stereotype of Arab women obeying male authority completely.

Women Learning in Cooperation or Collaboration with Others

The literature review also included studies in which women affirmed they benefited both from individual experience and from acting in cooperation or collaboration with others (Davis et al., 2015; Jiménez-Cortés et al., 2017; Peñaloza & Guarnizo, 2019; Rocks & Lavender, 2018; Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017). In a case study of female adult learners' experiences with using technology (Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017), participants shared they preferred learning that included interaction with others even though they specified that some aspects of the experience were improved when the content was individualized. In a study of women university students' use of strategies to learn information and communications technology (Jiménez-Cortés et al., 2017), participants indicated preferences for both collaborative and independent learning. In addition, the findings showed those learners who employed a wider breadth of strategies achieved more advanced digital competence skills. In Peñaloza & Guarnizo's (2019) research to understand how female modern language students in Colombia used artwork to communicate how they perceived educational aspects within a university context, the participants first reacted individually to the artwork but then utilized collaborative methods to explore different aspects of how the art inspired them in educational ways.

Rocks and Lavender (2018) used transformative theory to understand the

experiences of non-traditional higher education students at a college in Scotland. The study included 12 students and although they did not specify the gender of participants, the selected data described the experiences of four female students. The findings suggested students experienced changes in confidence and independence while participating in higher education learning experiences. The students also reported that relationships with and support from teachers played a significant part in the transformation process. In one final study, Davis et al. (2015) sought to discover the outcomes of doctoral student participation in service learning as part of an education leadership training program. Female graduate students at a U.S. university reflected on how service-learning experiences benefitted their academic and professional growth and emphasized their interest in the field of service learning was enhanced most particularly because the service learning positively contributed to their partner organizations.

The findings of this selected research both support and inform my study, despite no identified inclusion of women student veteran participants. Just as women learners in a male-dominated environment can develop thinking that may not be flexible enough to respond optimally in later learning challenges (Diamond, 2018), so too might women veterans bring set ideas about their own abilities to new learning situations. However, those same women veterans also may have experienced success within the masculine military culture similar to the findings Alshebou (2019) described, where female adult learners were able to develop and exercise agency that was not restricted by the dominant male authority. In addition, the findings describing women learners' preferences for individual learning and collaborative learning (Davis et al., 2015; Jiménez-Cortés et al.,

2017; Peñaloza & Guarnizo, 2019; Rocks & Lavender, 2018; Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017) provide insight into how my study's participants might describe their own learning.

Women's Ways of Knowing

Since the publication of Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) WWK model, it has been utilized infrequently as a conceptual framework for research. In a wide research database search with no publication date constraint but with the specification to include Belenky et al.'s work, I acquired a list of about 60 entries dated between 1988 and 2018. The list included articles and book reviews as well as research reports in disciplines such as education, business, health and medicine, religion, immigration, and social work. Fewer than 20 of the 60 items listed focused on research in which the WWK model was used and only four of those research reports were published within the last few years (Aldegether, 2017; Galotti et al., 2018; McCarthey & Kang, 2017; Pruitt, 2017).

Aldegether (2017) used WWK as framework to investigate the ways of knowing among a monocultural group of female Saudi student teachers and concluded the women employed procedural ways of knowing in their studies. The quantitative study showed even when the women were pursuing different majors, they significantly preferred connected knowing over separate knowing indicating they considered feelings and beliefs when analyzing and evaluating information. The study results also included the consideration that the women's preference for connected knowing could be an effect of the Saudi culture, rather than a preference separate from cultural influences. Aldegether's research relates to this study because it focused on a specific, underrepresented population of female adult learners. Another connection to my study is the monocultural

aspect of the study participants because the military structure and related experiences of the women student veterans similarly constitute a distinct culture. In addition, Aldegether discussed the influence of imposed authority on the Saudi women which can be likened to the imposed authority of the military on its members: both cultures are male dominated with prescribed guidelines for interaction among members. Unlike Aldegether's group of Saudi student teachers who also had monocultural backgrounds, the military is made up of a diverse population of service members in terms of gender, race, socioeconomic status, education level, and military training. Furthermore, Aldegether's study was a quantitative study lacking input from participants that might evidence their own voice. While Aldegether's research confirmed that a group of women learners preferred connected knowing over separate knowing, it cannot be used specifically to understand women student veterans' learning experiences either in the military or in college. However, Aldegether's research can be used as a model for using the WWK framework in a study of women learners, as my study is intended to do.

Pruitt (2017) used WWK as a framework in a study of the constructivist practices of a course's teachers and students when the course was delivered via two different formats, online and face-to-face. Pruitt's study was distinctive from my study of women student veterans because Pruitt's study was designed to examine two sections of the same course while my study was intended to examine learning in two separate learning environments and the study included review of documents and online communications as well as qualitative interviews while my study was intended only to include qualitative interviews. However, there are two ways in which Pruitt's study might inform my study.

When considering the learning experiences of women student veterans, it may be helpful to consider Pruitt's finding that it was the relationship between instructor and student, not the delivery method that influenced the students' constructivist practices. In addition, Pruitt's study demonstrates use of the WWK model in exploring both online and face-to-face learning.

One particular perspective from the WWK model, procedural knowing with its two associated elements of separate knowing and connected knowing, was used in Galotti et al.'s (2018) study which showed how an individual's preferred way of knowing predicted affective reaction to assignments and learning experiences. Galotti et al.'s work confirmed the findings of Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) original research, linking separate knowing to tasks using objective thinking and linking connected knowing to tasks using intuitive reflection and further asserted that a preference for separate knowing or connected knowing may influence how the learner perceives the importance and the impact of the task. Galotti et al.'s study may inform my study through the example of utilizing the WWK model to examine academic and non-academic tasks, as might be encountered in a discussion about learning with women student veterans.

In one current research study utilizing the WWK model in the conceptual framework, McCarthey and Kang (2017) examined how two kindergarten teachers used teaching and professional development experiences to inform their teaching. The study findings showed the teachers' approaches were influenced not only by methods but also by their ways of knowing. The more experienced teacher demonstrated use of constructed knowing as she infused personal aspects into her teaching while the newer teacher

demonstrated received knowing as she relied completely on direction from the curriculum and other teachers. In this study the teachers' ways of knowing intersected with their levels of experience to influence their process of incorporating new materials into their teaching which serves as an example of how the WWK model can be used to interpret how an individual's way of knowing might intersect with another factor.

These studies represent literature on how WWK has been used as a conceptual framework in current research. The findings of the studies indicated there are gender differences between learners who prefer separated knowing ways and connected knowing ways, women learners preferred connected knowing ways of knowing, relationships not delivery methods influenced constructivism in both teachers and students, and with experience a teacher's way of knowing can influence that teacher's approaches. These findings were helpful in the interpretation of qualitative data for my study.

Summary

Chapter 2 presented a description of the study's conceptual framework and a review of selected current literature relevant to the research topic. The literature review included topics related to the influence of the military on student veterans and content related to women learners in college. The chapter concluded with reporting on recent studies that utilized the WWK conceptual framework. In Chapter 3, I describe the research design, the rationale for choosing the research tradition, the role of the researcher, and the methodology I used for the study. I conclude the chapter by addressing how the study complied with ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. In this chapter, I present the research design for the study, and describe the rationale for choosing the design. I describe the role of the researcher, followed by discussion of the research methodology. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical issues as they related to the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question under investigation was: How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences in both military and college settings? I chose the basic qualitative approach as the research tradition for the study. In the qualitative approach, the researcher discovers the distinct experience of the individuals or groups of individuals under study and seeks to ascertain the meaning of the experience under study from the perspective of the individuals themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), especially individuals associated with underrepresented or marginalized groups (Roger et al., 2018).

The quantitative approach is restricted by its interpretation of phenomena and data in numerical terms (see Patton, 2015) and learning experiences cannot be explained in numerical terms; therefore, this study could not be accomplished using a quantitative approach. Because an investigation and exploration of women student veteran learning experiences would not be valid without the perspectives of the individuals having the experiences, nor could such inquiry be effectively accomplished in solely quantifiable terms, this study was most appropriately undertaken through a qualitative approach.

I chose the qualitative research tradition because the nature of the research question required a process that would allow for participant contributions of varying perspectives. Individual women student veterans have individual accounts of their experiences and to discover what those experiences are the women must be provided with a comprehensive opportunity to offer their descriptive perspectives. Even an exhaustive, comprehensive survey could not capture all possible viewpoints and details.

In selecting a qualitative approach for my study, I initially considered using a phenomenological approach rooted in Starks et al.'s (2017) idea that there is a fundamental perceived reality among those who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. However, my refined research question was mainly descriptive, and the intent of my query was pragmatic, which fit better within the basic design. A case study design would have been only partially effective in answering the research question because, assuming I could secure a setting for observation, that setting would only serve to address the college learning aspect of my study; I would not have been able to conduct a case study that encompassed the military learning aspect. Narrative inquiry as a process of working with participants' stories for the meaning they accord to their experiences (Bell, 2002) could have fit with the purpose of the project, but the approach encompasses more breadth and depth than my investigation required to address the research question. A grounded theory approach would not have been fitting because I was working from Belenky et al.'s (1986/1997) established model and I presumed the model would be a useful framework for designing the study and interpreting the findings.

The basic qualitative approach encompassed the elements that allowed

exploration of the research question through collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data in the effort to describe the experiences of women student veterans. The approach also accommodated the selected conceptual framework of Belenky et al. (1986/1997) addressing epistemological development in women which supported the exploration of women's learning experiences from the perspectives of the women. I collected the data through semi-structured interviews with all participants and then analyzed the data for themes that reflected and described both what the participants experienced and the ways in which they made meaning of what they experienced. Thus, the result was an authentic response to the research question that reflected participant perspectives.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this investigation of women student veterans' learning experiences, I had the role of being the primary research instrument. My personal and professional experiences while living and working among military communities and in adult education settings have shaped my worldview and have kept me centered in the field of education in various capacities. The topic for this study and the resultant research question were borne of the interest I developed in exploring the learning experiences of adult learners, specifically women learners and particularly military women learners.

For this research on the learning experiences of women student veterans, the study participants were new acquaintances to me to minimize any influence a personal relationship could have presented. However, working with new acquaintances necessitated gaining the trust of the women I hoped to engage in information-rich conversation about the topic under study. It was necessary for me to approach the

interview process with an informed respect for the participants as adult learners, as women, and as military veterans. Furthermore, it was necessary to assure the participants that they could speak freely. Roger et al. (2018) cautioned that although the researcher is not in any position of power over the participants, the participants may look upon the researcher as having power. In this study it was important for me to be aware of the perception of power with which the participants may have viewed me, a possibility in any study but an even greater possibility in a study with individuals connected to the military because military experience is rife with order, especially as it relates to relationships. As I recruited, selected, and interviewed the women student veteran participants, I was attentive to verbal and nonverbal communication that may have indicated whether this perception was affecting the process.

I planned several strategies to recognize and minimize the effects of researcher bias. These strategies included participant transcript review, utilizing empathic neutrality, documenting the research process, practicing reflexivity, and developing a fitting interview protocol. As with other elements of the research process, during the research process these strategies to manage bias were subject to ongoing reflection and in that way, I continually evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies.

Respondent validation, or member checking, ensures accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I had considered this but decided against that process. However beneficial it might have been to have the study participants involved in reviewing my interpretation of their responses, it was not practical to return to participants during the data analysis phase of the project, especially for the in-depth process that respondent validation

requires. Instead, I used participant transcript review, another internal validity strategy, because it provided an opportunity for the participants to be involved in the process and contributed to the credibility of the study.

Patton (2015) described empathic neutrality as cultivating a position that is understanding of the participant's situation without holding opinion or judgment and then demonstrating and conveying that understanding to the participant. Empathic neutrality is essential to the process of making known the assumptions of the researcher (Roger et al., 2018) to increase awareness of what could hinder maintaining authenticity of the participant voice. In addition, the practice of mindfulness is useful as a philosophy and a way to be aware of and exist in the present moment which is essential to empathic neutrality (Patton, 2015). As the researcher for this study, my background and experience with adult learners and specifically with the military community was helpful to building understanding of participants' situations and my ongoing practice of mindful meditation was helpful to remaining focused on the participants within the context of the study.

Qualitative research requires ongoing review and reflection, especially as related to managing bias. Janesick (2011) recommended keeping a research journal as a tool to evaluate experiences and refine ideas and beliefs. In providing a complete report of the research, the researcher should disclose biases and assumptions so it can be possible to consider factors that may have influenced the process or conclusions of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this study, I utilized a research journal to document aspects of field work and data analysis to examine the process and my conclusions toward ensuring that bias was identified and addressed. The journal writing also

facilitated the reflexivity process necessary to the study.

Both the interview guide and the interview process have potential for bias as each may pose the problem of reactivity, the occurrence of changes in participant response rising from the participant's awareness of being involved in a research project (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Participant reactivity could lead to inauthentic or otherwise contrived responses from the participant if the participant is responding to an element of the project such as the presence of the interviewer or a perception about the importance of a particular gesture or term rather than responding unaffectedly to the interview questions. Following Chenail (2011), I paid heed to the additional caution of ensuring that the design of the protocol was not limited to looking for what I believed I would discover but rather was designed to elicit information that I did not know there was to discover. To that end, I designed the interview following Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) recommendation to use open-ended questions as opposed to leading questions or questions that could be answered with a yes or no response and, while I endeavored to utilize terms common to the military community, I avoided relying on the use of jargon in constructing the interview questions or in other communication with the participants.

Methodology

In this section, I describe how I used qualitative research methods to conduct my study. I describe the participant selection method, instrumentation, and participant recruitment, followed by discussion of the data collection method. In the data analysis plan, I describe how data were collected and analyzed in the process of answering the research question through reporting the findings and drawing conclusions.

Participant Selection

The population under study was women student veterans: women who had served in any branch of the military and subsequently enrolled in and attended college. I established the study criteria to support the purposeful sampling strategy. Using this purposeful sampling facilitated a sufficient sample of information-rich participants.

To meet the veteran criteria, the participant women had to have served in any branch of military service and qualified for veteran educational benefits. I included the criterion of qualifying for educational benefits because an honorable discharge generally is required to qualify for those benefits, and an honorable discharge generally indicates that the term of service, to have included military training and education, was successfully completed. To meet the student criteria, the participant women had to have completed at least three college terms (quarter or semester) and had to have been currently enrolled in college-level courses within the last 12 months. I included the criterion of having completed at least three college terms because that would have provided some opportunity for the student to have sufficient experience in the college learning environment. I included the criterion of being currently enrolled with the intention of including student veterans who were near their military experience and thereby nearer to the occasion of both the environmental and cognitive dissonance that accompanies transition from military to civilian status. Potential participants must have met both veteran and student criteria to be included in the study.

Successful qualitative research requires a sample size sufficient to provide rich data that accurately reflects the perspectives of the participants experiencing the topic of

interest or phenomenon under study. The sample size also should allow for the variation that likely will occur within the range of possible experiences with respect to the topic or phenomenon under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recommendations vary for the number of participants a researcher should include in qualitative research samples to achieve saturation, depending on the purpose of the research (Mason, 2010). Although there is merit to the assertion that a priori sample size determination is not consistent with the tenets of qualitative research (Hennink et al., 2017; Mason, 2010), there is evidence to support the effectiveness of utilizing a sample selection process that is appropriate to the type of research study being conducted.

In a study utilizing purposeful sampling of a homogeneous population such as this study of women student veterans, a sample size of six participants could yield the majority of themes relevant to the topic but additional cases up to a total of 12 would be necessary to increase theme development and attain saturation (Guest et al., 2006). In a study that examined saturation by comparing code saturation and meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017), the authors contended that code saturation was attained within a total of nine cases, but more cases were necessary to reach meaning saturation. For this study, I planned to interview 12 participants to ensure that both code saturation and meaning saturation were attained.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this study was an interview guide (Appendix). In qualitative research, the researcher seeks to uncover and discover the essence of experience from the perspective of those individuals who experience the phenomenon

under study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and so must allow a way for participants to express their own perspectives by describing their own understanding and meaning of their experiences (Patton, 2015). Since the purpose of this study was to explore and increase understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans, it was necessary to utilize instrumentation that allowed the perspectives of women student veterans to become known. It would not be practical to request that the participants record and submit their own accounts of their learning experiences but even if that method were used it would not necessarily result in obtaining information sufficient and specific enough to address the research question. The most effective way to learn how women student veterans perceive their own learning experiences is to ask them questions about their learning experiences and allow them to express their perspectives in their own words. Using an interview guide provides a means to meet this purpose.

I developed the interview guide of semi-structured, open-ended questions with the intention of eliciting responses that would provide data to answer the research question about the learning experiences of women student veterans both in the military and in college. I modeled the interview guide after the guide developed by the Belenky et al. (1986/1997) in their WWK project. The interview guide included questions specific to learning experiences in the military as well as in college.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I planned to recruit participants by contacting individuals within organizations who served veterans and student veterans, inquiring whether they could assist with distributing the invitation to participate in the study via email notice or virtual bulletin

announcement. I actually used the participant pool from only one online university. Participation was open to women student veterans who met the study criteria and who indicated their desire to participate. I requested interested parties contact me by email and I conducted an initial screening for eligibility. Once I determined whether interested parties met the selection criteria, I responded to potential participants in the order they were available to obtain informed consent and to coordinate a time for interview. I arranged for the interviews to be conducted using the online application Zoom.

I collected data from interviews with the participating women student veterans using an audio recording device as the primary means of collecting the data, supplemented by note-taking. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Data collection was limited to information gathered in the interviews and any follow-up communication that occurred directly with the participants.

A final consideration in the process of data collection was the subject of reciprocity. Patton (2015) discussed that when interviewing participants, the researcher should be mindful that participant cooperation and time is valuable, and the researcher should be prepared to acknowledge the participant contribution in a meaningful way. For this project, I offered participants a small stipend in the form of a $25 gift card. I also offered participants each a copy of their own interview in final transcribed form, to affirm their participation and their contribution to the study.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis is the process of changing the data into the findings of the study. Because the participant interviews were conducted through an informal

conversational strategy facilitated by use of an interview guide, I anticipated that a substantial amount of data would be collected in the interviews. Those hours of interview data were reduced to a moderate number of main themes that emerged through the process of transcription, review, and coding.

I transcribed the completed interviews for analysis using an online application. I reviewed the initial transcriptions and used the recordings to edit as necessary to ensure accuracy. I then coded the data by hand rather than utilize qualitative data analysis software because that provided a detailed and thorough connection to the data. I safeguarded a complete version of each interview transcription in electronic format with at least two backup copies.

While working with the interview transcriptions I became increasingly familiar with the data which facilitated coding, creating categories, and developing the major themes. I reviewed the data several times to get a sense of the whole before examining segments or pieces of the data. Following Patton's (2015) recommendation, I used notetaking during that stage which served to further shape and develop the codes from which the categories or themes emerged. As I read the interview transcripts, clustering the codes into categories, and adding additional categories when indicated, I used a system for coding described by Roger et al. (2018) that did not suggest unintentional connections to value or meaning. I continuously examined the categories for their effectiveness in reflecting accuracy of the participant views they were designed to represent. Within the military community there is a sense of camaraderie that includes unique language (DiRamio et al., 2015) so to the extent possible the coding for this study

included the use of *in vivo codes* (Creswell, 2013, p. 185) to apply code labels in the exact words of the participants. The coding process also was designed to ensure consistency. Patton (2015) described two principles used to assess data categories: (a) internal homogeneity that confirms the data within a category fit together; and (b) external heterogeneity that confirms each category is distinct from the others. Using these principles, the categories were expected to be both internally consistent and externally clear and markedly well-defined.

Discrepant cases are those cases in which the viewpoint of a participant differs from the viewpoints of most of the participants. As I sought to best understand the topic of study, I was attentive to noticing when and where participant perspectives differed. I designed the plan to recruit and select the sample for this study project to provide varying perspectives of women student veteran learning experiences. Therefore, for this purpose of the project, I did not expect that discrepant cases would require treatment in any manner unlike any other case in the study sample.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Quality is essential in qualitative research; indeed, it is inherent in the term. The strongest component of quality in qualitative research is trustworthiness because trustworthiness is a determination of the degree to which the study is credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Patton, 2015). The integrity of the study is built upon the procedures and practices that ensure the trustworthiness of the research. Following here are the ways in which I designed this study project to ensure each of the four elements of trustworthiness in the research.

Credibility

The credibility of this study was ensured through procedure design. I designed the procedures to attain saturation in the data collection. Participants reviewed the interview transcripts for accuracy. The ongoing iterative process for data analysis brought forward patterns and themes that accurately represented the perspectives of the women student veterans in the effort to answer the research question. I supplemented these techniques with researcher reflection toward the objective of connecting the findings to the literature within the identified framework for the study.

Transferability

In this study, I focused on a specific population that had experienced learning in specific settings. The extent of transferability to other studies will depend on the descriptive data generated in the work of this study (Schwandt et al., 2007). The goal of my research was to provide rich, meaningful data on the learning experiences of women student veterans. In the research design for this study, I included not only a detailed description of the research process but also a disclosure of researcher assumptions. These detailed data and descriptions of context will allow other researchers to assess the possibility of potential transferability to research in other contexts with similar populations or similar topics of interest.

Dependability

For this study, I followed research process practices that were consistent and dependable as described in the above detailed section on methodology. In addition, I maintained clear and complete documentation of all aspects of the study, as well as

backup and retention procedures for consent forms, interview recordings, transcripts, report drafts, and any correspondence or other documentation related to this project and to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

Confirmability

I maintained a research journal that included documentation of all iterations of data analysis and the steps taken to identify and mitigate or minimize the potential effects of bias.

Ethical Procedures

This research study was guided by the ethical procedures described and defined by the Walden University Institutional Review Board for Ethical Standards in Research (IRB). The IRB furnished specific forms and planning worksheets to guide the researcher in ensuring that the study complied with all aspects of research ethics. Study procedures included steps to ensure that informed consent was obtained and documented, participant identity was protected, participants were informed on all aspects of the project and use of the data and findings, and that confidentiality was always maintained. In addition, the study included a plan to maintain and retain all research materials in a secure manner.

Qualitative research is thoroughly interwoven with aspects of experiences and world views that are personal to both the researcher and the participants and the study methods are intended to elicit data that reflect meaningful responses to the topic of study. In the process, however, there may emerge views, emotions, or incidents previously undisclosed until the process of the study reveals them. For these reasons, I was careful to include consideration of and preparation for ethical issues that may have arisen as related

to either the researcher or the participants.

The ethics of the researcher formed a central aspect of the foundation of the study. Patton (2015) asserted that a credible study is predicated upon the researcher's integrity and the thoroughness of the methods used in the study. For this study, I followed established guidelines of working with human subjects and for having the research proposal undergo review by the IRB. Furthermore, since unexpected issues may have arisen while working with the participants and the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I was aware of and prepared to respond to these unplanned occurrences. It was possible that during the interview, participants could have disclosed information they had not intended to address. One important way of responding to unexpected interview situations is for the researcher to have a depth of understanding about the target population (Patton, 2015). This study's participants all had served in the military. Because describing experiences connected with military service could have evoked sensitive issues concerning aspects of service that were problematic or traumatic, I included in the interview process a means of addressing what to do should a participant feel any distress or discomfort at any time in the interview or afterwards. Suzuki and Kawakami (2016) described a process of anticipating such sensitive issues and providing information and resources on counseling and other veterans' services for those participants who may wish to pursue them. Although I did not anticipate working with women veterans who had significant barriers to their educational process due to their military experiences, following Patton's (2015) suggestion, I prepared a handout of resources to maximize sensitivity and respect for the participants' sharing of experiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the research design and the rationale for choosing the research tradition. I described the role of the researcher with particular attention to the researcher's relationship with participants, managing bias, and related ethical concerns. The section on methodology included description of the processes for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of how the study will ensure compliance with ethical procedures. In Chapter 4, I will present the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. The research question was: How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences in both military and college settings? In this chapter, I will describe the setting for the study and the demographics of the participants, explain the process for data collection and data analysis, discuss the evidence of trustworthiness, and present the findings of the study.

Setting for the Study

I conducted the study through electronic means during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the participants indicated there were any special concerns related to the pandemic that affected their participation in the study. There did not appear to be any other personal or organizational conditions that influenced the participants or their experiences at the time of the study that could influence the data analysis of the study.

Demographics

A total of 17 women responded by email to the invitation to participate in the study. For the first 14 respondents, I confirmed that each one met all criteria for inclusion in the study and then proceeded with the informed consent process. One respondent withdrew prior to completing the consent process due to personal circumstances. After I obtained consent from 13 respondents, I scheduled an interview with each participant. One more respondent withdrew during the interview process due to personal circumstances. There were three additional women who responded after the study was

closed to interviews, all of whom I informed of the study status and thanked for their interest. In addition to consent, the study participants each provided a pseudonym and descriptive demographic information pertinent to the topic of the study. Table 1 displays selected demographic information about individual participants, including whether the participant separated or retired from military service and the type of college degree.

Table 1

Participant Military and College Demographics

Participant	Separated or Retired [a]	College Degree Pursuit
Autumn	Retired	Doctoral
Corvette	Retired	Doctoral
Elton	Separated	Bachelor's
Emma	Separated	Doctoral
Hope	Separated	Doctoral
Kendra	Separated	Doctoral
Lily	Separated	Bachelor's
MilitaryTough	Retired	Doctoral
Patrice	Separated	Doctoral
Renae	Retired	Doctoral
Taylor	Separated	Bachelor's
Tori	Separated	Master's

[a] Separation refers to having left military service after completing any length of service commitment, but not having met specific criteria for retirement.

Of the group of participants, seven participants were Army veterans, three were Navy veterans, and two were Air Force veterans. None of the participants were veterans of the Marine Corps or the Coast Guard, nor were any participants veterans of the Space Force, the newest branch of the military. Seven participants were from the enlisted community, which is the military workforce, and five participants were from the officer community, which is the military workforce management.

Among the group of participants, the length of time in military service ranged

from 4 to 28 years, with an average time in service of approximately 14 years. The length of time since leaving the military ranged from 3 to 27 years, with an average time of 12 years. Eleven of the 12 participants served during the post-9/11 era and one participant had separated from active duty prior to that time. Six participants referenced their military service in the context of wartime or combat experiences and the other six participants did not comment on whether they had served in war zones.

With respect to their college studies, five participants were in the field of business administration, three participants were in human services, two participants were in psychology, one participant was in education leadership, and one participant was in mathematics. Ten of the 12 participants indicated they had been enrolled in college-level studies before or during their military service. The other two participants did not specify whether they had earned any college credits before or during their military service.

Ten participants were located in various places within the United States, and two participants were working in overseas locations. Six of the women indicated they currently were working in jobs connected to the government or military. The other six women did not comment on current employers.

Data Collection

Initially I had proposed to recruit participants through several channels, and I had begun communicating with points of contact to determine the process for obtaining permissions to distribute the study invitation. However, shortly into that inquiry process the COVID-19 pandemic arose which created complications in reaching and following up with points of contact, as well as eventually rendering in-person interviews impossible. It

thus became necessary to devise a recruitment plan better fitting the restrictions of the times; therefore, I modified the plan to focus solely on electronic communication means.

Once I obtained IRB approval (07-29-20-0376791), I began the recruitment process. I conducted the process in a noncoercive manner by posting the invitation to participate in the study in the participant pool of an online university. Potential participants were free to respond or not respond to the invitation. In the snowball recruitment, potential participants who received an invitation passed on to them by study participants likewise were free to respond directly to me or not. Of the 12 participants, nine participants came to the study via the research website and three participants came to the study via the snowball method.

I conducted all interviews using Zoom, a web-based platform that afforded the opportunity to interview participants from varying geographic locations and time zones and accommodated participants' preferred time for interview. Each participant selected her own physical setting that she deemed conducive to conversation free of disruption. I used the video feature of the application during the opening and closing of the meetings, and I used only the audio feature of the application during the interviews. There were no technical complications in either the interviewing or the audio recording process.

Each participant took part in a single interview. During the interviews, the participants spoke freely and offered responses to all interview questions. I asked a final interview question that allowed participants to add information they felt pertinent to the topic of the study, providing an opportunity for them to share something not previously addressed or to emphasize further some aspect of what had been shared already.

I transcribed the interview recordings first by using the web-based application Otter.ai to generate a transcript and then by reviewing and comparing each transcript to the original interview recording to ensure accuracy of the transcript. I emailed a copy of each transcript to the respective participant for her review of the content. Each of the 12 participants confirmed the accuracy of her interview transcript, and five of the 12 suggested minor corrections or clarifications in their transcripts. After making all appropriate edits, I finalized the transcripts.

Data Analysis

I began data analysis during the data collection process. From the initial interview and transcription process through subsequent reading and re-reading of participant responses, I became increasingly familiar with the data and aware of the emerging codes and themes. I maintained focus on the purpose of the study and on the conceptual framework for the study. I first used open coding, noting specific key words and phrases that stood out as important or significant. As I progressed through the interviews, I looked for codes that were similar or related to the codes already noted, and for codes newly evident. When new codes were identified, I re-examined previously reviewed data for evidence of the new codes in an iterative process that brought forth a collection of codes that were both internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous.

Using analytical coding, I reviewed the collection of codes to determine relevancy to the research question and the degree of saturation of each code. As I considered relevancy, I recognized connections among the codes, grouping them into larger categories that represented those connections. These emergent categories became

subthemes from which the main themes emerged. As I considered saturation, I determined the extent to which each code cut across the 12 interviews, identifying codes that occurred in seven or more interviews as having reached a threshold for saturation. Specifically, I considered codes occurring in many (7-9), most (10-11), or all (12) of the interviews to have occurred frequently enough to be meaningful data. All codes grouped into each subtheme reached the threshold of saturation. Ultimately, I identified 13 subthemes that I grouped into four main themes which reflect meaningful commonalities in the participant interview data. Table 2 displays the themes that emerged from the data, the definition of each theme, and the subthemes for each theme.

Table 2

Themes, Definitions of Themes, and Subthemes

Theme	Definition of Theme	Subthemes
Learning path	Influences that facilitated participants being receptive to learning experiences and to participating in learning experiences	• Perseverance as a driving force • Aspects of self-perception • Guiding factors
Learning process	Distinct significant components participants identified in learning experiences	• Methods and strategies to support learning • Confirmation of understanding • Connection and collaboration
Learning challenges in the male-dominated military	Specific issues and difficulties within the male-dominated military environment and culture that impacted the participants' learning process	• Adaptation and adjustment • Limitations due to gender • Only one or one of few • Adversity and hostility
Learning purpose	Objectives and goals that represented the participants' purposes for learning	• Practical application of learning • Recognition of success in self • Making a difference

Study findings are supported by direct quotations from the participants. I have elected to include the words of the participants as they shared them, without judgment. Specifically, while I have added bracketed words that serve to clarify the subject of the quotation, I intentionally have not inserted my judgment about the correctness of the participants' language usage by utilizing "[*sic*]." Given that the aim of the study was to capture the voices of women student veterans as they described their own learning, it would be contrary to that aim to correct their expression of their perspectives of experience.

In reporting the study findings, I realized a need to exercise specific additional care in protecting participant identity and in maintaining confidentiality because military women are a relatively small group within a relatively small military community. Therefore, in addition to pseudonyms and reporting demographics in a group format, I masked any reference that could identify a participant's military rank, military job, location, or specific field of study. Where the specific word or words within a quote could not easily be masked or where masking would alter the significance of the quote, I have instead eliminated the participant's name from the quote. For the subtheme of adversity and hostility within the section on challenges of the male-dominated military, all participant names were eliminated due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

With several options for analyzing the data, I chose to categorize the data in a manner that would highlight the common aspects of the women student veterans' learning experiences both in the military and in college. Thus, the analysis is not a direct comparison of their responses with respect to the two settings, nor is the analysis

necessarily evenly balanced between the two settings. Rather, the analysis addresses the significant elements of the participants' descriptions of their learning experiences and identifies the setting as it pertains to the findings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in ensuring the quality of the study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability reinforce the study's integrity. The evidence of trustworthiness of this study resulted from my adherence to the study methods and procedures I described in Chapter 3 and subsequently implemented during data collection and data analysis.

To ensure credibility of the study, I used purposeful sampling to cull a sample size sufficient to attain data. The recorded interviews and verbatim transcripts provided an accurate record of participant responses. Each of the 12 participants received a transcript for review. A few participants suggested or requested minor edits, most of which I made and none of which altered meaning in the any of the responses. Each of the 12 participants indicated agreement that the transcript accurately represented her responses. This transcript review, along with the iterative data analysis process, allowed themes to emerge that were representative of the participants' perspectives.

To provide a basis for transferability of the study, I established specific criteria for participation in the study, developed and employed a specific interview protocol, and documented the data collection and analysis procedures, as well as my assumptions as the researcher. The data and descriptions of participants' experience in the findings provide a basis for other researchers to consider the viability of transferability to other contexts

with similar populations or similar research focus.

The dependability of the study rests in the consistent process practices I employed in conducting the study. I described the demographics of the participant group and the methodology approach. I documented the coding process and the identification of the emergent subthemes and themes. I maintained a record of all aspects of the research process.

The confirmability of the study is reflected in the description of data analysis and how the data was interpreted, along with how researcher bias was recognized and how the potential effects of bias were minimized. The inclusion of participant quotes also serves to substantiate that participant data is the source of the study findings. My identity as the researcher was disclosed on the consent form, none of the participants were known to me before the study, and my assumptions were disclosed. Utilizing a reflective process provided the opportunity to continually review for bias that could influence interpretation of the data.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. The research question was: How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences in both military and college settings? The participants shared detailed descriptions of their learning experiences and the descriptions were both personalized and communal in nature. Through coding and categorizing meaningful interview data I identified four themes which, taken together, provide a comprehensive

response to the research question. The four themes are: learning path, learning process, learning challenges in the male-dominated military, and learning purpose. The report of findings is organized by these four themes that emerged from the interview data.

Learning Path

Participants described what they relied on to guide them along their learning paths. They described elements that allowed them to be receptive to learning experiences and receptive to participating in the learning experiences. I grouped responses into three subthemes: perseverance as a driving force, aspects of self-perception, and guiding factors.

Perseverance as a Driving Force

As they described their learning experiences, all 12 participants included some expression of attitudes and actions that reflected determination and resolve. Participants described how their progress to attain their education goals was sustained by an attitude of perseverance. Autumn shared, “I just always knew that … I wanted to continue my education once I started, once I got my first degree.” She described the “driving force” that kept her on her learning path, beginning with attaining her bachelor’s and master’s degrees and continuing through to her current doctoral level studies. Similarly, Patrice stated, “Once I left the military, I wanted to obtain, finish my degree because it's something that I started. I don't like starting something and not finishing it.” Nearly all participants had completed some college-level education before or during their military service and the desire to complete the education objective that had been begun was a commonality among their stories. Perseverance allowed the participants the opportunity

to experience both formal and informal learning along their learning paths.

Perseverance surfaced when the women faced challenges to their study plans in the form of work demands, such as scheduling issues or increased workload. They recounted how they carried on in whatever way they could toward their goals. Corvette commented, “You know, it's, it's a matter of producing, you have got to accomplish this. You got to get through this class.” Hope’s account of not giving up on her college study path is a variation of several participants’ efforts to continue their studies despite the obstacles:

> So, the path I took, I wanted to work days and go to school in the evenings. That's what I was told you could do, but because of the job that I chose, it didn't allow that because I had to work shift work. And … I was on call 24/7 so I had to work days, some nights, and it interfered with school. So I didn't give up there still, I did take some classes. I could only take like maybe one class at a time, so I hammered away at one class at a time.

Kendra also met with unexpected obstacles to her plans. She had begun working toward an associate degree, but her studies had been interrupted. Then, while serving in the military reserves, she attempted to continue her studies by enrolling in another college, but she was called to active-duty service and was unable to attend that college. Kendra eventually found a way to carry on her education goals by enrolling in an online program which led her to a bachelor’s degree in psychology.

Participants also shared a belief that the quality of perseverance was not exclusive to them, but rather was a quality shared with other women veterans. Several women in

the participant group, including Autumn, Hope, Lily, Patrice, and Taylor, gave examples that evidenced this belief and showed their perception of connection to their fellow women veterans. Patrice summed it up as follows:

> So I, myself included, and all the women veterans that I know—the ones that are serving and the ones who have served—I have noticed that we have a similar characteristic, which is being determined and never giving up. And typically, when we start things, we finish them. And I would say the same of women that I know that are female students as well who were, who were military members. Once they start this process, whatever process they deem to start, whatever college level, it's something that they're going to see all the way through. They are determined to finish what they set out.

Aspects of Self-Perception

In their descriptions of their learning experiences, all 12 participants included comments that indicated how they saw themselves as learners. These references of self-perception showed both an awareness of various individual qualities that helped to motivate and guide them in their learning paths and an awareness of the importance of knowing themselves as learners. They also included reflection on how their status as women student veterans affected their learning paths.

Participants used a varied of qualities to describe themselves as learners, including intelligent, disciplined, competitive, and daring. Several participants considered themselves to be "lifelong learners." Corvette described how she seemed to move from one school experience to the next and added, "I like learning. I like being a student. …

I'm always trying to learn something new." Similarly, Kendra considered herself to be on an open-ended learning path. Kendra stated, "I won't know everything, and I don't think I'll ever stop learning, and I don't want to ever stop learning. … I want to keep this experience going on to learn new things."

Participants emphasized knowing themselves as learners and how understanding where they were as learners both affected their learning experiences and was affected by their learning experiences. The topic of youth and being young was particularly prevalent in these perceptions. Ten participants disclosed the effects of being young as they began their military learning experiences, such as MilitaryTough who recognized, "I didn't know. I was clueless to the [military] and what it represented. … I didn't know anything; I just knew how to spell [military]. What it all entailed, no, I did not know." At times, a lack of knowledge had considerable consequences. Lily recalled how she had not anticipated the extent to which her military training would require physical exertion:

> I was very naïve when I joined the military. I remember asking the recruiter, "Hey, will I go to war?" He said no [laugh] and I believed him. … I don't know what I was thinking. I was so naive, I thought, "Okay, yeah, we're gonna do a lot of physical labor and stuff, but … it's gonna be more like an academic setting." And so I guess I disregarded how physical it could be.

Other participants considered the effects of youth when they shared recollections of the level of responsibility they were charged with in the military training and the work that followed, and the weight they felt as a result. One participant described successfully completing the rigorous training to become airborne qualified at a young age. In addition

to the complex learning process, the participant considered the consequence of the end result as she said, “That was a lot, I believe, for someone who was 19 years old. You're going to be jumping out of this moving plane.” Another participant commented on becoming a platoon leader in an overseas location and being responsible for managing operations:

> It was a lot … that you had to learn and to check, as a young person. We were getting ready to go into [military conflict]. So that was a big project because I was a new officer and with what I thought was a lot of responsibility for a young person just coming out of college.

Another aspect of self-perception was the participants’ views of what it meant to be a woman student veteran. Elton introduced the idea that women student veterans have a unique perspective because “they have led both lives; they have led the civilian life, and then, the military life, and now, the civilian life.” Kendra added, “Well … veteran is one thing and being a woman is another and student [laugh]. … That’s like three hats.” Emma suggested that the role came with responsibility. Emma said, “There are times when you should stand up and be an example for others. … We have so much to contribute.” Hope provided the following response:

> Woman student veteran, that means you are covering all fields. That means you are gaining your leadership, you're gaining your training on three fronts. … And that is a big, big opportunity to be able to branch out and understand so much more. You're getting the wisdom along with the education. … When you are a woman student veteran, you are a hero. … I mean, you are going to impact history

in some way, shape or form. You're gonna make a difference in your community.

Guiding Factors

Participants described the ways in which their learning paths were determined and guided. They explained how their learning paths were guided both by institutional requirements and by mentors and instructors with whom the participants worked. They also explained how their college learning paths were guided further by personal interest, including interests influenced by their military experience.

Participants consistently described their military paths as being mostly, if not completely, directed by the rules and guidelines of the military institution. There were some differences between enlisted service members and officers in the details for how job selection and training were done, but overall, the process involved assessment of skills, assignment of jobs, and applicable training. Participants described the process as a sequence. Kendra shared, “They had that ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] test that they give you…it tests you on certain skills and stuff like that.” Once the test scores were available, Elton explained, “Now there was a selection criteria. So it was not like you had that choice, it’s you choosing from the selected criteria.” After being assigned to a job, training would follow. One enlisted participant stated, “In the military … you have certain courses you're required to take based on the rank that you have or based on the … [military] job that you have.” Another participant confirmed the process was similar for officers as she stated, “You don't really have a say so, as far as the officers are concerned, because in order to obtain rank you're really given slots and they coincide with your rank.” Corvette offered a summary:

> In the military … you attend courses, you attend training, that's specific to what your job is, so your military training is pretty laid out, it's very structured. … It's not that I selected the path. The path was selected for me depending on what job I held, depending on what tour I was stationed at.

Several participants explained that, at times, there was opportunity to have input in selecting a job from a list of open positions. However, Tori clarified, "After I make that selection, how I go about learning what I need to know to do that job is pre-determined and non-negotiable." Renee described her experience of the military's guidance of the learning path and how it coincided with her progression on the civilian college learning path:

> When I initially enlisted, there was a requirement, in order for me to become proficient in my career field, for me to also take military courses, so I took all of the mandatory courses in the military. But there was also a requirement if I had a desire to promote into leadership roles or to manager roles, there are also military specific courses that I needed to take. I have always been the type of person that liked to set goals for myself … so I looked at where I want it to be by the time I retired from the military, and I made it a point to enroll in all of the courses that I needed to progress to that level. So while I was continuing to increase my education on the civilian side … I was also doing the same thing in the military.

Once on the learning path associated with their specific military job, five participants told of the search for an individual to mentor them. For some participants, there were specific individuals with whom they could interact and from whom they could

learn. For example, Emma was assigned a sponsor who worked at the same location who helped her learn the job. Emma shared, “It was really helpful to … be walked through the kinds of trainings, so you're not thrown to the wolves for your first … set of duties. … You're gonna be eased into what will be expected of you.” In Autumn’s experience, it was a challenge to find a mentor with whom she could identify. Autumn commented:

> My mentors … most of the time, didn't look like me, unfortunately. They weren't necessarily [racial identity], and they weren't necessarily always a woman. … As I moved up in my career, I was able to find more individuals that looked like me. … My first female mentor probably would have been when I became a captain. … I would go to her … just starting to ask her questions and things. … So it ended up her being the one to help me or to set up a roadmap to get me to major. She said, here's the things that you need to be focused on. This is what you need to be looking at.

Another significant guide to learning paths described by 11 participants was that of their own interests when considering their potential fields of study in college, which included interests influenced by military experience. Taylor spoke of choosing to study a topic in which she had long been interested. Taylor said, “I had this interest or passion about [study field] since I was even small, so I decided why not align to this because it's my passion … why not do it now when I have time?” Emma said she chose her field of study based on her desire to have an understanding at “the most expert level … how these functions work, to the point where I could speak eloquently about it, and that was really a motivating factor.” Other participants were motivated by reasons of experience. One

participant shared how she decided to study psychology as she said, “I have had some very interesting experience interactions with people who, at first I didn't understand the behavior … why they were being the way they were, the way they thought. … So I was very curious about it.” Similarly, another participant described how her choice of study was influenced by what was happening with her at her workplace as she explained:

> I had been feeling a lot of angst and discontent with my experiences with leaders in civilian life. … I had always thought that my calling was to help people be happier at work. … I had always wanted to study psychology, but now I was in a position to make it more applicable to the workplace environment. … I got really excited about that and jumped at an opportunity to embark upon this type of program.

When discussing their paths for college studies, participants included how their paths were affected by having been in the military. MilitaryTough said, “I used that [military] experience to push me along in my other courses, like okay, it can be done. … [in] something completely new.” One participant recognized, in hindsight, how her choice to study disaster and crisis intervention was influenced by her military experience:

> Once I get out and see the world, it seems like everything is a crisis. So I know I chose the right degree field … the military is, they’re kinda called to crisis. So I was already in it, but I didn't realize it [laugh]. … I think maybe that's why.

Learning Process

The second theme brings together participant descriptions of how their learning occurred in specific situations in both military and college settings. Participants provided

detailed description of those learning experiences. I grouped the responses into three subthemes: methods and strategies to support learning, confirmation of understanding, and connection and collaboration.

Methods and Strategies to Support Learning

The first subtheme in the learning process theme addresses methods and strategies participants described as being helpful to them in learning pertinent information, techniques, and procedures both in the military and in college. Methods included participating in on-the-job training (OJT), learning by levels, asking questions, and utilizing repetition. Strategies included learning in a classroom setting then applying the learning in some manner, making use of military and academic institutional resources, making use of independent resources, and practicing balance and time management.

Methods to Support Learning. All 12 participants cited OJT as the primary method of learning in the military setting. Formal training specific to military jobs was available to many of the participants, but there were frequent accounts of not being provided the job-related schooling prior to or during their time at the job. Thus, OJT was the relied-upon method for learning a job. Elton said, upon arrival at a job, “Basically, I just sought advice from the people I found there. … Those who were already trained formed a good foundation.” Taylor added, “I made contact with the people [I was] training with, so they gave me a lot of information.” Autumn also relied on those who were there when she started a job. Autumn stated, “I had to depend on [others] that had experience … once I got to my first duty station.” Participants stated specifically that OJT was not book learning. Kendra shared, “It wasn't like … she gave me the book and I

read it. No, it was more practical. … Not their curriculum … no, I just went out and did whatever she said." Another participant explained:

> When you're on watch and you're experiencing different situations is where you learn the most. It's definitely not out of a book. … You will have guidance from … other officers on the deck, but you are in it. You're not observing.

Four participants also shared that, at times, OJT was not effective because of the reliance on other people's willingness to share the knowledge. Corvette described an experience where she reported to a new job and the person working there had not been informed about Corvette's arrival and was not willing to provide OJT. Corvette said, "I just felt as though I could have learned more from her, but she wasn't willing to oblige me of that." Hope described the challenges of relying on someone else's level of expertise to build her own knowledge. Hope shared:

> Well, you usually … go to your job and they teach you on the job. And that, to me, was a little sorry, when you got a … person that really didn't know the job, but this is way they learned it. "I'm gonna teach you how I learned it, not by the book." So those kinds of things … slowed my learning down. … I didn't really learn from them [co-workers] because they didn't have enough training experience. They were new themselves or they just learned their particular part of an MO [modus operandi] without understanding the purpose behind what they did. So it was a lot of parroting.

Learning by levels was a learning method that 11 participants described utilizing in military settings and, to a lesser degree, in college settings. Learning by levels included

breaking down lessons or problems into smaller pieces as part of the learning process. Participants described the military as structured to teach or train only on the piece of the progression needed for that time. Corvette explained, “The structure, the organization of the training… we're teaching you what you need to know, for your job [laugh]. And then we'll teach you this is what you need.” Autumn elaborated:

> They taught you what you needed for that time, and as you grow, they added the different levels, which now I understand from the civilian standpoint. It's like your career progression. … So like at each level, whether I was a [rank] or a [rank] or [rank], each one had its own leadership development plans and goals and you just learn what you need for that level. And then, once you've mastered it, you go to the next level.

Elton described the benefits of working step-by-step through the learning process in her college studies. Elton said:

> When you go step-by-step it’s more detailed … more efficient and effective in the long run. … I think it's useful because it’s better to understand and if you want to, if you have questions, you can address them there. … It may intrigue you to do more research on such topics to get a further understanding.

As a part of learning by levels, some participants referred to using what they had learned in previous levels or courses to prepare for the next lesson or class. Renae shared:

> In order to ensure that … I was prepared for the course, I would always go back and study the materials that I had from the previous course. I like to archive my training materials or manuals just to prepare me for the next upcoming course. …

> I would just kind of study that, make sure I was prepared to move forward in the next training course so that I could be successful.

Seven participants described another method, that of asking questions, as useful in learning both in military and college settings. MilitaryTough, Lily, and Renae all mentioned the role that questions of instructors played in progressing through various learning experiences. At times, asking questions was important not only to clarify information, but also to clarify understanding when to not be clear could have serious ramifications due to the setting of the application of the learning. One participant explained:

> When you are being prepared for war, you see, there are things that you are told to just know … before going to war, that were very important to consider, so, like how one should be armed, how one should approach the enemy, and what to wear, things like those. They were very new to me and so they captured my attention. So, if you had questions related to that, you were answered well. A good student … must be willing to ask questions where you don't understand. … Asking questions never really determined whether you'll be deployed or not, but it's a good thing, all to help you to understand even more.

Emma revealed that continuing to ask questions could cause one to stand out in an undesirable way. Emma said:

> I'm not one to keep asking the questions … I'll ask one or two, but if I still don't get it, I will ask the expert afterwards. I'm not going to make myself look completely ridiculous because what if everyone else does get it?

Even when it was uncomfortable or difficult, participants indicated that asking questions was integral to the learning process. Tori commented, “You just rely on your instructor to answer your questions and you allow yourself to have the courage to ask them.”

One final learning method that was considered important by several participants was the use of repetition. MilitaryTough stated, “Repetition is a good influencer. It definitely will solidify information.” Eight participants described making use of repetition in their learning in both military and college settings. Participants suggested that military drills and other repetitive exercises facilitated learning, especially activities that were physical and, at times, somewhat disagreeable to the learner. Lily shared:

> It was sometimes more of the physical aspects. … Let’s see, I remember when we had to learn how to do things like [military exercise]. And, well, I hated doing things like this. … For me, how I learned to do it without even thinking about it was the fact that … we did it so much and it was so repetitive that it kind of stuck with you even though you didn't like doing some of these things. It became such a part of you that you had to just get it done. … And then by week 8, I was doing it so methodically, with little to no help from anyone.

Tori described a similar experience in her college coursework in which she utilized repetition in learning a particular style of writing and formatting written work. Tori said, “Practice … repetition. … you get thrown into that fire all the time, so you have to practice it and get good at it.”

Strategies to Support Learning. In addition to the methods they utilized in their learning experiences, the participants referred to a number of strategies they employed in

their learning experiences. One common strategy that 10 participants discussed was the sequence of learning in a classroom setting followed by applying the learning in some practical manner. This strategy was cited as the common format for military training experiences, but it was not discussed in relation to college-level studies. One participant shared:

> Well, one thing about the military, from airborne training to my officer basic course, the officer advanced course, the Command and Staff course, they pretty much follow the same format. You will have a certain amount of classroom instruction, as well as hands-on training. … And then, of course, you will have your certain amount of tests. … But … regardless of the course, you will have your fair share of hands-on and classroom instruction.

Participants agreed that the classroom aspect of military learning was critical to the learning process. One participant addressed the issue when she explained:

> The classroom was very important, because it created a recipe for you. … It shows you all the components that are going to go in the cake and tells you what you're supposed to put in the bowl first. So when I actually sat in the classroom, it taught us about the basic components of the parachute, the components of our reserve chute in case there was a malfunction, how you put those components together. So that was a very important piece because they didn't want to just have us … just put stuff together and run out there and jump. They wanted to better prepare us to jump and then, in case of an emergency, this is what you do. And these are the components that you need to pull. This is what this component does.

> So that classroom was very important to really kind of give you the basic necessities of the parachute, and what its functions are.

Another strategy that participants described in their learning experiences was making use of military and academic institutional resources, as 10 participants disclosed what they relied on to support and facilitate their learning experiences. The most frequently mentioned military resource was standard operating procedures, known as the SOP, which provide specific guidelines for military operations and practices. As Corvette commented, “At every organization you should have standard operating procedures and guidelines and regulations. … If you want to know something, it’s written down. Now, it’s a matter of where to go to find it, but it's written down.” Patrice added, “You rely on the SOP. … They have a standard operating procedure for everything, so making sure that you read and understand those standard operating procedures was key.” Participants also described using military resources such as service organizations and military base websites, but these were talked about much less frequently.

Ten participants described a wider variety of resources within the college setting. The resources participants made us of included course syllabus, course reading list, instructor, enrollment counselor, peers, school website, academic support, student support, and skill building workshops. Taylor listed, “The details on the school curriculum, of course the financial aid, the details on support services where you can get help from tutors, the counselors, yeah.” Hope recalled:

> I learned to rely heavily on lab work, going to the lab and studying and … getting tutors to help you. I would watch a video or go through a little mini course … and

> spend just as much time in the lab as I did in the classroom.

Again, Corvette commented on her use of resources available to her:

> So I jump in, I try to find some other materials or resources that can break it down. … So it's trying to get as much information as I can get on the topic. You grab that syllabus from that instructor, and you read it. You look at the reading list and try to figure out is anything on there that can help you as you try to learn and understand this information.

Kendra shared about an online course, "The instructor was the number one resource, and then the books, and the discussion board with the other students and being able to interact with everyone else on it, which is very helpful."

Nine participants also shared that they made use of resources independent of the institutions of military or college. They described being self-sufficient as they sought out information beyond what they specifically had been provided. Hope described what led her to seek out resources and information on her own both in the military and in college. Hope said, "You really find out there's a lot of things you don't know and when you do, you always ask the question, 'But where do I need to go to find out more about it?'" Participants found that college study programs required more independent seeking out of resources than had the military. Autumn recognized:

> I think the biggest thing has been that it's made me not depend on the professors or someone to give me everything. I like somebody to give me the syllabus. Tell me what you want, when you want it, how you want it, and then, I'm good. But … you're not going to get it that laid out for you. We're going to give you what the

> requirements are, when it's required, and you go figure out how to get it done. And so that that has been the biggest learning part for me … figuring it out on your own and getting the resources to support that.

Elton described independently seeking out resources specific to finding information and support for women veterans. Elton shared:

> There are a lot of things that are posted online. … I started learning more on veterans on websites. … Topics like those ones really attracted my attention. … You see there is a platform there whereby you interact with other veterans who had ventured into other things, so you'll get information from them. And … there are different magazines that cover about military and veterans, things like those. And also information from colleges and universities and how veterans are assisted to get more education. So that's how I learned.

One additional strategy that participants indicated was important to them was practicing balance and time management. Seven participants discussed the numerous demands on their time and the struggle for balance in allocating time and attention to those various responsibilities and activities in a way that afforded them adequate time for their studies. Corvette expressed the challenge as "trying to find that balance that's never balanced." Corvette added:

> As a female veteran, I'm also a wife and a mom and I have certain obligations. So it [school] can—hamper might be too strong of a word—it can hamper that path. … It's not the learning part, it's the trying to balance between this is the path I'm on, this is the path I need to follow … sometimes there's a conflict.

Participants described seeking balance during both military and post-military times. As Kendra recalled her situation trying to go to school while she was still in military service, she said, “That didn't work out [laugh] because I was working full time, trying to go to school full time and it just, it didn't work out at all. So … I took a break outta school.” Participants described the challenges of having multiple priorities that competed for their time, and they credited their time management skills as a way to create some balance. One participant explained the challenges she faced working as a defense contractor in an overseas military environment while she was pursuing her college studies at the same time:

> I’ve learned how to manage my time. … I actually work … 12 hours a day, for 6 days a week. And so you really have to learn to manage your time well to fit in, getting your assignments done, and budgeting any other thing that might go on over here, such as power outage, internet network outage, spending time in a bunker because we have like, incoming [e.g. artillery fire]. So, I think time management is on the top of my list.

Confirmation of Understanding

This subtheme addresses the aspects of learning experiences through which participants confirmed their understanding. Receiving feedback, including attaining designations that demonstrated what had been accomplished and realizing the impact of particular learning experiences provided participants with confirmation that they had gained some level of understanding from their learning. Experiences of confirmation of understanding occurred in both military and college settings.

Nine participants described feedback as an immediate and clear means of knowing whether they had met the objective of the relevant learning. Kendra stated, “The military … they can teach you skills, but they're like, either you get it or you don't. A ‘go or no go,’ you know, it's like no in-between.” Elton said, “If he's [supervisor] complaining, then you're not doing a good job. You're not a good learner in the first place. But now, if you are doing a good job, you will be commended in most cases.” Renae described how feedback fit into ongoing training in the military. Renae explained:

> Once the exercise was over, you had an opportunity for the [commander] to come out and tell you, ‘Okay, these are the things that you did good on. These are the opportunities for improvement.’… I think once you had an opportunity to implement it and practice what was presented, and you either received a passing mark or needs improvement, that was … the confirmation to know if you were successful or not.

Lily described getting feedback in her college course that prompted her to delve more deeply into the work when she got a message from her professor that she did not do well on her assignment. Lily concluded:

> I'm not doing so well … okay, it's just best that I do not try to skip this or avoid this. I should … look at all the resources that are provided for me because it might be helpful down the road.

Autumn reflected on how the feedback process differed between military and college learning. Autumn noted:

> The comments from the professors and how to make a product better, that's been

> really good for me. I wasn't used to that. It … used to be a right or wrong. … I like the fact that they are kind of talking you through it … more.

Eight participants also agreed that there were indicators that could convey to others that a level of learning had been attained. These indicators included scores and grades on tests and in courses, certificates of merit or completion, military rank and rating designations, military ribbons and medals, diplomas, and titles. The indicators facilitated possibilities for the participants, such as being accorded value due to the accomplishments and having their contributions heard in professional settings. One participant described "that particular maroon beret … with your airborne wings on your chest" that communicated the successful completion of paratrooper training and told others she was part of the group within the Army with a reputation for excellence in manner and practice. Another airborne-qualified Army veteran talked about how both the airborne designation and her diploma were significant indicators confirming that she had attained specific levels of understanding and shared of her airborne qualification:

> You earned a lot of respect, especially from the men that did not go airborne. When they see that a woman … had airborne wings … she must be, wow, she must be tough. And then you earn a great deal of respect without even saying a word … because anybody that knew anything about airborne training knew … that patch was not given to you. If you wore that patch … you earned it.

She went on to share about her college diploma:

> The mere fact that they [university] mailed me my diploma meant that I met all the qualifications … to obtain this degree, and all the other points, marks,

> milestones along the way were completed to a satisfactory point as well. … The mere fact that I have in my possession this degree is an indication that I fulfilled all the [university] requirements.

Participants spoke specifically of the value of having the designation that came with being granted their degrees. Emma commented, “If I don't have the title, how do I show that I've got some credibility and the expertise behind it? So this [title], I felt, would certainly give me that expertise, that someone would certainly listen to me.” Participants also concurred that military experience in general was an indicator to others of their success in professional learning. Autumn recognized that military service:

> … made your career easier. I think that it helped people to move up in their careers and I think it's also something that civilian people look for when they're hiring. And I think that's one of the reasons why military is so successful when it comes to looking for jobs, because of their military training, and education. … I think I get a little bit more respect as a female veteran because of my experience, than I would just as a civilian. … I just think that people respect the military individuals and what they bring to the table. … They think, you know, that we come with this wealth of experience.

One other aspect of confirming their understanding that participants described was their realization of the impact of their understanding such that they had a perception of what it meant to have learned what they had learned. Kendra shared:

> You have to have an interest in doing it and knowing how your job connects to the whole organization, that they [military jobs] all connect to each other. So you

> have your part, the other units have their part, and then it all connects. And so that's pretty much the overall learning of being in the military, because if you ever get deployed overseas, you will know that this unit connects to that unit … and everybody has a specific job.

Emma also recognized the greater application of what she was learning "about my broader role, not just in my career field but how that career field impacts other career fields in the military."

Some participants described realizing the impact of their gaining understanding as when others looked to them as one who could lead. Autumn recalled coming to this realization:

> At first, I didn't understand it. When I came in the military, when you start with basic training, it's almost like they break you down to a very beginning. And it feels like you're being belittled but … to me, it was just to get me to a place where I'm ready to listen and understand and place a level of respect on the person that is in charge. And at first I didn't get that but as I got older, and as I became a leader … I understood it more.

Connection and Collaboration

Participants described the ways in which they experienced and sought connection and collaboration with others. Participants shared examples of camaraderie and working as a team, collaborating with peers and fellow learners, and associating with other military women. These experiences of connection and collaboration occurred in both military and college settings.

In discussing military learning experiences, participants emphasized the camaraderie of the military and how they learned to work with others, particularly as a team. One participant described how the team concept was part of the learning process as a Navy officer involved in a drill at sea:

> There's [work] stations that are on watch with you at the same time. It will be your team. … There'll be other officers on deck with you who could give you certain information … "How far to this?" "What are my wind conditions on the seas?" … "Am I about to hit something if I go full speed in this direction?" You have someone that can help you with that. So you have a team that's with you.

Elton described how she came to understand the value of the team concept as part of her learning process:

> I understand that you cannot just work independently, you have to involve others for you to succeed. Even in the normal life, you can't live like an island, you understand, so you'll need someone else. So maybe there was a problem that you're having or getting some advice—just advice, then you make the decision. So yeah, teamwork is very important. … I'm not saying independence is bad, but also you should embrace collaboration and also learn to be independent as a person but work collaboratively with others.

Taylor similarly explained how working with others in the military benefitted her individually in her learning process. Taylor said:

> Our collaborative way of working with … other people in my team … was good. … We would do mainly most of the activities in a collaborative way. … You need

these other people. You need to be an encouraging factor too.

Participants included perceptions of how the military camaraderie and teamwork experience transferred to civilian life and college learning experiences. Lily reflected:

> There is a lot of things that you'll learn innately that they don't actually teach you, it's just things that come along the way. … I think one of the biggest things I've learned in the military and it carries over now into being a veteran is just establishing good connection with people. And always looking out for your … friends … trying to be there for others. … I feel like the military did that for me.

Renae explained how her experience with camaraderie and teamwork transferred from the military to civilian learning experiences. Renee said:

> The camaraderie … when you're training with other [military members], you have an opportunity to form a bond. … You become a team. … When you're in a situation where there's no conflict, meaning you're not on a deployment, that's an opportunity for you to kind of grow together, to kind of learn from each other. … And then if you're on a deployment … there's no issues, I don't think, with you covering your teammates because that camaraderie is there. … And if you translate that into the civilian side, it's important, I think, in any job to build a team, especially if you are in a management role … because when there are challenges that you may face in the workplace, if you don't have that bond … then I don't think you're going to be successful. So I think the fact that the military really push teamwork and camaraderie, that translates well into the civilian side.

Ten participants also described how collaboration became useful in their learning

process as they pursued their college studies and worked in cooperation with their college peers. Autumn felt that the opportunity to collaborate with her college peers was beneficial to her. Autumn stated, “Hearing others and seeing others, the work of others—that has really been good for me.” Patrice echoed this view as she offered, “I rely on my fellow doctoral students … who really have helped me in this process.”

Participants described how they came to work in cooperation with their classmates. Elton shared how she learned with others, “There’s this online platform … there are various discussions that are held based on the topics that you have learnt in class. …You find someone asks a question, and you all continue.” MilitaryTough also found peers to work with in the online format. MilitaryTough shared:

> Because of the [online] format of the course … you're reading and all you have to depend on is how people were responding, how they were participating in class, in the student board … offering some substance in their responses. … No matter how much you know … someone always knows more. And so I'm like, “Okay, I don't know at all. No problem.” … And so then I would take that individual or individuals and would be in their hip pockets, as we say in the military.

Working in relationship with other people was woven through participant descriptions of learning experiences. Hope described her experience which summarized the experience of several participants. Hope said:

> We had cohorts. … All along the journey you do meet with people. … The closest cohort that I ever had was in my [degree program]. When I got to college, I realized that the cohort that you’re working with, you start off with, you don't end

> up with. They leave you or you leave them. And it's small, it gets smaller. … And we are friends for life. So yeah, we do rely on each other.

Within their learning relationships with others, participants described gravitating toward other veterans, particularly women veterans. Taylor commented, "First I rely on the other students … mainly those who are veterans. I seek a lot of support from them. … I would also find a way to interact with the veterans. Corvette also described seeking out fellow women veterans. Corvette stated:

> As far as academics … yeah, it's hard. You have to focus and there's a lot of sacrifice. I look for, you know, some solace and other female veterans to say, … "How are you doing this? How are you managing? How are you keeping it all together?" It's a matter of … what's the priority? Is the priority your family? Is the priority your education? … It's a sounding board … you know on those days when you really want to throw in the towel. You need someone and for me it's other women vets … to say no, we can do this, this is just a bad day.

Learning Challenges in the Male-Dominated Military

In the third theme, participants described learning experiences in the military that included explanations of challenges that arose because they were women in a setting that was infused with male-dominated tradition. Participant accounts made clear that the masculine military environment and culture created unique issues for women service members that affected their learning experiences. I grouped the specific challenges into four subthemes: adaptation and adjustment, limitations due to gender, being the only one or one of few, and adversity and hostility.

Adaptation and Adjustment

As female service members serving in a male-dominated military, the participants faced varied and complex challenges in their learning paths to which they adapted and adjusted in different ways. Kendra stated, “Being a woman in the military is challenging because it’s male-dominated.” Hope added, “There was always this unspoken rule that because you’re a woman there's certain ways you had to approach things.” In general, participants conveyed that they were aware the military was a male dominated environment when they joined. As Patrice stated,

> Being a woman in the military, although there are very few of us, I feel that the ones that I had the privilege of serving with, those were women that were very determined. … I believe that before they entered into the military, they already knew that it was male-dominated and so when they came, they had to come ready to fulfill their obligation to the country. They could not utilize the excuse of being a woman or believing that you’re a weaker sex, but that you had to be prepared to give it your all.

Despite being aware of the male dominance within the military, 11 participants described the effects of encountering the consequences of learning and working in that milieu in a range of ways. One participant described being prevented from working in the job for which she had been trained:

> Since I'm the only female with a bunch of men … they didn't really allow me to do much because they were pretty much doing all the work. So I only had … one day to actually sit down and work on something and fix it and replace it because it

> was just too many men there. … I didn't get any help from them … all I could do was watch them work because we didn't have enough shops for individual work.

This participant did not have the opportunity to apply what she had learned in the training for that job, and subsequently was transferred to a job for which she had not been trained.

Tori described being judged by male counterparts. Tori said, “The biggest learning is how to earn the respect as the new kid on the block with a bunch of dudes that have various opinions of your competency and your entitlement to be there.” Emma shared that she did not realize the extent to which being a woman would affect her in the military. Emma recalled, “I was pretty … naive at the time. I put a lot of trust in the system because I didn't think a gender thing could still be an issue.”

Given the male-dominated environment and culture in which they found themselves, most participants described the need to learn to adapt to continue along their learning paths despite the circumstances, and several participants also discussed the need to prove themselves. As Hope stated, “A lot of times, you just knew, it really wasn't really spoken out, ‘You’re a woman, get used to it.’” Autumn explained her process in moving along in her learning path even as she encountered challenges based in gender differences:

> Because you had to learn how to get along … that made it a little bit difficult. But I think the education … the way we were structured in … development, it helped you to deal with that even though it may not have been fair. You learn to adapt and to deal with it and to figure out how to maneuver around certain things. … I’ll apply this now, but later on when I have the opportunity to be in a leadership

> position, I'll change it. And that was always the concept that I had when I was in the military. You do what you can do at this point and either you trust your leadership to support you and do their part or you try to work harder to get to that point where you can make that change.

When discussing the perceived need to prove oneself, Autumn further stated, “We have … had to always struggle and do things twice. Things have been twice as hard for us as they have been for the men. We had to be twice as loud, to stand up and be heard.” A similar view was expressed by Corvette:

> You don’t want your gender to be viewed, you know, that you're not capable or you're inferior or you're a slacker, or you shouldn't be here. You don't want any of that kind of stuff. … I think there are times that I had to overcompensate.

One participant described how a certain learning path brought her to a new position of having to prove herself. The participant said, “The women that were selected to attend [airborne training], we were so motivated and dedicated and ‘hooah,’ because that was another indicator for us to prove our point that we were … tough cookies …and tough as nails.” Emma shared her experience of having to be careful not to alienate others while demonstrating her capabilities. Emma shared:

> I always feel like I'm trying to come up from … being dismissed as I’m just there to take notes. … It's definitely been a perception that if you're not the one presenting, then you must be the one taking notes, clearly. So it's … a defense mechanism of ‘this is how smart I am.’ I really don't want to lose that … reminding people that I grasp the deeper, more complex level of things without

> coming across as, ‘Oh I know everything,’ which I don’t.

In another participant’s experience, there was an additional factor of being in a position of authority that made the challenge more complex as she recalled:

> When I first got to my command, I was a young female officer who was in charge of much older men, or slightly older men, … guys who are my age … all the way up through guys who are old enough to be my dad, who are senior enlisted folks. And I'm the one that's in charge of all of them. And the biggest lesson, especially as a woman … was how to earn their respect. That's more important, I think as a female, because some of them are old school. They don't think you should be here in the first place.

The learning that resulted from the participants’ experiences of adapting and adjusting to the male-dominated environment supported their ability to navigate their military learning paths and allowed them to experience subsequent varied accomplishments.

Limitations Due to Gender

The second subtheme of challenges to learning rooted in the male-dominated military, limitations due to gender, encompassed the aspects of interview data that reflected how gender affected the training opportunities and experiences described by the participants. Eight participants discussed how military procedures intersect with gender considerations to limit options for female service members. One participant who served in the Navy explained:

> Another part of selecting a [specific job] is—especially … if you're assigned to a ship at the time—you’re only allowed to select from certain places that have

> female berthing. … So out of all the things you could select from, my choice is limited because of my gender in the first place … because there's only so many female beds on the ship. … So my gender has self-selected for me to an extent. … The system selected [for me] … based on my gender.

Some participants further experienced not just isolated assignments, but most or all their assignments to have been impacted by their being women. One participant thought her being a woman may have influenced the job she was given. The participant said, “Back then it could have been because missile technician really is not as dangerous as driving a crane or something like that, so it could have been affected by me being a woman.” Similarly, Corvette acknowledged, “The jobs that I held were predominantly held by other females.”

Participants recognized when men more easily got opportunities for transfer or advancement, even when the field was supposed to hold equal opportunity. Lily shared, “I think it [military learning path] was affected tremendously by me being a woman. I felt that way, but I still don’t have too much proof of it.” Lily went on to describe how she had scored highly on her qualifying test, as high as her colleague who was male. Lily continued, “And the only options they gave me was a [specific] job and a [specific job]. And I was like, really? … The guy next to me had so many different options.” Taylor likewise recalled, “Being a female there with the competition of men, I'll say men would get these opportunities very easy. I don't know, but that was my thinking. … They would really have those opportunities available to them.”

Gender limitations also affected participants seeking mentorship in their learning

process. Autumn described the challenge she experienced just to establish a relationship with a female mentor, but then found complications still existed because of gender. Autumn shared:

> I just felt like, at the time, it was difficult for them [female mentors] to show that they were in support or that they were in a mentor state because they too, were also still being judged. … It seems like women are scared to group and scared to … set up another woman for success, because they feel like they're not going to be accepted in the 'good old boy' network or they're not going to be able to move to the next level.

Being the Only One or One of Few

Ten participants described how they often were greatly outnumbered by their male counterparts as being only one or one of few women in a training or learning situation or job. When detailing the statistical reality of her airborne training experience, one participant said, "[I] started [in] a class with 1000 students, 300 were female, 700 were male. By the time we graduated, there was only 300, five of us were female. The rest were male." Being one of few women at times presented challenges to participating freely in the learning process. Tori shared:

> You will usually be one of very few females in any given military situation, so to be able to put yourself out there and be brave enough to say, "Hey, I don't understand something," or "Can you elaborate?" requires a bit of gumption.

Participants also allowed that being one of few was a factor in their tendency to seek out and rely upon other women. Tori continued:

> We relied on each other because you are severely outnumbered, and we supported each other. … we mostly relied on each other. And you just have to be willing to say, 'I don't care what you think, I am going to get this understanding.' with the understanding they're going to talk about you if they want to talk about you anyway. Guys are gonna say what they want to say, they're gonna think what they want to think. And you have to be brave.

Being one of few women affected experiences of working toward being promotable when participants desired to find female examples to follow and learn from. Renee wanted to qualify for promotion but found it challenging to identify women in a position to provide direction to her. Renee recalled, "When I initially [entered the military], there were not a lot of women. Actually, there were no women in leadership roles in the unit that I was assigned to … most of those positions were held by males." Another participant described her experience:

> I took some very difficult positions early because … I wanted to be one of the first female [racial identity] general officers … of some of the positions that have never been held by a female in [branch of the military]. And so I took some difficult jobs and with that, became in a more male environment where most … jobs would be normally a good mixture of women and men. For instance, like my first company command … was only two women …and then the rest were men. And … very similar when I went to [another location]. Most of them were infantry. And again, I'm in their world, they're not used to a lot of women. And so it was always having to either train, train harder to stay up, or always trying to

prove myself to be just as worthy as the men in those type of environments.

Adversity and Hostility

Most participants described learning situations that presented some level of adversity, and this subtheme represents situations in which adversity and hostility were overt and personalized. Many participants described instances of being told variations of the message that they were not qualified, on their own, to be in a certain job or assignment. One participant recalled:

> My boss, at that time, happened to be a [racial identity] male. … The first thing he said—that kind of made me feel bad—was, "You don't have anything to worry about. You're going to get it [promotion] anyway just because of affirmative action." And I thought, "That's a terrible thing to say." … I said, "…I still think even with affirmative action … it has to be based off my merit. I don't know how you could just put someone there that doesn't deserve it." … He eventually came back and … admitted that he just didn't mean it that way. … And so that was one of the times where I felt I need more women in my mentorship to help guide me.

In another participant's experience, she was trained for a job and assigned to a unit in which she was the only female. After being hindered from performing her duties, she eventually was transferred to another unit to work in a job for which she had not been trained. Her supervisor had not consulted her about the transfer and then he was dishonest about the move in the discussion that followed. The participant shared:

> They did not ask, they just put me there. … My [unit supervisor] did ask me … [but] my so-called [immediate supervisor] didn't, he just put me there because …

> I'm the only female and he didn't want me there in his section anymore. … I just told the [unit supervisor], "Yeah, I'm fine … I don't care." I didn't tell him that the guy put me there and I didn't ask to go there. I think he [immediate supervisor] told him [unit supervisor] that I wanted out of his section, but he lied. So I just said, "No, no, I'm good. I'll go."

One participant recounted a scene from her basic training in which she witnessed an assault against another woman that was presented as a demonstration in the training:

> A lot of the instructors are male … and I feel like in some ways they are … insensitive to female soldiers. … In basic training, we had a male instructor teaching … it's called combatives … learning how to fight hand-to-hand, fight someone without a weapon. … This was my first experience of knowing that, you know, some men still don't like the fact that women are in the military and they have little respect for us. … There's a stereotype about us or … biases that they have, that they don't know that they have about us. So I remember doing this training and he was instructing us and I remember him saying blatantly, and this was in front of all the … soldiers, "I do not know why the military allowed you guys [females] to even join." … And I also remembered, he put one of the females in a chokehold and he choked her out until she … literally passed out, because we had to learn that move. But later we discovered that he shouldn't have been doing that to any of us … he shouldn't have been choking out anyone, putting them to sleep.

Finally, participants indicated that learning paths could be significantly affected by

experiences of adversity and hostility. One participant shared:

> People have different ways of dealing with issues and some might be having a lot of depression when serving after undergoing the MSA [military sexual assault]. So this may even lower the output at work, and we discourage them. So instead of undergoing all this … some women may decide why not transition to something else, you see, because they don't want to be victimized.

These examples of adversity and hostility encountered by the participants show some of the obstacles to learning faced by women in the military. Despite the unfavorable and sometimes intimidating conditions, participants were not deterred from continuing on their learning paths.

Learning Purpose

The fourth and final theme addresses how participants described their perceptions of the value of their learning and their estimations of what successful learning would be. Participants described their objectives and goals representing their purposes for learning. Responses under this theme were grouped into three subthemes: practical application of learning, recognition of success in self, and making a difference.

Practical Application of Learning

The first subtheme related to participant purposes for learning addressed the application of the learning in practical ways. As 11 participants described their learning experiences in the military and in college, their accounts culminated with how their learning paths were aimed at achieving certain objectives that required being able to use their learning in real world applications. Attaining these milestones was most often

recognized in career or other workplace settings. Corvette described how she evaluated the effectiveness of various military trainings. Corvette explained:

> What you learn, now you are implementing it, you're putting it to good use, you are making what you've learned better. … The information was presented, I learnt what I was supposed to learn. I successfully completed the actual training. … I go back to my organization and I implement … what I learned.

For some participants, the real world they were preparing for was deployment, including during wartime and in combat situations. One participant shared:

> You see other things, like types of armaments to be used, … you're learning theory, and now you're going to apply it. … It's kind of different because you'll see it being applied in real life. … Where you are serving you are making sure, like, law and order was observed. I learned about defense mechanism, and also maintaining law and order, things like those. That is how now I was able to apply in real life when I was deployed.

Similarly, another participant described the real-world application of learning on military deployment. The participant said:

> All of my pre-deployment trainings were all valuable, not only as an individual, but as a unit. You could not afford to go to sleep, you could not afford to be relaxed … you wanted to go over, deploy, … do your mission, … and then you wanted to come back. But … the operative word is come back alive and so one erroneous move or slight mistake, because you did not pay attention to all the previous training that was conducted prior to the deployment— … All of those

> trainings, every last one of them were vital. It was … literally a life and death situation.

For some participants, there was a link between military learning and application in college and career. Emma shared:

> It's learning how to live and apply in a professional and personal sense that translates and communicates what you can do in almost any profession. … I've taken advantage of all the professional military education … [and] I've used that to become a better writer, a better researcher, a better collaborator in online team environments.

Tori gave an example of applying learning on the job as she explained, "I've incorporated … what I've learned into my current workplace, like how behavior at work is influenced. … I developed a training certification based off of the research that I learned in [my] studies." Similarly, Renae detailed the ways in which application of her learning in the real world has been of benefit. Renae reported:

> I've been able to take the … information that I learned in my courses and apply it to my everyday life. I've also been able to apply it in my career, and it's helped me to be competitive for higher level leadership positions. As a result, I, I've been able to make the kind of money that I wanted to make. … It makes me more marketable. It gives me something that I can give out to others. … It helps to make me a better person.

Recognition of Success in Self

The second subtheme related to participant purposes for learning addressed the

participant's recognition of their own successes, particularly as those realizations allowed them not just to persevere toward completion of commitments, but also to experience meaningful understanding about themselves as learners.

Ten participants described achieving objectives they did not know they could achieve and the impact of those realizations on their continuing their learning paths. Reflecting on what military learning achievements showed her, Patrice shared, "The most valuable, first and foremost, … [was] letting me know that I can truly do whatever I put my mind to." Taylor reflected on how she was changed after she completed the physical training that was part of her military job. Taylor recalled:

> When we were being trained, it was very challenging at times, because it's something that I had not done before. … Initially, I wasn't such a person who really loved outdoor things … [I learned] my body really supported it, and I have no health issues. So yeah, I was able to get trained well.

Likewise, participants reflected on their realizations from college learning experiences. Autumn stated:

> I've done very well in my classes, and I haven't quit because I'm telling you, I was so nervous from that first class. And hearing the number of individuals that are actually graduates … that was a scary thing. … I took a picture with individuals that I started my first residency with and it was about 15 or 20 of us. And now I have only seen in my classes, maybe about five of us that are still consistent. … That was the first leg of my success.

MilitaryTough described what she learned when she got through a particularly

challenging college course. MilitaryTough said:

> It was the antidote that I needed … to let me know that although this subject is new and … challenging, … if you work at it with a great deal of consistency, then it was what I needed to catapult me to continue to … [know] there's nothing that I cannot do.

Emma summarized the impact of realizing she had gained understanding at a deep and useful level. Emma explained:

> When I can repeat back my understanding of what's going on, even if it's not the same words and it's slightly different … that's what matters most to me. … This time it was months, if not more than a year removed from learning it. … It felt wonderful. It felt validating … like I've arrived.

Another way that participants saw success in themselves was when they realized that others were using them as a resource or as a mentor. Renae shared, "I actually had people to come to me and ask for guidance … the same questions that I asked my mentors." Corvette found she was left with good results that allowed her to be more effective at her job after attending a difficult military school. Corvette shared:

> For me to be able now to engage my fellow service members … from different branches … that felt like I had learned something, that it was successful because now I understood those concepts, those theories. … I can implement, I can talk, I can dialogue, I can collaborate with my peers, and I appreciated that. So now I know how to do my job more effectively and not feel uneasy or inadequate because I didn't understand or … have the knowledge I needed to do my job

effectively.

Participants described seeing their own success, particularly in ways they did not expect to have attained that level of success. Taylor stated, “Being able to offer the services that I’ve been trained for … [and] serving for more than the expected time that I thought I’d be there is a major highlight in my life. And it's not like I regret it.” These types of experiences contributed to participants viewing themselves as successful learners. Emma stated:

> I define success by how it makes me feel with where I go, not what I've done with it … because I feel like I'm always moving and having great ideas and I love the way that it makes me feel … I feel excited by what I've done and the prospects that I have.

Making a difference

Participants shared how they aspired to use their learning to make a difference. All participants described how a main goal of their learning was to leave a lasting impression of some kind. Participants were clear that their learning, whether in the military or in college, was intended to benefit not only their own selves, but also their fellow learners, co-workers, and other veterans.

Participants emphasized that a main reason to accomplish learning was to share what has been learned. Tori explained, “To be a good learner is applying knowledge to your life, to other people's lives, to make a difference … in someone else's life.” Patrice held a similar view. Patrice stated:

> I truly believe there are people who are going to be coming up behind me who

> want to go through this process, and they ask me questions, and I want to be able to provide them with adequate information. So in order for me to be able to provide it to them, I have to know it myself.

MilitaryTough shared how one's own knowledge can be strengthened by sharing it:

> If you really want it [learning] to be reinforced, there is no better way than … to share it with others and if you can assist someone else along the way, it's a win-win situation. … Stay focused on why you did what you did … to make this world a better place to live.

Renae described the ways in which she affected others with her learning:

> I was able to apply that [learning] in raising my children, even in encouraging my sisters or nieces and nephews. I think I was able to apply it in other areas of my life, even in mentoring and coaching my staff or … peers that would come to me for advice. … I think it's important to, if you've learned it in the military, help others that have a desire to promote, make sure you transfer that knowledge as much as you can. … I think, you know, with military learning, it's important to do that because you want them to be the best that they can be too, and I feel like in order to prepare them, it's important to share what you know.

Autumn recognized that she wanted to make a difference in her community. Autumn shared, "The success will be when I make a difference in the community. That's the biggest thing … if I can become the subject matter expert in my area, and I can make a situation better for the next person**."**

Participants also described how their military experience contributed to their

desire to make a difference with their learning. One participant shared:

> Being in the military and having … the experience I've had even after the military …it has affected the path that I've chosen. … Recently we had … a suicide. And so … for me as a veteran, a female veteran, it has affected my path because I feel like I care more about people who are in the service and veterans a lot more because I've had that experience. … I would like to do something [where] I feel like I'm helping people … and I feel like the military needs it as well. I mean, I see myself … finishing my degree and perhaps working for the Department of Veteran Affairs … helping soldiers or veterans after leaving the military.

Taylor also saw how applying her military learning could make a difference. Taylor said:

> In the current world there are so many mental issues. I'm able to encourage one who might be undergoing some bad, bad situations. Through this course, the stress management, this is a skill that I have learned, to see depression is an upcoming and major issue in the day-to-day living … you can see everywhere in the world. So, yeah, I can encourage someone.

Finally, Emma added her perspective of the importance of using her experience to be an example. Emma said:

> I really feel like it would be valuable to share my experience … you can never stop learning and I think that's an important message to share. … That, to me, is what a woman student veteran is, that lifelong learner able to set that example and not just carve a path, but make sure it stays there and widens for more to be there and say, "That's a way that I can go."

Summary

In this chapter, I described the setting for the study, participant demographics, the trustworthiness of the study, the collection and analysis of the data, and the findings of the study. The study resulted in four main findings expressed as themes which, taken together, revealed how the participants described their learning experiences in both military and college settings. Participants described the factors and influences that motivated and guided them along their learning paths in becoming interested in and involved in the learning experiences. They described the elements of the learning process, including methods and strategies they used, the ways in which they confirmed their understanding in the learning process, and the role and value of connection and collaboration in their learning process. Participants shared how the male-dominated military environment and culture posed challenges that they had to negotiate and endure even when the challenges hindered or prevented their learning. Participants explained how their learning had purpose as they identified and then worked to attain their objectives and goals.

In Chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of the study findings in the context of the literature included in Chapter 2 and the conceptual framework. I also will discuss the limitations of the study, provide recommendations for further research as supported by the study, and offer my assessment of the study's implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. I conducted this study because research on the learning experiences of women student veterans, particularly as interpreted through a female-centered conceptual framework, was not evident in the literature and this study would offer meaningful data toward more understanding of this growing subgroup of the adult learner population. The research question was: How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences in both military and college settings? I interviewed 12 women student veterans using an interview guide informed by the WWK work of Belenky et al. (1986/1997) that served as the conceptual framework for the study. Through analysis of the data and the themes that emerged, I identified four key findings from the study.

- Learning path: Participants were motivated and influenced to participate in learning experiences by both internal and external sources.
- Learning process: Participants identified meaningful learning experiences and the impact of the experiences on their learning.
- Learning challenges in the male-dominated military: The male-dominated environment and culture of the military presented specific challenges that had a bearing on the participants' learning experiences.
- Learning purpose: Participants identified and determined objective and goals for their learning purposes.

Interpretation of the Findings

I interpreted the findings of this study by making connections between the findings of this study and the findings of selected current research discussed in Chapter 2. I also used the contextual lens of the feminist-centered conceptual framework WWK (Belenky et al., 1986/1997) to relate the learning experiences described by the study participants to the epistemological perspectives from which women learners experience and perceive reality and make meaning of their learning. I connected the four themes that emerged from the data to current research literature and discussed the data in relation to all five of the epistemological perspectives of WWK.

Connections to the Literature

In this section, I interpret the findings in connection with current research literature focused on the military's influence on student veterans and women learners in college. The section is organized around the study's four themes. Aspects of all four themes were related to aspects of the current research literature.

Learning Path

Study participants described internal and external sources that provided influence and motivation for their participation in military and college learning experiences as they pursued their learning paths. Participants described internal sources in the form of their personal interests in learning and beliefs about themselves as learners, and they indicated that the external source of greatest influence and motivation was the military institution. The military not only provided structure and training, but also facilitated the development of important internal attributes which, in turn, provided influence and guidance for the

participants along their learning paths.

Study findings aligned with research on military environment and culture promoting the development of discipline and perseverance within military service members (Blaauw-Hara, 2016; Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). In this study, all 12 participants provided examples of attitudes and actions that reflected their determination to pursue their learning in the military and college environments. Student veterans have credited military training for the development of a "drive to complete the mission" (Blaauw-Hara, 2016, p. 812) and a personal internal control (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016) that also were evident in this study, where participants who had begun college-level studies prior to or during their military service expressed their effort to continue with their studies after leaving the military as the desire to finish what had been started. Similar to research findings (Heineman, 2016) that showed military experience contributed to female service members' capacity for adapting to challenges and for persisting through academic pursuits, this study's participants recounted ways they negotiated their education paths throughout their military service and after leaving the service despite encountering obstacles to their progress and related their perseverance to what they believed to be true also for other women veterans. All participants included descriptions of themselves as learners and their perceptions of how their status as women student veterans may have affected their learning paths.

This study's findings also aligned with the research reporting that military training facilitates a process in which the service member's identity transforms from an individual acting separately into a member of a collective larger group operating as a

team (Suzuki & Kawakami, 2016). The findings align with Hammond's (2016) assertion that even with civilian status the student veteran retained "veteran" as the core identity at the same time as being hesitant or unwilling to identify as such on campus. In this study, the individual aspect of identity was evident as participants easily offered descriptions of themselves as individuals with attributes such as intelligence, discipline, and being open to challenge which supported their pursuit of education and learning experiences.

Participants expressed how their youth affected their expectations about military learning and contributed to their development as a learner in the military. The orientation of the participant as learner shifted as participants spoke of becoming part of the military unit and learning as a member of a larger group, similar to Iverson et al.'s (2016) report that veterans experienced intersectional identities when transitioning from military status to veteran, civilian, and student statuses. Iverson et al.'s finding was confirmed as this study's participants recognized that after transitioning from active duty to civilian status and being enrolled in college studies, they had the unique identity of being women student veterans with intersecting identities, which Elton described as like having lived "both lives" and Kendra described as like wearing "three hats." In a study of women veterans who previously had identified primarily as disabled persons (Lundberg et al., 2016), women veterans had a shift in self-perception after associating with each other in a different context. Along parallel lines, participants of this study framed recognition of the complex identities of being a woman student veteran in positive terms, acknowledging, as Hope said, that there was a "big, big opportunity to be able to branch out and understand so much more" and, as Emma said, that they had "so much to contribute." These aspects

of self-perception served as a touchstone for the participants to return to in keeping themselves focused and progressing on their learning paths.

Learning Process

Participants described their learning process in both military and college settings by discussing how they learned, how their learning was confirmed, and how they developed and utilized connection and collaboration in their own learning experiences. Military learning experiences served to inform participant determination of effective methods and strategies which participants then carried into their college learning experiences. Participants also described their preferences for learning experiences in cooperation with others.

The findings of this study supported existing research that described the benefits of military training such as the development of organization skills, discipline, and accountability (Hammond, 2016; Heineman, 2016; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015) which allow for learning success. This study also confirmed Heineman's (2016) assertion that female veterans' military experience contributed to their independence in college. Study participants reported that successful learning involved being taught or shown the information in systematic ways such as learning by steps or levels and utilizing repetition, followed by application of the learning in practical ways. Participants described how formal military training delivered through classes or schools employed relatively consistent practices to successful ends while informal training, mostly OJT, employed varied approaches with mixed results. When OJT was effective it facilitated learning because, as one participant shared, "…you are in it. You're not observing." However,

OJT experiences sometimes fell short of that effectiveness, as when Hope described having to rely on a co-worker's' expertise when the co-worker "really didn't know the job." Hope went on to say that the lack of understanding of the purpose of the work "slowed my learning down." Although participants acknowledged that the difficulties of incomplete training and of trainers who were less than fully competent or cooperative were disappointing when the learning objective was not fully met, participants still affirmed those experiences as valuable because the experiences demonstrated the importance of independence in ensuring learning was successful. These experiences of participants using the disadvantages of a learning experience to their advantage confirmed Stone's (2017) finding that despite the military's focus on the unit rather than the individual, the military's structure facilitated development of internal foundations that supported self-authorship within service members.

One specific strategy to support learning addressed by more than half of the participants was that of practicing balance and time management. In describing multiple demands for their time, study participants echoed Auguste et al.'s (2018) finding that, beyond military role and student status, female student veterans' experience was affected by family and employment status, as well as socioeconomics and race. Study participants described how these competing factors necessitated prioritization and allocation of time so they could maintain sufficient focus on their learning activities, expressed by Corvette as "trying to find that balance that's never balanced."

One study finding was not directly aligned to the literature but was related to participants' discussion of the challenge of managing multiple priorities within specific

learning situations, even in demanding situations such as preparing for or engaging in military field or combat operations. Participants related learning experiences that prepared them for combat in the same way they discussed other learning situations, even those solely academic in nature: by describing learning by levels, utilizing repetition, asking questions, making use of resources, and other means that facilitated their learning. While participants included comments showing awareness of the emotional and enduring effects of experiences related to field and combat operations, they focused discussion on the learning process. This clarity in separating the identification and effectiveness of the methods and strategies significant in their learning experiences without infusing emotion or discussion of other impactful aspects of the experience suggested their strong awareness of their basic learning process and their success with that process.

Rocks and Lavender (2018) found that for college-level learners, relationships with instructors were a meaningful part of their learning experiences. Broding (2020) found that verbal feedback from faculty had a positive influence on student veteran academic performance. In addition, although student veterans have expressed reluctance to engage in conversation about their military experiences, particularly combat experiences (Iverson et al., 2016), they were willing to seek connections with others based in their practice of teamwork and the camaraderie in the military (Blaauw-Hara, 2016). Study participants described their experiences communicating with their college instructors and how they felt the connection benefited them in their learning process. While participants indicated that they operated with a high level of independence, they shared that they were receptive to seeking help from their instructors or other campus and

outside resources. Kendra stated that the instructor was the "number one resource," Tori said that it was important to "rely on your instructor to answer your questions," and Autumn explained that she learned the biggest part was "figuring it out on your own and getting the resources to support that." These experiences differed somewhat from research findings asserting student veterans were reluctant to seek help in college due to the military emphasis on self-reliance (Currier et al., 2016; Iverson, et al., 2016).

Participant descriptions of the role of relationships with other students aligned with Stone's (2017) finding that strong relationships were a support in the development of self-authorship for women student veterans. Broding (2020) found that peer connection was an influence on women student veterans' work in college writing courses. These findings were confirmed by this study's participants. While in the military, study participants sought out other women to learn from and in college, they sought out other women veterans because they felt the common experience helped them to be better understood as learners. Most participants indicated a preference for working in cooperation with others because they found collaboration beneficial to their learning process and helpful in their understanding of what they were learning.

Learning Challenges in Male-Dominated Military

Participant accounts of military learning experiences contained many descriptions of effects of the military's male-dominated environment and culture on their learning experiences. In many instances, participants related recognizing these effects at the time they were occurring and described their responses to the experiences. In less frequent instances, however, participants first said they had not experienced circumstances where

their gender mattered and then continued on to describe circumstances in which gender had affected their experiences. Whether the participant was aware of the effects at the time of occurrence or upon later reflection, all participants described aspects of the impact of the male-dominated environment and culture on military learning experiences, but none described aspects occurring in their college learning experiences.

Heineman's (2016) study reported that female service members developed focus and maturity because they were in a male-dominated environment and Iverson et al. (2016) reported that through facing the challenges of the environment, female service members developed the capacity to adapt and persist by determining ways to continue toward their objectives and by increasing their efforts. This study's participants confirmed these findings as they described how they had to learn, as Autumn said, "to adapt and to deal with it and to figure out how to maneuver around certain things." Participants recognized that working harder because they were women was often necessary and described various ways in which they worked to prove themselves capable and qualified, even in situations in which they were in a position of authority. They described independent ways in which they pursued college studies as a continuance of ways they learned to get along in the military when guiding resources were not available to them. Participants independently navigated these situations to figure things out and get along; they did not indicate that help-seeking was part of their strategy. These study findings align with Iverson et al.'s (2016) finding that female service members were disinclined to seek help, especially outside their unit and DiRamio et al.'s (2015) finding that this hesitancy could be attributed to the military's emphasis on self-reliance and the

service member's desire not to be seen as weak.

Although participants generally recognized that their options were limited at times due to their gender, they conveyed that an acceptance of the circumstances allowed them to progress and attain effectiveness and success on their own learning paths, in alignment with Alshebou's (2019) finding that female learners in a male-dominated environment were able to develop and exercise agency even though their presence as females did not have a significant impact on the male dominance of the environment.

Learning Purpose

Participant descriptions of the purposes for their learning indicated that they had awareness and intention about their learning paths in the form of objectives and goals. Participants described the most direct objective of their learning to be its application, particularly when they perceived the application to have meaning beyond the immediate lesson or experience. The importance of using what they had learned was a recurring concept that indicated the participants' focus on their learning purposes.

Rocks and Lavender (2018) found that adult learners who were involved in higher education learning experiences had changes in confidence and independence. Suzuki and Kawakami (2016) linked the collective culture of the military the development of an awareness of the value of service to others that was carried into civilian life after the service member separated from active duty. Davis et al. (2015) reported that adult students felt service learning was valuable not only because they personally benefitted from the experience but also because their learning benefitted their partner organizations. This study's findings aligned with these conclusions. Participants explained that when

they were able to recognize success in themselves as learners, their ideas about what they believed themselves to be capable of doing changed with their increased understanding. They explained that they intended for their learning to benefit themselves, their direct work units, their co-workers and colleagues, others that will follow, their families, their civilian jobs, and other organizations, depending on the level at which they were working. The extent to which participants identified potential beneficiaries of their learning makes clear their goal that their learning be applied in ways that ultimately would benefit others.

Connections to the WWK Framework

In this section, I interpret the findings in connection with the WWK (Belenky et al., 1986/1997) conceptual framework. The discussion is organized around the study's four themes. I related aspects of all four themes to aspects of the five epistemological perspectives of WWK: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing.

Learning Path

Participant experiences with the influences that facilitated their involvement in learning both in the military and in college evidenced received knowing, subjective knowing, and procedural knowing. Received knowing was evident in participant descriptions of the external influences that facilitated their being receptive to participating in learning experiences, primarily in the discussion of how youth and being young affected the participants' military learning. Participants described how when their younger selves met with military conditions and expectations, the incoming source of

knowledge was the authority, and they accepted the conditions and expectations. Reflecting on having believed what the recruiter had told her when she joined the military, even though it was inaccurate, Lily said, “I don’t know what I was thinking.” She had not anticipated the intense physical aspect of the military. Emma also shared about her early military days, saying that because she was “naïve at the time” she “put a lot of trust in the system.”

As participants remained in the military learning environment, they continued with received knowing in relation to the consistent and clear-cut military structure but evidenced subjective knowing as they drew on their internal and independent sources of information for ongoing guidance in their learning paths. In subjective knowing, their perseverance and other aspects of self-perception fueled their motivation along both military and college learning paths as they met with various challenges that created moments of pause in their progress.

Procedural knowing was evident mostly when participants described their progress forward in their college learning paths. Participants used procedural knowing as they considered and evaluated both external military sources and their internal sources to make decisions about pursuing colleges studies and about their fields of study. Procedural knowing also surfaced during the interviews when participants reflected on their experiences with received knowing and subjective knowing in the military learning environment. Participants shared how they used their internal sources of perseverance and other aspects of self-perception within the structured military learning environments as they acknowledged how they, as individuals, became useful and successful as

members of the military collective.

Learning Process

Participant descriptions of experiences with identified significant components of military and college learning processes evidenced received knowing, subjective knowing, and procedural knowing. Received knowing was evident in participant descriptions of the established and consistent training methods used by the military and in the nature of the feedback received in military learning experiences. The military's use of learning by levels and utilizing repetition for training allowed participants to take in information without having to evaluate its meaning or value while they built mastery of the concept or lesson. Feedback to indicate whether they met the objective and of awarding of certificates and rank for levels of accomplishment was clear and absolute. Kendra referred to feedback in a "go or no go" determination, and Renae described it as part of the ongoing training process where the supervising officer provided immediate "confirmation to know if you were successful or not."

Subjective knowing was evident in participant descriptions of how they extended using the methods and strategies they learned in the military for use in their college studies learning processes. Participants described using independent thought to employ the methods and strategies they found useful in their college coursework. Procedural knowing was evident as they described their developing understanding of the value of connecting with others in the learning process and learning in collaboration with their peers. The concept of working as a team was cultivated in received knowing within the military learning environment, but as participants internalized the experience and benefits

of camaraderie and teamwork, they demonstrated procedural knowing in making conscious choices to seek out opportunities to learn from and with their peers.

Learning Challenges

Participant descriptions of experiences with specific issues and difficulties within the male-dominated military environment and culture that affected their learning process evidenced received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and silence. Participants generally faced challenges of this nature in circumstances originating in received knowing. Direct orders and assignments over which they had no control led to experiences in which participants were subject to a strong external source of authority. The ways in which the participants moved through these challenges to "get along" reflected subjective knowing. Participants described the internal, independent thought that facilitated their reconciling of the challenging incidents and situations and their persisting through to accomplish their mission. Procedural knowing was reflected particularly when the participants described their experiences of being the only woman or one of few women in military learning situations. Because they experienced various forms of isolation connected with being one of few, participants described how they sought out other women and how they tended to associate and bond with other female service members whenever possible. This tendency to seek each other out carried into their college learning experiences and further contributed to their preference for collaborative learning experiences. Seemingly to the contrary but also apparent in participant descriptions of their experiences of isolation was the procedural knowing reflected in participants using those experiences to facilitate their independence in college

learning situations.

With respect to the challenges based in the male-dominated military environment and culture, participants described experiences where they faced adversity and hostility in military learning situations. These experiences, both subtle and overt, took participants directly to silence. Participants were subject to what was enacted as absolute military authority and they were left disconnected from others without a voice or any avenue to resolve the situation through independent thought. The pressure of the authority that lay in male domination was too onerous and oppressive for participants to dispute. Even so, while participants were not able to combat the adversity and hostility of the male-dominated environment and culture, they described eventual reflection on the situations in subjective knowing and procedural knowing that allowed them to use the experiences to inform their continued learning progress.

Learning Purpose

Participant descriptions of the objectives and goals that represented their purposes for learning evidenced both procedural knowing and constructed knowing. Procedural knowing was evident as participants emphasized that the objective of learning was not just to have learned something, but also to apply what was learned to everyday work. One participant summarized, “You’re learning theory, and now you’re going to apply it … in real life.” Another participant emphasized how the successful application of “every last one of [the trainings] were vital. It was … literally a life and death situation.” Participants described taking the knowledge and skills they had learned from both external sources and internal sources and making practical use of the knowledge. As participants

described the importance of practical application of their learning, they indicated that the value of their contribution was evaluated both by how the contribution met the standards within the workplace setting and by how the contribution met the participant's personal objectives for learning. Renae shared that she took the information she learned in her coursework, applied it in her career, and it "helped [her] to be competitive for higher level leadership positions."

Procedural knowing also was reflected in the participants' descriptions of how they used the recognition of their learning success to validate their attainment of learning objectives and to gain meaningful understanding of themselves as learners. In this way, participants used their individualized perception to evaluate their own success as learners and then used their conclusions to inform their continued progress toward their further learning. Constructed knowing was reflected in the participants describing how the ultimate goal of their learning was to make a difference and to effect a benefit for others. Participants explained their intentions to incorporate their learning while continuing to gain new learning as they used their knowledge and skills to help others however the context of the application might allow. To this end, all the participants sought to have their learning be of use not only to themselves, but also to their colleagues and co-workers, and most especially to other veterans.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study relating to methods design included small sample size and purposeful sampling technique, both of which limit the potential to generalize the study findings. After I completed data collection and analysis, I identified the following

additional limitations:

- Criteria for participation in the study included self-selection which limited participation to individuals who had interest in sharing their experience and who took the initiative to respond to the study invitation. It is possible that there are important findings related to women student veteran learning experiences that remain unknown, including not only aspects of the learning experiences but also identification of the barriers that may have deterred individuals from sharing about their learning experiences.
- A majority (nine of 12) of the participants were post-graduate students, most (eight of nine) of whom were studying at the doctoral level. It is possible that the participants' extended time and experience with formal schooling may have led to more experience with reflection on their own learning.
- Findings related to military learning could be weighted by the experiences that correlate to specific military branches. Only three of the six military branches were represented and over half of the participants were from one of those three branches. It is possible that important findings related to learning experiences in any or all of the three unrepresented branches remain unknown.
- Findings could be affected by the length of time elapsed between the time of participant military service and related learning experiences and the time of college learning experiences.
- Findings could be affected by the mode of delivery of college programs. All but one of the participants attended on-line college programs, and the participant

attending an on-campus program had recently begun on-line courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is possible that experiences could vary with the type of delivery of coursework.

- Using only the audit feature of Zoom to conduct the interviews meant that no face-to-face interaction occurred during the interview. I was unable to observe facial expression or body language which might have conveyed information about participant perception of experience.
- My own experience with adult learners, women learners, military learners, and both military and college environments presented bias toward empathy and effort to support participants as learners. My bias toward equity and equality for women learners may have influenced my analysis and interpretation of the data.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military and in college. The study findings met the purpose of the study, but more exploratory research could contribute to greater and deeper understanding. Although the small sample size and self-selected participant group meant that the findings were not generalizable to the larger population of women student veterans, the themes that emerged in this study could be used to frame further research on the learning experiences of this important adult learner population.

Additional recommendations for further research follow from participant responses that included brief insight into two topics: race and military sexual trauma

(MSA). Almost half of the participants referred to issues of race in their responses. While participant perspectives on race and learning experiences did not emerge as a theme, I recommend further research exploring aspects of race and their effect on women student veterans' learning experiences. In addition, one participant spoke directly about military sexual assault (MSA) and another two participants referred to MSA indirectly. Although, like aspects of race, participants' perspectives on MSA and learning experience did not emerge as a theme, I recommend further research on women student veterans' perceptions of how MSA might impact their learning experiences. Examination of each of these topics could provide valuable information that might be of use not only to those who serve women student veterans both in the military and in college, but also to the women student veterans as learners themselves.

It is important to note that for the participants of this study, their terms of military service occurred prior to October 2017 and the manifestation of the #MeToo movement (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019) in the current political and social zeitgeist. The #MeToo movement and its resultant widespread sharing of personal experiences have increased situational awareness about the occurrence and impact of sexual harassment and assault, including in the military, and have provided a model for women using their voice to speak out on matters of importance. At this time, the immediate and longer-term effects of the #MeToo movement on the male-dominated environment and culture of the military remain unknown. I recommend further research on the learning experiences of women student veterans who served in the military entirely since October 2017 and the presence of the #MeToo movement to continue to develop relevant understanding that could prove

valuable to serving this unique subgroup of the adult learner population.

Implications

The study findings may have implications for positive social change in the field of adult education both in the military and in postsecondary education institutions. Increased and improved understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans may be useful to the administrators and instructors of military training and education programs, administrators and educators in academic settings, and individuals associated with military veteran service organizations to increase awareness and inform practice. In many instances, the experiences shared by study participants illuminated institutional barriers that impacted their learning. Study findings could be used in the development of an evaluation or review process toward program and process improvement in both military and academic settings.

This study provides a framework within which the voice of woman student veterans is heard, and study findings can be used to encourage the continued exploration of their experiences. The study findings demonstrate the varied abilities and the notable capabilities of the participants, which serve as a promise of what lies unknown among this unique population of adult learners. As this population is not adequately represented in the literature, any steps taken to shift attention and importance on women student veterans and their learning experiences will be steps toward positive social change.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to gain understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans by analyzing their perspectives of their own learning both in the military

and in college. Through a purposeful sampling process, I interviewed 12 participants about their learning experiences, and four themes emerged to frame the study's key findings. Participants identified what factors motivated and influenced their learning paths; participants identified elements of their learning process and the impact on their learning experiences; participants described challenges to their learning specific to the male-dominated environment and culture of the military; and participants identified their purposes for their learning. Because the nature and significance of women veterans' learning experiences are largely unknown, this study contributes to the body of literature by giving voice to the perspectives of this important growing subgroup within the adult learner population.

Participants shared their experiences seemingly freely and without hesitation. They conveyed emotion and exhibited a high level of ability to reflect thoughtfully on their own experiences and ascribe meaning to their experiences, including fitting their experiences into a larger perspective of their lives and the greater society. At times they commented favorably about the interview questions I asked and most of them expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to share their experiences. Their collective enthusiasm about the purpose of the study affirmed that research on issues concerning the woman student veteran population is worthwhile.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Adapted from *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986/1997, pp. 231-236).

A: Introduction

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research project. My project is designed to increase understanding of the learning experiences of women student veterans. The research question is: "How do women student veterans describe their learning experiences both in military and college settings?"

The interview will be about 45-75 minutes and will focus on your learning both in the military and in college. You have acknowledged your consent to this interview on the consent form you responded to with an email confirming your consent. I will be recording this interview by audio so that I will have an accurate record of your responses. Upon reviewing the recording, I may contact you for a brief follow-up inquiry if clarification is needed. The recording will be used to create a transcript of the interview, a copy of which I will make available for your review at a later date.

Everything we discuss will be held in confidence. Your identity will not be shared or linked to any of your comments. You do not have to answer any questions that you prefer not to answer, and you have the option to end the interview at any time.

A1. Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

Do you wish to proceed with the interview?

B: Self-Description

I'd like to get some basic descriptive information.

B1. How long did you serve in the military?

When did you separate or retire from active-duty service?

Which branch were you in?

What was your job [MOS, Rating, AFSC] and field?

Rate/rank attained?

B2: How soon after leaving military did you enroll in college?

How long have you been enrolled in college here?

What is your major or main course of study?

B3. What prompted you to participate in this study?

B2. Tell me about what the term "woman student veteran" means to you.

C: Learning Experiences in the Military

Learning situations in the military take many forms. Think of a time while you were in the military and you were learning something new.

C1: What were you learning and how did the learning happen?

Where did it happen? Was the learning a training situation, a classroom situation, a work or field experience?

What makes this experience memorable or important?

C2: Thinking about your learning experiences in the military, what did you rely on to guide you as you learned something new?

How did you become aware of or involved with the resources or people who guided you?

C3: What aspects of your learning in the military, if any, do you believe were valuable to you?

Describe why you consider them valuable.

C4: What would you say it means to have been an effective learner in the military?

How did you come to this general understanding?

In what ways would you consider yourself to have been an effective learner in the military?

D: Learning Experiences in College

D1: Tell me about your decision to enroll in college.

Think of a time since you have been in college and you were learning something new.

D2: What were you learning and how did the learning happen?

Was this an individual experience or were others involved? If so, who were they?

What makes this experience memorable or important?

D3: Thinking about your learning experiences in college, what do you rely on to guide you as you learn something new?

How did you become aware of or involved with the resources or people who guide you?

D4: What aspects of your learning in college do you believe are valuable to you?

Describe why you consider them valuable.

D5: What does it mean to be an effective college student?

In what ways would you consider yourself to be an effective college student?

E: Conclusion

As we come to the conclusion of the interview:

E1: Do you have any comments or information you would like to share about the

topic of this study, i.e. learning experiences of women student veterans in the military and in college?

E2: Do you have any questions for me?

Once again, thank you for your time and participation in this interview.