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Post-9/11 Women Veterans' Experiences Transitioning Into the Civilian Workforce

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Abstract

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MA, Argosy University, 2008

BS, American Intercontinental University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial and Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

Post-9/11 veterans' transitional challenges have become an important topic in veteran studies. However, there was a gap in the literature regarding post-9/11 women veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce. This interpretative phenomenological analysis explored the lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of eight post-9/11 women veterans (four enlisted and four commissioned officers) who had transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. The study was guided by Schlossberg's transition theory. Data from transcribed participant interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. The superordinate themes included navigating the career transition, exploring identity shifts, accessibility and use of supportive services, interacting with civilian employers, and networking. The subordinate themes included preparedness, transitions are difficult, new routines, visibility, self-identification, connectedness, sense of purpose, availability of services, navigating Veterans Administration resources, employability, civilian workplace environments, gender-based discrimination, entrepreneurship, and the importance of developing networks. Findings indicated that when transitional challenges are not addressed, it can impede the overall workforce experience, with significant similarities and few differences based on rank. Findings may be used by local, state, and federal human resource development professionals and organizations to promote positive social change through designing and implementing best practices to enhance the transitional experiences of post-9/11 women veterans into the civilian workforce.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, SFC Jose Salazar (retired), my hero who has supported me throughout this journey and beyond. As a combat veteran and law enforcement officer, you have genuinely shown me what it takes to be persistent and never give up. With all of your sarcastic wit, I will never forget, "If you are going to quit, I don't want to hear about your regret later." Throughout the last 6 years of this PhD journey, I mirrored your passion for serving others and adopted your quitting-is-not-an option attitude. And I am thankful that I did because here I am! Your love and support have truly made this journey worth the effort.

To my daughters, Victoria (17), Ava (11), and Isabella (7), thank you for coming on the ride with me. Looking into your eyes every day and showing you that what you may think is impossible is truly possible has been a delight. In 2003, as a single mother and active-duty soldier, I promised you, Victoria, that we would be OK and that I would make you proud. Well, I hope I did that. Thank you, Ava, for the nights you stayed up with me as I feverishly wrote this dissertation. You are my angel. Isabella, my last heartbeat, I thank you for allowing me the space to grow academically as you grew developmentally. I started this journey when you were only 1-year old and look at us now. To my beautiful, unique, and talented bonus daughters, you ladies have cheered me on during this process, and I am thankful to call you all my daughters and friends. I love you girls to the moon and back.

To my parents, thank you for the strong foundation you set for me. I could not have asked for a more remarkable set of parents. Priscilla, thank you for being mother

number two. To my siblings, thank you all too for this wild ride. As the youngest of six, I am thankful that you all led the way. Finally, to my Mimi, you are my heart!

To my tribe, what would I do without you? You know who you are! To my partner in crime, Dr. Virginia Dick, thank you for seeing something in me 11 years ago that told you I could accomplish this pursuit. We have laughed, cried, and laughed some more through this journey, celebrating after every term. You told me it would be challenging, but you would always be there as a shoulder to lean on. Indeed, you kept your word! Mary Ellen Salzano, thank you, my dear spiritual counselor, thank you for all of the wisdom you have imparted the 20-plus years you have been advocating for women veterans. Thank you for helping me to find my own voice! Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas, you will forever be my "shero," and you were 100% correct; all who wander are not lost.

To the eight post-9/11 women veterans who shared their lives with me, you all make this world a better place. I am eternally thankful for the opportunity to connect and share your stories with the masses. I hold each of you in my heart, and I only hope I made you proud. Thank you for your service to ALL of my fellow women veterans. As long as I have breath, you will not be invisible!

Thank you, God, for your continued grace and mercy!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Little was known about the lived experiences of women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce after September 11, 2001 (9/11). Current academic literature indicated a lack of research addressing the unique challenges faced by women veterans. Most recent studies focused on the obstacles this population has faced in accessing civilian employment, but limited research had been conducted to focus on their experiences within the civilian workplace (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). Greer (2017) suggested that both practitioners and scholars were aware of the disparities related to employment between veteran women and veteran men. However, the gap had received little attention.

The current qualitative study explored the career transitions of post-9/11 women veterans to provide insight into successful or less successful career transitions, with the hope of positively impacting the field of industrial and organizational psychology. This research was designed using the work of Greer (2017), who highlighted the challenges women veterans face as they transition from the military into the civilian workforce. As the presence of women serving in the military increases, it is critical to conduct studies aimed at identifying and addressing their unique challenges after their service; this includes vocational challenges (Brown et al., 2021). There was a need to understand career transitions from the point of view of women veterans. As a result, this research aimed to give women veterans who faced challenging career transitions a voice through sharing their lived experiences.

With less than 1% of the total United States' population serving on active duty since 9/11, most Americans have limited knowledge and understanding of military service and the military-to-civilian transitional experience. Estimates showed between 2014 and 2020, over 1 million service members joined the ranks of the more than 2.4 million veterans who had separated and transitioned from the military back into the civilian world (Vogt et al., 2018). Most veterans successfully navigate the transition process. However, some veterans experience challenges related to transition. These veterans struggle with shifting from a highly structured and disciplined environment to an environment in which they independently make decisions impacting significant aspects of their lives.

Additionally, veterans must negotiate a sense of identity at the individual, community, and societal levels without fellow service members respecting rank held in the military (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019; Mercurio, 2019). Military culture has been identified as a central theme related to transition. Keeling (2018) acknowledged that an ingrained military culture requires a veteran to learn new skills and cultural understandings while adapting to civilian life. Veterans who have deployed, combining military culture with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, face significant challenges related to reintegration and transition (Stern, 2017). Significant challenges related to transition include obtaining civilian employment, handling finances, maintaining physical and mental well-being, and negotiating a sense of identity in their communities (Keeling et al., 2018). The feeling of unpreparedness for civilian life and adaptation to life as a

veteran frequently leads to cultural shock and can have a negative effect on the veteran (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015).

Stern (2017) suggested a key to post-9/11 veterans' successful transition includes obtaining employment. However, finding a new career path and obtaining meaningful employment is a significant challenge faced by transitioning veterans. Dodds and Kiernan (2019) indicated that for many veterans, the only work-related experience comes from their time in the military, and they lack the experience needed for the civilian workforce. In civilian workplaces, veterans are faced with employment barriers, including the inability to communicate relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities to civilian employers; reluctance in requesting supportive services; and evaluating the use of nontransferable military skills (Rae Flat & Rhodes, 2019). Additionally, as post-9/11 veterans enter or return to the civilian workforce, they often must learn the organization's culture, expectations, and norms (Helfant, 2021). This represents a shift from a previous military culture that defined their work environment, with explicit and implicit elements that differs substantially from the civilian workplace (McCormick et al., 2019).

In the United States, post-9/11 women veterans suffer from high unemployment and underemployment rates (Eichler, 2017; Greer, 2017; Reppert et al., 2014). In a recent study, 5.0% of women veterans between the ages of 35 and 44 were unemployed compared to 2.9% of civilian women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). As women veterans transition into the civilian workforce, many expect their military experience to transfer to the civilian workplace. However, transitioning women veterans are met with

different backgrounds and rapidly find an absence in employment interventions geared toward them (Mankowski et al., 2015).

Prior research on women service members and veterans focused on accessing health care and military sexual trauma (Thomas et al., 2018). Prokos and Cabage (2017) drew attention to sparse research on women veteran status and employment. Greer (2017) further asserted that research providing solutions to employment challenges for women veterans was limited. There is a growing body of literature examining the employment outcomes of men and women veterans collectively. However, the collective research can mask challenges that are specific to women veterans. As a result, there is a need for more research on women veterans' employment challenges and outcomes (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). In addition, the limited existing human resource development (HRD) literature on women veterans has concentrated on accessing employment and had rarely focused on women veterans' transitional experiences in the workplace and the impact that gender plays (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019).

This qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned into the civilian workforce within 5 years of separating from the military. Additionally, this study explored the influences of military culture, rank, and identity and their successful or less successful impacts on career transitions. The remainder of this chapter provides the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, significance, and a summary.

Background

Approximately 3.6 million veterans served on active duty between the years 2001 and 2016, and by the year 2020 more than 5 million returned to the community and civilian workforce (Greer, 2017; Stern, 2017). Keeling et al. (2018) suggested that finding employment was one of the most challenging experiences faced by veterans after military service. Loughran (2014) reported that veterans' unemployment rate between the ages of 18 and 65 was higher than the unemployment rates of nonveterans in the same age range. Estimates showed roughly 53% of post-9/11 veterans are unemployed for some time upon their military discharge (Keeling et al., 2018). This unemployment rate was attributed to an array of challenges that contributed to the length of time a post-9/11 veteran was unemployed. At the time of the current study, the COVID-19 pandemic was also a critical factor impacting post-9/11 veteran employment and the labor market. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), in 2020 the unemployment rate for veterans who served on active duty at any time following 9/11 spiked to 7.3%.

Vogt et al. (2018) pointed out a lack of research focusing on post-9/11 veterans' transitional experiences as a significant gap in the literature. Vogt et al. further suggested that studies conducted on post-9/11 veterans' overall well-being have been performed more than a few years following their separation from the military, and the sample population of veterans had an array of separation dates from the military. Therefore, it was vital in the present study, to sample a population of women veterans who transitioned from the military within a specified amount of time.

During the transition process, post-9/11 veterans are confronted with their civilian employer's civilian hiring process and expectations (Minnis, 2017). Similarly, Rae Flat and Rhodes (2019) noted that civilian employers were unfamiliar with how post-9/11 veterans' past military experiences transferred into the civilian workplace. Dirani (2017) suggested veterans could transfer skills learned in the military into the civilian workplace. Dirani also noted the limitations related to civilian employers' knowledge: (a) of military culture in the civilian workplace, (b) experiences veterans brought to the civilian workforce, (c) effective communication strategies, and (d) building trust with veteran employees. These limitations were described to create a cultural divide within the workplace (Rae Flat & Rhodes, 2019).

More recently, civilian employers have started capitalizing on the values brought into the workplace by veterans (Ford, 2017). Civilian employers have been encouraged to hire veterans; Pollak et al. (2019) indicated the practice made good business sense due to veterans' skills and experiences brought to the civilian workplace. The development and implementation of veteran programs have propelled civilian employers to increase their knowledge and strategies to attract, develop, and retain veterans. Additionally, hiring veterans has also attracted considerable attention from HRD professionals to develop interventions to help employees understand military service (Stern, 2017). However, veteran programs and workplace policies designed to aid veterans have been systematically developed for veteran men and have been limited in increasing the employability of women veterans (Greer, 2017). Civilian employers and HRD professionals must have insight into who women veterans are as individuals and who

they were as service members to work efficiently with this population (Reppert et al., 2014).

Women veterans have been described as one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S. military. Brown et al. (2021) reported that 16.70% of the military's active-duty component was composed of women. More than 300,000 women veterans deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) were eligible to pursue roles in combat (Armey, 2020). Constantine and Morton (2018) noted that even though women veterans are the fastest growing veteran population, limited research has been conducted on them. HRD professionals have grown aware of the unique challenges faced by women veterans, but little attention has been given to them in the field of research (Greer, 2017). Hirudayaraj and Clay (2019) reported the absence of research related to exploring women veterans within the private sector and their challenges related to career development and advancements.

Most studies conducted on women veterans in the United States have been quantitative, using gender as a descriptive variable and lacking examination of women veterans' postmilitary lived experience (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). Research has focused on physical disabilities, mental health, socioeconomic issues, stigma, and stereotyping (Greer, 2017; Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). The limited research hinders the chances of improving the employability of post-9/11 women veterans and decreases the opportunities for added support of evidence-based solutions for HRD professionals. This topic needed to be explored to serve women veterans. Additionally, research needs to

detail the experiences of women veterans to include their narratives (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to explore the lived experiences and challenges of post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned within 5 years of this study from the military into the civilian workforce. The literature review presented in Chapter 2 indicated that women veterans are an understudied population. Individualized experiences of career transitions have not been addressed, and this study adds to the growing body of literature for HRD professionals working to employ and support post-9/11 women veterans.

Problem Statement

The lived experiences and challenges facing post-9/11 women veterans in transitioning into the civilian workforce has become an issue in need of thorough exploration. Kintzle et al. (2015) identified seven employment challenges faced by veterans that included unaddressed behavioral health issues, lack of preparation for civilian employment, a continuation of military identity, criminal backgrounds or dishonorable discharges, stigma related to hiring veterans, veterans' age, and appropriate job availability. Vogt et al. (2020) indicated that the challenges faced by recently separated post-9/11 recently separated veterans differ from those who separated from the military several years ago.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2017), post-9/11 women veterans are among the fastest growing populations. Estimates showed that women service members will transition to the status of women veterans at a yearly rate of 18,000

for the next 10 years (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Strong et al. (2018) suggested that it is imperative to understand women veterans' unique needs with their expected increase. Greer (2017) pointed out that women veterans face unique experiences transitioning. Experiences include premilitary life trauma, military sexual trauma (MST), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental and physical disabilities (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Haskell et al. (2011) also reported women veterans were more prevalent in having physiological complications and mental health conditions in comparison to male veterans. Strong et al. (2017) compared women veterans to male veterans and determined women veterans were more racially diverse and younger; had higher education rates, divorce rates, and remarriage rates; and had higher rates of living in poverty. Leslie and Koblinsky (2017) suggested that to address the needs of women veterans transitioning into civilian life, there needed to be more investigations of women veterans' subjective experiences and challenges related to their transitions.

Dodds and Kiernan (2019) pointed out that although there has been an increase in military research, gender-specific military research focused on women veterans remains underrepresented in the literature. Dodds and Kiernan further emphasized that only 2% of the literature mentioned women veterans and even fewer studies focused solely on women veterans. Research conducted on women veterans has focused on PTSD and MST (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Additional studies have focused on education, but less is known about women veterans' transition into the civilian workforce (Prokos & Cabage, 2017).

Estimates showed of the 3.6 million veterans who served in the United States Armed Forces from 2001 to 2016, approximately 17% were women (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Recent years have witnessed a growing role of women serving in the military, including deployments to combat zones (Eichler, 2017). Leslie and Koblinsky (2017) reported almost 12% of women veterans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan in support of OEF and OIF. During the OEF and OIF conflicts, the role of women veterans included but was not limited to patrolling dangerous areas, guarding prisoners and bases, providing emergency health care, handling human remains, driving convoys, gathering intelligence, and commanding battalions (Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). Serving in those roles alongside their male counterparts often brought women veterans into harm's way (Armey, 2020). The various roles and experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan can cause women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce challenges in translating their skills and experiences into civilian workforce positions.

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (2018) reported that finding a job was the second most significant challenge faced by women transitioning from the military. Ford (2017) noted that transitioning women veterans had a more extended period of unemployment than male veterans. The nature of veteran unemployment has been a subject of growing interest; in 2015, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 women veterans was 6.4% compared to the 5.7% unemployment rate for male veterans (Greer, 2017). With the unemployment rates rising as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rates have increased to 7.2% for post-9/11 women veterans (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Lawrence et al. (2021) furthered the point and noted that post-9/11

women veterans were at a higher risk of poor occupational outcomes, which also impacted other areas related to overall functioning, including family and psychosocial functioning. Understanding the complexity of unemployment is essential, and a need exists for more research on the effects of women veterans' status related to employability (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Greer (2017) further suggested the need to add to the body of literature to develop research-based programs to help women veterans overcome unique challenges during their career transition and gain meaningful employment in the civilian sector.

Historically, career development programming assisted the needs of male veterans during transitions. These programs have been shown to be less effective for increasing the employability of women veterans (Greer, 2017). Minnis (2017) suggested the need for an increase in career and HRD research focusing on women veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce. One significant challenge women veterans face is the inability to translate their military skill set and experiences into the civilian workforce (Davis & Minnis, 2017). The lack of research has impacted HRD professionals, leaving them with a limited understanding of the unique transitional challenges faced by women veterans. The sparse research has also made it difficult for HRD professionals to design and implement programs and supports necessary to help women veterans transfer their skills from military service to the civilian workforce (Greer, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to explore the lived experiences and challenges of post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from military service into the civilian workforce. The study explored career transitions as a phenomenon. The study findings may inform academic, military, and HRD professionals of the challenges related to women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce from the subjective experiences of women veterans. Additionally, the research findings may aid in developing and implementing women veteran programming in the civilian workforce.

Research Questions

Considering the research problem, the following research question (RQ) and subquestions (SQs) were developed:

RQ: What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce?

SQ1: What are the perceptions of enlisted and officer women veterans?

SQ2: Where are the similarities and differences in their perceptions?

Theoretical Framework

In this qualitative study, women veterans' transition from the military into the civilian workforce was explored through the lens of transition theory (see Schlossberg, 1981). This theory was deemed relevant because it focused on experiences that impacted and changed people's lives. According to transition theory, an individual's ability to cope with a transition is based on their available resources when a change occurred. Transition theory as a theoretical framework has been used extensively in the adult career transition

literature (Greer, 2017). Therefore, utilizing transition theory in this qualitative study aided in analyzing post-9/11 women veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce. The goal for the study's findings is to help local and state agencies, federal agencies, employers, and HRD professionals develop and implement women veteran-centric programs and policies. For the purpose of this study, transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981) was applied to post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military and into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years; how an individual views a transition can often present unique challenges, opportunities, and transformation (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg (1981) described the principal resources or factors known as the four Ss, which relate to the individual's situation, self, support, and strategies. The theory states that transitions can differ based on the individual, and as a result, outcomes can vary (Schlossberg, 1981). Adler and Castro (2019) applied transition theory to occupational health and well-being. Taking adjustments in the workplace into consideration, Adler and Castro provided three steps to improve an individual's transition. The three steps were based on the individual's control of the transitioning experience and included examining whether a situation could be changed to enhance the transition experience; the second step involved an examination of the possibility of the individual altering the meaning of the problem using various strategies, and the last step was to manage transitional strength in the event that the other two steps failed (Adler & Castro, 2019).

Greer (2017) applied Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory to women veteran research. From the lens of transition theory, Greer viewed the transition as the time between a person's discharge from the military to full integration into the civilian workforce. An examination was conducted to explore components of transition theory, including the self, situation, support, and strategies. Greer's use of transition theory provided a framework for HRD professionals planning to improve the transition experience of women veterans into the civilian workforce.

Post-9/11 women veterans have unique challenges related to transitions that can negatively impact them their relationships with others and their work if adequate resources are not provided. For the purpose of this study, exploration of the four Ss included how Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory applied to post-9/11 women veterans transitioning from military service into the civilian workforce, and how they found adequate resources to cope with work transitions.

Nature of the Study

Using a qualitative IPA approach as a guide, I explored the lived experiences of eight post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce. The participant criteria included women veterans who served as either enlisted personnel or officer personnel, who were currently living in the United States, and who transitioned from any of the five military branches within the last 5 years. This allowed me to compare the experiences of each of these groups.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), researchers using phenomenological approaches are interested in an individual's lived experience of a phenomenon. In the

current study, career transitions among women veterans were the defined phenomenon. To maintain consistency on the focus of transitions, I used Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework, which allowed for the examination of the four Ss (i.e., situation, self, support, and strategies) related to the experiences of the eight transitioned post-9/11 women veterans. The details of the methodological approach for this qualitative study are discussed in Chapter 3.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to help the reader understand each word's meaning in this qualitative study.

9/11: The date of September 11, 2001, when acts of terrorism impacted New York City; New York; Washington, DC; and Shanksville, Pennsylvania (Yuval et al., 2011).

Career transition: A period in which an individual changes their role, including changing jobs or careers (Van Rensburg & Ukpere, 2014).

Combat veterans: A veteran who was ordered to participate in supporting activities against a known enemy. This veteran is seen as being sent into harm's way (Coleman, 2008).

Operation Enduring Freedom: Associated with combat deployments in Afghanistan, this mission focused on fighting the global war on terrorism. It began shortly after 9/11 and ended on December 28, 2014 (Waszak & Holmes, 2017).

Operation Iraqi Freedom: Associated with combat deployments to Iraq from March 2003 to August 2010 (Waszak & Holmes, 2017).

Operation New Dawn: The renamed war in Iraq from September 2010 to December 15, 2011 (Waszak & Holmes, 2017).

Reintegration: Veterans coming back home after deployment to community life (Maiocco & Smith, 2016).

Transition: An event that results in changes in assumptions about oneself and their world. This event can change the individual's behavior and their social relationships (Schlossberg, 1981).

Women veterans: For this qualitative study, veterans were classified by gender. Coleman (2008) defined a veteran as a person who previously served in a branch of the United States military for a length of time in either an active or reserve component.

Assumptions

As a researcher, I assumed that all responses from the eight post-9/11 women veteran participants were authentic and accurate reflections of their transitional experiences, and that during the semistructured interview process, participants felt comfortable speaking candidly about their experiences via Zoom. I also assumed, based on the multiple lived experiences of former enlisted and officer post-9/11 women veterans, numerous realities and potential biases were present.

Scope and Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was that all participants identified as female post-9/11 veterans who voluntarily shared their lived experiences. The research participants may not have fully represented the norm for all women veterans. Additionally, the small sample size may have limited the insight for developing strategies to enhance career

development techniques in the civilian workplace. Another delimitation of this qualitative study was that the data were reflective of a 5-year window after transitioning from the military. For those women veterans with an earlier transition before the 5-year window of time, perceptions may have varied.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included the difficulty of recruiting women veterans who faced challenges while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. The COVID-19 pandemic played a role in the recruitment process. It took a significant amount of time to get participants to sign up and participate. Additionally, the inclusion criteria limited the potential participant pool. However, with the multiple modifications to transitional programs for veterans, focus on the last 5 years was imperative. Another limitation of this study was the geographic location of participants and its impact on transferability. Based on the study's findings, transferability may or may not apply to other transitioning women veterans depending on urban or rural settings. Lastly, as the researcher and a woman veteran who experienced challenges during my transition, reducing biases was challenging. I separated my role as the sole investigator by bracketing my personal experience and feelings to ensure my ability to identify the essence of the experiences of the women veteran participants.

Significance

Women veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce have faced unique challenges that have been understudied in scholarly literature. In the United States, there are over 2 million women veterans, and by the year 2043, the U.S.

Department of Veterans Affairs (2017) projected an increase of 50%. As a result of the sparse scholarly literature related to post-9/11 women veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce, there was a need to address the transition phenomenon. This study was essential to HRD professionals because they are positioned to assist women veterans with career development and employability. Understanding the lived experiences of women veterans in the civilian workforce may assist HRD professionals in developing and implementing gender-specific policies and programs related to post-9/11 women veterans.

Greer (2017) reported that women veterans were underserved by existing programs and policies in the civilian workplace, primarily because the programs and policies implemented assumed that the veteran employees were men. Furthermore, Lloyd-Hazlett (2016) reported that due to the dearth of research on women veterans gaining employment, there is limited understanding of how to help women veterans overcome the barriers and challenges related to transitioning into the civilian workplace. The current study addressed the gap in the literature by exploring women veterans' lived experiences and challenges in transitioning into the civilian workforce.

With an increase in studying the phenomenon related to career transitioning and women veterans, I hoped that the results of this qualitative study would contribute to closing the literature gap pertaining to gender and would reduce the disparities regarding veteran womens' employment. This study aimed to increase the HRD professional's military cultural awareness related to women veterans. Findings may be used to develop and implement programming to support and retain the post-9/11 women veterans' talent

pool. Finally, I hoped to conduct a qualitative study that gave a voice to the post-9/11 women veterans who have been deemed "invisible veterans" (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). Allowing each of the eight post-9/11 women veterans to share their personal narratives and provide recommendations to the field and their fellow women veterans afforded them the opportunity to be a part of this social change.

This study has implications for positive social change and may contribute to the growing body of literature related to post-9/11 women veterans transitioning into the civilian workplace. As post-9/11 women veterans continue to transition from the military into the civilian workforce, providing this population with adequate supportive services is imperative. As women veterans continue to join the civilian workforce, HRD professionals must act as change agents and become culturally aware of the experiences of veteran women to provide an environment fostering career development. This research intends to equip HRD professionals with knowledge to develop and implement career development programs and policies with women veterans in mind.

This study may help HRD professionals develop workplace peer support programs or employee resource groups designed for women veterans. Workplace peer support programs improve overall employee well-being and employee relationships (Agarwal et al., 2020). Employee resource groups or affinity groups would allow women veterans to collaborate on shared identity and military cultural experiences. Designing these gender-specific programs would promote connectedness in the workplace, enabling women veterans to network and engage with other women veterans who have successfully transitioned. Also, implementing women veterans' supportive programs in

the workplace would allow women veterans to support one another and would reduce stress related to transitioning into the civilian workplace.

Summary

In this study, the researcher explored the challenges and perceptions of eight post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. This study furthered the work of Greer (2017) and aided in providing lived experiences and perceptions to HRD professionals and researchers focused on women veterans, using semistructured interviews and IPA as a guide to capture the participants' lived experiences. Chapter 2, reviews Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework used for this study. Additionally, the literature review focuses on the history of women veterans and past research conducted on post-9/11 women veterans and their transitions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent years, the field of HRD has begun to explore the needs and challenges faced by post-9/11 veterans (Kirchner, 2018; Minnis, 2017; Stern, 2017). The nature of veteran employment has been the subject of several recent veteran studies. Though researchers have explored the employment challenges faced by veterans, there has been a lack of studies addressing the specific experiences and employment challenges faced by women veterans. Indeed, Prokos and Cabage (2017) noted the growing body of literature on the employment of men and women veterans, emphasizing the need for studies directly focused on veteran women. Although previous veteran studies offered practical insight, they provided only partial scholarly findings related to women veterans.

The relevance of the current qualitative study is demonstrated in this chapter by providing a synopsis of the literature related to the research problem. Hirudayaraj and Clay (2019) noted the lived experiences of veteran women in the civilian workplace had received minimal attention in the HRD literature. Existing research on veteran women's employment focused on the challenges they faced while obtaining jobs rather than on their civilian-workplace experiences (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019; Krigbaum et al., 2020). The gap in the literature has impacted HRD professionals in furthering their understanding of the needs, challenges, and potential barriers faced by women veterans as they enter the civilian workforce. With the increasing number of women veterans entering the civilian workforce, the effect of their veteran status on employment is a topic that has received minimal research (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). This chapter outlines what

is currently known regarding women veterans' transitions and why this study aided in filling the gap in scholarly HRD literature.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans transitioning from military service into the civilian workforce. This chapter summarizes current, scholarly peer-reviewed literature related to the history of women serving in the U.S. Military, post-9/11 women veterans, military-to-civilian transitions, transitional challenges faced by women veterans, and understanding women veterans in the civilian workforce. Chapter 2 also focuses on a discussion of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and its relation to the transition of women veterans into the civilian workforce. The literature review concludes in a summary of findings and the importance of studying this topic.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review for this study included a search of the following academic databases for recent scholarly peer-reviewed articles published in English: PsycINFO, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Sage Journals, Thoreau database, Business Source Complete, and the Military and Government Collection. The process of searching for literature included identifying keywords related to the study's topic. Keywords searched included *veterans, military*, *employment*, *veteran reintegration*, *veteran talent management*, *onboarding*, *military transitions*, *transition theory*, *career development*, *post-deployment*, *reintegration*, *women veterans*, *gender*, *experiences*, *identity*, *military culture*, *rank*, *combat veteran*, *employment barriers*, *civilian workforce*, and *social support*.

Approximately 150 scholarly articles spanning the last 10 years were screened and identified as relevant. Following the initial screening, a narrowed focus included articles that ranged from 2014 to 2021. The reference lists of critical articles were reviewed for sourcing additional scholarly literature. The screening process concluded with the selection of 135 literature sources and recent, scholarly peer-reviewed articles for the literature review.

Overview of Transition Theory

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory served as the guiding framework to explore the phenomenon of transitional challenges faced by women veterans in the civilian workplace. In research, transition theory has been used to explore adult career transitions, and due to the purpose of this study, it was deemed a reasonable framework. Transition theory asserts the significance of transitions and understanding how individuals adjust (Adler & Castro, 2019). Anderson et al. (2012) reported that there are three major parts related to the model: the transition identification and transition process, the Four system, and strengthening resources.

Transition Identification and the Transition Process

Identifying the transition allows an individual to ask what type of change is getting ready to occur. Experiences of transitions will vary for individuals, and as a result, it is imperative to explore how a specific transition changed an individual's role, routines, relationships, and assumptions (Anderson et al., 2012). Although significant life transitions can be anticipated or unanticipated, they can also change the course of an individual's life. Examples of anticipated transitions related to the HRD field include

starting a new job or retiring. When an individual's transition is anticipated, they can plan and consider multiple options. Alternatively, unanticipated transitions are unpredictable and may include giving up work based on illness, being fired, or being demoted. When a person faces unanticipated transitions, it presents unique challenges, and the individual often does not have the time to plan effectively.

Individuals transitioning may question their values, redefine their identity, and shift their roles and responsibilities (Reppert et al., 2014). Transitional experiences vary by the individual, and as a result the outcomes of transitions will be different (Schlossberg, 1981). The transition process pinpoints where an individual is in transitioning and their reactions based on the time frame of occurrence. Anderson et al. (2012) noted that as adults go through a transitional process, they may feel confused and need some form of assistance. Greer (2017) pointed out that transitions can also be positive or negative. Based on the current literature, determining the utilization of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as a framework appeared to be meaningful in analyzing transitions and providing recommendations related to interventions helpful in facilitating smooth transitions.

Four Ss: Self, Situation, Social Support, and Strategies

Schlossberg's transition theory presented four major factors known as the Four Ss that influence an individual's experiences in the transition process (Adler & Castro, 2019; Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). These four factors provide a way to identify the resources an individual has access to during a transition. Depending on these four factors, everyone will deal with their transition differently. The four coping factors include self,

situation, social support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1981). Self is the first factor related to the individual's strengths during the transition. Its focus is related to personal factors, including personal outlook, personal control, motivation, optimism, demographic characteristics, and values (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). Situation is the second factor. It refers to the transition details, including the timing, duration, trigger, personal control and feelings, and coexisting stressors related to the transition (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014).

The third factor is social support and is related to the individual's support system, including family and friends, who can aid the individual in their transition (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). This factor also encompasses networks and larger organizations used for support (Adler & Castro, 2019). Finally, the fourth factor is strategies. This factor is related to any coping strategies an individual uses to lessen the transition burden (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014). Reppert et al. (2014) offered a few examples of effective strategies individuals can use to cope with transitions: joining professional organizations, volunteering, attending conferences, and journaling. Additionally, strengthening resources allows the individual to utilize new strategies based on the Four Ss (Anderson et al., 2012).

Transition Theory and Post-9/11 Women Veterans

Transition theory as it relates to military studies is cogent at this point and time. Through utilization of the transition theory framework, this qualitative study may further the knowledge of HRD professionals and may aid in the development and implementation of programs and policies that can facilitate successful transitions of post-

9/11 veteran women. Also, Anderson et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of considering contextual factors like gender to determine whether these factors directly or indirectly influence the transition and how a woman might perceive their available resources. Reppert et al. (2014) suggested using this model as a resource to help veterans manage their concerns related to their transitions; additionally, the researchers suggested using the model to explore women veterans' challenges with employment and career development.

Based on a veteran woman's transitional event, she may perceive the situation to be manageable if initiated by her. However, as she navigates the transition process from the military into her new civilian life, it is vital to assess the situation by observing any triggers, duration, and the change of roles (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Critical triggers to observe include whether the transitional event was anticipated or unanticipated; for example, whether the veteran woman was retiring from the military (anticipated) or whether was she injured and could not continue serving (unanticipated). Upon transition, women veterans notice a change in their sense of self due to their military experience and note the experiences contribute to a new identity (Demers, 2013). Based on her discharge category, a woman veteran may feel a loss of her identity (Greer, 2017). Furthermore, depending on the woman veteran's rank, she may also feel this as another significant loss. Additionally, if other stressful factors include reintegrating into her family role or suffering from physical or behavioral-health challenges, these experiences can increase the difficulty in transitioning.

Reppert et al. (2014) suggested that resilience, adaptability, meaning making, and role salience are essential for women veterans to identify as internal resources related to the self. As women veterans' transition, they trade their military identity for a civilian identity. In addition, Greer (2017) noted that women are trading their up-tempo military career for one that may be reduced in responsibilities. Questions asked during this stage include "was the transition from the military into the civilian workplace planned?" "was the discharge from the military voluntary or involuntary?" and "was it the catalyst that triggered the woman veteran to enter the civilian workforce?" (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015).

Women veterans who voluntarily leave the military or complete their contracted term of service might have a different perspective on transition compared to woman veterans who might have been discharged. Social support is seen as an aid in women veterans adjusting to their civilian identities during their transition into the workplace; social support is also vital to overall well-being. In addition, social supports like connecting to a larger organization or networking with peers can help the woman veteran integrate their military identity with their new civilian identity so both identities can effectively function (Thompson et al., 2017). Women veterans have been reported to have fewer social supports than their male counterparts; as a result, this is a critical factor to explore (Reppert et al., 2014).

Finally, it is important to consider the strategies women veterans implement to ease the challenges related to their transition into the civilian workplace (Pellegrino & Hoggan, 2015). It is imperative to know whether the veteran woman modified her

situation, changed the meaning of her challenges, and effectively managed transitional stress. Thompson et al. (2017) noted that when veterans experience identity challenges during transition, more work needs to be conducted for the individual to identify effective coping strategies. As each woman veteran factors in the Four Ss, they can further comprehend what it takes to successfully transition into civilian life and the civilian workforce successfully.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The past 40 years have shown an increase in women who have served in the military (Mattocks et al., 2020). In recent studies, it has been reported that women comprised 14.5% of active-duty personnel, 18% of the Reserves and National Guard personnel, and approximately 8% of the entire veteran population (Amara, 2020; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). As the number of women serving in the military increases, it is projected by 2040 that roughly 18% of the total population of veterans will be women (Afari et al., 2015). Post-9/11 women veterans are the largest cohort of veteran women to have served during war times with actual involvement and engagement in combat zones (Maiocco & Smith, 2016).

Historical Perspective

Women have served in the United States Armed Forces in various capacities throughout America's history. Kamarck (2019) reported women's service in the military dates to the Revolutionary War. Early history depicted women serving in informal roles. Women became noticed as a regular part of the military in 1901 during the Spanish American War (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Subsequently, they achieved

integral roles in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 allowed women to become a permanent part of the Armed Forces by Congress. However, a gender cap restricted the percentage of women serving to 2% (Disabled American Veterans, 2018). In 1967, the restriction was repealed, and the number of women entering the military grew significantly, changing the trajectory of women's service to include roles in the Vietnam War (Disabled American Veterans, 2018; Kamarack, 2019).

Before the 1970s, the contributions made by women who served went unrecognized by academia, politicians, the media, and the public. As a marginalized population, women veterans were referred to as "invisible" (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). One of the most important events of the 1970s included the military's shift towards an All-Volunteer Force, which provided an increased opportunity for women to serve due to shortages of qualified male recruits (Kamarck, 2019; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Changes to policy in the 1990s allowed women equal opportunities to serve, including serving in combat roles (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015). Since then, the percentage of women serving has considerably increased from 2% to approximately 15% (Eichler, 2017).

The role of women serving changed considerably over time to include serving in combat zones. During the pre-9/11 era, women service members fully integrated into units and deployed during the Persian Gulf War; approximately 40,000 women deployed and played vital roles in theater (Maiocco & Smith, 2016; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). The increased roles in combat zones began women service member's

visibility to the public and media. Subsequent to the tragic events of September 11, 2001, also known as the post-9/11 era, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provided women the opportunity to regularly deploy in support of OEF/OIF/OND with male service members (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Specifically, between 2001 and 2016, 3.6 million veterans served on active duty; of those, 18% were women (Greer, 2017). Estimates also show that over 280,000 women supporting the Global War on Terrorism were deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq (Disabled American Veterans, 2018; Eichler, 2017). Historically, this marked the largest cohort of women to actively serve in combat (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017).

Today's Women Service Members

Almost two decades have shown a steady increase in the number of women enlisting into the military. Estimates show 20% of recruits are women, 15% of women are serving on Active Duty, and 18% make up the Reserves and the National Guard (Afari et al., 2015; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). Furthermore, a breakdown of women serving report statistics related to the percentage of enlisted women and commissioned officers serving on active duty. For example, Kamarck (2019) pointed out the percentages of women serving as enlisted personnel: 20% in the Navy and Air Force, 14% in the Army, and 8.7% in the Marine Corps. Whereas women accounted for 20% of all commissioned officers in the Army, Air Force, and Navy, and 7.9% of the Marine Corps (Kamarck, 2019).

Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn

Approximately 2.4 million service members served in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in support of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT; Minnis, 2017; Waszak & Holmes, 2017). Known as the post-9/11 service era, service members who served during the timeframe served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and/or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), with a mission of fighting against Islamic terrorist groups (Caamal, 2019). OEF service members fought in Afghanistan from September 2001–December 2014, whereas OIF service members fought primarily in Iraq from March 2003–December 2011 (Waszak & Holmes, 2017). Less than a month later, the conflict was renamed Operation New Dawn (OND), and it was fought from September 2010–December 2011.

The ongoing conflicts commanded a large portion of service members to deploy more than once to defend the United States against terrorism (Salazar Torreon, 2016). Some troops voluntarily redeployed in support of the conflicts in the Middle East (Smith & True, 2014). With less than 1% of the United States population serving on active duty, it was the first time in history where so few service members fought for the freedom of so many citizens (Stern, 2017). A residual effect of an all-volunteer force was the unawareness and lack of understanding by Americans of challenges faced by those transitioning due to combat experiences (Demers, 2013). Challenges most documented due to combat deployments included mental health, physical health, and substance use issues (Ahern et al., 2015).

Roles of Women in the Armed Forces

Women's military career experiences varied based on their aptitude, skills, and interest (Redmond et al., 2015). However, while serving in the earlier OEF/OIF/OND conflicts, women were excluded from combat roles and units but served in various capacities, including commanding battalions, gathering intelligence, guarding bases and prisoners, driving convoys, patrolling dangerous areas, providing emergency health care as medics, handling human remains, and various other hazardous occupations (Disabled American Veterans, 2018; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). Due to their varied roles in the OEF/OIF/OND conflicts, reports indicated women's exposure to stressful and traumatic events compounded their experience in combat zones (Heineman, 2017; Strong et al., 2015). Afari et al. (2015) further noted that roughly 74% of women veterans experienced direct and indirect hostile action during deployments to the Middle East.

In 2013, the Pentagon announced that it would lift the ban on women serving in combat roles; this decision allowed approximately 237,000 military occupations to open to women (Disabled American Veterans, 2018). The decision to lift the ban was due to the federal government and the Department of Defense's recognition of women's service and contributions. However, before the formal ban, women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq frequently experienced combat situations without frontline exposure (Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). Official changes related to the lifted ban took effect in 2016 (Afari et al., 2015; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). The ban's lift allowed women service members to train and serve along with their male counterparts in peacetime and wartime. Investigations have shown evidence of the lift and the increase in women joining roles

only allocated for male service members in the past (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2017). Moore (2017) provided a clear example of the ban's lift. In 2016, two women became graduates of the U.S. Army Ranger School. Shortly after, 10 women commissioned officers who graduated from the first gender-integrated class of Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course made history (Moore, 2017).

In fiscal year 2017, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (2017) reported the three most common military occupational specialties (MOS) for women were administrators, medics, and supply personnel. Ample evidence suggested an increased visibility of women serving in the Armed Forces and their roles. The increased visibility has allowed a shift in military culture and societal culture related to gender (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017). Due to the break in gender roles, women are slowly creating personal narratives sharing their experiences in nontraditional roles as opposed to societal gender norms (Disabled American Veterans, 2018).

Post-9/11 Women Veterans by the Numbers

Post-9/11 women veterans are the fastest growing group within the veteran population; they also comprised the largest group serving extensively in combat operations (Disabled American Veterans, 2018; Leslie & Koblinsky, 2017). In 2000, women made up 6% of the veteran population; in 2015, it was reported women made up 9.4% of the veteran population. Estimates show by 2040, women will make up 18% of the total veteran population in the United States (Maiocco & Smith, 2016). Undoubtedly, the number of women veterans is increasing due to more women joining the Armed Forces. Based on this review of literature, even with the increase in women entering the

military, relatively little is known about the population. Indeed, researchers know little regarding women's military experience and its impact on transitioning into the civilian workforce (Padavic & Prokos, 2017). Limited existing research has shown the experiences of women in the military include adopting a strong work ethic, camaraderie, structure, military policies, and the danger related to war (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015).

Military-to-Civilian Transition Process

By 2020, more than five million veterans returned to civilian communities and joined the civilian workforce in various capacities (Stern, 2017). The term transition refers to a person's responses and reactions to change as they go through life (Williams et al., 2018). During the life course, all people experience some form of transition. Similarly, during a veteran's military career, multiple transitions are encountered. Adler and Castro (2019) presented several transitions that included a shift from the civilian culture to the military's culture, frequent relocations, combat deployments, and departures. After a combat deployment, a transition is a period when a service member leaves their military community and reintegrates into civilian life (Cooper et al., 2018; Grimell, 2017). The military to civilian transition (MCT) has been described as a momentous major life transition (Thompson et al., 2017). Robinson et al. (2017) further defined MCT as:

> The process through which military veterans and their immediate family members achieve and maintain a stable level of psychological, physical, and economic well-being. They are satisfied with their abilities to meet their immediate and long-term economic needs and are committed to a post-military identity and a

> sense of purpose that allows them to engage in productive work and social connectivity commensurate with individual goals, desires, and abilities. (p. 8)

Robinson et al.'s research indicated the process appeared complicated, and if not achieved, may result in post military service challenges.

There is a multitude of military values embedded in veterans, even some specific to branches of service. Redmond et al. (2015) identified discipline, self-sacrifice, obedience, and courage as core military values. Equally important are service members placing the mission before personal needs. This contrasts with civilian values, which are noted as individualistic (Demers, 2013). With regards to values, Dodds and Kiernan (2019) argued veterans often struggled during the transition period with feelings of not belonging due to the lack of family, friends, and colleagues not sharing or understanding the military experience.

Prior studies compared veterans of past wars to veterans of the OEF/OIF/OND conflicts and indicated that more OEF/OIF/OND veterans found significant difficulty transitioning than previous generations. For example, Stern (2017) reported approximately 72% of all veterans described transitioning back into civilian life with little difficulty, whereas 44% of post-9/11 veterans reported difficulties in transitions. Another study conducted by Robinson et al. (2017) reported two-thirds of veterans found their transition period to be problematic; and, as a result, felt unprepared to adjust to their civilian lives. Overall, research findings suggested the transitional process challenged veterans if they were not prepared for their transition into civilian life and potentially caused long-term effects when assimilation was unsuccessful.

Military Culture and Structure

Those joining the military come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Recruits often joined the military to better themselves or to participate and contribute to a more significant cause (Smith & True, 2014). Before joining the military, many service members have limited experience working in the civilian workforce (Krigbaum et al., 2020). During basic training, recruits' civilian identities are stripped and replaced with a military identity, resulting in service members' integration into the role of Soldiers, Airmen, Sailors, and Marines (Demers, 2013; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Conformity, hierarchy, structure, and comradery are vital components of military culture (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). One key aspect relative to the military's structure is uniformity. Uniformity in the military is often emphasized by core values embedded in all aspects of the service member's military experience (Redmond et al., 2015). Moreover, Redmond et al. (2015), found that service members shared similar experiences related to the military's culture, including languages, values, symbols, and shared experiences.

Civilians often misunderstand the culture of the military. Many civilians lack the understanding of the military and the ingrained culture of its members. Furthermore, civilians are often unaware of the issues stemming from combat experiences. According to Mobbs and Bonanno (2018), Pew Research Center reported half of the participating civilians noted the wars in the Middle East did not have significance in their lives. Mobbs and Bonanno also noted that approximately 40% of civilians stereotyped veterans with thoughts that they all suffered from mental health disorders. In 2017, the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) released a published report noting women veterans

believed there was a need to educate the public and policymakers about their leadership capacities, challenges faced transitioning, and the experiences and narratives of their service.

Veterans transitioning into civilian society experience profound feelings related to being lost due to the loss of their military culture and community (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). Studies conducted on transition suggested veterans were accustomed to the military's culture, which, as stated, included hierarchical structure, rules, steady income, social networks, and a plethora of support and resources (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Furthermore, service members' needs were filtered through their branch of service and military community. Outcomes for service members transitioning from the military included shifting from military to civilian culture, changes in work structure, and a shift in personal and social identity (Castro & Kintzle, 2016). Veterans who felt a loss of identity often found it challenging to connect with civilians and often decided not to disclose their military experiences (Thompson et al., 2017). Considering the reported loss of veterans' personal and social identities, it can be concluded that transitions can harm a veterans' well-being (Thompson et al., 2017).

Due to the nature of complex transitions, increased supports for veterans were made available. Estimates show roughly 200,000 service members transition into civilian life annually (Anderson & Goodman, 2014; Vogt et al., 2020). Before separation from the military, service members are mandated to participate in the Department of Defenses' (DOD) transition assistance program (TAP) or pre-separation counseling 90 days from discharge (Kamarack, 2019; Keeling et al., 2019).

The TAP foundation began in 1991, upon Congress' recognition for service members to prepare for their transition from the military into their civilian lives. The DOD administers TAP through an interagency collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor, Department of Education, Homeland Security, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Small Business Administration (Whitworth et al., 2020). Whitworth et al. (2020) noted TAP recently adapted to include counseling related to employment assistance, VA benefits, and developing an Individual Transition Plan (ITP). The newly modified program is often referred to as Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success), and is utilized to help each service member define their individual journey to transition thereby establishing their own next steps in pursuit of a career outside of the military.

The TAP provides pre-separation services and briefings to aid transitioning service members in setting goals and creating individual transition plans (Collins et al., 2014). A primary objective of the TAP is to assist service members in becoming career-ready upon their transition into the civilian workforce (Keeling et al., 2019). Sessions included during the TAP aid veterans in translating their military skills, training, knowledge, and experience to civilian careers; additionally, the Department of Labor provides a workshop covering topics related to resume writing, interview techniques, and job search skills (Keeling et al., 2019). Despite being well-intended, the TAP tends to be short-termed and only focused on the service member's initial job search strategies and activities (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). Moreover, Keeling et al. (2019) contended not

much is known about veterans applying the skills learned during the TAP and its effectiveness in veterans securing meaningful civilian employment.

Military Ranks: Enlisted and Officers

The military is said to be comprised of hierarchical organizations with all levels of authority clearly defined amongst its members (Kapp, 2018). Military rank is the foundation of the military management structure and is embedded within a veteran's perception of self (Mattila et al., 2017; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2017). Service members may be enlisted, warrant officers, or commissioned officers. On average, there is one military officer to five enlisted service members (Redmond et al., 2015). Each rank category has specialized training courses, roles, responsibilities, authority, and areas of expertise (Mattila et al., 2017; Reppert et al., 2014). Military rank can be viewed as a badge of leadership, and as one's rank increases, so does one's responsibility (Reppert et al., 2014). Military rank also denotes seniority, commanding power, social status, and is essential for leadership positions (Mattila et al., 2017). Military rank was also said to be so intrinsic that it becomes a part of the veteran's identity (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018).

When one decides to join the military, one must choose to either enlist or accept a commission as an officer (Redmond et al., 2015). Enlisted personnel are required to have at least a high school diploma or its equivalent, whereas a commissioned officer is required to have at minimum, a bachelor's degree (Redmond et al., 2015). Kapp (2018) reported that enlisted personnel made up approximately 81% of the Armed Forces, while officers made up just 19%. Duties and expectations of enlisted personnel and commissioned officers vary. Mid-level noncommissioned officers (NCOs) makeup

approximately 44% of enlisted personnel and lead small units, ranging from a small number of personnel to more than a few dozen personnel (Kapp, 2018). Whereas senior noncommissioned officers advise and support commanders and mid-level NCOs (Kapp, 2018). Commissioned officers include warrant, company grade, field grade, and general officers (Kapp, 2018). Kapp noted that warrant officers conduct specialized or technical work within their MOS; whereas company-grade officers lead units with personnel ranging from several dozen to several hundred, field grade officers lead several hundred to several thousand, and generals lead organizations with several thousand to hundreds of thousands of military personnel. Stern (2017) noted that between 1973 and 2010, enlisted women service members grew from 42,278 to 166,729. Stern further contended the number of women serving as commissioned officers grew from 12,750 to 35,341. That aside, women are still underrepresented in higher military ranks, and their promotion rates are lower than males' (Reppert et al., 2014).

During combat operations, one's seniority within the military requires obedience from lower-ranking personnel. Those service members in commanding roles are responsible for the overall well-being of their subordinates (Redmond et al., 2015). Frequently, the experiences of one's rank become ingrained in their identity. The literature on rank suggested military rank is embedded in a service member's self-perception (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). While this is the case, the alteration of one's military identity to civilian identity might deter veterans from having a successful transition (Adler & Castro, 2019). When veterans transition from the military, they leave distinct military identities and traditions of their branch of service, including rank in

service, ranging from a four-star general to lower enlisted personnel (Zoli et al., 2015). Upon transition, no longer is the veteran's rank acknowledged, and if one were an officer, the salute rendered out of respect would be no longer (Gaither, 2014).

Identity

Veterans shifting from their military life also must shift attitudes, views, and identities (William et al., 2018). Upon leaving the military, veterans face numerous identities in which they must negotiate. These identities include but are not limited to a parent, follower, leader, military, warrior, veteran, and civilian (Caamal, 2019). Commonly, transitioning service members feel they do not matter in the civilian world. Transitioning from military service encompasses several factors, including the sense of importance, being valued and appreciated, having pride, and having people depend on them (Anderson & Goodman, 2014). For that reason, many transitioning veterans struggle with identity issues. Thompson et al. (2017) pointed out identity issues were becoming a focal point during the MCT. Anderson and Goodman (2014) further noted the MCT's impact on a service member may require letting go of a former self and taking on a new role and identity as a civilian.

Views on military identity range from its development during training and reinforcement through service experiences (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). Many veterans leave the military, retaining their military identity, and struggle to form new civilian identities. Romaniuk and Kidd's (2018) systematic review suggested some characteristics of the military identity, which included being assertive, mission-driven, focused, task-oriented, efficient, and dedicated. These characteristics differ relatively in the civilian

world. Keeling et al. (2018) also asserted that one's military identity was tantamount to self-esteem, and transitions from the military for some service members felt like a loss of one's identity. Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) agreed and stated the transition also threatened veterans' self-worth and sense of self. Romaniuk and Kidd suggested the loss of identity for some transitioning veterans caused episodes of distress and grief, which prolonged the transitional experience.

Transitional Challenges Faced by Post-9/11 Women Veterans

As post-9/11 women veterans transition into civilian life, their unique experiences in the military affect their lives post service (Greer, 2017). Women veterans' experiences with MCT show they are a marginalized population with unique challenges compared to their male counterparts. Consequently, their needs for a successful transition differ from males (Greer, 2017). Mattocks et al. (2012) suggested male veterans' experiences overshadow the challenges women veterans face, including family caregiving, financial hardships, and lack of social support systems.

Upon exiting the military, Demers (2013) noted, women service members struggle to make meaning of societal views of their roles in service. Based on the findings of Thompson et al. (2017), civilians who have not served do not understand the lived experiences of veterans outside of the news, movies, and media. Media coverage often depicts veterans as broken and violent, causing civilians to stereotype veterans. Furthermore, accomplishments achieved like badges, honors, and medals are not significant to civilians (Thompson et al., 2017). Due to the lack of complete comprehension and acceptance of women veterans' roles in the military, as they

transition, society might not perceive women as real veterans. nor recognize the dangers women faced (Heineman, 2017). Another essential point noted in the literature was women were not seen as warriors compared to male veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2018).

As stated previously, loss of identity can have a negative impact on women veterans' transitional experiences. With much of the military's history being a masculine culture, women have conformed to excel (Demers, 2013). Women veterans' identity challenges stem from the acknowledgment of two identities. The former identity being a female and the latter identity being a veteran. Historically, evidence suggested women veterans did not fit the category of being a veteran due to gender norms, nor did they fit equally with civilian women due to societal norms (Strong et al., 2018). Mankowski and Everett (2016) asserted that assuming a new identity as a civilian was the basis of challenges related to multitasking and taking on numerous responsibilities (i.e., parenting).

Dodds and Kiernan (2019) suggested many women exit the military earlier than planned; the researchers suggested the reasons why women leave are not fully understood. Much of the research on women veterans' transitions noted women veterans faced challenges related to mental health disorders, physical injuries, unemployment, financial issues, reestablishing relationships, less perceived social supports, and homelessness (Maiocco & Smith, 2016; Mankowski & Everett, 2016). Mental health challenges related to sexual harassment, MST, and PTSD were noted as salient within this population (Di Leone et al., 2016). Researchers are just beginning to understand how

women veterans' major life transitions impact long-term well-being (Cooper et al., 2018). Research has indicated that without proper support, many women veterans grapple with transitional challenges and stress. Furthermore, Zoli et al. (2015) suggested the top five challenges related to reintegration were: navigating benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (60%), finding employment (55%), acclimation to civilian culture (41%), finances (40%), and translating skills (39%). Demers (2013) suggested the need for developing innovative programming to help ease the transition process; programming should mirror the military's basic training to acclimate veterans into their civilian community and help them reintegrate and transition their military identity into a civilian identity.

As women veterans transition from the military into civilian life, they regularly look for ways to secure their futures. Most women veterans work to find meaningful employment and establish new social networks (Castro & Kintzle, 2016); therefore, it is vital to understand their transition and support their transition (Ahern et al., 2015). The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2017) further noted the importance of exploring their post military outcomes. Moreover, Segal and Lane (2016) found evidence suggesting problematic transitional experiences contributed to women's higher unemployment rates. Caamal (2019) suggested finding a job and adapting to the civilian workplace are components of a successful transition.

Women Veterans and Identity

Before discharge, a woman veteran's attachment to military culture, work role, and combat experiences may be central tenets to her identity (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018).

Demers (2013) explored women veterans and their identities and suggested that as women transitioned from the military, they struggled with returning to a traditional female role due to a developed atypical identity in service. Thompson et al. (2017) thought the transition process often caused women veterans to isolate or feel lonely and attempt to rectify their established identities prior to military service. What is more, is that women veterans possess a triple identity threat because they belong to three minorities at any given time: a woman who served in the military, a veteran, and an individual identifying as a racial minority or as having a (mental or physical) disability (Thompson et al., 2017).

Women in the military are encouraged to repress femininity due to the nature of their work to include combat tours (Reppert et al., 2014). That aside, in Western culture, (feminine) traits associated with women: being nurturing, passive, attractive, and fragile are qualities that women veterans learned to downplay in military service (Demers, 2013). Based on the findings of Thompson et al. (2017), less is known about how post-9/11 women veterans' identities are impacted during transitions due to their minority status in the military. Therefore, it is critical to explore the role of identity for women veterans (Di Leone et al., 2016).

Understanding Women Veterans' Challenges in Transitioning Into the Civilian Workforce

Women veterans transitioning from the military often transition into a secondary career following their exit from the military; some pursue post-secondary education utilizing their post-9/11 GI Bill, and some pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. For

some, the transition from the military is anticipated, and for others, the event is unanticipated. Estimates showed in 2016 that over 10.6 million veterans were employed in the civilian workforce (Yanchus et al., 2018). As veterans transition into civilian life, obtaining employment is vital to their reintegration (Caamal, 2019). Many veterans are successful with the transition into the civilian workplace, but others struggle to find meaningful work or face other employment challenges. Due to the difficulties implied, it is essential to understand the barriers veterans face post-military service in securing and maintaining employment in the civilian workforce (Keeling et al., 2019).

A veteran joining the civilian workforce brings their military experiences; this includes military culture, training, and combat experiences. The lack of exposure to military experiences challenges the understanding of veterans' civilian counterparts (Yanchus et al., 2018). Numerous scholars have conducted research focused on the employment status of veterans, examining PTSD, work and life imbalance, unemployment/underemployment, and disabilities (Miller, 2017). However, there is limited research focused on veterans' experiences with finding and maintaining civilian employment (Keeling et al. 2019).

As a workplace, the military has been described as profoundly different than the civilian workplace (Redmond et al., 2015). Consequently, as veterans transition into the civilian workforce, they are challenged by the lack of structure, direction, and support that is characteristic of military culture, and for that reason, transitioning into the civilian workforce has been viewed as a daunting task (Ahern et al. 2015; Rose et al., 2017). Estimates show that roughly half of veteran new hires resigned from their first job post

military within the first year (Ford, 2017). Women veterans, whose personal identities were strongly tied to their military career, struggled with transitioning into the civilian workforce due to feeling civilian jobs had less meaning and value (Mankowski et al., 2015). However, those who transitioned into the civilian workplace were often viewed as cold, rigid, or lacking interpersonal skills (Sheperd et al., 2019).

According to Maury et al. (2018), women veterans take about three months longer than their male counterparts to secure employment after transitioning from the military. Maury et al., also noted the top five occupations and top five industries for women veterans. The top five occupations for women veterans included: (a) office and administrative supports; (b) healthcare practitioners and technical occupations; (c) management; (d) sales; and (e) education, training, and library. Additionally, the top five industries were: (a) health care and social assistance; (b) public administration; (c) educational services; (d) retail; and (e) professional, scientific, and technical. Maury et al.'s findings suggested a percentage of women veterans are thriving in the civilian workforce. However, women veterans still face significant challenges from the military to civilian transition.

A report conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation in 2016 noted many veterans lacked experience in the civilian workforce due to only having careers in the military (See Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). Veterans who felt unprepared after transitioning from military service faced challenges with applying for civilian jobs. Recent studies, including the works of Thompson et al. (2017) suggested veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce faced numerous employment challenges. Keeling

et al. (2018) suggested that attempts at translating their military skills, qualifications, and experiences were difficult, not only for the veteran, but also for the employer in determining suitable positions. Davis and Minnis (2017) suggested that veterans spent significant time highlighting their technical skills, and those skills were not always well-understood by civilian employers. The absence of understanding leads to many organizational barriers the veteran must navigate.

Numerous studies have investigated veteran employment, and findings have suggested the veteran population needs resume writing skills, interviewing skills, networking abilities, and assistance translating military experience into terms understood by civilian employers (Greer, 2017; Rose et al., 2017). These skills are topical sessions covered during the TAP workshops, mentioned previously, as a service member transitions. However, due to the minimal time allocated for the workshops, many veterans still feel unprepared for the civilian workforce (Keeling et al., 2018).

To date, attention paid to women veterans and employment has been scant. Reppert et al. (2014) reported women veterans are a minority population needing specialized assistance with transitions and career-related development. Upon entering civilian life, women veterans were said to struggle with finding employment. Women veterans are faced with unique challenges due to numerous experiences during service that differ from their male counterparts. However, Greer (2017) pointed out the lack of research on helping women veterans overcome their challenges.

Women veterans are said to have a strong work ethic but still faced workplace challenges (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). As they transitioned into the civilian workplace,

their efforts and gender-specific challenges often go unnoticed (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). Most research conducted on women veterans and their employment needs stated the benefits of seeking and obtaining employment. Dodds and Kiernan (2019) noted seeking civilian employment enabled women veterans to develop a sense of confidence and self-belief. Thompson et al. (2017) further emphasized the connection between employment and identity, suggesting work was vital in helping the veteran develop their civilian identity as they transitioned from the military.

Approximately 53% of post-9/11 veterans faced a period of unemployment upon their transition from the military to civilian life (Keeling et al., 2018). In 2015, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 women veterans was estimated at 6.4%, which was higher than the 5.7% unemployment rate for veteran men (Greer, 2017). Additionally, women veterans' unemployment rate was higher than the nonveteran population (Collins et al., 2014). Poor physical and psychological health, employer discrimination, skills mismatch, job search, and selection were suggested as commonly cited reasons unemployment rates were so high amongst veterans (Loughran, 2014). Recent data from the Department of Labor suggested a decrease in overall unemployment rates of OEF/OIF veterans (4.7% and 4.9%), with the highest rates reflecting the status of women veterans (Ford, 2017). The unemployment rates reflected a decrease that was consistent with the civilian unemployment decline; in both cases, women experienced higher unemployment rates.

Veteran employment has become a priority in recent years for both public policy and research. For example, in 2009, the Veteran Employment Initiative was established

by executive order; subsequently, in 2011, the Veterans Opportunity to Work and the Hire Heroes Act were signed into law (Schulker, 2017). Furthermore, studies confirm numerous programs have been developed to assist veterans through transitions (Collins et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2018; Schulker, 2017). However, even with implementing programs and policies, Anderson and Goodman (2014) pointed out employers were still not readily recognizing the value of a veteran's military experience.

Minnis (2017) suggested HRD professionals are valuable in providing career development, hiring supports, and organizational education to aid in veteran transitions. Keeling et al. (2018) explained private-sector employers were developing hiring initiatives and training their recruitment staff on military culture. However, there were still challenges related to building trust, establishing rapport, and effectively communicating with veterans in the civilian workforce. Concerning culture, Keeling et al. (2019) proposed developing programming to ensure employers and employees were culturally competent regarding military and veteran experiences. Correspondingly, the researchers proposed veterans should also receive civilian cultural-competency training. The provision of cultural competency activities for both the employer and the veterans can be deemed beneficial while enhancing the working environment. Overall, this strategy may be beneficial in easing veterans' transition.

By implementing veteran-centric policies and programming, private sector companies are raising the bar on recruiting their veteran talent pool (Schulker, 2017). However, their efforts have historically focused primarily on the veteran recruitment process. In contrast, limited evidence showed employers following through with retaining

veterans in the workforce (Keeling et al., 2018). HRD professionals need to further understand veterans' lived experiences transitioning into the civilian workforce to develop and implement strategies to impact their long-term career goals (Minnis, 2017).

Fortunately, programs to help U.S. veterans are growing rapidly. It is estimated that over 150 programs exist to aid veterans in employment and career development (Prokos & Cabage, 2017). Despite the abundance of developed programs and policies, many discriminate against women veterans and were developed based on veteran men and their transition needs (Eichler, 2017; Greer, 2017; Mankowski et al., 2015). Specific challenges related to women veterans were not often considered during the development of these programs and policies (Hirudayaraj & Clay, 2019). Consequently, discrimination has caused women veterans to be underserved. Thus, it can be seen that career-development research related to post-9/11 women veterans is meager (Reppert et al., 2014). Moreover, there needs to be more emphasis on enhancing women veterans' employability and career development (Greer, 2017). Strong et al. (2018) recognized the importance of vocational training specifically designed for women veterans to emphasize topics related to gender-specific barriers.

Personal Barriers

It is estimated that less than 10% of the United States' population served in the Armed Forces; as a result, most people are less likely to understand their culture, lived experiences, and challenges (Hammer et al., 2017). Previous research indicated personal barriers were challenges that impacted women veterans' transition from military service to the civilian workforce. Keeling et al. (2018) suggested planning, preparation, and the

military-civilian cultural clash as barriers that challenged veterans' employment experiences.

Planning and Preparation

As transitioning veterans move into civilian life, feelings of being unprepared arise. For example, Keeling et al. (2018) emphasized personal preparedness impacted veterans' transitions. The researchers further noted, upon transitioning, veterans developed unrealistic expectations related to obtaining jobs and emphasized reuniting with family and friends. Additionally, Keeling et al. found transitioning veterans set unrealistic timeframes and often experienced a culture shock due to their unpreparedness. Robinson et al. (2017) insisted that culture shock can negatively impact the transition experience.

As previously stated, finding employment was said to be a challenge for women veterans. Additionally, women veterans struggle in translating their military training into the civilian workplace. Veterans often encounter challenges obtaining employment where their military-related training could readily transfer into a civilian sector job (Shepherd et al., 2019). For veteran men, having a veteran status and obtaining a job matching their military occupation experience was more prevalent. However, this was not the case for women veterans (Padavic & Prokos, 2017). Women veterans who transitioned hoped their experience would open employment opportunities for them; for many, that was not the outcome (Mankowski et al., 2015).

The military trains (personnel turned) veterans on tactical and technical proficiencies. Still, upon transition out of the military, veterans need to plan how they

will demonstrate crossover in skills desirable in the civilian workplace. For example, Davis and Minnis (2017) suggested veterans should emphasize their skills in leadership, decision-making, perseverance, communication, and risk mitigation, all of which can make the civilian workforce successful. Also, it was suggested that veterans need to be prepared to share their soft skills, including job searching, networking, salary negotiations, and interacting with colleagues (Carter et al., 2017).

Military and Civilian Cultural Clash

Based on the findings of Mobbs and Bonanno (2018), approximately 84% of post-9/11 veterans believed civilians lacked understanding of the challenges experienced upon returning home from combat or transitioning from the military. One critical transitional challenge faced by veterans was the assimilation into the civilian-workplace culture. Military experience provided veterans with a strong work ethic, one which differed significantly from the civilian workforce. As veterans entered the civilian workforce, they reported missing the camaraderie, cohesion, structure, and hierarchy attained in the military (Keeling et al., 2018). Veterans perceived the civilian workplace as an entity that promoted autonomy and individualism; characteristics that differed from the military (Keeling et al., 2019). Smoother transitions for veterans included their unlearning of specific skills learned in the military and learning or enhancing new skillsets beneficial to civilian workplaces.

Research conducted by Keeling et al. (2018) presented veterans' reports of frustration due to the cultural clash in the workplace, which often led to a job resignation or termination. Redmond et al. (2015) also highlighted how simple it was for employers

to misinterpret veterans' behaviors if they were not culturally competent. Employers' lack of awareness of military cultural norms, readily led to stereotypes that played a significant role in the culture clash. As it relates to post-9/11 veteran women, not understanding their experiences can further the stereotypes and misinterpreted narratives about their military service (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). Shepherd et al. (2019) suggested employers labeled veterans as rigid, strict, inflexible, less likely to learn new tasks, and unable to interact and adapt to situations with their civilian colleagues. Davis and Minnis (2017) also wrote that some employers thought veterans only had combat-related skills. Due to the cultural divide, employers struggle in accounting for veterans' valuable skillsets (Carter et al., 2017).

Post-9/11 veterans reported having beliefs that civilian employers did not want to hire them because employers assumed they were dangerous, physically broken, and had psychological disabilities (Yanchus et al., 2018). Comparatively, in a study conducted by Stone et al. (2018), the researchers suggested civilian employers valued hiring returning veterans because they acquired the necessary leadership and teamwork skills while in the military, but they lacked the necessary social skills. Similarly, Davis and Minnis (2017) contended veterans were a talent source for employers. Civilian employers and HRD professionals need education and training to both become better aware of veterans' talents and how to translate them for the civilian workforce.

Private sector organizations have begun hiring veterans at high rates; however, Carter et al. (2017) suggested some employers hire veterans because it is the right thing to do, without understanding what talents veterans bring to the civilian workplace.

Civilian employers need to acknowledge their lack of knowledge and understanding in order to implement adequate processes to hire, train and develop, manage, and retain veterans in the civilian workforce (Carter et al., 2017). As private sector companies continue to refine their processes in hiring veterans, it is imperative for them to also aid veterans in bridging the two worlds (military and civilian) to successfully navigate the civilian workforce (Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018).

Summary

Numerous scholars have begun extensively researching transitioning veterans' experiences; however, much of the research has not specified gender (Heineman, 2017). Padavic and Prokos (2017) noted even with the increase of veteran studies, it is still common for studies to exclude women. Despite recent historical recognition, women veterans are underrepresented in the scholarly literature (Demers, 2013; Dodds & Kiernan, 2019; Eichler, 2017). Roughly 2% of veteran-related scholarly literature mentioned women veterans; even less focused primarily on women veterans (Dodds & Kiernan, 2019). Thomas et al. (2018) insisted that studies on women veterans are an emerging area of research. Furthermore, researchers are interested in gathering information related to the lived experiences of women veterans (Eichler, 2017).

Research conducted on women veterans is often quantitative and located within the health sciences (Eichler, 2017). Indeed, much of the post-9/11 gender-specific research has extensively focused on medical care, PTSD, MST, and educational experiences with very minimal research on reintegration into civilian life (Demers, 2013; Thomas et al., 2018). Indeed, these topics are significant, but they do not encapsulate the

scope of transitions of women veterans. Furthermore, studies focused on gender-specific challenges and how these lived experiences affect job-seeking women veterans accessing supportive services and resources have been shown to be insufficient (Brown et al., 2021). Additionally, it has been challenging to find research on women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce. More research is needed to explore how women's military experiences impact employability and sustained civilian employment (Padavic & Prokos, 2017).

There is a need for more qualitative research focused on narratives and the experiences of post-9/11 women veterans. The significance of conducting more qualitative research brings awareness to the needs and challenges of women veterans (Mankowski & Everett, 2016). Leslie and Koblinsky (2017) emphasized the need for more considerable investigations of women veterans' lived experiences and challenges as they transition to civilian life. The need for further research on post-9/11 women veterans' experiences is apparent. Similarly, there is a need for more research focused on women veterans and employment. Hirudayaraj and Clay (2019) noted that the existing literature on women veterans and employment focused on their problems accessing employment. They also documented that more research was needed to explore women veterans' experiences within the civilian workplace.

By exploring the lived experiences of women veterans, I hope to help advance interventions for women veterans struggling with transitions related to personal barriers. Similarly, focusing on women veterans' post-military identities can be an additional way

to help this population to transition into post-military life successfully. Chapter 3 will provide support for the methodology used in this qualitative study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter introduces the research methodology and how this qualitative study was carried out, including a thorough description of the methods and procedures utilized. The following components are included: (a) the research design and rationale, (b) the role of the researcher, (c) methodology, (d) issues of trustworthiness, (e) ethical procedures, and (f) the chapter summary.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences faced by post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce. Existing research conducted on women veterans had focused on their experiences with PTSD and MST. Recent literature indicated that few veteran studies focused on the subjective experiences and challenges of women veterans' career transitions. Furthermore, women veterans' experiences in the civilian workforce is an understudied topic, and this qualitative study intended to add to the body of literature. Utilizing a qualitative approach allowed for a deeper understanding of women veterans' experiences transitioning into the civilian workforce.

Research Design and Rationale

In this section, I discuss the research question and subquestions for this study. Additionally, I discuss the research design and rationale for utilization.

Research Questions

The central phenomenon of this study was career transition. Career transition, in the context of women veterans, has been described as the period in which women

veterans' career roles change. In seeking to understand career transition as a phenomenon, I addressed the following research question and subsequent questions:

RQ: What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce?

SQ1: What are the perceptions of enlisted and officer women veterans?

SQ2: Where are the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the two groups (enlisted and officer)?

Research Design

At the onset of exploring career transition as a phenomenon, I wanted to ensure the utilization of the most appropriate research method. Petty et al. (2012) suggested that the research question largely determines the researcher's approach. However, the goal of the research also guides the selection of the methodology. Ravitch and Carl (2016) further noted that the researcher's positionality and identity should also be factored into the decision-making process of selecting a research method. Upon completing the literature review for this study, I determined that quantitative and qualitative research have their place in veterans' studies. However, ontology, epistemology, and methodology differed significantly between both research methods.

Quantitative research addresses the "what." Based on a positivist paradigm, quantitative researchers seek to explain the causes of change and use numbers to study a particular phenomenon (Arghode, 2012). Quantitative methods include large numbers of participants to predict, explain, confirm, control, and describe a phenomenon. Researchers who utilize this method assume there is a singular reality, and through

statistical analysis they generalize their findings to make predictions on future events (Petty et al., 2012; Teherani et al., 2015). By incorporating the scientific method and using statistical tools, the quantitative researcher remains objective and serves as a detached observer who does not influence the outcomes of the research (Arghode, 2012).

Researchers utilizing the qualitative method desire to understand and make meaning of the human experience. Qualitative researchers consider the lived experiences of their participants to be central to their research study (Arghode, 2012). Qualitative research is focused on understanding the quality of the participants' lived experiences instead of the causal relationships established in quantitative research. Teherani et al. (2015) reported that constructivist researchers assume multiple realities and truths and work to elicit their research participants' reality views.

Researchers who utilize this method want to explore, understand, explain, evaluate, and describe social phenomena. Social phenomena related to qualitative research can include lived experiences, individual or group behaviors, how interactions shape relationships, and the functionality of organizations (Teherani et al., 2015). Qualitative researchers conducting credible and rigorous studies guarantee alignment of their epistemological beliefs, research questions, and research approach. Blustein et al. (2005) supported the notion that qualitative approaches are highly favored explorative studies. Additionally, Blustein et al. suggested that the use of the method has been seen in the study of career development.

At the onset of developing this qualitative study, I reviewed the most used qualitative methodologies. I determined the five most frequently used approaches

included grounded theory, narrative, ethnography, case studies, and phenomenology. After reviewing the five approaches, I worked to determine which method would produce the most credible and transferable research findings. Because I wanted to capture the experiences of women veterans and examine how they made sense of their experiences, I selected the phenomenological approach. The selection of the phenomenological approach aided in shaping my research questions, the methods of collecting data, and the data analysis.

Based on the research questions developed and the goals outlined in this study, I determined that a quantitative method was inappropriate. I aimed to explore and understand lived experiences women veterans face transitioning from military service into the civilian workforce. Critical to the study was exploring and understanding the transition as a phenomenon in a natural setting, focusing on the "why" as an alternative to the "what." This study was designed to explore women veterans' subjective interpretations of their lived experiences and challenges related to career transitions. This resulted in the decision to conduct a qualitative study because it was the appropriate methodology to answer my research question and subquestions.

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach was developed in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1931, Husserl (as cited in Alase, 2017) conceptualized and theorized phenomenology as a way for researchers to understand the context of their research participants' lived experiences and how they made meaning of their experiences. Additional philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, Satre, Merleau-Ponty, van Manen,

Moustakas, Polkinghorne, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin have also contributed to phenomenology (See Alase, 2017; Petty et al., 2012). As a novice researcher, I noted that two of the main theoretical frameworks used in qualitative phenomenological studies were based on the philosophies of Husserl and Heidegger. Qualitative studies utilizing Husserl's philosophy included transcendental and descriptive phenomenology, where the methods are descriptive based on the participants' intuition (Davidsen, 2013; Giorgi et al., 2017). In contrast, qualitative studies utilizing Heidegger's philosophy are hermeneutic and interpretative; researchers using these approaches focus on interpretation (Peoples, 2020).

Multiple interpretations of phenomenology have been developed (Giorgi et al., 2017). For the current study, both philosophical approaches were reviewed, and it was determined that the utilization of Heidegger's philosophy was best suited. According to Davidsen (2013), Heidegger's philosophy was based on understanding and describing human existence; it also included the researcher's interpretation. Overall, phenomenology's focus is on exploring and understanding the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, phenomenology aims to understand how study participants make meaning of their experience (Davidsen, 2013). Phenomenological approaches are used to explore a particular phenomenon with individuals or groups. In comparison to other qualitative methodologies, phenomenology allows the researcher to collect in-depth data via detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of research participants.

For qualitative researchers, utilizing a phenomenological approach allows for rich data sources to be collected to examine a participant's lived experiences (Smith et al.,

2009). Upon further review, multiple contemporary phenomenological approaches were discovered, which were relevant to the current study. Neubauer et al. (2019) described the approaches as lifeworld research, post-intentional phenomenology, and IPA. Based on the three contemporary approaches, IPA seemed most relevant to the current study's purpose and goals. Also, IPA was consistent with my epistemological position of social constructivism. As a woman veteran, I had insider status and explored the meaning of lived experiences and realities told by research participants.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

This qualitative study was performed using the IPA approach, which is theoretically grounded in hermeneutics. The IPA approach was conceptualized based on the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Smith et al., 2009). Developed by Jonathan A. Smith, IPA provides a detailed examination of what a significant life experience means to an individual (Peat et al., 2019). In the 1990s, IPA was an approach used in counseling and psychology; in recent years, the use of IPA has expanded to various other fields (Eatough & Smith, 2017). While researching IPA, I determined that Smith et al. (2009) were acknowledged as the leading theorists behind the approach. Smith et al. suggested that researchers interested in the approach were concerned with human predicament or difficulty. Additionally, Alase (2017) proposed that one of the benefits of the IPA is that it allows the research participant to fully express the stories of their lived experiences and provides the researcher with rich and thick descriptions of the participant's experiences.

The IPA approach is used to investigate and interpret the detailed personal lived experiences of research participants who share a similar phenomenon (i.e., career transition). IPA is used to explain how the subjective experiences impacted their lives (Alase, 2017). IPA is focused on a personal lived experience and is said to be an interpretative process between research participants and the researcher. IPA is heavily influenced by the principles of phenomenology (lived experience), hermeneutics (interpretative), and idiography (Peat et al., 2019; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The idiographic approach is used to show how research participants in given contexts make meaning of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). Researchers using IPA adopt a participant-oriented approach and show great empathy, sensitivity, and respect to their research participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). The researcher bonds with the research participant to develop an interactive and interpersonal relationship, promoting ease in information gathering and data analysis. Researchers utilizing the approach view the research participant as the experiential expert and deliberately choose not to prosecute or distort their lived experiences narratives (Alase, 2017; Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Alase (2017) pointed out that IPA has been used to explore participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon. In the current study, the IPA approach was used to explore the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from military service into the civilian workforce. I aimed to better understand post-9/11 women veterans' challenges by exploring and describing their transitional experiences and perceptions. Each research participant was identified as an

experiential expert related to their meaning making of the experience addressed in the study. As the researcher, I obtained a deeper understanding of women veterans' experiences by utilizing the IPA approach.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative study, my role was twofold. First, I served as the researcher and the primary instrument of data collection. IPA researchers take on dual positions. As Smith et al. (2009) noted, IPA researchers make sense of their participants' descriptions of the experience/phenomenon under study. Second, as the researcher, I began this qualitative study by identifying career transitions (phenomenon) as a challenge faced by post-9/11 women veterans (population).

As stated, the research participants were regarded as the experiential experts; however, the role of the researcher was to interpret the research participants lived experiences (Peat et al., 2019). Capturing the essence of the study in phenomenological research requires the researcher to bracket themselves away from the topic they are said to address. Peat et al. (2019) asserted that bracketing should be completed before engaging with research participants and the data. Developed by Moustakas in 1994, bracketing was noted to be a critical and reflective activity (Alase, 2017). Bracketing allows the researcher to bracket their personal experience from their research participants' experiences.

As the researcher, I diligently worked to be mindful of my personal experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. I wanted to ensure my intimate knowledge of the phenomenon was only used to enrich the interpretations rather than hinder or cause challenges. As a

post-9/11 woman veteran who faced challenges during my transition from the military, I was aware of how I could positively or negatively influence the research process. Instinctively, I foresaw myself wanting to share my lived experiences with study participants to strengthen rapport building and validate the collective experience. However, I deemed it appropriate to limit sharing my lived experiences to avoid unnecessary interjections or reactions.

Additionally, Peat et al. (2019) noted the usage of intersubjective reflexivity as a reflexive practice to aid in unraveling relationships between the research participant and the researcher. The reflexive practice used throughout the data collection and data analysis process was self-reflective journaling. Though time-consuming, the self-reflective journaling process was beneficial for self-awareness and acknowledging the commonalities and disparities between me as the researcher/post-9/11 woman veteran and the research participants (all post-911 women veterans). Conducting this practice at every stage of the research process allowed me to be aware of my preconceptions, biases, and prejudgments. It also aided in the maintenance of rigor and trustworthiness in this research study.

As the researcher, I have approximately 20 years of experience working with the military and veteran population. I enlisted in the Army Reserve in 2001 and transitioned into the civilian workforce in 2006. In addition, I am a spouse to a combat veteran. Most recently, I served as the Co-Director of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administrations (SAMHSA) Service Member, Veterans, and Their Families (SMVF) Technical Assistance (TA) Center. The SMVF TA Center is responsible for strengthening

behavioral health systems for SMVF across the nation. One of our most prominent initiatives is the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families. This national effort included 35 states across the country, developing, implementing, and working to sustain suicide prevention plans and targeted efforts to reduce suicides within the SMVF population. It should be noted that participants in this study did not have any direct relationship with me as the researcher that might impart any biased responses. In my various roles over the years, I have been thoroughly trained in the skills necessary to conduct this study, including experience in interviewing. Additionally, I have been trained and have experience working with veterans experiencing stress or anxiety in responding to any of the semistructured interview questions.

Methodology

This section discusses the procedures, sampling strategy, and population used in this qualitative study. I also addressed the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participant selection, the number of participants used for the study, and the strategies used to recruit participants.

Procedures

Upon approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I reached out to my contacts to locate a non-profit veteran service organization specifically focused on the needs of women veterans. My approved IRB number was 11-10-20-0611582. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to ensure participants recruited for the study met the demographic needs of the study.

Sampling Strategy and Population

I served as the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study. In accordance with protecting study participants and the recommendations of the IRB, I was the only person who gathered, transcribed, and analyzed the data. The study participants were post-9/11 women veterans over the age of 18 who served and transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. Post-9/11 women veterans who served during other eras besides post-9/11, still serving, and those who transitioned from the military longer than the 5-year window were excluded.

The 5-year window was significant to the study and me as the researcher. Every year, the Department of Defense updates the TAP, which substantially impacts transitions (See Chapter 1). The 5-year window also allowed women veterans study participants to recall their transitional experiences. Overall, the goal of this targeted approach was to contribute to the field of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, primarily HRD professionals, and advocate the need for social change related to career development programming in the civilian sector to aid women veterans' transitions.

As Alase (2017) reported, the usage of homogenous sampling allows the researcher to gauge the phenomenon under study. For this qualitative study, the sampling technique used was purposeful criterion sampling, and the selected study participants met the specified inclusion criteria. This allowed each woman veteran recruited to share their own experiences and perspectives on challenges faced during their career transitions. Additionally, the participant sample was divided for this study so that the career-transition phenomenon could be understood from more than one perspective (enlisted

versus officer). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) noted in IPA research that similarities and differences were usually analyzed within a group that has been defined as alike. This resulted in this study's research subquestions analyzing post-9/11 women veterans who were enlisted personnel versus commissioned officer personnel upon transition.

Since IPA focuses on small, homogeneous samples with thick descriptions, it was necessary to focus on a small group of women veterans. Smith et al. (2009) suggested a sample size between three and six participants. Due to the large quantity of data generated through the IPA process, using a small sample size allowed novice researchers to develop significant points related to the similarities and differences between study participants without getting too overwhelmed.

For this study, data was collected from eight women veteran participants. The small sample size was beneficial for enabling a micro-level analysis of each woman veteran participating in the study. To determine the similarities and differences in study participants' lived experiences, I collected data from four women veterans who were enlisted upon transition, and four women veterans who were officers upon transition. Once repeated themes and elements emerged related to the military to civilian career transition, data saturation was determined. By the seventh interview, it was apparent data saturation was reached. However, I wanted to have an equal number of semistructured interviews with four enlisted and four commissioned officers. For this study, additional recruitment efforts and semistructured interviews would have continued if new themes and/or sub-themes emerged during the data analysis process, which could have furthered the exploration of post-9/11 women veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce.

Participant Recruitment

Before official IRB approval, I piloted the data collection process with five volunteers. During the pilot, I shared the demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) and the 12 semistructured interview questions (Appendix F). To ensure my comfortability and professionalism related to my interviewing skills, I also conducted two mock interviews.

Two recruitment tools were developed for this qualitative study: (a) A recruitment flyer and (b) a social media recruitment document (Appendices C & D). Upon receiving approval for this qualitative study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University, I conducted outreach to a non-profit national women veteran's service organization (VSO). Recruitment of the research participants was conducted by contacting the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of this non-profit national woman VSO via email (See Appendix B). On December 1, 2020, the initial email was sent to the CEO providing information about the study. The IRB-approved recruitment flyer (See Appendix D) was sent to the CEO, which included a description of the research study and my contact information for those interested (See Appendix A). Additionally, the social media recruitment document was shared with one women veterans' community on a social media platform (See Appendix C). All recruitment materials explained that upon completion of the semistructured interview, participants would receive a $10.00 Amazon gift card for their time. At the request of the CEO, a conference call was scheduled on December 15, 2020, to answer follow-up questions. On December 16, 2020, I received correspondence from the CEO that the recruitment flyer for the study was shared with the VSO's Listserv, Facebook, and LinkedIn social media communities. In the qualitative

research documentation, the CEO was acknowledged as a target community gatekeeper. The CEO was instrumental in assisting with recruitment efforts in obtaining access to the women veterans.

All study participants initiated contact via text or email. I sent all interested participants an official invitation letter that detailed the study and informed the participants of next steps—responding to the informed consent form, preliminary demographic questionnaire (Appendix E), and establishing a date and time for a semistructured interview. Each study participant was informed that the study was voluntary. The demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) was critical in determining if the study participants met the inclusion criteria for the study.

Recruiting participants for the study was proven to be a complex process. In hindsight, I realized multiple factors played a part. The following significant factors played a role in the recruitment phase: the COVID-19 pandemic, the holiday season, and the overall invisibility of women veterans. To ensure transparency, the proposal for this study was approved in August 2020, and IRB approval was granted in November 2020. Coordination with the VSO CEO/gatekeeper delayed the recruitment process, due to the request being submitted during a high season of advocacy and holidays. In total, 13 post-9/11 women veterans shared an initial interest in participating in the study. However, upon receiving completed demographic questionnaires, only nine of the volunteers met inclusion criteria. Three volunteers had transitioned outside of the 5-year timeframe, and one volunteer respondent did not follow through. The final volunteer participant was not utilized due to data saturation.

Women veterans who met the criteria for the study were provided information on scheduling an interview date and time convenient for them. Alase (2017) noted the site of interviews should be the preference of the participant. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, safety precautions were considered, and it was determined the semistructured interviews must take place utilizing a virtual platform. In response to the requests, all eight of the study participants were accommodating and willing to move forward with using the Zoom platform. Before the interview, participants had the opportunity to review the consent form, which detailed the nature of the study and their requirements as a participant via email. As explained in the consent form, participants had the opportunity to ask questions related to participating in the study. To make the process as seamless and straightforward as possible, participants were only required to respond to the informed consent with a statement of "I consent" in a corresponding email.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

In this section, instrumentation and the procedures related to data collection are discussed. As the researcher, during the data collection process I observed, took copious notes, and conducted the semistructured interviews using Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework. Other data collection instruments included the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix E) and the 14-question interview protocol focused on the depth of the phenomenon and women veterans' lived experiences. The demographic questionnaire, which included nine questions, was hosted via the Typeform platform. A link to the questionnaire was included in the recruitment email. The demographic questionnaire gathered data to identify post-9/11 women veterans who fit

the inclusion criteria for the study. The 12-question interview protocol served as a guide from beginning to end (see Appendix F). The questions developed were drafted to reflect Schlossberg's transition theory and the 4Ss described in Chapter 2.

Basis for Instrumentation

In phenomenological studies, semistructured interviews are a widely used method for data collection. The utilization of the technique allows the researcher to gather rich, descriptive data related to study participants' lived experiences. For this study, I developed and followed a semistructured interview protocol of 12 open-ended questions. The open-ended questions guided the overall conversation with study participants. The 12 open-ended questions were developed with Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory (4Ss) in mind and resulted in the identification of five categories. The categories included: (a) military experiences, (b) transition experiences, (c) military to civilian workforce experiences, (d) sense of identity experiences, and the (e) participant recommendation and sharing of one's story experience.

Data Collection Procedures

As a systematic framework, Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory benefited this study during data collection; it allowed me to listen to the various unique narratives of post- 9/11 women veterans. Semistructured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted to elicit rich first-person accounts of eight post-9/11 women veterans' lived experiences of transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce. The usage of semistructured interviews allowed the study participant and me to engage in a conversation with a purpose. During the data collection process, I implemented the

reflective practice known as bracketing (suspension; Smith et al., 2009). The bracketing practice aided in limiting personal preconceptions out of the interview process. Smith et al. (2009) noted bracketing personal preconceptions during interviews enabled the researcher to express their concerns and it limited their personal experiences and biases.

Semistructured interviews were conducted using the virtual platform Zoom in my private office to limit interruptions and ensure privacy. Each of the eight one-on-one interviews were audio-recorded. Onsite materials used included a printed copy of the interview protocol questions, paper and pen for notes, and an additional recording device if the Zoom platform or internet were compromised. I estimated 60–90 minutes to complete each interview. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, with one interview lasting around 160 minutes.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent form and requested permission to audio record the interview session. I worked diligently to establish rapport early on to put each participant at ease. To aid in extrapolating rich data, I diligently worked to establish a friendly virtual environment for the post-9/11 women veteran participants. Additionally, a copy of the printed interview protocol helped structure my notes and keep my thoughts organized. Each study participant was assured that they could take breaks as they deemed necessary.

Data Analysis

The IPA data analysis process is described as an iterative cycle comprising six stages (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher, I moved back and forth from the data collection and data analysis. The IPA analytical process has been described as a double

hermeneutic, due to the participant's attempt to make meaning of their world through the semistructured interview questions, and the researcher's attempts to decode the meaning. Ultimately, this led to making sense of the eight post-9/11 women veterans' meaning-making of their lived experiences related to career transitions. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) stated IPA provided a set of flexible guidelines based on the researcher's objectives.

Before starting data analysis, I journaled by describing my personal experiences with career transitions (phenomenon) from the military into the civilian workforce. In great detail, I journaled my first-hand experience of being a post-9/11 woman veteran transitioning. As a result of journaling, I was able to reduce and avoid interjecting personal lived experiences into the narrative experiences of the study participants. Additionally, based on significant knowledge related to the topic, I also developed a list of factual statements based on personal and professional understandings of post-9/11 women veterans' career transitions.

Alase (2017) suggested that in-depth interviews should be viewed as a conversation with a purpose. Smith et al. (2009) further suggested, when interview questions were efficiently developed, they allowed the researcher to be an active listener who was engaged, flexible, and responsive. Using IPA required transcriptions of interviews to be verbatim; this included transcribing every word spoken by the research participant and the researcher (Smith et al., 2009). The Zoom interview audio recordings contained the raw data that needed to be transcribed and analyzed. Thus, I transcribed all eight one-on-one semistructured interviews verbatim. To protect each participants'

identity (see Chapter 4), I assigned a pseudonym identifier (i.e., P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, and P8). On average, each transcription took between 10–12 hours.

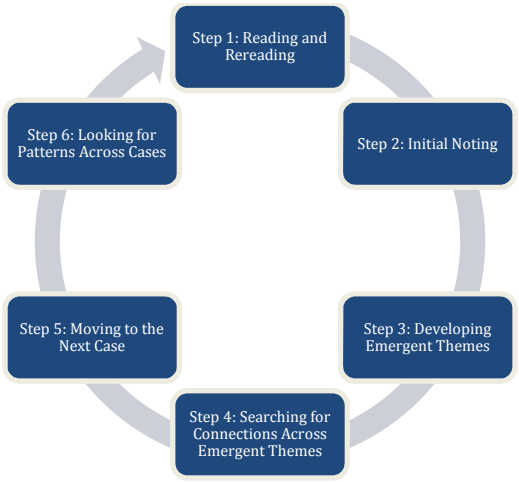
Following transcription, study participants received an emailed copy for member checking and approval; this ensured the transcripts accurately reflected the participants' accounts of their lived experiences transitioning. I also shared takeaways from the study participant's interview; this allowed the study participant to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations. Each study participant was given approximately a week to respond and share any takeaways or request modifications. During the waiting period, I utilized the demographic questionnaire and the draft of the transcript to begin writing brief narrative stories on each of the post-9/11 women veteran participants. The utilization of this strategy was a great addition to furthering my comprehension of each study participants' lived experience. Another benefit to this strategy was it helped keep in check personal assumptions of each participants' experiences.

Once approved by participants, two sets of transcriptions were printed, and one was saved as an electronic file. The first printed set of transcripts was used as a master copy and was safely stored away. The second copy was used as the working copy, which I marked up consistently. The third copy was stored safely on a personal password-protected laptop.

For this qualitative study, the data analysis process included six steps. According to Smith et al. (2009), the steps should include reading and rereading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next step, and looking for patterns across cases (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Data Analysis Process



Note. Steps for qualitative data analysis recommended by Smith et al. (2009).

Step 1: Reading and Rereading

This immersive, first step of data analysis consisted of reading each transcript several times to get intimate and familiar with the data. I read each transcript numerous times for total immersion into the data following the audio and transcript reviews. For each participant, I read the written transcript once in silence, I then reread the transcript while listening to the audio recording. This part of the process was noted as the conversation analysis. By listening and reading, new insights related to the data collected were formed. Due to interviewing eight study participants, there was a substantial number of transcribed pages detailing the data. I made notes on reflections, observations, and initial interpretative comments I found significant to the study. Additionally, I highlighted key phrases and annotated critical points where emotional responses were provided.

Step 2: Initial Noting

Upon reading each transcript several times to get intimate and familiar with the data, I took notes on the margins of the transcripts. I also logged separate notes to annotate sayings and significant phrases voiced by each of the study participants that were pertinent to the research question and subquestions. Smith et al. (2009) suggested the noting process be broken into three discrete comment processes with varied foci. The three types of comments included descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. The descriptive comments noted what each participant said, the focus was on the talk. The linguistic comments focused on the particular language used by the study participants (i.e., language specific to the military experience). Lastly, conceptual comments focused on the overall understanding of the study participants' experiences related to the phenomenon.

Step 3: Developing Emerging Themes

The third step included the development of emergent themes. In this step, I worked with the notes and focused less on the transcripts. Utilizing Microsoft Word, I created a separate tabled document that included all eight study participants. In the table, I listed the initial themes for each of the 12 interview questions. I sorted these themes into the following categories: (a) military experience, (b) transition experience, (c) military to civilian workforce experience, (d) sense of identity experience, and (e) sharing one's lived experiences.

Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

The fourth step of data analysis was aimed at connection. I worked to compile and identify connections between the emergent themes based on the study participant's whole transcript. I created a table (in Microsoft Word) summarizing relevant themes. This process identified subthemes, and I completed the table by adding relevant participant quotes for clarity. In addition, I began clustering themes based on similarities. Themes were organized in the way in which the theme developed.

Step 5: Moving to the Next Case

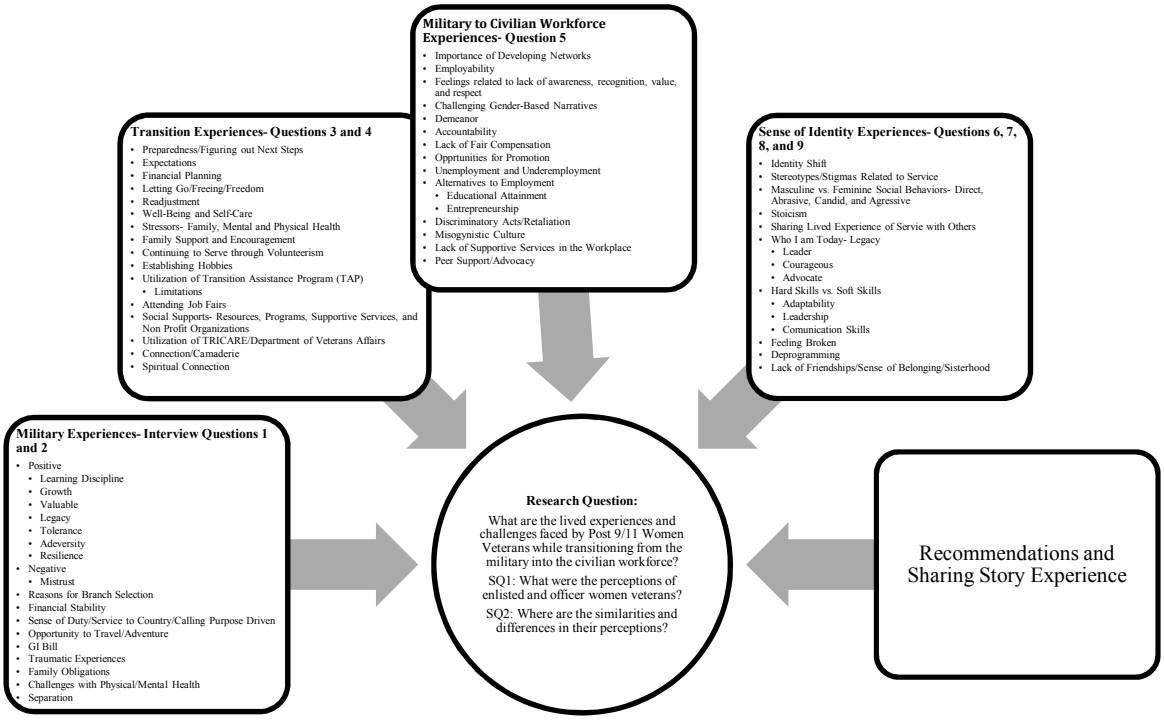
After a thorough analysis of the first case, I developed a master table of themes and subthemes for each interview question to capture the essence of the post-9/11 women veterans' lived experiences. This process was completed for the remainder of the cases ($N = 8$).

Step 6: Looking for Patterns Across Cases

To take the analysis a step further, Pop and van Nieuwerburgh (2019) suggested using mind mapping to aid the researcher in observing themes and subthemes across participant cases. The mind map I generated included a list of master themes and subthemes based on the 12 semistructured interview questions (see Figure 2). By utilizing the mind map as a tool, a visualization of the shared lived experiences of the eight post-9/11 women veteran participants emerged. Following close analysis of the mind map, I interpreted the data by writing a description and explaining how post-9/11 women veteran participants experienced the transition phenomenon as an entire group. I discuss the analysis in greater length in Chapter 4.

Figure 2

Categorical Mind Map



Note. Master table of themes and subthemes generated into a categorical mind map

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has been defined as the confidence/trust a researcher can have in a study and its findings. The rigor of qualitative research is based on a study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each standard is contingent on the other and is essential in establishing trustworthiness. Qualitative researchers utilize various strategies to validate their studies' credibility and rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, I employed: self-reflexivity/bracketing; prolonged engagement; purposeful sampling; triangulation; composing thick, detailed descriptions of the data; member checking; and external auditing by members of the dissertation committee (i.e., peer critique).

At the start of each one-on-one interview, I immediately developed rapport with the post-9/11 woman veteran participant. I strived to create a level of comfort and trust. I shared my role as the researcher with study participants, and I clarified the process with each participant. Additionally, at each stage of the research process, I reflected and documented significant decisions pertaining to the study. Petty et al. (2012) suggested the final written report should include all research participants' voices and the usage of reflexivity on the part of the researcher (see Chapter 4).

To ensure validity and to reduce the chances of compromising this qualitative study, I journaled extensively. Through the process of journaling, I was able to annotate personal assumptions, biases, and beliefs. I triangulated the data by thoroughly reviewing scholarly literature on women veterans spanning the last 10 years and analyzed the rich

information provided via one-on-one interviews. Confirmability was reached via the member-checking emails with study participants.

Ethical Procedures

In the field of psychology, including industrial and organizational psychology, ethics are essential. The importance of ethics was a considerable concern related to this research. In working with post-9/11 women veterans, it was imperative to address ethical issues or dilemmas. The current APA (2017) ethics code outlines principles to guide psychologists on ethical ideals (see Chenneville & Schwartz-Mette, 2020). According to Chenneville and Schwartz-Mette (2020) the five principles related to the ethical code include: "Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, "Fidelity and Responsibility," "Integrity," "Justice," and "Respect for People's Rights and Dignity." In addition to the principles are 10 standards that are enforceable rules of conduct. These standards included resolving ethical issues, competence, human relations, privacy and confidentiality, advertising and other public statements, record keeping and fees, education and training, research and publication, assessment, and therapy.

For this qualitative research study, I consistently reviewed the APA (2017) ethics code, especially throughout the data collection process. Overall, the three critical ethical considerations I focused on were the overall welfare and protection of the research participants, informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality.

Participant Protection

Researchers utilizing IPA must do everything in their power to protect the participant. This protection includes their rights, privacy, and dignity (Alase, 2017). For

this current study, it was my goal to preserve the post-9/11 women veterans' privacy and ensure their privacy would never be compromised. All information provided by study participants that could identify them was kept confidential. All study participants selected a pseudonym of their choice that was used for identification purposes. For example, instead of providing their real names on the demographic questionnaire, study participants were asked to provide their own pseudonyms. However, for the purpose of reporting the results of this study, each participant was identified as P1–P8. In addition, to reduce unintended breaches of confidentiality, I ensured all one-on-one interviews were conducted in a private locked office. Doing so reduced the chance of anyone external to the study seeing or hearing the study participant's interview.

All information gathered on participants were secured on a personal laptop using password-protected files on a password-protected server that only I had access to. All data collected for this study were stored on a DropBox Business cloud storage account that was protected and encrypted. As an added level of participant protection in an IPA research study, it is suggested to delete all recordings after verbatim transcription (Alase, 2017). As a result, all audio recordings were destroyed after transcription to keep participants safe and protected. The transcribed data was stored until the end of the study; all copies were then destroyed.

Participating in this qualitative study was strictly voluntary. Risks to the participants were deemed to be minimal. Minimal risks included mild distress that arose from thinking or speaking about their lived experiences with transitioning and/or military service. For some of the study participants, the topics were sensitive and caused mild

distress during the interview. To mitigate harm, as a behavioral health professional, I offered to provide the study participants with information regarding culturally competent resources, like counselors to contact to receive psychological support, if deemed necessary. In the two one-on-one interviews in which such occurred, the study participants declined the need for resources. Study participants were also reminded that the Veterans Crisis Line contact number, a 24/7 free resource, was listed on their consent form.

Due to the study's sensitivity, all participants were informed that since their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw from the study at any point. Participants were also reminded that they could refuse to answer questions or excuse themselves if they felt the study was causing harm. Ultimately, my goal was to ensure that the post-9/11 women veteran participants felt sharing their lived experiences would increase public knowledge and awareness, and not hinder or harm them in any way.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research method used to answer the research question and subquestions in this qualitative research study. A thorough discussion of the procedures, population, and study participants, the data collection process, and the data analysis plan was presented. As the researcher, I determined that a social constructivist IPA approach was best used to explore the career-transition challenges of post-9/11 women veterans. By sharing their lived experiences, the research participants will contribute to the field of career development in exploring ways civilian employers can support their women employees with previous military experience. Chapter 4 will

provide the qualitative study results and demonstrate that the methodology described in this chapter was followed.

Chapter 4: Results

The qualitative nature of this study provided the rich descriptions needed to tell the story of the eight post-9/11 women veterans. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. To gain a thorough understanding of their lived experiences, I used an IPA approach, supported by Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory. As mentioned by Agee (2009), developing a qualitative research question is a process of reflection and interrogation. After the development of my initial research question during the proposal process, I continued to reflect and determined it was slightly redundant. Upon completion of the eight semistructured interviews and data analysis, I reflected on my overarching research question and subquestions and determined there was a need for refinement.

The overarching research question designed for this IPA study captured a basic goal: to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of post-9/11 women veterans transitioning (phenomenon under study) from the military into the civilian workforce. The two subquestions developed from the overarching research question provided a narrower focus on the research question. The subquestions offered an opportunity to look closer at the similarities and differences of enlisted versus commissioned officer study participants.

During the proposal phase, the subquestions appeared to reflect the purpose of the study, but upon further reflection following data analysis, there appeared to be some redundancy. Creswell (2007) and Agee (2009) noted the pertinence of research question

refinement to assess the appropriateness of wording along the researcher's journey. Based on the discovery during data analysis and reflection, I modified the (two) subquestions by deleting the word "experiences" from both. Doing so allowed for the focus of the subquestions to be perceptions because lived experiences were explored in the overarching research question. The modification fit the need of this IPA study.

The only revisions were to the subquestions; the overarching research question stayed consistent from the proposal stage through the final study. The subquestions were revised to focus on the perceptions, thereby reducing redundancy and allowing the analysis and response to those questions to focus on specific areas. The final research questions are the following:

RQ: What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce?

SQ1: What are the perceptions of enlisted and officer women veterans?

SQ2: Where are the similarities and differences in their perceptions?

The research questions formulated for this qualitative study, and an extensive literature review related to women veterans (see Chapter 2), helped with the development of the semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix F). By manually analyzing the rich, detailed oral descriptions of the career transitions experienced by each of the post-9/11 women veterans, I was able to identify five superordinate themes that provided a deep, detailed descriptive response to the research question and subquestions.

In this chapter, I present an interpretive narrative of the research findings for this qualitative study. This chapter includes the narratives of the eight post-9/11 women

veteran participants along with a discussion of the five superordinate themes and 14 subordinate themes that emerged from data analysis. The five superordinate themes presented in this chapter were shared among the eight post-9/11 women veteran study participants for member checking. The identified themes included navigating the career transition, exploring identity shifts, accessibility and use of supportive services, interacting with civilian employers, and networking. In this chapter, I examine each of these superordinate themes including how they are similar and different between enlisted and officer women veterans (the two subquestions). In each of the five superordinate themes, several subordinate themes also emerged, and these are presented as well. In this chapter, details regarding the setting, demographics, data collected, data analyzed, and the study's results are discussed as well.

Setting

With Walden University's IRB approval and voluntary informed consent from all eight study participants, I scheduled and conducted individual semistructured interviews via the Zoom online platform. In a quiet room in my home, separated from distractions, I interviewed each participant in privacy. At the start of each interview, I established rapport and reviewed each participants' voluntary consent to participate in the IPA study.

Each post-9/11 woman veteran participant was treated with a great degree of respect, honor, and patience. Participants recalled and shared their lived experiences related to transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce. At the end of each semistructured interview, I did a check-in, asking each study participant how they felt about sharing their stories with me to help further the knowledge and literature on their

population. Each participant described the experience as positive and shared how they hoped it would bring some attention and awareness to better support women veterans.

Demographics

Study participants were eight post-9/11 women veterans with self-reports of transitional challenges from the military into the civilian workforce. The participants interviewed for this study met the study criteria. The findings of this IPA study represent responses from participants representing both enlisted and commissioned officer ranks. Of the eight participants, four were commissioned officers, and four were enlisted personnel. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 65. The study participants were from three branches of service: the U.S. Army (Active and Reserve), U.S. Marine Corps (Active and Reserve), and the U.S. Navy. Representation from the Air Force and Coast Guard was not included in this study. The study participants reported their ethnic race as being Hispanic/Latina (three), White (four), and Other (1).

Of the eight post-9/11 women veteran participants, four reported being married, two reported having partners, one was divorced, and one reported being single. Five of the participants had children while in the military, two had children before joining the military, one was expecting at the time of the interview, and one had no children. Seven of the participants reported having a bachelor's degree, and three were working on graduate degrees. Three had completed doctoral degrees and shared their level of participation in this IPA study to advance the research on the topic of women veterans.

The eight interviews were conducted at the convenience of each of the participants. The eight post-9/11 women veterans took part in audio-recorded

semistructured interviews. At the start of each interview, I spent approximately 5 minutes getting to know the participant and establishing rapport. I also provided each participant the opportunity to ask questions about the qualitative study and reviewed the consent form. To protect the identity of each study participant, pseudonyms were used. Additionally, each participant was identified by their branch of service, rank, years served, years separated, and reason for separation. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographics (*N = *8)*

Participant	Branch	Rank	Years served	Years separated	Reason for separation
P1	Army	Enlisted (E-4)	8 years	4 years	Expiration term of service (ETS)
P2	Marine Corps	Enlisted (E-5)	5 years	2 years	Medical retirement/ separation
P3	Marine Corps	Officer (O-3)	13 years	3 years	Voluntarily separated
P4	Marine Corps	Enlisted (E-4)	4 years	2 years	Medical retirement/ separation
P5	Navy	Officer (O-8)	39.5 years	2.5 years	Retirement
P6	Navy	Officer (O-4)	30 years	4 years	Retirement
P7	Army	Officer (O-3)	22.5 years	2 years	Medical retirement
P8	Army	Enlisted (E-4)	8 years	2.5 years	Involuntarily separated

Data Collection

In this qualitative study, my role as the researcher was critical. My personal experience as a post-9/11 woman veteran who faced challenges during my transition was one reason this topic was of interest to me. As a novice researcher, my aim was to understand what other post-9/11 women veterans (both enlisted and commissioned officers) experienced in their transitions to provide knowledge and awareness to the field

of industrial and organizational psychology. Due to the similarities related to the lived experiences of the study participants, it was imperative for me to keep a journal throughout this study to help reduce personal bias and preconceptions.

The IPA research guidelines provided by Smith et al. (2009) offered a step-by-step approach that aided in the data analysis to create superordinate themes and subordinate themes. Each of the superordinate themes incorporated multiple subordinate themes that offered greater detail supporting the data analysis. One by one, each interview transcript was thoroughly reviewed, and themes were identified across the other participant interviews. Findings within the five superordinate themes explained the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce.

All semistructured interviews took place between January 6, 2021, and January 23, 2021. The eight post-9/11 women veterans who participated in this qualitative study were between the ages of 25 and 65, served as enlisted or commissioned officers, and were separated from the military within the last 5 years. The eight participants were asked a series of questions from five different categories: (a) military experience, (b) transition experience, (c) military-to-civilian workforce experience, (d) sense-of-identity experience, and (e) sharing one's lived experience. All eight of the women shared their stories, which provided the rich and thick descriptions necessary to interpret their lived experiences related to the phenomenon of transition. I then identified emerging themes and listed them. All of the eight interviews were conducted according to the IRB protocol

approved in November 2020. There were no unusual circumstances that occurred that would have caused me to deviate from the protocol.

Post-9/11 Women Veteran Participants' Narratives

I didn't know where to turn for a new social support system outside the active duty military. I didn't feel that I fit in anywhere, particularly in the veteran community. I wasn't going to tell jokes with the older vets at the local Veterans of Foreign Wars bar. Civilian settings didn't feel any better — I didn't have much in common with the women in local women's organizations. I was weird.

Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas

The following section contains a brief narrative for each post-9/11 woman veteran participant. To address my research question regarding the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce, it was critical to understand each woman veterans' story. The following eight narratives describe their military experiences and how they transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce. It was a humbling experience and an honor to interview each of the post-9/11 women veterans who volunteered for this study. While serving as enlisted or commissioned officers, women veterans are widely visible due to being one of the largest populations to serve. However, upon transition from military service, they often become forgotten or invisible and often deemed "invisible veterans" (Thomas & Hunter, 2019). It was a privilege to interview each of the post-9/11 women veteran participants who took the time to share their lived experiences.

Participant 1

P1 joined the Army Reserve in 2008 and served a total of 8 years. She initially joined the Army Reserve for financial stability, the post-9/11 GI Bill, the student loan repayment program, and adventure. She was incredibly proud of joining the Army Reserve at the age of 37 and attended boot camp at 38. Financial stability for her family was a leading factor for her enlistment. P1 shared that she always wanted to serve but having her first child at 16 prevented her from serving earlier in life. Upon initial entry into the Army, she planned to sign on for the active-duty component. However, she determined that joining the Army Reserve was a better decision because she was a single mother. During her time in service, she took advantage of the post-9/11 GI Bill and obtained her postsecondary degree. She shared her inability to utilize her student loan repayment program, but she shared, "you can't have it all."

She joined the Army Reserve with the intent of deploying overseas. P1 served a 466-day tour overseas in a combat zone in support of OEF/OIF/OND. She reached the enlisted rank of E-4, which is a specialist/corporal. Overall, P1 noted that her time in the military was favorable, and it was a good learning experience. She credited her personal growth, career growth, discipline, and opportunities to her military service. P1 shared that during her 8 years in service, she saw opportunities as equal. She shared that she had experienced one traumatic event in service, which impacted her greatly. However, she stated that the experience did not ruin her overall image of the military.

Her separation from the Army 4 years ago was anticipated based on her Expiration Term of Service (ETS). However, returning home after service, her civilian

career suffered, and her relationship with her children was significantly impacted. In addition to joining the military later in life, P1 felt that she would not be able to fulfill 20 years in the Army and retire. She wanted to focus on her children and her civilian career, where she planned to retire. P1 noted that she, "came back broken, unprepared, and hyper-vigilant related to PTSD following military service." She shared, "I feel like I am paying for that, and people use it against me, or I'm afraid people are going to judge me for it. When I went into the Army, I felt strong; I felt confident."

Two years ago, P1 met her partner and she shared that she would be lost if not for her support. Her partner encourages and supports her with her challenges related to her mental and physical health and the challenges she faces in the civilian workplace. She shared, "the position I had did have daily trauma, like there are things that you shouldn't be subjected to without support for that separately." To cope with some of her challenges, she has enlisted the help of a service dog. She is expecting to begin taking her service dog to work with her in July 2021.

Participant 2

P2 joined the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in 2013 and served on Active Duty for a total of 5 years and 4 months. She joined the USMC to travel, and she wanted to pursue a goal of service to the country. As a daughter of immigrant parents, she felt that she wanted to pay her dues and serve in gratitude for her citizenship. She described her experience in the USMC as toxic. She shared that her military experience changed every time her leadership changed, which ultimately resulted in her separation from the military.

While in service, she felt that she did not have a work-life balance. She shared, at times she was a machine to the USMC. Her military experience included significant obstacles, but she was thankful for meeting her husband in the military. With being a dual-military family, it was often difficult to manage home and work. Her husband is currently serving on Active Duty in the Army, and she credits his support in helping with her transition.

Due to her strong advocacy, she was able to help change policy, and she attributed that change as being a significant part of her military legacy. P2 is currently pursuing a master's degree in marriage and family counseling. Upon separation from the USMC, she reached the enlisted rank of E-5/Sergeant. During her military service, she did not deploy overseas. P2 separated from the USMC due to a Medical Retirement/Separation 2-years ago. Right before leaving the military, she went on new parent leave, which she credits to easing her transition. Since transitioning from the USMC, P2 has attended career fairs and has been on a few interviews. However, she decided to further her education prior to continued pursuit of civilian employment. P2 shared that she was an MST survivor and had physical health challenges related to mobility. She shared following her service, she needed time to reset her mind and her body, "So I started receiving new parent support and telehealth therapy with my own Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist."

Participant 3

P3 joined the USMC in 2007 and served a total of 10 years on Active Duty and in the USMC Reserve. P3 has a family history of service and shared that serving in the military was always a favorable decision. Her cousin was tragically killed in Iraq, and his

funeral impacted her decision to join the USMC in that she wanted to honor her cousin's life. P3 other deciding factors in her branch selection included the "toughness" of the USMC; she was also attracted to the camaraderie and the idea of belonging to something bigger than herself. She described her overall military experience as positive, formative, and educational. P3 referenced receiving her commission following her 21st birthday and how spending her 20s in the USMC impacted the way she perceived the world and the USMC's organizational culture.

In total, P3 completed three deployment tours. At the 10-year mark of her military career, she decided to voluntarily separate from the USMC. She explored the idea of staying in; however, she felt she would have stayed for another 10 years to get to retirement at 20 years if she stayed. P3 noted,

I could have faked it, but a "good" Marine just never felt like a natural fit for me. So, I said to myself, "do you want to keep doing this for 20 years, or you acknowledge that there are cool opportunities on the outside, too? Ultimately, I think I made the right choice, but I think it would've been a quicker choice and a more comfortable choice for me if I would've known that on the outside, it was okay. You'll be fine. This is not the only way of life. This is not the only world that you can live in.

Before separating, P3 had the opportunity to take an assignment in Tokyo, Japan, but ultimately decided it was time to do something different. She shared that she had family and friends that supported her during her decision-making phase and during her transition phase. As a dual-military family, she also received support from her partner, who retired after 20 years from the USMC.

During P3's time in service, she attained her doctoral degree. She reached the rank of O-3/Captain upon her separation from the military. She anticipated and planned her transition from the USMC. Due to her final deployment a year before separation, she was financially stable; and dedicated approximately 6 months to transition. P3 separated almost 4 years ago from the USMC (at the time of the interview). Following her transition, she took a gap year and worked for AmeriCorps. Shortly after, she was able to start a career in contracting: "Working from home, I know that is best for me. I like the flexibility/control part."

Participant 4

P4 joined the USMC in 2014 and served on Active Duty for 4 years. She shared that her time in service was not what she planned. P4 joined the USMC after completing her Associate Degree in Criminal Justice. She planned on furthering her education, but she had to postpone her goal due to a lack of finances. P4 shared that wanting to pursue a career in the Secret Service and was advised joining the military would benefit in getting the background experience needed.

She initially planned to join the Air Force, which she thought was a better fit. However, a family member in the USMC shared their experience with her; and it piqued her curiosity. P4 hoped for a positive experience and benefits from the USMC. She was injured twice, which ultimately led to her separation from the USMC. She recovered from her first injury; however, her second injury resulted in her blowing out her anterior cruciate ligament. She endured numerous surgeries and spent significant time in physical therapy. She shared not feeling supported by the military and knew her body was not in

the physical condition needed to maintain military readiness. Upon leaving the military, P4 had strong emotions related to feelings of empty-handedness and not getting much out of her military service. She also expressed feeling broken, used, and mentally and physically exhausted. She even shared the feeling of being disrespected and called a malingerer,

> I'm still mentally, I'm still trying to grasp what happened. I feel like I've extended all my time. I wish things had been different. There are all these things I wish that would have happened, but I can't go back in time and fix it. So, talking to my therapist because I am in therapy right now. I have a lot of anxiety. I have all these issues I didn't have before. I feel like a completely different person that I don't really like. I know it's myself, but I have a hard time understanding myself and having to deal with it. Sometimes I feel like it's a blessing in disguise that I ended up coming out instead of just staying, but I don't know. I have mixed feelings about it.

She reached the enlisted rank of E-4/Specialist upon separating from the USMC. P4 completed her service without any deployment contingencies in support of OEF/OIF/OND. She was separated from the USMC 2 years ago due to a Medical Retirement/Separation. Upon transitioning from the USMC, she received very little support from family and friends. She found herself serving as a caregiver for her grandparents and attempted to go back to school to finish her bachelor's degree. Due to physical and mental challenges, she was unable to complete her degree. At the time of

this interview, she had just begun a new job working in a dance studio and was terminated shortly after.

Participant 5

P5 joined the Navy in 1979 and served in both the Active Duty and Reserve component for 39.5 years. Upon graduating from college, P5 decided to join the military for financial stability. After speaking with both Army and Navy recruiters, she decided to join the Navy. She shared that joining the Navy allowed her to go to Officer Candidate School and pursue a military career that she loved. As she stated, "they're going to pay me to do what I love, be in the water." Some key takeaways from her military experience included her Christian values of accepting, adapting, and overcoming. She shared that her military experience meant and confirmed her belief "that God created the human spirit to face adversity and be able to overcome it and achieve success."

Overall, P5 had a positive experience serving in the Navy. As a dual-military family, she and her spouse both retired as Commissioned Officers. While serving in the Navy, she was able to attain her Ph.D. in counseling. She found her degree to be extremely useful and used it to help with mentoring and supporting her fellow service members. In her last 4-years serving, she had a really prominent job. However, P5 decided to retire, knowing she could no longer be promoted due to statutory limitations. She also felt that with various changes occurring in the military, it was an excellent time to transition.

She finished her service as an officer, retaining the rank of O-8/Rear Admiral Upper Half- RADM. She completed one deployment tour of duty in support of

OEF/OIF/OND. After almost 40 years of service, she retired from the Navy 2-years ago. Since retiring, she has returned to her home state and is surrounded by supportive family members. Some that even reside on the same street. Within a month of retiring, she took up quilting. She shared the experience, "was such a journey of reminding me of what it is to start something new." She also has become the caregiver to her mother-in-law.

Regarding employment, P5 decided to become an entrepreneur, and she opened her own clinical practice in her community. P5 mentioned, "the goals of my practice are to earn enough money to pay for my licenses and CEUs [continuing education units]." She also noted at the end of the year, she looks at the revenue she generated and writes checks to charity.

Participant 6

P6 joined the Navy in 1987 and served 20 years on Active Duty and 10 years in the Navy Reserve. She described her military career as "awesome." She joined the Navy later in life and had worked in the civilian sector for several years before serving. While in the military, she found the people and the locations she served to be her community. Overall, she attributed 80% of her 30-year career to be positive. She shared that she had her son at the age of 15, finished high school early, and put herself through college. In college, she worked for a contracting company, where her boss, a Navy Reserve Officer, influenced her to join the Navy Reserve. Later she served on Active Duty.

P6 served approximately 9 months on Active Duty in support of Desert Storm. She came off Active Duty and went back to work in the civilian sector. She eventually became an educator and was recalled to Active Duty. She stayed on Active Duty for the

remainder of her military career and started her own business towards the end of her career. Due to statutory limitations, she had to retire. Looking back, P6 shared she wished she had the opportunity to leave the Navy on her own terms. During her last few years on Active Duty, she worked for high-level commissioned officers, including a Three-Star General. She also shared one of her mentors was a high-ranking African American General.

Upon separation, she reached the rank of O-4/ Lieutenant Commander (LCDR). She did not have any deployments supporting the Global War on Terrorism, but she did serve in Desert Storm. She retired from the Navy in 2017. After her military service, she began pursuing a Ph.D., but she was unable to complete her studies due to an illness. Recently, she became her mother's caregiver after she fell ill.

Participant 7

She joined the Army in 1995 and served for almost 23 years. P7 joined the Army as an enlisted service member, then commissioned and retired as an officer, reaching the rank of O-3/Captain (CPT). A few months before graduating high school, P7 saw a commercial of military women climbing over a wall. At that point, she was determined she wanted to be ambitious like them and join the military.

Overall, she loved her military experience but shared some bittersweet moments. She shared that she grew up in the military after joining at the age of 17. She contributed her military experience as a part of her growth. She developed many relationships during her time in service, many of which she calls her family. She obtained her Ph.D. during her time in service. However, getting married and having a family, and balancing a

military career became a struggle. For approximately 10 years, P7 struggled with creating a balance. This caused her to experience burnout. And as a result, with almost 23 years of service, she was medically retired.

During her time in service, she did not deploy overseas. Upon her transition, she received support from her friends and family. P7 shared that her transition was not always easy,

> I guess this is a part of the transition and it's not linear, and it looks different for everybody. And to me, it was just a lot of questioning certain decisions and learning to let that go. So journaling, prayer, therapy, talking to my husband, or seeking out other female veterans that have transitioned before me and just seeing like, is what I'm feeling normal; am I good?

P7 was medically separated from the Army 2 years ago. She also was able to return to dance and traveled the world, which she used as coping strategies. As a daughter of immigrants, P7 shared how proud she is of her service explaining,

> As a woman, I honor the fact that I served, that I was able to accomplish all that I did while I was in. I identify with the sense that I served, and I served fully. I served honorably, and I am very proud. I always say to my son, because I'm a daughter of immigrants, "Here it is. It's this legacy that we serve."

Participant 8

P8 joined the Army in 2010, serving on Active Duty for the duration of her career. She served as an enlisted service member for a total of 8 years. After graduating high school to escape from poverty, P8 made the decision to join the military. She

described her overall military experience as, “Not that good and not that bad.” Her time in the military was complicated, and she expressed having held feelings of bitterness. However, she attributed her time in the military as an aide in creating financial stability.

Several factors contributed to her separation from the Army. Before her separation, she had two children within 2 years and had a hard time getting promoted. Her mental health was also a contributing factor in her separation. Upon her separation from the Army, she was an E-4/Specialist (SPC). She did not deploy overseas during her time in service. It has been approximately 3 years since she separated from the Army due to an Involuntary Separation. Regarding her transition, she shared, “It was not as bad as I thought it would be. It is a little weird sometimes because I don’t really have many friends, so a lot of people don’t really get me.”

As a dual-military family, her husband supported and provided her guidance throughout the transition process. With her husband’s support, P8 was able to obtain local resources and connect to the VA and the Vet Center to begin services. She also received support from other family members. She noted her mental health was a challenge for her, P8 shared,

Well, I’m getting treatment and everything like that. That’s okay, but I know when I first got out, I was going through a lot of . . . I was reliving a lot of things from the military because of stuff that happened, and the hardest part of getting out was, I had time to think. That was the hardest part. With my mental health, it was not the greatest for like the first year. And it wasn’t because I got out, it was because of some other stuff, and I just had too much time on my hands. I started school and

stuff. It helped, but that was the hardest part, was having time to think, you know what I mean?

She is currently pursuing a master's degree in legal studies and is currently teaching part-time.

Results

After analyzing the data, five superordinate themes emerged across the eight semistructured interviews. These include (a) navigating career transitions, (b) exploring identity shifts, (c) accessibility and use of supportive services, (d) interacting with civilian employers, and (e) networking were found among the study participants. These superordinate themes resulted in 14 subordinate themes: (a) preparedness, (b) transitions are difficult, (c) new routines, (d) Her service: Visibility matters, (e) self-identification, (f) connectedness, (g) sense of purpose-volunteerism, (h) availability of services, (i) navigating VA resources, (j) employability, (k) civilian workplace environments, (l) gender-based discrimination, (m) entrepreneurship, and (n) importance of developing networks.

One overarching research question and two sub-questions were answered based on the identified superordinate themes and subordinate themes. The overarching research question read, "what are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce." In all, five essential superordinate themes emerged from the data to answer the overarching research question. The superordinate themes provided key information about the overarching research question by informing the field on how post-9/11 women veterans experienced

transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce, including which factors were most important (i.e., career transitions, identity, supportive services, interactions with civilian employers, and networking).

Additionally, the superordinate themes addressed the similarities (i.e., importance of networks, lack of support systems, and perceived discrimination) and what differences existed between enlisted and officers (i.e., resources available to each, preparation prior to separation, and development of networks). It is critical to note, that all superordinate themes were compared against the eight transcripts to identify the similarities and differences in the lived experiences amongst the four enlisted and four officer study participants.

For each of the superordinate themes presented in this chapter, Table 2 provides a visual representation of the prevalence related to the subordinate themes across the post-9/11 women veteran study participants. In this study, I diligently worked to ensure the sampling of all eight of the post-9/11 women veterans quotes. The intention was to ensure each of the women had a voice in sharing their lived experience with transitions (i.e., the phenomena of focus). Quotes from study participant transcripts related to each of the superordinate and subordinate themes are included to aid in exploring the lived experiences of the study participants.

I believe that the superordinate themes reported in this chapter reflect the participants' lived experiences and perceptions of what it means to be a post-9/11 woman veteran transitioning into the civilian workforce. The quotes are also vital in understanding and sharing the similarities and differences between the enlisted and

commissioned officer's experiences. Analysis of the interview data uncovered critical aspects of post-9/11 women veterans' transitions into the civilian workforce that employers and human resource professionals can take into consideration as they recruit, train, and retain women veterans.

Each of the themes identified in this IPA qualitative study informed the overarching research question and sub-question in varied ways. In general, the superordinate themes informed the overarching research question by providing key insights into what factors were critical to transitions. The subordinate themes provided more detail about what aspects of the primary themes influenced transition and aided in answering the sub-questions related to perceptions of personnel based on rank as well as the similarities and differences related to perceptions.

Table 2

Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate theme	Subordinate themes
Navigating the career transition	• Preparedness • Transitions are difficult • New routines
Exploring identity shifts	• Her service: Visibility matters • Self-identification • Connectedness • Sense of purpose-volunteerism
Accessibility and use of supportive services	• Availability of services • Navigating VA resources
Interacting with civilian employers	• Employability • Civilian workplace environments • Gender-based discrimination • Entrepreneurship
Networking	• Importance of developing networks
Recommendations for needed supports	• Building an inclusive workplace culture • Establish employee resource group's • Mentoring

Superordinate Theme 1: Navigating the Career Transition

The first superordinate theme to emerge from the data was the challenge of navigating the career transition from the military into the civilian world. For the purpose of this qualitative study, a transition occurred when a post-9/11 woman veteran exited her branch of service and applied focus on attaining civilian employment, pursuing post-secondary education, or entrepreneurship. This theme provided key insights into the

overarching research question by highlighting the ways in which participants navigated career transitions. The ways in which participants navigate career transitions helps the field of Industrial and Organizational Psychology and HRD professionals to understand key considerations in developing interventions to support post-9/11 women veterans in all transitions.

As noted by P6, a retired Navy officer, there is "not one right way to transition," and that upon transition, women veterans transition into different roles that can impact long-term success. The transition experiences of the eight study participants varied, but despite the differences, I was able to identify subordinate themes that further explained their challenges. Of the eight study participants, one woman veteran was involuntarily separated from the military, two women veterans voluntarily separated (i.e., expiration term of service; ETS), three received medical retirement/separation, and two retired after serving more than 20 years in the military. In each of the eight interviews, study participants easily recalled and shared their individual transition experiences

All eight post-9/11 women veterans shared their experience with preparedness, both successful and unsuccessful; many talked about their experiences participating in their service branches' transition assistance program (TAP). However, all reported experiencing some type of difficulty during their transition. Some described their transitions by expressing emotions related to that period in their lives. It was apparent that the transition process had a substantial impact on them. All talked about new routines with a sense of enjoyment and freedom, while at the same time sharing that there were

components of their military experience that they missed. Table 3 provides an in-depth breakdown of the subordinate themes related to navigating the career transition.

Table 3

Subordinate Themes Related to Navigating the Career Transition

Subordinate theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Preparedness	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Transitions are difficult	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
New routines	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Preparedness

Study participants shared the importance of having finances in order, relocations planned, enrollment in benefits including education, and employment options lined up before separating from military service. However, for the participants in this study, it was apparent that commissioned officers were better prepared than the enlisted study participants. Several of the enlisted women veterans indicated they were unprepared to transition into civilian life. P2 described her experience as it related to preparedness as she transitioned into civilian life.

> I did not have time to properly plan due to going on new parent leave. Any other chance I would've had enough time to get a job lined up, but my first focus was to find myself again as a mother. I was experiencing a lot of postpartum anxiety and postpartum rage, and that came from all the hatred that I felt coming my way from the Marine Corps, my leadership. And the lack of support ended up taking a toll on me as a mother and as a human being, so I lost a lot of my identity.

P4 shared upon her separation, her only plan was to care for her grandparents. She noted, "I didn't have a job and did not have any savings." She further expressed, being a caregiver to her grandparents reminded her of negative experiences in the USMC, she noted,

> Right out, I ended up moving with my grandparents. Because they kept asking me during enlistment if, whenever I did come out, if I could come with them and help them out because they're getting older. I felt like I was in the same environment that I was in when I was in the Marines. Constantly being insulted, criticized a lot, not really respected, my boundaries. And so being there, I got very depressed. I didn't leave the house. If I did, I was just out in the yard hiding. It was not a good place.

P4's quick transition following her medical separation left her little time to heal emotionally and psychologically, which ultimately impacted how she navigated her role as a caregiver.

Whereas study participants who served as commissioned officers were more prepared. For example, P3 mentioned her intentionality in her transition:

> I had a very good transition-off experience. I chalk that up to a couple things. I deployed the year before, so financially, I was set. I had a plan. I was moving across the country when I got off active duty during the 3 months, so I had something ready that was exciting and that I was literally running toward immediately post-transition or post-exit. But the big thing is the last 6 months that I was on active duty, the guy who had taken over for me on the deployment was still there, and

> the new guy was coming in, so there was no reason for me to take over again. I really had those 6 months completely dedicated to transition.

P3 further noted that following her transition, she jumped into her next opportunity,

> But I got out and immediately jumped from this thing to the next thing and have been very busy. So, I haven't experienced some of the negative parts of transition, I think, that I heard or I was expecting. Maybe I was just guarding against it. I say I jumped in, but I jumped into a gap year, a gap month. I was single, I had no kids, I had the flexibility to risk. I was in the Reserve, so I had healthcare. I could risk not having a high-paying job. I only had to worry about me.

P6 mentioned military experience helps with preparation for transition. She noted, "I think we in the military are prepared. If you think about it, because we train for war, we train for conflict. Whether the conflict happened or not, we are trained for uncertainty."

P6 also noted the importance of having her finances situated upon her transition, which allowed her to take it slowly upon her transition and not have to rush into the civilian workforce. As she put it,

> So immediately when I knew it, I put a plan together. I had 5 years. I'm like, I have 5 years to pay all my debt, so I'm not going to have debt when I get out. And I always remember telling myself when I retire, I want to have a choice of not having to work. I will decide if I want to work or not. So, I paid all my bills, I made sure I had enough money saved, the things they tell you that most people don't pay attention to.

P7 shared that she was prepared for her transition. In her words,

> Well, I think that I was prepared. I was prepared to be at home, per se, in a way. I can't ask no one, "How are my children going to take this?" Or "How is my husband going to react to this?" I mean, that's a lived experience that I'm going through. And so, I can't say no. I think the people that were in my corner, around me as I was transitioning, were as helpful as they needed to be. I retired from Kansas. So, we had already made a decision with the choice that this is where we're going to stay just for about a year, kind of get the kids stability here. And then we'll move to Georgia. We'll move to Georgia because we had a house here. We had a house, and so we were in agreement with that.

The Role of TAP. I explored the study participants' usage of TAPs for each of their service branches. Seven of the study participants indicated that they participated in their branch of services transition assistance program classes before exiting the military. Of the seven study participants who shared attending a class, only half found it helpful. A few of the study participants shared they were able to obtain good resources and networking opportunities. However, several study participants expressed that they received some benefit from the class, but overall, the class needed restructuring. Study participants shared the need for the classes to be altered and not only focus on transitioning into civilian work, but it needed to have a holistic component and focus on other factors that impact the transition.

Two of the USMC study participants shared their experiences, which were completely different. For example, when describing her experience participating in TAP, P2 stated, "so, the best part of TAP, bottom line, was networking with other service

members that already had their stuff lined up." She further noted, "other than that, it was pretty useless because two of the four teachers just wanted to talk about themselves." Alternatively, P3 shared a different experience as an officer in the USMC. In her words,

> I did a mentorship program through the Marine Corps. I was able to go take a test and do the seminar. My command, my job, position, everything allowed me to really focus on transition for those six months. So, I did the Transition Readiness Seminar course. I'm kind of an independent person, so I was kind of doing things on my own, but it was really helpful to understand my strengths, my weaknesses. It was helpful to understand some of the job market stuff. Yeah, I think it was helpful, and I think it's even more helpful for maybe the younger Marines that spent 4 years. Like joined at 18, they're 22 now, and they've never written a resume, they don't know how to go to school, they don't know how to use the GI bill, all that kind of stuff. There was very practical use.
>
> Then the same thing for people who spent 20 years—here are the things that you need to think about. The program out in San Diego was actually really good. I had a good mix of practical skills, and we did an exercise where you find out what your color is. It's one of those strength tests or whatever. But I remember that. I remember doing that and at the time thinking, oh, this is kind of cool, but looking back now, I'm like, that's been really helpful in determining what jobs I want to take, what I want to do, because I know that these are my strengths. For example, I'm orange, which is work hard, play hard.

As a retired Naval Officer, P6 also found TAP helpful. The classes helped her put a plan in motion to work out of her debt before retirement. She stated,

So, the most challenging part for me, I started the transition process with TAPS? TAPS, is that what you call it? They tell you not to make really major decisions within the first 6 months. So I went through a divorce at 50, and everything that I had planned for my life . . . And he was also in, we were dual military, and it's like, okay, what do I do next? Not only was I no longer in that place, but now I have $100,000 in debt. So, we have all these houses and all this stuff. I went from having stuff that I personally bought to having debt.

P7, a retired Army officer, found TAP valuable and relevant for navigating resources in the Army. She stated,

Yes. So you know it's called Soldier for Life? Right. I love the fact that the program name is fitting, soldier for life, so that you can still access the resources, even after you transition out. So, it was very helpful. I think there's some stuff they . . . I questioned some people that taught certain classes, but for the most part, the information that I needed was relevant. I'm trying to think what else could they . . . Because you're in that particular state, so they can't cover every state or what to look for, but they provided the places where you can go for that. So, I think it was good. I didn't have anything to say like, "Oh my God, this is a waste of time." I took advantage, full advantage of whatever opportunity was available for me to seek. I did, with the exception of, and I probably wouldn't have been good for that one, but they have, if you want to work in the civilian workforce, they have a 12-

> week program where you can transition into the workspace. They give you permission to work there for 12 weeks, and it leads you right into your transition period. And people get hired from there.

For P5, who served as a Navy officer, she did not share a positive experience from her TAP class. She shared how as an officer, she walked away offended by the general instruction of the program and stated the need for a change in the training modules and instructors.

> So, for senior officers, it's a little different. I did not appreciate their underlying slant against women. And it was so obvious in the class I was in other senior officers who during the break would ask me, "How can you put up with that?" So, they saw it too, and it was frustrating for them. So, because when you go into TAP, they do some Myers-Briggs stuff, they do look at your resume, they look at what you've done, and they come at it from corporate America. They have this tone of, "you don't have the skillset. You don't have the persona. You don't have the charisma that's wanted in corporate America. So, you probably need to start down here." I didn't appreciate that. And I think a number of the female officers called the company out on that, but I don't think it did anything. I don't think it changed a whole lot.

P5 further explained,

> So, the TAP course kind of left me with, I'm not ready to hit my head against any more walls. It was very convincing. Like, I did that for 40 years. I should be able to stand right here and say here's what I bring to the table.

P8 noted TAP was helpful, and she was able to obtain the needed resources to transition into school following her military service. In her words,

> Well, the actual classes were pretty useful. I found them informative. I don't remember a whole lot since it was a couple years ago. It was very helpful, especially, too, with my main concern, getting out and into school. And it helped me switch to the Post 9/11 GI Bill and anything like that. So, I found it really useful. But yeah, TAPS was good to me.

P1 shared her perspective of the military's transitional programming stating,

> I think the military needs to do a better job of teaching people how to deprogram themselves from that military mindset into going back and working in a civilian workplace. They do more for prisoners to send them back into civilian life than they do for the military.

Transitions Are Difficult

All participants shared that they experienced difficulties as they transitioned back into civilian life, understanding these difficulties are critical to civilian employers' and HRD professionals' understanding of how some post-9/11 women veterans' transition, and therefore, how to build supports. For many of the participants, mental health supports were needed to help them transition. Of the eight participants, over half indicated receiving counseling or support to develop transitional coping strategies. Additionally, participants shared their lived experiences of physical disabilities and mental health challenges including PTSD and MST and its strain on their transitions.

The women veterans who served in combat roles shared some of the challenges they experienced with their transition, sharing that they felt behind their peers. Frequently, the strategies they used to cope were not comparable to what they needed in their civilian lives. When describing her transition, P1, who served in the Army Reserve, thought it was critical to discuss her deployment time and what it was like to return to her civilian workplace.

> So, my transition was a struggle. But coming back from my deployment in 2011, I came back to work. And I was struggling. I again was like, I've done all of this, and I feel like it should have benefited me a little bit more than it did in the real world. But I got back, and it felt like the whole world stood still while I was gone, and now I'm trying to catch up. I mean, I'm sorry, I'm backward. I meant I stood still, and the whole world moved on. Yes, including my career, and so I got back, and I looked around, and I thought these were the people that used to report to me; they are now the people I am reporting to. And like they've been promoted and benefited from this time period, I didn't. And I feel like I'm suffering.

P7, an Army Officer, discussed the shift from being in the military to transitioning into civilian life as a lonely experience.

> I'm like, what? It just felt lonely. But it was needed. And just asking a lot of questions. I got very anxious about even applying for a job. Like I knew when I got out, I was like, I'm not working. I don't want to work. And I had to really convince myself that I needed this time for myself to just kind of piece all of these things together.

P8 was proud of her overall transitional experience, but she did share her challenges related to separating herself from her time in service.

> We got the house and stuff like that. So, transitioning out was pretty smooth. Smoother than probably how it would be for a lot of people. I do have a hard time, well, not relating to people, but I'm having a hard time separating myself still from the military. But it's not anything I can't handle.

P3, the USMC Officer, shared a broad perspective to women veteran transitions, especially as a dual military family.

> Not only as a woman veteran, but I'm wondering if this would be applicable to a woman veteran, but my partner and I retired. The personal/social impacts on leaving and retiring are big. I think leaving the service sometimes you have to learn how you live with yourself. How do you live with yourself again? Or if you were the primary, how do you transition from being the person who dictates to being a trailing spouse or being the supporting partner. This probably doesn't apply so much to women, because typically men are the primary movers. Like their career takes priority but especially for two military couples, if one's getting out how to transition those interpersonal roles and the same thing for socializing. In the military, you have a built-in social network. You go to a new unit, you have to uproot your life every three years, and that's really tough, but you go into work, you have ready-made friends. They're almost obligated to hang out with you, whether or not you get along.

New Routines

All eight study participants recalled having to set up new routines as they transitioned, and the importance of these new routines to the success of their transition. Study participants shared positive emotions about establishing new routines. One participant described new routines as newfound freedom. P3 described her new routine by saying,

I think just the idea that it's going to be okay. That's your whole life, the military. The Marine Corps dictates what you wear, your nail polish, your hair color, when you can have a baby. I guess not technically, but yeah, they do. Whether or not you're going to have a relationship with anyone, deployments. All that stuff is dictated completely at will. Then it's hard to imagine life outside of that.

P4 expressed her enjoyment of her newfound freedom after her separation from the military, she noted,

I guess, had a little bit more freedom because I had to do whatever I needed to do without being stressed. It's hard. I really don't have anything to say that's been easy for me. I'm trying to reconnect with some of the things I used to growing up. Most of it consists of art, baking, dance. Doing school, regular academics wasn't working for me. I was having a lot of trouble concentrating, focusing, and then the medications I was taking for antidepressants. It was just messing with my memory. So I ended up sticking to just dance classes and trying to reconnect with myself, taking some meditation classes. I have been kind of on a spiritual journey right now.

Asking about P5's early experiences with new routines seemed to evoke memories of just having too simply slow down.

So, my last tour of duty was in Washington, DC, and we transitioned to Georgia. So, I went through some practical changes. My neighborhood doesn't have . . . Only a limited number of people can have cable, DSL. So it's like, oh, internet. Just some kind of things. There's a grocery store. It's a 25-minute ride without traffic. So there are some life adjustments in terms of, if you want to go do anything, it's a hike. It's a hike on some roads. So that was this kind of slowing down life. And by slowing it down that much, you recognize the pressure cooker that you were in.

P7's expressed her enjoyment of no longer asking for permission and the freedom and autonomy that her transition offered, noting,

Oh my God. Just the liberty of, Oh, I ain't got to put no leave form in! I love to travel. And so it was that like, Oh mama, we're going to Senegal! Yeah. Okay. We're going here and there. We're going if it was that like not having to put in requests. But being physically and mentally present for my children, if something would happen to them in school without me having to tell a supervisor or someone my business, but I don't want you all in my business. So that liberty of. That autonomy. That true independence of, okay, my daughter is having a moment at school. And I'm not feeling anxious like, oh, okay. I really got have somebody cover down for me while I go. No, I'm at liberty to get up out of my bed if I want to; that's another thing too and go see about them.

P7 also mentioned that following her military service, she also had time to think about how she felt about her military service experiences and transition,

> So everything moved with ease. I think for me, it was, I didn't realize all the feelings and stuff that I would have to address, but now you got time. Oh, you got time. You're not in this busy mode anymore. Now, it's, Oh my gosh. Like, where is this coming from? It's that just meeting you where you are now and having time for that. And it's like, "Wow, okay, what is going on with some of these things here?

P6 also shared the relief of no longer having to wear her military uniform was a new routine for her. In the words of P6, "They're like, 'oh my god, I don't know what I am going to do.' I'm like, 'Oh great, I don't have to wear combat boots anymore.' So that makes the difference."

P2 shared her struggle with new routines and adapting to being a full-time mother during her initial transition,

> Saying goodbye to the place was easy. Saying goodbye to my identity where I said it once, and it was done, was not easy because I had a two-year-old and a newborn. And a two-year-old doesn't understand my commands. Then it took a little bit for me to truly turn off that "Get it done" mind-frame, to "Let me teach you," in a baby status. Because that was the hardest part. Getting used to dealing with a toddler. It took me a couple of weeks to realize that I was taking my stress out on the kids because I was talking to them like they were in the Marines. I would get upset because they didn't follow instructions, so I was like, they're two and not 10.

P8 noted the easiest part of her transition was settling into her new role; she explained, The easiest part for me was just kind of settling into the new role. It was also kind of hard too. I went from active duty to stay-at-home mom and college student. So, while it was easy because I was tired, it was still kind of hard to get used to the fact that I'm not running around 24/7, and getting up at 4:00 a.m. and, it was easy to get used to. Still, it was also kind of strange because it's like 6:00 a.m. and I'm having my coffee and my smoke, "Oh crap, oh wait, I don't have PT anymore." I was surprised to learn that participants were more similar than they were different as they navigated their transitions. However, the study participants who were commissioned officers upon transitioning were more prepared for civilian life than the enlisted women.

Superordinate Theme 2: Exploring Identity Shifts

The second superordinate theme to emerge overwhelmingly among the post-9/11 women veterans was the shift in identity upon transitioning from military service into their civilian communities. In understanding the overarching research question, this theme and the participant responses helped to understand the role that identity shifts have in participants' successful transitions. It is critical to note that the women veterans shared some of the obstacles related to trading their military identity for a civilian identity during their transition process.

Overall, most study participants shared that military service was not just a job; components of their service were strongly connected to their lifestyle and identity. Many of the study participants shared their feelings related to being misunderstood and isolated by members of their community and society as a whole. As a result, several women

veterans shared that they do not publicly self-identify due to a lack of societal understanding of their service. The second superordinate theme included four subordinate themes (see Table 3), all of which are discussed below.

Table 4

Subordinate Themes Relating to Exploring Identity Shifts

Subordinate theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Her service: Visibility matters	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Self-identification	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Connectedness	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Sense of purpose	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Her Service: Visibility Matters

Visibility was prevalent among the study participants. Feeling out of place and misunderstood was a common occurrence amongst the women veterans. Many shared that society often downplays the role of women in the military and reduces their importance. Unfortunately, due to society's misperceptions, many women veterans felt their service has gone unrecognized; this observation was pertinent to both the enlisted and commissioned officers study participants. For example, P1 specifically described her feelings of societal offense, stating,

I hate to say this, but sometimes I feel offended by society. Because I feel if I was a man who served the length of time that I did, even the side-by-side duties that I did, he would have garnered more respect.

P5 reflected that upon her retirement, she outranked her husband, and when interacting with some of their community members, she was not recognized for her service. The following statement expresses P5's experience,

So, in the end, I had a little more rank than my husband. But you go someplace, and it will be, "Captain, how are you doing today? P5, what are you doing?" And you kind of go, "Wow," it's just, it doesn't change. Some people do that. Not all people do that, but some do it. Some of the activities I got involved in, I don't think they embrace their women veterans the way they embrace their male veterans. Because at some level . . . and it's okay, some people think that the military is not the place for women. That still exists.

P8 noted that she took pride in her service but still felt the sense of societal ambivalence and felt undervalued. She reflected on her experience and explained,

I'm proud of it because a lot of people assume that women didn't serve, and I really like throwing people for a loop because I'm such a goofball. You know what I mean? Sometimes, I do feel undervalued, like if you'll see those old guys with the Vietnam war hat and they'll just assume that you didn't serve, and sometimes, that's a little insulting. But, other than that, I feel pretty good about throwing people for a loop, if that makes sense.

P4 shared her experience regarding visibility noting,

I have a hard time explaining to people who I am ‘cause I don’t like labeling myself as an occupation. So, I am hopeful for the future and plan on going forward. I’ve been told I need to stop sabotaging myself and step up as a leader. But I’m still having issues with anxiety but slowly learning to deal with it.

P3 noted that her military experience had a significant impact on her life, but she did not feel it defined her life, explaining,

Not that every Marine woman lives up to the hype, but I carry myself differently if I know people know that I’m a Marine. I think for me, and maybe for others, being a woman in the Marine Corps was always something different. It probably aided me in having a separate identity because the Marine Corps is so masculine. I think it’s very easy for men to get sucked into that. I think it’s very easy for men to let that become their entire person. But I think for being a woman because there’s almost a backlash. After all, the Marine Corps strips so much femininity that you hold onto it a little bit tighter. Maybe. A lot of the women I know that served or are still serving take pride and joy in being a woman.

P5 noted that as veterans, marginalization of military experience can have a negative effect. She shared,

And not just women, but veterans, in general, are quick to marginalize what’s going on. Because we’re tough. We can handle anything. We’ll persevere. All those great qualities veterans have, it’s their worst enemy. So we marginalize the impact.

Self-Identification

Upon transition, study participants shared how they had to learn how to redefine themselves following their military service. Study participants shared how challenging it was to move on to their new phase of life, which included entering their communities and the civilian workforce. For P1, she recognized that her transition experience entailed a level of stoicism similar to her male counterparts.

We expect veterans to not talk about their experience, to be strong, to keep it inside.

> Inherently, the male viewpoint. Keep it inside, don't cause a commotion, don't talk, you went through it, you dealt with it, you're living with it, just move on. And we expect females to do that at a higher level because we're asking them already to match this male view. And then even more, because their experience is so different, and they inherently have a more emotional tie to their experiences because society doesn't give them that stopping point.

P3 shared that she had no problem identifying as a women veteran. However, her veteran status is only a component of her identity.

Now, I have no problem identifying as a vet, and I definitely still am tied into that circle.

> Veterans' advocacy groups, no problem. I do still identify as a Marine, and that is a big part of my life, but I think we're probably at a stable level now where it's one component of who I am and what I do. It's not going down, but it's not increasing either.

P3 also noted that even though she identifies as a women veteran, she still struggles to carry on with some of the military culture and traditions that follow. In this example she noted,

We came back from a deployment, and when the Marine Corps hymn plays, you know, you have to stand at attention. I follow those rules, but I would never do that naturally. Like if I'm in my house or somewhere, if we were at a bar . . . Like one time we were at a function and a couple of the old guys at the bar realized that we were all Marines, and they put the hymn on. I kind of rolled my eyes like, "no, I'm not going to." Someone looked over at the older guys, and they were standing attention, so I was like, "Okay, I'll do it too." It's one of those things of, there's an obligation, there's an additional obligation, to act a certain way in the Marine Corps that I am happy to do, that I wouldn't naturally do. Even if I don't believe in it, it's respecting the institution enough to know that this is what is expected. It doesn't do you any harm to stand for a few minutes or whatever. It means something to someone else, so you owe it to them to do that. It is kind of how I think about a lot of the traditions and stuff.

P4 shared that she avoided conversations regarding her service because of her negative experiences related to inappropriate questions and assumptions.

When I have shared about it, people react. And I tried just avoiding the conversation because then they ask stupid questions of me or they end up overshadowing the conversation of things that they think they know, and it's not, whatever friend

> they had was trying to impress them, that kind of thing. They just don't pay attention, and they just make up shit.
>
> I feel like, overall, I notice the differences. Males, everyone gives them recognition, everyone is all up on them. For females, it feels like guys here think that females shouldn't be Marines or in the military in general. They think it's male-dominated. Only males can be in the military. They think you're taking up space and making it harder for the rest of them. If you're in the military and you're a female, there's something wrong with you. You're crazy. It's always something negative associated with it. That's why I've been keeping my mouth shut because I'm tired of the negativity that comes from people, not realizing we're more than capable and, if not better than males, in my opinion.

P8 noted that she is still learning to figure out who she is outside of her uniform,

> I think I'm more easy-going than I was. Well, I still get worked up about things, but my identity, though, I don't think it's changed that much. When I was serving, I didn't act like I was in the military. You wouldn't know I was in the military until you saw the uniform. Also, I still feel like . . . I am not me anymore. I don't even really know what "me" is still, though, but that's something that's always been a problem.

P5 reflected on the usage of the term Admiral and how she would simply state being a Two-Star to relate to people.

> I don't use the term, "Admiral" a whole lot. I would identify as a two-star. And that's related to gender. Because it's really interesting, in our church, we have a

> couple who are wives of Generals from the different services. People can understand that terminology if they have a male in front of them, but you can watch their brain have this disconnect seeing a woman with a title from the military. That doesn't make sense to them. That's just how people's brains work. It's the natural functioning of the brain.

Connectedness

Having a network of support during the transition was deemed to be integral. Many women veterans shared that their colleagues were like family and the camaraderie between them helped immensely during their time in service. However, in the civilian world, many women veterans shared that they did not have the same bond and connection. This lack of connection has caused some of the women veteran study participants to isolate. P2 shared that outside of her veteran and military community, "I don't have friends." P2 further noted,

> In the military, you are taught to take care of your own, put them on their feet, and then you let them go. So I would say my innate need to see everybody succeed has hindered me in the civilian world because I can't let you batter yourself down when I can see you do better.

P4 also shared her challenges with connections since her transition. In her words,

> It's just been really difficult because I don't have a support group, not from when I was living in Dallas. Most of them have forgotten about me, or they are completely different people than what I knew before. And our personalities clash. And then some of them are able to break away and quit talking because they think I'm just

> this gung-ho motivated person or just have severe PTSD, all the stereotypes you can think of. So, that's pretty difficult.

Study participants who served as commissioned officers shared not having the same challenge regarding connection. P3 shared that following transition, she picked back up friendships and networks and lacked feelings of disconnect. She noted, "I haven't felt lonely or disconnected. Like I haven't really felt isolated. I think that's probably because I have a pretty big friend network of support." She also joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). P3 also shared that in most of her social groups, she is the only former commissioned officer:

> In all of the veteran circles I'm in, I'm like the only Officer. Sometimes I won't tell that part of my identity because that's not necessarily a good thing. Some of these communities. Actually, one of the first fellowships I got, the guy who ran it, we spent about two or three days together, and we were walking in DC, and he goes, "You know, P3, you're the first officer I haven't wanted to punch in the face." Not even like, "You're pretty cool for an officer." "Literally, you are the first one that I have not hated." He's like, "I almost didn't accept your application when I saw that you were an O." He's like, "Someone pointed out, that's kind of discriminatory. You can't really do that.

P6 shared a similar experience and felt connected to her military community and that the camaraderie between her and her peers still existed.

> Again, I think I'm fortunate enough that I had support in a little town. For example, like Fayetteville, where the entire town is military, even when I was not on active

> duty, I still have enough of the core people around me that I needed to get support from them. So I think I knew I was out, but I was not out. So I would go to the PX Exchange and saw everybody there. When seeing people, they would ask, okay, you need anything? And I'm like, "No, I'm retired. I can sit here and eat lunch and shop." But I think for me, I was still very involved with my command at that point. Then last year, I went into two different business-related programs but had a lot of military. So one, it was a military cohort, and then one which was spouses of military, so that was a whole solid year. And it's like I just always felt that I was connected, even though it was something very different from the military.

P7 shared missing the camaraderie found in the military when she was enlisted, compared to the loneliness she felt as a commissioned officer transitioning,

> What I missed, though, was I found myself comparing my enlisted time and my officer time because of the camaraderie that I had in my enlisted time. It was very different as an officer. And I had missed that. I wondered if I retired in the enlisted rank or within the same field that I had been enlisted, right. Would I feel a little different? Because I really felt kind of like lonely towards the end of my career.

In the same vein as connection, several study participants shared their challenges with feeling like they belonged. P1, P3, P7, and P6 shared similar experiences.

In sharing her experience, P1 said,

> You probably heard it before, like parking in the veterans parking spot, and somebody's giving you a look in their vehicle. Don't do that. And on Veterans Day, if you're

> not wearing one of those hats that say that you are a veteran, they question you for asking to use a veteran discount.

P6 noted joining a community group helped to strengthen her sense of belonging. She noted,

> And you see, here's the thing, it doesn't have to be like we belong to this big thing. It was a group of eight. And if we would have been four, it would have been okay, too. It was the fact that we were there supporting one another, even though we all have different, totally, completely different pasts. He had been out since the eighties or nineties. Two of them were Marines that went to Iraq and Afghanistan that probably nobody at their age should have seen the things that they saw. One of them was a Navy SEAL. Like the whole entire thing. So, again, I get it's a part of . . . we are not alone. Because I think we all felt like we were alone.

Sense of Purpose

The majority of study participants shared their tendency to want to continue to serve following military service. Several women veterans volunteered in their communities, noting that the work gave them a sense of purpose. During their time in service, they stated that their purpose was clear, and they were surrounded by other service members who had a similar purpose. Whereas in the civilian world, their sense of purpose was not the same, and many shared the feelings of being out of place, and volunteering allowed them to serve in areas where they were passionate. P3 reflected on how she continued her service following transition, doing a year with the AmeriCorps.

However, she examined her sense of purpose at several points of her transition. In her words,

> But I definitely struggled. I'd say I struggled a little bit with purpose when I left. I hadn't finished my Ph.D. yet. But I had moved, and it was like, I moved to this small town in the south where I don't know anyone, I didn't have any friends, I didn't go to work every day because I was working remotely, so I thought what am I going to do.

P1 specifically described her experience as a volunteer and stated that she felt she was making a difference in her community. And that helping in her community served as a way to heal.

> So I volunteered this past year. I volunteered with animals. Basically, I volunteered to foster animals. We fostered 10 dogs and about 20 cats. I like to give back to the community, whether it is military or not. Well, we also donated suitcases to a local foster care nonprofit. We donated hundreds of hours of time. Somebody coined the term that "helping is healing." I feel like I can make a difference.

P2 shared volunteering on the military base working with military-connected children, and supporting those children had a generational impact.

> I love volunteering. Not just because you help people, but I get to say, "I gave my time to children that don't have anybody else." I learned to be a better leader in the Marine Corps through being a volunteer at church. You want to build the leaders of tomorrow. Our generation is just the working muscle for the next generation

> that are going to rule us. So you might want to mold them to what you want the country to be.

P8 also appeared to enjoy volunteering and the need to support and provide service to her community. In her reflection, she shared,

> Well, it's not too crazy. I volunteer with a group called Warriors, and they do advocacy work for sexual assault and domestic violence victims. I don't put in that much time because I just do their listserv. Their email lists. But it's pretty cool getting to talk to people who feel passionate about the same things. It's not really military-related, but I try to bring awareness. Like, doing the email like promote it, like promote other nonprofits, and I promoted veteran organization stuff. So, doing some of that stuff is pretty cool.

P6 shared her experience with volunteering with national nonprofit groups and how she felt that the work was an extension of her military service. P6 noted, "I volunteer a lot for nonprofits veterans' groups. And also, when I was getting my degree, I was able to do some of my projects with my degree program for the veteran community."

P5 shared her enjoyment of helping others as well, she stated,

> Getting very, very comfortable with helping people in one-to-one victories. That's like the logo I chose for my little company is, there are no accolades, there's no press feed, there's no great title. I mean, you can make one up, but it's just, here's what I did with this person, and I made a difference in their life. And you kind of go, at the end of the day, that means more than anything.

P4 noted she is still working on identifying her sense of purpose,

As time goes by, I keep wondering what my real purpose is. Still don't have a definite answer, but I do know Arts has always sparked something in me. Unfortunately, I still get a lot of criticism and judgment for it, especially hearing, "How do you go from Marines to dancing? Aren't you broken?" I pick my battles, others I ignore.

Superordinate Theme 3: Accessibility and Use of Supportive Services

The third superordinate theme reflected a reoccurring narrative that accessing and using supportive services upon transition was stressful and difficult. This theme is key in understanding how existing services are impacting participants transitions. Many shared their challenges with both the Department of Veterans Affairs and supportive community services. The majority described the need for the Department of Veterans Affairs to have a more streamlined process and to better educate veterans about accessing their benefits upon transition.

Regarding community supportive services, many of the enlisted women veterans noted that several of the more extensive non-profit organizations were designed to support the male veteran, and the woman-centric programming was limited. It was also pointed out that the connection to relevant organizations was difficult. With the abundance of non-profit organizations serving veterans, there was a significant level of additional stress in navigating supportive services. The following table provides a breakdown of the subordinate themes related to accessibility and use of supportive services.

Table 5

Subordinate Themes Relating to Accessibility and Use of Supportive Services

Subordinate theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Availability of services	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Navigating VA resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓

Availability of Services

This subordinate theme was strong across the study participants. Study participants noted an abundance of resources allocated for veterans, but the challenge was finding the right resources to fit their needs. Many shared that their military service was overlooked and minimized as they navigated the VA and community supportive services. Some of the study participants recalled not feeling that they were prepared to navigate the resources located in their community. P4 shared she struggled with knowing where to locate resources in her community since a recent move. P1 described how she felt that programming was developed with the male veteran in mind and then tailored for women veterans.

I mean, I hate to admit that because that's also another stereotype, especially nowadays with women in combat that I was in a support role. And I think that, let's admit like most of the women are getting help in male-dominated programs.

She also shared that finding resources has come with its own set of challenges. Some of the non-profit organizations that she participated in did not provide her with adequate supports. She noted,

I joined other military organizations, nonprofit groups because I thought I would get the support I needed. But long story short, I joined two well-known organizations in the area, somewhat national. One, I went to, and all they basically did was sit around and drink and smoke. So that was that organization, the other one I'm giving another chance. I interacted with them for 5 years. And it was really the toxic masculinity that was set up that I did not care for when I was there. But they seem to be partnering with another group to do a post-traumatic stress program. I was in shock when I heard they were doing it. I am very delighted to hear that they are trying to do something like that. And I signed up to take part in. I would like to be a mentor.

P2 spoke about her experience obtaining a service dog and the inability to get one due to not having combat PTSD and being service-connected due to MST. She stated,

This is very important that I tell you. I could not get a service dog. Not top of the list, but I couldn't get on the regular waiting list for a service dog because I didn't have combat PTSD. And every time when I would talk to them, they would be like, "Oh, are you the veteran, or is your husband the veteran?" And I would say, "I am the veteran!" They would then ask what deployments did I have, and I would say no, I did not deploy; I was a part of the lab rats making sure you all got home. And they would say, "Well, right now, we don't have enough dogs. We only have dogs for people who saw combat . . . or have PTSD." He said. And I was like, "I have PTSD from Military Sexual Trauma."

Fortunately, as she explored resources to help with parenting, she was able to find a relevant resource. She shared,

My husband is on active duty with the Army, and I found this new parent support program. Basically, a social worker comes in and helps me for an hour, teaches me how to be a mom. And that was the best thing I could have done. Humbling myself to the point where I knew that I needed help, not just therapy-wise, but doing things wrong at home.

P8 shared that following her separation from the Army, she had 6 months of transitional medical coverage that was highly beneficial. In her words,

One thing that I think was positive was, I don't know if it was connected to medical care. I got Tricare six months for free, and that really helped because ... well, they weren't going to leave me without my medication, but I got to get some therapy while I waited for the VA, and I got my meds smoothly because I went to a Marine base. So, that really helped me a lot, with having the Tricare for six months.

P4 shared her limited knowledge of accessing adequate resources in her community caused her to isolate and hindered her transition. She shared her sentiments on the needs of women veterans as they transition and need supports by noting,

I still believe female vets need more resources to better deal with situations outside our service and also find our voice. We are unique, and the world isn't aligned to us. The other issue, like one of my vet friends mentioned, is that some of us go through an identity crisis.

Navigating VA Resources

Several of the study participants expressed feeling stressed as it related to navigating VA resources. There were shared experiences between commissioned officers and enlisted. Each of the study participants who participated in a transitional assistance program prior to separating from the military were introduced to their benefits. However, the majority of the study participants experienced challenges obtaining their benefits. P3 described how she struggled to navigate the VA:

> The biggest struggle was navigating the VA. Trying to do all the VA stuff. Just all the admin stuff of leaving the military. It's harder to get out than it is to get in. Calling around and saying, how do I get all of my medical records? I probably have spent an entire week on the phone for like eight hours a day, no joke. "Call this place." "Oh no, call this place." I'm like, "Wait, hold on, what place is this? Yeah, I called them on Monday, and seven calls later, they sent me to you." I still don't have half the stuff I need. I'm still trying to process claims and file upgrades and appeals and stuff. That was a big pain—the GI bill. I had a little bit of the GI bill left. There was one period, like a month, where I was furious, and clearly, I blocked that part out because I can't explain exactly what happened anymore. But I missed out on some benefits, which I was very upset about. It didn't make any sense. Nobody could explain it. I couldn't get anyone on the phone, and I'd be on the phone for hours and hours—all that admin process. Obtaining benefits is probably one of the most frustrating parts of the transition.

P5 shared a similar experience regarding navigating the VA. Specifically, P5 spoke about applying for disability and the stressful process it took to obtain her disability rating. P5 contends,

> So, as I transitioned out, I put in all this disability paperwork. And unfortunately, I started two days too late when I was still on active duty, so they would not process it until I was retired. And since I moved from DC to Georgia, that created problems. And then Walter Reed forwarded all my medical records, and of course, the VA said, "We don't have your medical records." So, they said the decision is being delayed because we don't have access to your medical records, and we don't have this information. So, I went through probably an 18-month reiteration of them looking at my record, making determinations, driving... Once again, you're out in the country, so you have to drive 70 miles to their doctor and then get the call, "Oh, we lost the information, the doctor did it wrong, have you do it someplace else.

Additionally, in her experience as a VA Clinic patient, P5 noted,

> So, I showed up at the clinic. And when I got there, they said, "You have some more paperwork to fill out." So, I'm filling the paperwork out, and I'm sitting there looking at this waiting room of predominantly men. It was oppressive. It had this air about it that it was just closed in, and people sat there and waited and waited and waited and waited. And I said, "I'm not doing this." I haven't pursued it since.

P5 also shared her lived experience being assessed for VA Disability,

They have stringent rules, and I understand why they have those stringent rules. But how do you define the impact of stress, of being in a combat zone, of all this, and they boil it down to certain questions. I'm kind of going; that question is slanted from the get-go toward the male warrior with a gun on the front lines. So in the interview, the way they ask the question forced me as a female to marginalize the impact of that year in my life. And I think that probably happens across the board to all these female warriors. Because they ask the question, as were you on the pointing end of the gun?

P1 also noted the challenges she faced with the VA Disability Claims Board and how she felt that male service members were rated differently than women veterans. She explained,

I follow, like, the claim boards, and you know I do a lot of my own personal research as much as I can. I see a lot of guys again, and I see a lot of, "Oh my God, you got to do and say this to get this check." You don't think that we earned that right. Is that what you're saying. And there are actually separate boards for women and men. And they can't get along. They can't judge a woman with the same disability as you, who might even have more injuries than you. And it's like, no, because you're a man, we're not going to second guess why you need benefits. As a woman, you know, you have to prove that you did something in the military.

There were some positive experiences noted by study participants. For example, P8 mentioned, "I got my VA rating right when I got out and went right to college, and everything was set up for me." She also noted her experience receiving quality care from

the VA's Veteran Center. In her words, the "Vet Center connected me with mental health resources if I needed them and showed me how to submit my DD214 to start my disability claim."

Additionally, P4 recalls having both positive and negative experiences in accessing her benefits. She shared,

I don't know that many resources. When I got out, I heard beforehand that I was going to be taken care of by the VA. When I got there, I was already set up with appointments from VA. I had my therapist, physical therapy. I thought they were very helpful, for the most part.

However, with a recent move, she has noticed the differences in medical treatment of male veterans compared to women veterans in the VA Outpatient Clinic near her residence. She noted,

I think I see it more with having to get medical services, especially when I go in, and if I have male doctors, actually even a female, they classify us as having a higher tolerance for pain, which I can still feel it. I may not show it on my face or anything. I had no choice but to hide, or it was going to get worse. For me, it's harder to explain, "I'm really having this pain." I don't know how to explain it, but it's not normal, and my body is telling me that it's not okay. Any time I get medical services in regards to that, I feel like they dismiss me most of the time, or they think I'm just being crabby. As far as medical, I feel like that has been biased.

Superordinate Theme 4: Interacting With Civilian Employers

The fourth superordinate theme for most post-9/11 women veterans that surfaced was their experiences interacting with civilian employers. Transitioning from military service into the civilian workforce was described as stressful, and many participants struggled with this stage of their transition. As I explored this theme, I realized that the study participants were transitioning their employment role from service member to a civilian employee, which involved discipline and structure; they also attempted to obtain employment where they could be faced with underemployment lower-earning wages.

The study participants who were enlisted all shared challenges related to the length of time to employment. Of the four, P1 was the only participant who did not face the challenge of obtaining civilian employment. Upon her separation from the Army Reserve, she was already in a full-time position. However, she did face challenges with interacting with her civilian employer. P1 explained,

So, they're like, "Why are you having a hard time, and it was very frustrating." Because in the corporate world and transitioning; it was like, that's over, leave it out there, come back, don't come back to the military attitude, don't come back with the military experience move right back into your position While it wasn't easy to do and it was really hard.

I was surprised to learn of the eight study participants, only two former enlisted study participants were attending school full-time. However, both joined the civilian workforce and shared their experiences throughout their interviews. P8 explained,

I was trying to get a job because I had four months before starting school, and I was bored, and I think my military experience hindered me because I was overqualified. I just found this stupid job at Walmart as a cashier. I'm a college student; I don't care. I just need the extra cash right now. Then, get a job, you know? Then, some of the other stuff, like the stuff that I did in the military, I was under-qualified because I didn't have a bachelor's degree. So, that sucked a lot. And, another thing was, as a veteran, especially given my experiences, I didn't believe that I could do a lot of things. So, that kind of messed it up for me too.

P2 shared that focusing on obtaining her master's degree in counseling was a priority and her goal upon completion was to establish her own private practice. She noted with her husband's support that they both agreed that this was the best employment option for her due to her disabilities potentially impacting full-time employment. In her words,

So even if I did want to get equal employment with my condition, I couldn't because I don't have a service dog to help me. So me and my husband had a conversation like, "You can get a low-income job." to make extra money, or I can just focus on school and be the best I can at home. That was a team solution.

At the time of her interview, P4 had just been terminated from her employer and was working diligently to regain her sense of worth. As she put it,

My boss didn't like me, but instead of being upfront about it, he was disrespectful and listed several things about my personality for why he was firing me. He said I asked too many questions, "something about my personality" that he couldn't explain, he didn't want a pro teaching but more of student like (he never bother to

> see my resumes), and didn't like that I had opinions and was direct with him. What did he expect hiring a Vet? So this was my first experience as a civilian employee getting fired. In all the jobs I had, this was just another lesson for me. I cried about it but realized it wasn't about me.

All of the commissioned officer study participants had some level of interaction with the civilian employers, except for P5 and P6. P5 established a counseling practice following retirement. P5 shared her sentiments regarding women veterans entering the civilian workforce stating,

> And I think it's a characteristic that most women veterans, once they get out... This is opinion . . . and they could get back in touch with that natural human spirit they have to overcome in the face of adversity, that they would recognize that they'd gotten this wonderful fabric woven into them from the military, they can do anything they want in the civilian sector. Because they bring a whole skillset to the table that a lot of people don't have.

Whereas P6 explored the idea of returning to the civilian workforce. She had periods of civilian employment during her military service. In addition, she developed her own business selling women's apparel while in military service and decided to work full time on her business following her retirement. In this sentiment, P6 shares her exploration of working in the civilian workforce upon transition,

> And a part of me goes, should I get a job, or should I work remotely? Should I apply . . . And I applied for a couple of GS jobs, and I qualified. One was in GS-14 at the front office, for a two-star, and I'm like, I worked for a three-star, number one.

> But then I'm like, I don't want to wake up at 6:00 in the morning. I don't want to. And my friends that knew me were like, P6, this is perfect for you, you need to apply for this job. And I was like, no.

P7 spent a short amount of time in the civilian workforce and decided on an entrepreneurship track. Conversely, P3 noted that upon her transition, she felt pressure to find a job,

I definitely felt that pressure of what's next, and whatever's next is forever. I applied for

> CIA and various other federal organizations, NGA, State Department. I did all the stuff that you're supposed to do when you transition as an intel officer, especially if you're supposed to go and do these contracting things. I actually ended up contracting. I didn't seek out contracting, but it found me. I think I felt that pressure to pick the next thing and pick right. It was like, whatever you do next has to be what you're going to do for the rest of your life. Which is just not ... I don't think that's accurate. Luckily, I was able to explore.

Table 6

Subordinate Themes Relating to Interacting With Civilian Employers

Subordinate theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Employability	✓	✓		✓				✓
Civilian workplace environments	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Gender-based discrimination	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Entrepreneurship					✓	✓	✓	

For each of these subordinate themes (see Table 6), there was more variability in the number of study participants that discussed each theme.

Employability

Factors that impacted employability included service-connected disabilities, both physical and mental. In this study, several of the women veterans who were enlisted while in the military and were service-connected experienced employment challenges. P1 and P2 shared their sentiments on writing resumes and having civilian employers not recognize their achievements. According to P1,

> And your military accomplishments on your resume don't matter. I don't know why I even put it on there. And they're like, oh but wait, you have only been at this company for six years, but I was like wait a minute, I was in the military for eight. But if I were a guy, right? They would say he was in the military; let's give him the job. I don't know what he did, but he served 10 years in the military.

P2 shared a similar sentiment by stating,

> So I focused on basically rebuilding my resume to where I wasn't so lost in the Marine Corps, and it was more about the things I'd learned from it. Because you could get a couple of calls and informal offers, but . . . I wasn't getting offers that were similar to a male's offer for the amount of experience and the things that they wanted me to sacrifice; it just wasn't worth it.

In addition to resume writing, P2 and P7 shared their experience with attending job fairs to explore civilian sector jobs. Both wanted to explore their marketability in the civilian workforce. P2 shared,

I also went to one or two job fairs here. The ACS put together, and I still went there looking for a job, but at this point, I really just wanted to see what my worth was on the market, and if the right offer came along, it was mine. But I wasn't desperate for a job.

P2 noted that she was extended an offer for one position but decided not to take it due to her perception of salary inequities stating,

And so one of the offers that I got was about $11,000 less than my male counterparts. And that makes a difference because it was a commute, and then my kids would have been going to different childcare in a different area. So it just wasn't worth it. I would be sacrificing myself and my family life, which is one of the reasons before I even got medically retired, so I had to make a decision. This life just wasn't for me anymore.

P7 noted her experience as one in which the potential employer recognized her worth and wanted to extend her an opportunity to have more of a senior position than what she wanted to take at the time. She reflected,

I mean, I remember one time I went to this job fair and I handed this lady my CV, and she was like, "Oh my God, can we get an interview?" She was like, "tomorrow." And I went home, and I was like, "Oh, okay, sure." I said sure, but when I got off the phone, I kind of felt antsy, right. Because I was... In my mind, I was still holding on to this like obligation thing of the military. Like, "Oh my God, if I do this, it's an obligation." And so I had to kind of release myself from those feelings like, "No, you ain't got to go all-in for this. You don't have to..." So that was one

> of the things that I had to work through, and of course, I went through the interview date. I wanted a basic job. And they were like, you could be the Dean of this college. And I was just like no, and they didn't know that I just came out of a leadership position. Like, I'm not trying to do that right now. And I was like, Oh, okay. But when I left out, I had to send an email to say- Thank you, but no thank you.

P6 mentions contemplated going back to work in the federal government but decided to pursue a doctoral degree and focus on the business she developed. However, shortly after starting school, P6 went into a major anaphylactic shock after a fall. Upon her recovery, she decided to just focus on her business. Nonetheless, here is an excerpt from P6 detailing her employability. In her words,

> And so when originally when I got out, I was going to go back to the same job I was in and work as a GS person, but just outside of retiring, what's his name had frozen all the bills. So if you were an officer, you have to wait six months. So I couldn't get into the federal government, so I was going there as a contractor, and that didn't happen. So I knew that in advance, and so I'm like, okay, I'm going to go to school. I said I was going to school, and I found a program that I wanted, and I literally forced myself into the program.

P2 mentioned her disabilities, both physical and mental, were affecting her current full-time employability status. She noted that she has perceived the civilian workforce as one that does not incorporate workplace flexibility and accommodations:

I'm not part of the full-time employed people because my disabilities stop me from it.

> Because no employer is going to be like, "Yeah! Take Friday off if you feel like shit today." Let's be honest, no one is going to want to pay an employee full-time for them to be gone out of the office for sick days and VA appointments. That's just not going to happen. And I don't get paid for my current work. I don't get offered the same as my male counterparts, who did far less work than I did.

P4 shared that when she decided to start looking for civilian employment, she knew she did not want to go back to an office job, so she explored other options for employment. Her first job as a civilian was with a rideshare company. She shared,

After I came back to Texas, I started in the summer of last year, or not last year, but the

> year before, with Rideshare, because I didn't want to be with people, going back to an office space kind of thing. I'm still in the mind that I really don't want to be here in an office sitting down and having the same problems. I feel like at this point if I reencountered the same thing, I might throw a chair at someone. I'm so done. The Rideshare has been pretty helpful. But I'm at the point where my car can't handle that anymore.

P8 shared the psychological encounters she faced in military service, which caused her a significant workplace challenge, which limited her intentions on job searching. Her first job following her military service was in retail, and she recalled that experience:

And, I have a lot of issues, and it kind of stayed with me until like ... I did eight years so,

> I PCS'd a couple of times, and it stayed with me. My whole military career, I thought I wasn't bright enough. I would crack under pressure, and it affected my

> civilian life. Like my job that I had over the summer because I felt like if I messed up or something, I would get yelled at or get fired—this anxiety. Retail is pretty stressful. Sometimes, fucking shit needs to get done, and people are like, "Hey, come on, let's go." And I was scared they were mad at me. It even affects my social life. I know people around, and I talk to them. I'm a regular at Starbucks and stuff, and I've even went to school with a couple of people that work there, so they know me, and I'm afraid when they're talking to me, they think I'm stupid or something. So, it had a huge effect on my civilian job.

Civilian Workplace Environments

All of the study participants shared their perceptions of the civilian sector. However, of the eight study participants, only four were currently employed in some capacity, whether full-time or part-time employment. Two commissioned officer study participants P6 and P7 had experience in the civilian sector but decided to become entrepreneurs. P4 had recently been terminated from her job as a dance instructor. And the last participant, P5, chose to pursue a career outside of the civilian sector to use her leadership and clinical skills and focus on entrepreneurship. P5 shared her reasons as to why she did not join the civilian workforce, "I was determined that I would just kind of sit still for a while after retirement. But I think one of the most annoying things was the civilian sector not knowing how to embrace and address a female veteran."

P1, P3, and P8 shared their experience related to culture shock. P8 noted that in the civilian workplace, she was not as stressed due to the culture of her employer's organization. She recalled, "it was still like so strange because it was so much more laid

back." P3 noted the differences in language style and directness used. She realized her level of candor worked and was necessary for the USMC, but it was frowned upon in the civilian sector. She recalled, "that culture shock was really hard. I think I reached out to a lot of people that I knew, people that had done it before, and they helped me through." P1 furthered the point that the civilian workplace was not as rigid as the military. She made reference stating, **"**It basically is like the civilian workplace is not very rigid. Even the interpersonal communication you have at the watercooler is different in the motor pool than in the snack room at work."

P7, the retired Army officer, shared her experience related to culture shock after working for 2 weeks and resigning from her civilian employer due to the organization's lack of structure and accountability. Two components of her military service that she found critical to the workplace. She mentioned,

So lack of accountability, lack of structure in some things, and lack of communication.

> Not that stuff didn't go on in the military, but when there was the lack of communication, okay. There was ways like, okay, we work to rectify it. But here it was just going on a business as usual and stuff.

The four study participants shared their thoughts on their organization's commitment to embracing them as women veterans. P1 shared the lack of support in the workplace contributed to the challenges she experienced. She describes going back to the civilian workplace, choosing not to share her diagnosis of PTSD out of concern in the way her employer would treat her. She noted, "so, I never really told them specifically that I do

suffer from PTSD. And I don't have to, but I might talk to them about it." She further described her feelings related to coming back to her job with PTSD,

The military and civilian world are completely different structures. It's very hard, especially when you come back with PTSD, or you come back from the combat zone to turn that off in your brain. You get penalized in the corporate world for behaving the way you were slotted for in a military environment, very hard.

P1 further stated, "How much support there is for male veterans and female veterans, just get shafted. That's almost misogynistic."

P8 shared her experience regarding her organization's commitment and noted the support she received from her civilian employer. Feeling supported by an employer was new to her since that was not her experience in the military. Initially, she felt guarded but eventually, she shared her appreciation of the support. In her words,

I'd been out 2 years, and I got a summer job at Lowe's. It was a good place to work but, it was very overwhelming because I was used to getting yelled at a lot and stuff like that, and when I would screw up at work, I'd be like, "Oh my God," and they'd be like, "Hey, P8, it's not a big deal." I only quit because I started school again, but really, dealing with civilians who don't make a big deal out of everything was very strange.

P8 further shared,

I worked at night, and I would work with ... well, it was this old guy and this other guy, and so I worked with two men. I remember working in the appliances department, so there was a lot of finding stuff in the back, and I couldn't find an item number.

> My coworker was in the back office, and I had the door propped open. I was like, he was on the computers and show me where it was, and I didn't feel like ... because the door wouldn't stay open and I was acting all weird, and having to deal with that was very hard. It's not that I didn't trust him; it's just habits. When I told somebody about it, and my manager ended up giving me a doorstop. So, people were pretty supportive, but it was still kind of weird. Because they know ... some of them are veterans, they understand that stuff.

In her part-time position, P2 noted not having the organizational supports needed to balance her work and family life,

> I see clients, right now from noon to three, and then I have class from 4:00 to 9:00 p.m. So, my husband's Army. That means he goes to the field whenever he goes on duty, so that leaves me with challenges with my toddlers. And when I tried to fight and voice things to my employer like, "Hey, this is taking a lot out of me; I have children, and my partner travels." I wasn't trying to pull the military card. I was just trying to figure it out, but I was told that the other employees make it work.

I further explored how the organization's level of commitment and support impacted the study participants' engagement as an employee. P1 noted that her employer gave her a promotion upon her return from her deployment, but she was not receiving the supports in the workplace that she needed. Ultimately causing her demotion, she noted,

> So they gave me a promotion when I got back; however, it wasn't equal to the people that were my peers, right. They were at a higher level; they gave me a

> promotion like, “oh yay, you’re getting a promotion.” So, it still wasn’t the types of people that I used to actually give work to. And when I had put in for another promotion to that level. When I got it, they were like, “you are doing great.” And then there was no support. They were like, here do this job, but if you don’t do it exactly like we want you to do it, we are going to cut you later. And so I got demoted, and over and over again.

P8 expressed that with her organization’s support, she could be successful and engaged in her job,

> I did really well, though. I think it helped my work ethic too. I caught on. It’s simple stuff, but I caught on pretty fast, and I got to do stuff, like actual work, and not be told, “No, don’t do this. Go sweep the back room” I actually got to do work. I don’t know. It really did have a huge effect on me, though. Still does.

P3 noted that in the military, there were lots of supports to get the job done. In contrast, in the civilian workforce, she had to use her military skillset and learn how to navigate her job with fewer supports provided. She mentioned,

> It was all this new stuff because I think even as an officer, the military holds your hand through a lot of things, right? You don’t have to pay for anything. They tell you where to go. Now it’s trying to figure out how to set up emails and trying to figure out how to do your travel plans for your company without an admin person to go through, or whatever was really hard. I think there’s a lot of things I learned as an intel officer and as a Marine that are almost cross-disciplinary that are very helpful. I think the knowledge or the skills learned in the Marine Corps of, okay,

> just figure it out, start calling people, start figuring it out. I think are very important on a practical level.

Gender-Based Discrimination in the Civilian Workforce

As several study participants navigated the civilian workforce, they faced the challenges of translating their military experiences, in addition to showing their leadership capabilities, technical skills, and educational attainment. For the study participants in the civilian workforce, experiences related to stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination were shared. Stigma related to their military service and the lack of recognition also was determined to be challenging. For example, P2 shared,

> And it's really hard for me to put that on the resume. Because I only have a handful of professional references that could vouch for my good work. I have all the certificates, but we live in an era in the 21st where it's who you know and what they say. So sadly, even though... Even though I did things above my pay grade, that's not what would have been on my paper because I'm not a male. The good old boys probably would not have vouched for me.

P1 shared her lived experience with discrimination in the workplace, stating,

> So in all, I had indirect reports were eight. They then cut it down to four and then cut it down to zero, and then one of my direct reports became my boss again. And I said, what exactly is going on here? You know, and again, it's just this cycle. There's no word for it. I can't think of what I'm trying to say. It's a word for it; they systematically work on you, knowing you can't prove that they're just, they're discriminating against you, you can't go turn that in because there's no

> evidence to support it. They were like, "Oh, well, we have to." We're doing a reorganization, and we have to figure out who was going to go during this reorganization, and it just happened to be the girl with PTSD that just asked if she could have a service dog at work. And that's when it all went downhill. It was like, okay, I want to discuss this with you; the organization I have been working with wants to know if I can bring in a dog just to see how it feels during the day. And I got demoted like soon after that. It was crazy. I moved down out of that place where my experience and career led to being a supervisor. I like had to move out of that because they just kept on chipping away at me. I am not doing what I use to love. And something that I dread every day.

P2, P3, P4, and P1 shared that their communication style significantly impacted their organizations' social expectations. Specifically, P2 shared,

> I struggle with authority views with my voice of candidness. Those are the two things I struggle with the most. They don't take very kindly to it, coming from a female. I think they think I come off as abrasive and aggressive, but if a man said it, there wouldn't have been any issues. So I think identity-wise, some of the things I struggled with was candidness, maybe? Or what is it? Being too direct.

P3 reflected on her own experiences and noted the usage of code-switching in the workplace; she mentioned how she apologized to her colleagues for behaving in a more militant manner. She shared how she had to code-switch during her time working for AmeriCorps and her current job. In her words,

> Code-switching. “I’m so sorry, don’t tell anyone. That’s so unprofessional.” They’re like, “No, it’s so weird. Who is Johnny, and why is he in trouble?” It was a very cultural change. Then the same thing, I’m at the State Department now, and that’s a similar thing. When you talk about things or when little things come up, you notice the very different approaches.

P4 noted her experiences with limiting her social interactions while she was employed,

> Being in an office location is just a completely different environment. In the Marines, I felt like you had free range just to say whatever you wanted if you were a higher rank, and if you were a lower rank, you couldn’t say anything back. Here, we have a little bit more liberty. I have no filter. I don’t know how people are going to react to me sometimes. So I often keep quiet. The majority of people don’t know that I have military experience. I know what the job site was like. There’s no person who has experienced the same thing as me.

P1 reflected on a recent job interview, where her social interactions were addressed. In her words,

> I had feedback in one of my performance interviews because I was curt, and I used military cuss language, and I didn’t talk how I was expected to talk based on how I looked. And that was six months back from deployment. It’s still programmed in your brain, especially when you’re on the go in an emergency environment. It’s going to stick.

Entrepreneurship

Of the eight study participants, three commissioned officers decided to pursue entrepreneurship versus careers in the civilian workforce. It was apparent that officer women had better employment outlooks upon transition. P5 noted, "so, after transitioning, I set up my LLC." P5 stated that "as a woman veteran, you have the ability to create anything you want." P5 further noted that she took courses in public speaking and travels around doing speaking engagements. Additionally, P6 shared, "So I decided to not just enter the civilian world and the civilian workforce but create a path of independence and entrepreneurship." P7 also noted,

> I did go on a few interviews, but I can tell what I was into because I am an entrepreneur. So, that was already in place while I was in the military. And so I just expounded on it even more. So I enjoyed that liberty, but I was like, "Okay, I have all these skills; let me see what's out there."

Superordinate Theme 5: Networking

The fifth superordinate theme identified related to the importance of networking. This theme resonated with all the eight post-9/11 women veteran study participants. The majority of study participants shared how networking has benefited them since their transition. The post-9/11 women veterans shared lessons learned and provided sound advice to future transitioning women veterans. Some of the study participants even shared how they wished they could network more than what was accomplished. The table below provides an in-depth breakdown of the study participant responses related to networking.

Table 7

Subordinate Themes Relating to Networking

Subordinate theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
Importance of developing networks	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

As the study participants transitioned from their military service, several found social networking as a conduit to stay connected to others and build relationships in their communities and throughout the nation. P2, P3, P6, and P7 shared how networking helped them in the civilian workforce. P7 noted,

> When the Army decided to allow me to go for my doctorate for 3 years, no uniform with my children and my husband was on the road a lot at that time. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm ready, I'm ready to be outside the uniform. I love it, but I'm ready to do this here." So that actually prepared me in the sense of building networks even more with people in the civilian sector. And so, getting out, I was ready.

P2 shared a similar message regarding networking; she stated the importance of networking, "And then networking in my job market, because what I found out was that it was still the little boys' club." In addition, P6 explained,

> And I surrounded myself with the people. So I almost have, I don't want to say double life, but I have a different life because I have my business associates, right? My entrepreneurs, which are probably women like you and me. We're go-getters. I call like a different breed, right? And then I have the people that I

> worked with that were civilians. I was very involved. I was the President of a Hispanic Association, I was President of a Business Woman Association. So I was so involved. And so for me, being out, I was like, okay, so what's next? What do I get to create? That's the way that I saw it when I got out.

P3 noted the relationships and networks she created were helpful in her growth and deciding a career,

> On a more intangible level, I think the service brought me a lot of really good relationships and networks. I think it made me mature very, very quickly. I think it made me understand and become interested in national security, defense, international relations in a way that I probably would've been but from a different approach. It has certainly brought me, I think probably, the people. That means a lot to me; different types of people and those contacts that I still have that make me feel like a more well-rounded person. Then, of course, the again propaganda machine of being a Marine is like a club.

P1 shared how networking can help women veterans find medical care and resources vetted by other women veterans,

> Networking with other women veterans seems to be the most valid way of finding effective care. Knowing which doctors to avoid at the VA, knowing what to expect at the C&P exam, and sharing that information so that an official network of women out there offline, like helping each other, like we always have I mean it's so important. Like people will tell you, there are bad programs, and listening

> will help you avoid a lot of pitfalls on the road if you have a network to learn from.

As a continued form of service, several study participants shared how they share and disseminate resources to fellow women veterans. Many noted that they understand what other transitioning women veterans will face, so they choose to be a support system for them so they can help to provide a more positive outlook and help their fellow women veterans transition more successfully.

P1 noted how she supports other women veterans,

> I disseminate information to other women veterans through a network online, where women can talk to each other because the information is like all over the place. There's no true clearinghouse that helps. It's very piecemealed, and some of it isn't even very good (hit or miss). And some of the facilitators are kind of iffy. So even if it's specifically targeted towards women, it's very hard to find. It's very hard to find a good program that you get valuable assistance from. If that makes sense.

P4 shared how she is currently brainstorming an idea to support women veterans on social media. In her words,

> I have an idea of developing a Facebook group specifically for women veterans. Having that resource and then having that support group where we can share experiences and maybe someone else who has had similar experiences, they can talk to them and feel a little bit more comfortable instead of just keeping that to themselves.

P5 noted the importance of sisterhood, stating,

> I think women veterans, in general, need to learn how to get off their high horses sometimes and learn how to work with each other and create the sisterhood that we, as female veterans, could have. And I haven't figured out what the jig is that women who go in the military, and they come out and have to be these lone rangers or something. And I'm guilty of that somewhat too, but I don't know what it is in the culture in the military that kind of perpetuates you can't create that sisterhood.

Summary of the Essence of the Post-9/11 Women Veterans' Experiences

Upon completing data analysis and interpretation of the participants lived experiences, it was determined that post-9/11 women veterans overall faced challenges upon transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce. These challenges were explored via the superordinate themes. There were similar perceptions related to transitions that impacted all eight participants, including include the importance of preparation, difficulty in transitioning, establishing new routines, visibility, self-identification, connectedness, sense of purpose, and networking. Additionally, there were differences in officer perceptions related to availability of services, navigating VA resources, employability, civilian-workplace environments, gender-based discrimination, and entrepreneurship. Overall, the overarching research question and its two subquestions helped to address the transitional lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans and how they perceived their experiences based on their enlisted or officer paths.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from the eight one-on-one interviews conducted with post-9/11 women veterans. Four enlisted and four commissioned officers transitioned from their branch of service and into the civilian workforce within the last 5 years. The IPA analysis showed that several factors played a part in a successful transition. These factors included how the women veterans navigated their career transitions, explored their shifted identity, the accessibility and use of supportive services, how they interacted with civilian employers and networking. Throughout this chapter, I included quotes to support the identified superordinate and subordinate themes. The data analysis also illustrated the importance of needed supports in the civilian workplace. As a result of the IPA analysis, as the researcher, I discovered that the experiences and perceptions of the post-9/11 women veterans both enlisted and officers encompassed both similarities and differences. Upon concluding that I met saturation, I refrained from additional interviews for this IPA study.

In Chapter 5, a reflection of my interpretation of the findings will be shared based on the research and subresearch questions. Additionally, I will present implications for social change related to developing and implementing veteran-centric programming in the workforce that acknowledges the needs of women veterans. I will also include recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Post-9/11 women veterans are among the fastest growing subgroup of veterans, and as a result it was vital to understand their challenges as they exit the military. Additionally, it is estimated that approximately 18,000 women veterans will transition out of service each year over the next 10 years, meaning that it is imperative to help communities and HRD professionals understand the unique transitional challenges they face. Previous research showed that post-9/11 women veterans' unemployment rates have risen, and those who enter the civilian workforce experience unique challenges that differ from their male veteran counterparts and civilian women (Albright et al., 2019; Greer, 2017). Additionally, Thomas et al. (2017) determined that transitioning women veterans were more at risk of challenges with belonging and discrimination than men veterans. Despite the discrimination women veterans face in uniform and outside of uniform, they are finding ways to thrive and be resilient amidst their challenges.

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore and understand the lived experiences and challenges of post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce. In addition, I sought to determine whether there were similarities and differences between enlisted members and officers. To understand the problem being studied, I utilized an IPA approach to help close the gap in knowledge related to this population. I interviewed eight post-9/11 women veterans to acquire a rich understanding of their transitional experiences from the military into the civilian workforce. All of the participants had transitioned from military service within the last 5 years, a specified eligibility criterion.

This IPA study was conducted to provide a rich understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of post-9/11 women veterans to build on the literature associated with the topic. In recent years, studies focused on veterans' transitions from military into civilian life have shed light on the challenges that they face and have offered suggestions to mitigate the challenges. However, few studies focused on gender differences, and fewer examined gender differences during a specified time period. The importance of the time constraint was related to the impact of the military's use of TAPs because they are updated annually. To my knowledge, no other study had explored the lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans separating from the military into the civilian workforce within a defined 5-year window, and researchers had not examined the similarities and differences between enlisted members and officers.

For the eight study participants, transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce provided many opportunities. Some of the participants were furthering their education in preparation for future employability. Some were working in public and private sector jobs, while others were pursuing entrepreneurship opportunities. Based on the stories of the participants, it was evident that this IPA study was aligned holistically. As the researcher, I thought it was unrealistic to narrowly focus on transitioning into employment without addressing military cultural experience, camaraderie, support systems, and other factors contributing to successful or unsuccessful transitions. Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, HRD professionals and communities must support a holistic transition by focusing on each of the areas underpinning a successful transition to employment (Barrow et al., 2019).

This study's interview questions were designed to elicit pertinent information regarding each participant's experiences and perceptions. The overarching research question and subquestions addressed in this study were the following: What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce? What are the perceptions of enlisted and officer women veterans? Where are the similarities and differences in their perceptions? The development of the research question and subquestions was critical to the study's design and the development of the semistructured interview questions.

To contribute to the body of literature on veteran studies as the researcher and as a post-9/11 woman veteran, I wanted to provide an opportunity for post-9/11 women veterans to reflect and share their personal experiences related to transitioning to the civilian workforce. Five superordinate themes and 14 subordinate themes emerged through analysis of the data that were used to address this study's research question and subquestions. In this final chapter, I discuss the interpretation of the findings in the context of related studies and Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, identify limitations of the study, describe implications for social change, provide recommendations for action and future research, and present a conclusion.

Interpretations of Findings

This IPA study supported the current literature focused on post-9/11 women veterans. Furthermore, this study extended the work of Greer (2017) by exploring the lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of eight post-9/11 women veterans. Findings revealed that transitions from the military into the civilian workforce were

difficult. Consistent with the literature review in Chapter 2 and Greer's (2017) findings, findings indicated that transitioning for women veterans impacted three distinct areas of their lives: their individual self, their relationships, and their work/career. Findings revealed that transitions were complicated and, if not navigated with proper preparation for the long term, postmilitary challenges were likely to occur.

This IPA study addressed the following research question and subquestions:

RQ: What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by post-9/11 women veterans while transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce?

SQ1: What are the perceptions of enlisted and officer women veterans?

SQ2: Where are the similarities and differences in their perceptions?

The eight post-9/11 participants shared that five major factors played a significant role in their transitions. These five factors were identified as superordinate themes that answered the overarching research question: navigating the career transition, exploring identity shifts, accessibility and use of supportive services, interacting with civilian employers, and networking. Additionally, 14 subordinate themes were identified: preparedness, transitions are difficult, new routines, Her Service: Visibility Matters, self-identification, connectedness, sense of purpose, availability of services, navigating VA resources, employability, civilian workplace environments, gender-based discrimination, entrepreneurship, and the importance of developing networks.

Each of the themes identified in this IPA qualitative study were used to answer the overarching research question and subquestions. The superordinate themes answered the overarching research question by providing key insights into what factors were

critical to transitions. The subordinate themes provided more detail about what aspects of the superordinate themes influenced transition and aided in answering the subquestions related to perceptions of personnel based on rank, including similarities and differences related to perceptions. Post-9/11 women veterans' perceptions provided a clearer understanding of their needs upon transition and what types of resources were needed for successful transitions. Participants' perceptions also provided vital information regarding what was not working and what hindered successful transitions.

A better understanding of these lived experiences may provide greater insight and a breadth of knowledge to those wanting to aid post-9/11 women veterans in successful transitions from the military into the civilian workforce. Findings from this IPA study also revealed a significant cultural divide between the military and civilian communities. Therefore, local, state, and federal level efforts must be designed and implemented to address this gap, which may positively impact the transition process and the overall well-being of post-9/11 women veterans. A unique finding of this study was the importance of taking a more holistic approach. Midway through the first interview, I concluded that the transition into the civilian workforce was a process. Various factors need to be addressed for women veterans to fully acclimate to civilian workplace environments.

During the interview process, study participants shared their experiences of joining the military through their transitions into civilian lives, describing the civilian workforce in great detail. Some of the participants experienced traumatic events during their time in the military. However, they all displayed a sense of pride in their service. Participants also identified themselves as having a solid work ethic and leadership

characteristics that suited them well in the military, but that they were slightly down casted in the civilian workforce. In addition, several participants shared their reasoning for joining the military; some reasons included financial stability, the pursuit of adventure, safety, and establishing one's purpose. Finally, each shared their experiences adapting to military culture, separating from the military, and adjusting to the civilian world. There was a wide range of ranks and military service across the participant sample. However, military branch and rank were not examined for variations in experiences other than enlisted or officer rank. There may be variations in transition experiences by military branch, and a follow-up study could investigate these potential variations in greater detail. The superordinate and subordinate themes are discussed in relation to existing research, the research questions of this study, and future recommendations.

Superordinate Theme 1: Navigating the Career Transition

Each of the eight participants shared their reasoning for exiting the military, ranging from involuntary separation to retirement. It was apparent that the participants who had control over their separation were more prepared during their transition. Conversely, the participants who did not have much control over their separation found their transition challenging. This finding aligned with existing literature on post-911 women veterans' transitions from the military, which indicated that transitions were complex and involved unique challenges (Greer, 2020). Friedman (2015) further noted poor mental health outcomes and challenges related to employment, family disruptions, suicide, substance use, and psychosocial limitations that impacted veteran transitions.

Several post-9/11 women veterans interviewed for the current study experienced significant challenges transitioning from the military. Studies had shown that while serving, women reported difficulties related to trauma, challenges navigating their identity, and supports received from their units, which significantly impacted their overall well-being during transition (Albright et al., 2019). The negative experiences for several current participants, mainly those in enlisted ranks, continued upon their transition. The participants' responses revealed it was critical to be prepared for the transition, and some components of the transition were more difficult than others. The initial phase of the transition for many of the study participants included a degree of culture shock. Many felt a high degree of unpreparedness and did not have the full responsiveness to adapt to their new lives as women veterans living in a civilian setting.

Some of the challenges shared by participants included unemployment, underemployment, financial issues, reestablishment of relationships, finding social supports, navigating civilian settings, and adequately addressing physical and mental health needs. In addition, participants experienced varied levels of preparedness, and their branch of service TAP program played a role in their preparation for their return to civilian life and civilian workforce. Whitworth et al. (2020) suggested that those serving are not adequately prepared when leaving the military and entering an individualistic culture. The military's TAP program has been shown to not address veterans' mental health challenges adapting to changes in relationships external to the military (Whitworth et al., 2020). Several participants shared their disdain with their service branches TAP. Participants noted the program lacked meaningful guidance to navigate support and equip

them with the tools needed to succeed in the civilian workforce. In addition, participants who found some or all of the elements of the TAP beneficial also seemed to have a solid outlook on self and robust support systems. Participants who transitioned in the status of officer seemed to perceive the transition as less challenging and were more prepared. Officer participants shared the value of planning for the transition early, preparing for finances and supportive systems, and easing the burden of the transition.

In contrast, four of the participants reflected on their emotional distress and feelings related to not being fully prepared for their transitions. The perception of these study participants was that transitions were complex, and so was finding their career path and adjusting to the new civilian environments. Finally, participants shared the importance of establishing new routines following the transition; also, navigating their new normal with fewer structure systems and boundaries was helpful.

Superordinate Theme 2: Exploring Identity Shifts

Identity shifts were perceived to be a challenge among the study participants. As study participants transitioned, they became aware that their civilian and military identities differed. As Hirudyaraj and Clay (2019) reported, identity issues are perceived to be a unique challenge for women veterans because of the intersection of multiple identities, one of which is female and the other veteran. Furthermore, Schuman et al. (2019) reported that women veterans upon being discharged from the military had a higher rate of experiencing feelings of invisibility and invalidation; in comparison to male veterans. Consistent with this, challenges faced with identity issues caused study participants to feel disconnected. Many study participants shared they felt like their

service was invisible to their communities at large. For example, P5 retired as an officer and outranked her husband, but his service was more outwardly recognized in their community than hers.

Albright et al. (2019) stated as women veterans transition into civilian life, the highly-masculinized culture and mannerisms celebrated in the military cease. Study participants mentioned this as their experience and shared how they had to learn to develop new routines that included adopting a new style of dressing and behaving to accommodate the social norms of their civilian counterparts. Participants found that one of the values in their military experience was camaraderie. Camaraderie served a significant purpose to the study participants. It provided them with a sense of belonging. Several shared the challenges of connecting upon their transition to civilian life because they did not share similar lived experiences or interests. To cope, study participants noted the importance of maintaining connections to others serving or who had served in the military.

Whitworth et al. (2020) reported that serving in the military provided veterans with a sense of purpose. In the current study, participants shared that volunteerism was a significant factor that helped them regain a sense of purpose. Matthieu et al. (2021) noted that service did not end upon discharge for many service members exiting military service. In this IPA study, volunteerism allowed the study participants the opportunity to connect and begin the reintegration process back into their communities. Many participants shared they volunteered for efforts supporting the veteran population. That also allowed them to connect and engage in the camaraderie built on during their military

service. All eight study participants shared stories of giving back to their local communities and how it benefited their transition.

Superordinate Theme 3: Accessibility and Use of Supportive Services

As study participants continued to navigate their transitions, the accessibility and use of supportive services were deemed to be stressful and challenging. During the one-on-one interviews, I explored how the study participants coped with their transitional challenges and understood how some of the strategies used, like accessing and utilizing supportive services, also caused significant stress. Albright and colleagues (2019) emphasized that women reported having poorer health status following military service than their veteran men counterparts. Koblinsky et al. (2017), also purported that amongst this population, as many as 20% suffer from PTSD, 14% suffer from depression, and a significant amount of others experience bouts of anxiety, substance abuse, and various other issues. And one of the most common mental health diagnoses faced was depression (Koblinsky et al., 2017).

Consistent with Koblinsky et al.'s (2017) findings, this was the case for many of the study participants. Participants noted that navigating services, programming, and benefits at the Department of Veterans Affairs was daunting and recommended the needed for a more streamlined process to support the needs of veterans. As seen in the study conducted by Whitworth et al. (2020), 60% of veterans receiving care from the Department of Veterans Affairs shared the same sentiment and found the process challenging. The findings that more than half of the post-9/11 women veterans in this

study reported physical and behavioral health needs draws attention to the importance of efforts focused on supportive services.

Furthermore, Whitworth and colleagues (2020) noted that the abundance of organizations supporting veterans during their transitions remains underutilized. Regarding the post-9/11 women veteran study participants, it was determined that there were many organizations supporting transitioning veterans; however, programming was often seen as masculinized. Study participants shared that there were limited amounts of programming developed with a woman-centric design. Study participants shared the importance of programmatic fit and ensuring that participating in specific programs would be beneficial to serving their needs instead of causing some form of a negative trigger connected to their military service. Aronson et al. (2019) reported that many transitioning women veterans' non-use of supportive service was due to not knowing their eligibility status and not knowing where to go for help. This was definitely the case for several of the study participants. Additionally, some study participants shared simply not knowing where to look for adequate supports and the need for strategies to be developed to make the process less daunting to find the appropriate supportive services.

Superordinate Theme 4: Interacting With Civilian Employers

As the study participants navigated the civilian workforce, the stage was marked with difficulty and stress. As service members, the enlisted and officer women shared the degree of structure and discipline required in the military. In addition, study participants noted their strong work ethic, which essentially encompassed teamwork. Several participants shared their degree of assertiveness impacted their employability and was

often seen as a hindrance for upward mobility. It was suggested that civilian workplace environments were not culturally aware of the possibility of hiring an overly assertive post-9/11 woman veteran. And as a result, many of the study participants experienced gender-based discrimination. Many participants shared how this characteristic impacted their jobs. The commitment to getting the job done and self-discipline, which were highly valued in the military, did not have the same impact in their civilian workplace environments.

The study's findings also revealed that participants living with physical and/or behavioral health conditions felt a great deal of frustration while navigating the civilian workforce. In addition, the study participants perceived that their employers lacked the insight or awareness to empathize with their needs. This led to frustration, causing the study participants to feel that little care was shown to veterans in the civilian workforce as they transitioned. This valuable source of insight disputes the current literature, highlighting military-friendly employment initiatives being adopted widely throughout the country (Ward, 2020). Of the eight study participants, five were currently employed in the civilian workforce. While the other three study participants transitioned from military service into entrepreneurship. One of the three officers did find employment in the civilian workforce but resigned two weeks later and decided to follow her dream of entrepreneurship.

Superordinate Theme 5: Networking

Networking was perceived to be critical amongst the study participants. Thomas, et al. (2021) reported engaging and networking had critical protective effects related to

veteran transitions. Many of the study participants noted that networking with other veterans was an effective strategy to cope with their transitions into the civilian workforce. As it provided a great degree of social support, deemed as critical by Thomas, et al (2021); especially since the experience of women veterans varied from their male veteran counterparts. In addition, several of the study participants noted they started networking with others before their separation from the military. This was beneficial since it provided them with insight into civilian life and the changes that would occur. Several women veterans perceived that networking could contribute to one's successful transition and aid in career development and progression in the civilian workforce.

From utilizing Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as the theoretical framework for this study, it was apparent that once participants began their transition process, their individual roles, routines, relationships, and assumptions shifted. Within the context of post-9/11 women veterans, the results of this IPA study highlighted areas that can encourage gender-specific resources that could ultimately aid in the reduction of workplace discrimination and increase organizational diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives.

Overall, the results of this study verified the challenges transitions had on post-9/11 women veterans, but in their own voices, the study's participants offered recommendations on how to better serve their unique population. The narratives shared by the post-9/11 women veteran participants undeniably revived a sense of importance in telling their stories related to transitions that this IPA study sought to address.

Throughout the data collection and analysis journey, the emotions participants expressed, and the insights shared, displayed how the challenges faced impacted the participants' transitions into the civilian workforce and beyond. It is imperative to note that there is actual power and healing in storytelling (Landrum, et al., 2019). Making meaning of the stories and lived experiences of the eight post-9/11 women veterans led to the main takeaway of this IPA study.

Theoretical Framework: Schlossberg's Transition Theory

By utilizing Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as a framework, I was able to analyze the transitions of the study participants, and with their assistance, frame strategies that could aid in the successful transitions of future post-9/11 women veterans. The applicability of the theoretical framework was significant since it focused on post-9/11 women veteran challenges and provided a platform to provide recommended solutions to some of the noted challenges mentioned by the study participants. The outcomes of each study participant varied based on various factors to include Schlossberg's four Ss: *situation, self, support, and strategies*.

The first "S," which focuses on the situation, was extremely applicable to this IPA study. Whitworth et al. (2020) concluded that service members who did not initiate their exit from the military experienced more difficulty with their transitions. Furthermore, in a similar study, Ward (2020) noted that by utilizing the transition theory framework, factors related to the transitional event could determine how challenging the transition would be. For example, P6, a retired Navy officer, transitioned from the military being adequately prepared for the transition and had established goals for herself upon returning

to the civilian workforce. However, when P4 was separated from the Marines due to an injury and was not prepared for her transition, she experienced significant barriers. As a result, transition theory was instrumental in accessing the varied situational events leading to the military to civilian transition and how it impacted the study participants overall experience.

As mentioned by Greer (2017), those who anticipated or initiated transitions, felt more control over the situation. Additionally, the length of time it took to transition impacted the variability of how easy or difficult the transition would be. For instance, P2 shared that her Medical Separation was a drawn-out process that increased her level of difficulty transitioning. In this study, five participants (four officers and one enlisted) experienced anticipated transitions from the military into the civilian workforce; they were all readily prepared to transition into the next phase. All four of the officer study participants had experiences with transitions prior to their final separation from the military and those experiences were helpful.

It was apparent the study participants who seemed to have more control of their transition encountered challenges but were able to transition more efficiently than the study participants who did not have control of their transition. Two other study participants experienced unanticipated transitions and significantly struggled with the transition. And one study participant was involuntarily separated but had strong family support to aid her through navigating the transition. For those study participants who did not have control of their transition, strong emotions were tied to the experience, which impacted their overall well-being. Additionally, some of the women veteran study

participants shared the benefits of networking during their TAP workshops, or with their social supports and connected with other women veterans who successfully navigated their transitions.

The second "S" in Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory focuses on self. Lloyd-Hazlett (2016) suggested women veterans are accustomed to assuming various roles and responsibilities that span gender norms. As each of the women veteran participants, both enlisted and officer, transitioned from the military, they each had to learn how to adapt to a new normal living their lives as veteran-civilian women (self). It was apparent that coping with one's transition was a significant takeaway.

During their transition process into the civilian workforce, each participant had to develop new identities and conform to new structures that were not as rigid and controlled as their military experience. These experiences often caused the post-9/11 women veterans stress and required them to create new coping strategies. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) noted that psychological resources and one's individual characteristics were critical to this factor. It is interesting to note that among the longer serving and officer participants in this current study, personal attributes significantly influenced the manner in which they transitioned, based on the narratives and common experiences. Age, stages in life, and health were also significant factor to *self,* and impacted study participants' transitions.

The third "S" in the Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory focused on supports. Goodman et al. (2006) noted that the provision of social supports aided in smooth transitions. As noted throughout this IPA study, a plethora of supportive services exists

and are made available to veterans, some even gender specific; but many women veterans do not utilize these services to full capacity (Thomas et al., 2021). For example, the majority of the post-9/11 women veteran study participants accessed some form of supports during their transitions but two of the officers did not. All of the study participants noted receiving supports from their family members or friends, suggested to be relevant forms of transitional support as noted by Ward (2020). Regarding workplace supports, several of the study participants who were presently employed shared limitations. It was apparent there were needs for sources of support in the workplace to aid women veterans into the work environment transition and beyond.

The fourth "S", strategies, suggested that the way veterans managed their transitions included situational modification, management of stress, and controlling the meaning of the problem (Greer, 2017; Ward, 2020). Griffin and Gilbert (2015) suggested the implementation of numerous coping strategies one should take during the transition process. This study's participants were afforded the opportunity to share strategies and ways in which they coped with their transitions with some offering recommendations to future transitioning women veterans and to the field. All eight of the post-9/11 women veteran study participants shared how the experience of sharing their lived experience was such a freeing opportunity that afforded them the opportunity to be heard. This will be explored further in this chapter.

Limitations of the Study

There were several notable limitations to this study. However, these limitations can inform future studies focused on post-9/11 women veterans and their experiences

related to transitioning into the civilian workforce. First and foremost, this IPA study was intended to capture the lived experiences of a small, homogenous sample of post-9/11 women veterans who served in any of the five United States Armed Forces branches and recently separated within the last 5 years. Therefore, given the intentionality of the criteria, the transferability of this study's findings is limited. For instance, the results of this IPA study may not be transferable to women veterans who served in previous eras or post-9/11 women veterans who transitioned longer than the 5-year window. Additionally, this study only focused on the lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans' transitions, and it does not include the veteran men's lived experiences or perspectives.

Finally, I anticipated that personal bias might be a limitation of this study. As a post-9/11 woman veteran, I am passionate about the population and the topic of transition. However, I was open to making meaning based on the participant's lived experiences and perspectives shared while conducting this study. To prevent personal interference, as the researcher, I bracketed my biases, and I also used reflective journaling throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Despite the limitations, this IPA study provides a baseline in which HRD professionals and practitioners can strategically develop and implement messaging efforts, initiatives, and programming for women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce. Future research could also involve testing the messaging efforts, initiatives, and programming to continue refining the topic.

Implications for Social Change

This study was conducted primarily with HRD professionals and Industrial and Organizational Psychology professionals in mid, but as mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a need to take a more holistic approach. The key findings of this study will also be beneficial to federal agencies, including the Department of Defense (TAP), United States Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor (Veterans' Employment & Training Service), employers, state policymakers, local communities, and grassroots efforts in strategically designing and implementing best practices to enhance the overall experience of women veterans in the civilian workforce, to include measures in recruitment, training, and retaining. As mentioned by Ward (2020), relevant authorities working together can play a significant role in veterans' transitions, by instrumentally streamlining the transition process and improving existing programming. Current programming can bridge the military-civilian divide (Biniecki & Berg, 2020). However, through collaborative efforts, current programs can be refined and address gender-specific challenges and aid in the successful transitions of women veterans in particular.

The current findings have significant implications for local, state, and federal HRD professionals and organizations working to aid post-9/11 women veterans' transition into the civilian workforce. This IPA study revealed that post-9/11 women veterans have continued to experience challenges as they transition into the civilian workforce, which impedes their successful transition. Building on previous research and the current study, this is consistent. Recommendations from the study participants

suggest that building an inclusive workplace culture, establishing employee resource groups, and offering mentorship are strategies to help ease the transition.

As a novice researcher and a post-9/11 woman veteran, I chose to conduct a study to bring awareness to the challenges faced by a population that often goes unnoticed. Giving a voice to my study participants and allowing them to not only share their stories, but also play a crucial role in shaping recommendations to further support other women veterans, is indeed the meaning of "service after service." Over time, it will help others in the field understand the needs of this population better and further support opportunities.

For the field of I/O Psychology, a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans can aid stakeholders in obtaining the guidance and resources needed to support women veterans' successful transitions into the civilian workforce. Additionally, strategically shifting the workforce culture to one that is aware and understanding of the unique challenges and complex experiences related to post-9/11 women veterans' transitions can be a tremendous aid in helping the population feel embraced and included. This shift can also positively impact organizational efforts related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA).

With persistent, unique challenges, it is critical to highlight the need for increased cultural awareness and the implementation of programming focused on transitions from military service to civilian workforce environments. By understanding and becoming aware of the subjective lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans, federal, state, and local government agencies and employers can establish a workforce environment where post-9/11 women veterans can receive the support necessary to thrive, including peer

mentoring, networking opportunities, and coaching to aid in their coping with transitions. Indeed, as Whitworth et al. (2020) pointed out, the one-size-fits-all approach does not reflect the needs of all veterans. Therefore, it is vital as programming and best practices are being developed, to incorporate components that will allow for individualized supports and training focused on strengths, needs, and short and long-term goals for the woman veteran.

Recommendations for Action

This IPA study has led to recommendations for action to serve the needs of post-9/11 women veterans. Upon completing data analysis, it was evident that disparities were facing this population, and exploratory efforts are needed to begin addressing their needs to lessen some of the challenges they experience during transition. To enhance opportunities for women veterans to successfully transition into the civilian workforce, the study participants, in their own voices, shared three practical recommendations: (a) building an inclusive workplace culture, (b) establishing employee resource groups, and (c) encouraging peer-outreach and mentoring. Establishing effective programming and policies in the civilian workforce may take time and concerted efforts to implement and sustain. However, it is critical to enhancing the employment opportunities of post-9/11 women veterans.

As the one-on-one interviews concluded, I asked each study participant to share recommendations on how to support transitioning post-9/11 women veterans. Since the study of women veterans' transition has not been solidified in the literature and veteran studies, the study participants' insight can only enhance future programming and

development of supports. In addition, several study participants shared the types of programs and services they would like to see made available to women veterans in the civilian workplace.

Build an Inclusive Workplace Culture

Several of the study participants shared how offering special supports in the workplace can help to alleviate some of the obstacles faced. For example, in P1's workplace, she is seen as the go-to person. Employees often seek her out for support, she stated,

> So transitioning people still come to me because they know me as that person that stirred the pot. So veterans come to me, family, even family members come when they are like my husband/wife has been struggling, and we don't have these resources, and we thought we'd get the help we needed when we came back here. And I don't see it happening. So, I am unofficially that go-to person in the corporation. I reached out to several people that have hired military and said, hey, do we have support services here for military personnel that are associates. I was told no. Since 2011, I went to leadership, and I asked for an associate resource group for military, veterans, and transitioning members, and for 11 years now, I've been fighting them for that. And just last year, our CEO called for it to be done. He said I want it done; you figure it out. And so I've been working with a steering committee to do that, putting together this team. And I officially launched last year, but with COVID, nothing took place.

P5 shared her sentiments on how employers can build inclusive workplace environments,

> I think they should have; this may sound a little snarky. They need to accompany me to ensure that they have quality across the board in all walks, all things. I don't care about color, race, whatever, veteran, not veteran, you need to make sure that you recognize, keep things on a level playing field. So I don't think women should get a one-up or whatever. I think it's like, these are veterans, and here's what we provide. I guess that's where I come from. And so, I think the goal of the company should be, we're going to honor our veterans. And so, in your programs, you must have a full spectrum of our veterans.

P2 noted having resources for child-care would be helpful to women and male veterans with children. She stated, "I guess I would like to see programs in the workforce that help with reliable, safe childcare for parents/gender-neutral because I know there are single moms and dads or dual parents raising children."

Establish Employee Resource Group

The need for employee resource groups was recommended by two of the study participants. Employee resource groups would be comprised of employees who share military experiences. In turn, they would help their fellow transitioning veterans navigate and assimilate the organization's culture. P1 shared how this is a goal of hers within her organization,

> And still, every year, this corporation on Veterans Day touts how great they are, and they've done all this to support veterans. They have done some great things,

> don't get me wrong, but they haven't rolled out that support system that I've been fighting for called the associate resource group.

P8 noted how support groups in the workplace can be beneficial to women by sharing,

> Maybe more support groups in the workplace, if that's your thing. There are a lot of women who have a hard time just relating because being a woman Veteran is so different, I think. Because, now you're going out into the world where you're surrounded by other women, but they don't have the same experience as we do, like our identity and stuff like that. So, maybe like more support groups at work.

Mentoring

All of the study respondents shared the need for mentoring in the workplace. Having mentorship programs within the civilian workplace would allow the transitioning veteran to discuss their military experiences and find solutions to challenges related to navigating the workplace. P4 noted the importance of mentors stating,

> Having those types of people like mentors there that and in their free time, they can actually offer services and at least get them through the steppingstones of transitioning or whatever is going on in their life while at work.

P1 suggested that mentorship can aid in the transition. Her organization does not currently have a mentorship program, but she shared she has recommended it. Her sentiments related to mentorship are as followed,

> There are not mentors that are helping people. I think this just needs to be like a bridge and someone has to stand on that bridge and make sure they're walking across it okay. There's not anyone who does that. They're just expected to be like

> back to normal. Yeah, having some kind of program or thing in place that long term helps people transition into successful careers. It's easy to leave the military and find a job. But yeah, once you find yourself a job, you are just left to flounder on your own.

In addition, P5 shared how building one-on-one relationships can help with the woman veterans' transition. She noted, "If you want to help them create a vision with the least amount of stress, it's in a one-to-one relationship." Study participants acknowledged that having an opportunity in the workplace to socially interact with those that have similar experiences could be helpful with overcoming transitional challenges. In addition, chances for open dialogues or forums to share their experiences with civilians were also reported as innovative ways to assist with transitioning.

Recommendations for Future Research

The meaning and other insights gained from the study participants' lived experiences and perceptions were categorized into five superordinate themes and 14 subordinate themes. All of the superordinate themes identified as a result of this study were supported by findings in the existing literature but expanded on the in-depth understanding of the key themes and implications. In this study, the insight gained by exploring the transitions of eight post-9/11 women veteran participants demonstrated that it is imperative for gender-specific programming to be developed and implemented to support post-9/11 women veterans as they transition. Additionally, by associating the key findings from this IPA study to the existing literature on the post-9/11 women veterans' transitions, future directions for research and practice can best be informed. For the field

of I/O psychology, HRD professionals, scholars, and anyone interested in veterans' transitions, this study provides a voice to a population of post-9/11 veterans facing unique challenges and complex experiences regarding transitions that have not been selectively identified and documented previously. In addition, the findings of this IPA study may offer a breadth of information, which is helpful in advancing the cultural awareness of post-9/11 women veterans in the civilian workforce.

Researchers could also conduct future qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods veteran studies on post-9/11 women veterans who have transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce with a timeframe longer than 5 years, which was a criterion for this IPA study. For example, it would be interesting to study how the older TAP program prepared post-9/11 women veterans enlisted and officers as they transitioned into the civilian workforce compared to more recent program versions. It may also be useful to research and identify which components of TAP, past and present, have been the most useful and where the most changes have been needed. Additionally, it would be interesting to study how military-friendly employers have addressed the needs of this population to ensure retainment and upward mobility. Finally, future research should also explore minority women veterans lived experiences and perceptions, especially as many organizations are working to ensure they are equipped with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of post-9/11 women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce are scarcely acknowledged within the literature and veteran studies, despite

their historical contributions to the military and society in general. This qualitative IPA study, intended to fill the gap in the existing literature, created new data on the lived experiences and perceptions of post-9/11 women veterans transitioning into the civilian workforce. Grounded in Nancy Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, the narratives of the study participants provided a detailed description of the challenges faced and offered recommendations for immediate action. Post-9/11 women veterans who transition from military into the civilian workforce will need support in place to ease their transition. When transitions are filled with challenges, risk factors may become prominent and have a negative impact on post-9/11 women veterans' transitions.

There is a significant divide amongst military and civilian cultures, which can negatively impact veterans' transitions. In communities and states throughout the country, partnerships are being developed to better serve the needs of the veteran population. While doing so is impeccably admirable, it is also vital to remember that women veterans experience unique challenges upon their transition that often call for strategies to include gender-centric focuses. Civilian workplace cultures may not understand the unique and complex experiences but working to become culturally aware and building an inclusive workplace culture, is a significant start.

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Appendix A: CEO Recruitment Script

Dear (VSO CEO),

My name is Qwynn A. Galloway-Salazar, and I am conducting a study on the experiences of post-9/11 women veterans who have transitioned from the military into the civilian workforce within the last five years.

Research on this understudied topic may benefit the veteran community by educating employers, human resource development professionals, researchers, and our fellow veterans about the perceived transitional experiences of women veterans into the civilian workplace. Additionally, research like this study can help identify the needs of women veterans in the civilian workforce, and the study may be used to inform the development of gender-specific programming.

Participation is entirely voluntary and would involve a Zoom interview (approximately 60–90 minutes). Participating women veterans' identities will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for all of the participants. Privacy and confidentiality will be upheld to the highest degree with all potential participants. Once again participating in 100% voluntary, and post-9/11 women veterans who choose to participate will be presented with a $10 Amazon gift card.

Would you please circulate the attached flyer for study recruitment via your organization's list serv and/or social media sites? I would like to get the word out and obtain 8–10 potential participants within the next month. Thank you for your willingness to support this study.

Interested post-9/11 women veterans can contact me (an Army Veteran) via email or call for more information.

Appendix B: Recruitment Email Script

Dear (Participant's Name),
My name is Qwynn Galloway-Salazar, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University, pursuing a Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology. I am currently recruiting participants for a research study exploring the experiences of post-9/11women veterans who transitioned from the military to the civilian workforce. If you have transitioned from the military within the last five years, you are eligible to be in this study.

If you decide to participate in this voluntary study, your requirements will be minimal. First and foremost, you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which should take between 5–10 minutes. You will also be asked to engage in an interview with me via Zoom. Please know, you can choose to withdraw from this study at any time. The interview will last between 60–90 minutes and will focus on your experiences and perceptions of transitions. During the interview, I will ask questions about your military service and your experiences as a woman veteran. You are free to skip any questions asked during the interview. For the purpose of the study, I would like to record our interview. However, please know the only person that will have access to the audio recording will be me as the researcher.

I believe that your insight will add significant value to my study, and I am hopeful that you will agree to participate. A $10.00 Amazon gift card will be provided to you upon completion in appreciation of your time.

Please contact me, and we will set up an interview day and time at your convenience. I will also send you the consent form at that time, which will provide you with further detail regarding the nature of the study and your requirements as a participant. At any point, please feel free to ask as many questions as needed for you to be comfortable with voluntarily being a part of the study. Additionally, I will send you the link to the demographic questionnaire to complete prior to the interview. Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me or my dissertation supervisor, Dr. James Herndon.

Thank you for your service and for your willingness to participate in this study.

Warmly,

Qwynn A. Galloway-Salazar, MA
Doctoral Candidate
Industrial and Organizational Psychology
Walden University

Appendix C: Social Media Recruitment

Hello,

My name is Qwynn Galloway-Salazar, and I am an Industrial and Organizational Psychology doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am currently completing my dissertation research, exploring transitional experiences of post-9/11 women veterans from the military into the civilian workplace. Over the next three weeks, I am looking for post-9/11 women veterans to volunteer to be interviewed, sharing their transition experiences.

You are eligible if you are:

- A post-9/11 Woman Veteran
- 18 years old or older
- Transitioned within the last 5 years

Participants will receive:

- For your participation in a brief demographic questionnaire online followed by a 60 to 90-minute interview on Zoom, you will be compensated with a $10.00 Amazon Gift Card.

I would greatly appreciate it if you could spread the word about my study to other post-9/11 women veterans!

Interested post-9/11 women veterans can contact me at via email or call for more information

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

Seeking Post-9/11 Women Veteran Participants
Help advance the research in the area of Women Veterans transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce!

The goal of this study will be to help identify the needs of women veterans in the civilian workforce.

You are eligible if you are:

- Post-9/11 Woman Veterans
- 18 years old or older
- Transitioned within the last 5 years

You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire online to determine study eligibility, followed by a 60-to-90-minute interview on Zoom.

Upon completion, you will be awarded a $10.00 Amazon Gift card for your time (open for three weeks).

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questions:

With your permission, I would like to collect some demographic information:

1. What is your pseudonym "fake name"?

2. What year were you born?

3. What ethnic race do you identify?

    1. White
    2. Black
    3. Hispanic/Latina
    4. Asian
    5. Other

4. What year did you join the military?

5. Which branch of the military did you serve? How long did you serve?

6. Did you serve on Active Duty, Reserves, or the National Guard?

    a. Were you an enlisted member, warrant officer, or a commissioned officer at the time you separated from the military?
    b. What was your Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), and can you describe your job responsibilities?
    c. What was your rank upon separation?

7. Did you deploy overseas in support of OEF/OIF/OND? If so, how many deployment tours?

8. How long have you been separated from the military?

9. What was the reason behind your separation from the military?

    a. Expiration Term of Service (ETS)
    b. Retirement
    c. Involuntarily Separated
    d. Voluntarily Separated
    e. Discharged for other reasons
    f. Medical retirement or separation

Appendix F: Semistructured Interview Questions

Eligibility Questions:

1. Are you a post-9/11 woman veteran?
2. Have you transitioned from the military within the past five years?

Consent form signed? _____

Interview Questions:

1. Introduction: How would you describe your military experience?
    a. What motivated you to join the military?
    b. How did you decide to leave the military?
2. What meaning does your military experience have for you?
3. Within the last five years, what has been your experience been like thus far with transitioning from the military?
    a. What has been the easiest part of your transition process?
    b. What have you found to be the most challenging parts of the transition?
    c. What strategies have you used to cope with transitional challenges?
4. Please tell me about your experiences utilizing resources or supportive services that may have directly impacted your transition?
5. Can you describe your experiences and/or challenges transitioning from the military into the civilian workforce?
    a. What do you feel was the most challenging part of your transition from the military workplace to the civilian workplace?

   b. Is there anything you wish you would have known about the transition process before you left the military?
   c. What support did you receive from your employer, and was it helpful?
   d. How did previous experiences in the military impact your work in the civilian work environment?

6. While comparing your identity to serving and now after the transition, what would you say you have observed?
7. How would you describe your identity as a woman veteran and what does it mean to you?
8. Please describe your experience as to how your identity as a woman veteran has aided you with your transition.
9. In contrast, can you describe how your experience and veteran identity may have hindered your transition?
10. Based on your own experiences, what advice or recommendations would you give another post-9/11 woman veteran transitioning out of the military and into the civilian workforce?
11. Based on your personal transitional experiences, what types of programs or services would you like to see be available for women veterans in the civilian workplace?
12. What was it like talking with me about your personal transition experiences?

Amazon gift card issued? _____