

2023

## U.S. Navy Senior Enlisted Women Career Barriers to Success

Angela Campbell  
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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Angela Campbell

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

U.S. Navy Senior Enlisted Women Career Barriers to Success

by

Angela Campbell

MPhil, Walden University, 2020

MS, University of Phoenix, 2008

BS, Saint Leo University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

May 2023

## Abstract

Active-duty military, senior female enlisted leaders in grades E7-E9 are underrepresented in the Navy due to navigating organizational, social, and cultural barriers. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. This transcendental phenomenological study's research questions focused on the experiences of U.S. Navy senior enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved career success in a male-dominated organization. The career resilience framework was used to assess the impact of conceptual and personal factors that enabled U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women to overcome career barriers and achieve success. The data were collected from semistructured interviews with 13 participants recruited using purposive sampling. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a modified version of van Kaam's transcendental phenomenological approach. Seven themes emerged: organizational culture, roller coaster of emotions, barriers broken, success is a team effort, right time, people, and place, characteristics, and success. Seven subthemes also emerged: being a woman, lack of change agents and unsupportive leadership, lack of sisterhood, underrepresentation, the meaning of barriers, being fierce, persistent, and hard work, and having supportive relationships. The findings may contribute to positive social change by inspiring military leaders to further develop senior enlisted women in the Navy.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this body of work to my beautiful mother, Malisse. You have been my pillar of strength during this entire journey. You have motivated and encouraged me to reach for the stars and never give up. You have taught me to be the woman that I am today. I would also like to thank my brother, Trevor, for his support. My best friend Karlene for providing encouragement and a shoulder to lean on when needed.

I would also like to thank the rest of my family for their support during my journey. All of you were on the sideline, cheering me on, knowing I would be one of the first in the family to achieve a doctorate.

My dissertation journey was much like my career in the Navy. It was full of trials and tribulations that challenged me to become a better version of myself each day. The knowledge I gained from networking with people whose ideas differed significantly from mine opened my mind to endless possibilities. I am blessed and honored to have been mentored by strong, courageous women who have supported me throughout my journey. The completion of this journey would not have been possible were it not for the humble, fierce, and courageous women who dedicated their time to sharing their stories. I am blessed to have my assigned committee members who dedicated their time to mentor me by telling me what I needed to hear and not what I wanted to hear. However, this journey was possible with the right people in the right place. Today I rejoice because I have completed this beautiful journey and have evolved into a better version of myself from when I first began. Thank you to all that supported me throughout my learning journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Women face barriers to achieving leadership roles and career success in male-dominated industries. Women employees endure barriers that frequently cause them to experience numerous workplace disadvantages (Yu, 2020). Despite women achieving career success and contributing to the economy, women are underrepresented in leadership roles. Women encounter slower promotion rates to senior-leadership positions than male coworkers in the same career fields (Casas-Arce & Saiz, 2015; Catalyst, 2018a). Gender promotion gaps are evident at senior management levels throughout many industries (Gipson et al., 2017; Seo et al., 2017). Economic security, occupational segregation, leadership roles, better jobs, inadequate workplace flexibility, and sex discrimination are other barriers women face in male-dominated organizations to achieve career success (Catalyst, 2021a). Success for women in male-dominant occupations may only be achieved if women understand the unique advancement barriers they experience in male-dominated job fields (Catalyst, 2018a, 2018b; Sandgren, 2014). Discovering common attributes and performance behaviors that permit women to navigate barriers and succeed in male-dominated professions may reveal a pathway for others to pursue to achieve their career goals.

Chapter 1 presents the research subjects, conceptual approach, and model specification of significant concepts and ideas investigated in this study. This chapter also shows the research's strengths, weaknesses, and implications for military organizations

and enlisted women. Finally, Chapter 1 ends with a summary of key ideas and a brief introduction to Chapter 2.

### **Background of the Study**

Women have made a significant contribution to the workforce throughout history. During wartime, women disguised as men served as cooks, spies, and soldiers in military camps. They also served as factory workers and support staff and assumed roles in male-dominated jobs such as pilots, ambulance drivers, and field intelligence agents (Army Women's Foundation, 2019; Mitroff & Bonoma, 1978). Once the war ended, the jobs were filled by the men returning home, and some women reverted to taking care of the household while others sought to stay employed in the workforce.

Women who strive to attain leadership positions have found it difficult due to the lack of support and barriers they faced in their careers (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Women's barriers to achieving career resilience are ingrained in the cultural and social norms, and women's self-efficacy is problematic in male-dominated industries. Historically, men have held leadership positions in male-dominated work environments from traditional gender hierarchies and social norms (Alvinus et al., 2018). Research consistently indicates a promotion variation between women and men in leadership (Bierema, 2016; Catalyst, 2018a; Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). Gender stereotypes influence how people explain gender disparities in the workplace (Ezzedeen et al., 2015; Hüttges & Fay, 2015). Women who typically encounter challenges to advancement in most work situations are handicapped in male-dominated companies or professions once it relates to

being chosen for senior management positions (Catalyst, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2021c; Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006).

The military (armed forces) is considered the most male-dominant organization of all work settings (Gustavsen, 2013; Marenčinová, 2018). Females were not allowed to join the military permanently in Western countries (Mankowski et al., 2015). The transformation process for women started when they protested for equal rights to work. In 1948, The Women's Armed Service Integration Act was implemented by Congress, allowing women to serve as continuous military service members. After this act, women became permanent members in the Korean, Vietnam, and Desert Storm wars. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act banned gender discrimination, and military service academies opened to women. Female sailors and Marines have been allowed to serve on non-combat ships since 1978 (Army Women's Foundation, 2019; Mitroff & Bonoma, 1978). The Department of Defense (DoD) established a policy in 1994 that barred women from serving in combat, cannon, armor, special forces, and special operations groups (Kamarck, 2017). But all military services made all combat jobs available to females based on their occupation requirements, effective December 3, 2015.

However, according to Marenčinová (2018) and Parker and Funk (2020), the armed forces exemplify a culture based on a foundation of male superiority and females (Marenčinová, 2018; Parker & Funk, 2020). The thought of pursuing a job in a disadvantageous setting significantly impacts females in the military. Females in the military have faced career barriers (Holden & Raffo, 2014). Therefore, advancement is a

significant area that continues to be plagued by gender discrimination in the military (Ishaq & Hussain, 2014).

Women in the military are provided equal training, and their male colleagues are provided equal opportunities, but the underrepresentation of women occurs at senior levels of leadership in the U.S. military. Women in civilian and military sectors continue to be underrepresented in top senior-leadership roles because gender bias and discrimination create barriers to advancing to these roles (Parker, 2020; Sipe et al., 2016; Taukobong et al., 2016). Among the three major branches of military duty (i.e., Army, Navy, and Air Force), the U.S. Navy has the smallest overall proportion of women representation at the highest levels of leadership (Defense Manpower Data Center [DMDC], 2022b). Within the enlisted military rank system, only a small proportion of women attain senior-leadership roles. According to the Defense Manpower Requirements Report (2020), in 2017, 6,383 Navy personnel advanced to senior-leadership positions in the commissioned pay grades of E7 through E9 (Department of Defense, 2019). Only 854 (13%) of the 6,383 sailors promoted were female. As of October 31, 2019, 31,548 active-duty Navy sailors in the enlisted pay grades of E7 through E9 served as senior leaders. Only 3,831 (12%) of the 31,548 sailors who served as senior leaders in pay grades E7 through E9 were female (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2022a, 2022b). A low number of female leaders throughout senior enlisted pay grades shows a gap in the promotion ratio of male and female leaders to senior military pay scales E7 through E9 in the U.S. Navy.

Various obstacles impede women from reaching the highest enlisted leadership positions. Implicit and explicit bias existed in the military before women were allowed to join (Moore, 2020). Some researchers have used the glass ceiling and sticky floor to define the obstacles preventing women from advancing. However, not all paths to advancement are equal. Some women have overcome obstacles meant to deter them or slow them down. “Navigating the labyrinth” is a metaphor used to describe the obstacles a woman faced and overcame in her career to achieve success (Eagly & Carli, 2018). A significant absence of women exists at senior levels of leadership throughout organizations, which strengthens the awareness of persistent gender discrimination that helps to support establishing gender inequality in the military workforce. Researchers have mentioned that this has led to an underrepresentation of senior enlisted female leaders (Bierema, 2016; Hüttges & Fay, 2015; Kaur et al., 2017; Seo et al., 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

Military females in male-dominated organizations are underrepresented in management roles due to gender bias and discrimination, underuse of leadership talents, and lack of role models (Lipe, 2018). The general problem is that businesswomen face career barriers in male-dominated organizations to achieve career success, such as economic security, occupational segregation, leadership roles, better jobs, inadequate workplace flexibility, and sex discrimination (see Raghuvanshi et al., 2017). The specific management problem is that senior enlisted military women in male-dominated organizations are underrepresented in senior management roles due to career barriers

(Carli & Eagly, 2016; Catalyst, 2021a; Gipson et al., 2017; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). The 2020 Defense Manpower Requirement Report showed that 6,383 Navy personnel advanced to senior leadership in the enlisted pay grades of E7 through E9 for the fiscal year 2020; only 854 (13%) were female. As of February 2022, 32,427 active-duty Navy sailors served as senior enlisted leaders in pay grades E7-E9, and only 4,194 (13%) were female (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2022a, 2022b). A low number of female leaders throughout senior enlisted pay grades shows a mismatch in the promotion ratio of male and female leaders to senior enlisted pay grades E7 through E9 in the U.S. Navy. There is a disconnect between women's networking and job advancement, making it difficult to pinpoint specific measures to increase women's agency and fortify the networks necessary for women to rise to the highest levels of management (Wanigasekara, 2016). Research is needed because there is little understanding of the experiences of retired senior enlisted women leaders who served in the military and how they overcame barriers to success in a male-dominated organization.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, had served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived

experiences of senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semistructured face-to-face interviews with 13 retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data.

### **Research Questions**

Research Question 1: How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?

Research Question 2: How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, career resilience was used as the conceptual framework to explore the experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who overcame barriers and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. Career resilience (CR) was first coined by London (1983) as an area involving career motivation. Resilience theory addresses individuals' life experiences and ability to adapt to adversity based on resources and support from friends, family, employers, and the community. Researchers have defined resilience as the outcomes and interactions among an individual, environment, and processes (Mishra & McDonald, 2017; Rossier et al., 2017). Rutter's (1999) perspective suggested that resilience is not connected to individual psychological traits but rests on adaptation based on the right resources. Garmezy (1987) contended that individual, family, and community protective factors influence resilience.

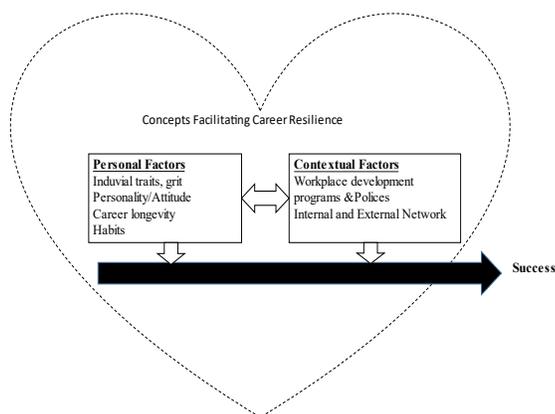
Ungar (2008) posited that resilience is based on support from caring friends and family, nurturing employers, and effective governments yield the difference between individual success and failures.

Career resilience is a person's ability to overcome career barriers with the right resources. As individuals gain life experiences as their careers evolve, career resilience encompasses factors that potentially influence how individuals deal with barriers.

Researchers have suggested that resilience focuses on positive situations, and social and individual protective factors, known as assets and resources, help alleviate challenges and barriers for individuals (Rossier et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2013). Mishra and McDonald (2017) defined career resilience as learning to endure, adapt, and thrive in one's professional life despite obstacles, shifts, and disruptions. This study's conceptual framework was based on Mishra and McDonald's CR's nomological network (Figure 1).

## Figure 1

### *Career Resilience Conceptual Framework*



According to scholars, CR is a complicated phenomenon involving interactions between personal and contextual variables (Mishra & McDonald, 2017; Rossier et al., 2017). The concepts of personal and contextual factors encompass resources positively correlated with CR in mitigating barriers (Mishra & McDonald, 2017; Rossier et al., 2017). Therefore, the concepts of personal and contextual factors were used to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) on how they made meaning for overcoming career barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization. Further explanation of CR concerning understanding retired senior enlisted women overcoming barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization is detailed in Chapter 2 of my literature review.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative methodology with a transcendental phenomenological design was used to explore the lived experiences of 13 U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) in the United States who overcame career barriers and achieved post-military career success in a male-dominated organization. A phenomenological research design is dedicated to the wholeness of experience and understanding the perception of how participants describe their experiences about a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The foundation of phenomenology is that awareness and experiences are linked to objects that help form the wholeness of experiences and provide knowledge (Sokolowski, 2000). Thus, phenomenology proceeds from conscious experience to factors that aid in the intentionality of experience. A transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me to

(a) explore the human experience by focusing on the overall experience, (b) recognize the purpose and significance related to the experience, (c) acquire first-hand descriptions of life experiences using semi-structured interviews until saturation, (d) acknowledge that the information of the life experience is critical for newfound information, and (e) consider my obligation as the researcher (see Husserl, 1964; Sokolowski, 2000). Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam technique was used as this study's primary data analysis strategy. The modified van Kaam technique is described in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

Understanding specific keywords or phrases in this study provides a greater comprehension of the purpose of this research. The following is a list of terms used in the study.

*Career barriers:* Foreign or internal pressures might stymie professional objectives (Lent et al., 2000).

*Career resilience:* A developmental process of overcoming barriers by being persistent and adaptable during disturbances and altering events to achieve career success (Mishra & McDonald, 2017).

*Command senior enlisted leader:* An enlisted advisor to the commanding officer at one's assigned command who supports and advises the commanding officer on all topics concerning the well-being, training, and equipping of enlisted employees (Department of the Navy, 2016).

*Glass ceiling:* A phenomenon that allows women to catch glimpses of promotion chances but prevents them from breaking through the barrier to achieving job development (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

*Junior enlisted member:* Non-commissioned officers serving in pay grades E1-E6.

*Male-dominant professions:* Professions where women represent 25% or less of the total personnel employed (Campuzano, 2019).

*Navigating the labyrinth:* A metaphor describing women's complex path of barriers to leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

*Rating:* General enlisted professions used by the U.S. Navy consist of specific skills and abilities; occupational specialty in the U.S. Navy (Cutler, 2017).

*Senior enlisted member:* Non-commissioned officers in pay grades E7-E9 (Department of the Navy, 2018).

### **Assumptions**

The effectiveness of an experiment depends on how clearly its fundamental assumptions are stated (Mitroff & Bonoma, 1978). These concepts underpin not only laboratory testing but also social evaluation research. Six underlying assumptions were made for this study's investigation of the barriers faced by women in the workplace. The first assumption was that I would be able to find enough retired senior military women (E7-E9) in the United States who overcame career impediments to success in male-dominated organizations. The second assumption was that every respondent experienced career hurdles and eventually achieved success. The third assumption was that the

volunteers were interested in the study and wanted to engage in the research. The fourth assumption was that the participants were ready to freely participate in an interview about their lived experiences with the theme of professional resilience. The fifth assumption was that the selected respondents would relate their encounters that led to their ideas on career hurdles and workplace success rather than the experiences or viewpoints of others. The final assumption was that the participants were openly available to aid in bias reduction by reviewing the data. Observations and my inferences via participant observation, affirmation of people taking part, or participants, as well known as participant or respondent confirmation, were used to determine the validity of the results and a platform to strengthen trustworthiness.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of a study is to identify critical elements used by the researcher as a guide to explore a phenomenon within a specified field (Simon & Goes, 2013). The scope describes the methodology, phenomenon, purpose, and population. Defining the scope of the study not only shows what the study covers but also improves the study's credibility, validity, and reliability and lets other scholars know what subject, context, time, and the area they can use to evaluate and replicate the study (Akanle et al., 2020).

This transcendental phenomenological study's research questions explored the lived experiences of U.S. Navy enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved career success in a male-dominated organization. The CR framework was used to assess the impact of conceptual and personal factors that enabled U.S. Navy retired

senior enlisted women to overcome career barriers and achieve success. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with 13 retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted women who served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. The number of years and participant prerequisites were chosen due to career longevity and experience. The results, data, and information collected can be used in other military organizations.

Delimitations restrict the identified elements a researcher will not employ in their study (Akanle et al., 2020). These restrictions could be a study's inclusion, exclusion, and methodology. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. This methodology was chosen because qualitative research is used to explore the essence of the experiences associated with a phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019), whereas quantitative research is numerical data driven by testing hypotheses and making predictions using large and randomly selected participants (Apuke, 2017). In this study, the participants were retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted women in pay grades E7-E9 who served 20 or more years in the Navy, deployed on land or sea, experienced barriers, and succeeded in male-dominated organizations. Those not considered for this study were active duty, who did not serve 20 or more years in the military. The exclusion was due to the accessibility of active-duty personnel due to

unannounced deployments or mission requirements and career longevity. A career in the military for regular retirement purposes is considered 20 years.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are potential study flaws beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). These factors were the limitations (a) the researcher's role in the study and (b) methodology due to the generalizability of the results to the sample size. The results cannot be generalized across all military organizations. The experiences of the U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women leaders could differ from other women depending on when and where they served, their culture, and their education. Due to unplanned deployments and mission requirements, active-duty personnel were not selected to complete this study in a reasonable timeframe. Data collection occurred at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made scheduling interviews challenging due to people returning to the office or traveling for leisure or work. I had to remain flexible in rescheduling interviews.

The potential for bias in the research outcomes may be because I am a retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted leader who served in a male-dominated organization. I bracketed my biases and assumptions. The epoché technique raised consciousness and encouraged me to observe the participants' life events as if they were happening for the first time (see Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers must ensure their bias does not overshadow their study's data collection and analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Before analyzing the data, I bracketed and reflected on any potential presumptions and reviewed all data as if I were listening or reading it for the

first time. The transferability of the results, data, and information collected could be used in other military organizations. Moustakas's modified van Kaam technique and NVivo were used to maintain dependability.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research acquired knowledge about senior enlisted military, female leaders in the United States and how they define career success and methods of overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization.

### **Significance to Practice**

This study may help inspire military leaders to investigate further policies and programs to help advance women into leadership positions. Problems related to work culture are not addressed, perpetuate disparities in men's and women's expectations, and must be addressed at the organizational level and within the context of the corporate culture (DeSimone, 2021). Organizational practices that better prepare women for leadership roles, such as having female mentors and a supportive environment encouraging women to build their self-confidence through positive feedback (Chen et al., 2021). This study might enable enlisted females to overcome barriers to success in male-dominated organizations. Enlisted women have the potential to become leaders. This study provided comprehensive knowledge of the challenges and barriers that successful women leaders overcome.

### **Significance to Theory**

CR is a complex concept known as an ability, attitude, habit, or coping mechanism to overcome barriers (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Careers that evolve in a complex environment require CR to maintain stability and success (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Despite confronting gender-related development impediments, some military women have ascended to senior enlisted leaders. However, there remains a marginalization of senior military female leaders. Unlike its private-sector counterparts, the U.S. military does not keep statistics on the quality of those leaving the Army, nor does it know why. There were no departure interviews for outgoing leaders and no data on who stayed or left without explanation (Bensahel et al., 2015).

Scholars who have studied military women leaders have identified causes for the marginalization of female leaders and the types of impediments that women in the military face (Alvinus et al., 2018; Braun et al., 2015; Marenčinová, 2018). Some military women have risen to senior enlisted leaders despite gender-related hurdles to promotion. Even though some women have achieved senior enlisted ranks, there is still a lack of female senior enlisted leaders. Female military leaders are underrepresented (Alvinus et al., 2018; Bensahel et al., 2015; Braun et al., 2015; Dichter & True, 2015; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2020; Marenčinová, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017a; Trobaugh, 2018). However, there was limited research to understand how senior enlisted Navy women leaders overcame obstacles to promotion to advance to senior leadership. This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the

experiences of these enlisted females who overcame career barriers to success in male-dominated organizations (Dichter & True, 2015; Dzubinski et al., 2019; GAO, 2020; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

### **Significance to Positive Social Change**

This research may help military organizations gain insights into integrating and developing women leaders. Historical, cultural, economic, and social norms have shaped the perception of women's societal roles (Krawiec, 2016), creating challenges and barriers to obtaining leadership roles. Over the years, women have successfully served in male-dominated organizations and have outperformed or met requirements created for men only (Krawiec, 2016). By establishing a mentorship program within a network of female leaders, women can share their experiences and advice to assist and inspire other women at all career stages (Chen et al., 2021). This study may help junior enlisted women understand that barriers are difficult to navigate in the military. However, with grit, persistence, and a supportive network, barriers can be overcome and achieved in a male-dominated organization.

### **Summary and Transition**

Senior enlisted military females are underrepresented in senior management roles in various organizations because of career barriers to success in male-dominated organizations. This research filled a gap in the literature by learning about the experiences of female enlisted military leaders who described how they achieved post-military success in a male-dominated organization. This chapter introduced the problem

statement and background of the problem. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature and the conceptual framework using the phenomenological lens to explore the experiences of retired Navy senior women leaders who overcame career barriers in a male-dominated organization and achieved success. The topics include women overcoming barriers, women in male-dominated organizations, and gender barriers.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Military females in male-dominated organizations are underrepresented in management roles due to gender bias and discrimination, underuse of leadership talents, and lack of role models (Lipe, 2018). Some barriers women face in male-dominated organizations to achieve career success are economic security, occupational segregation, leadership roles, better jobs, inadequate workplace flexibility, and sexual discrimination (Raghuvanshi et al., 2017). The specific management problem is that senior enlisted military females are underrepresented in senior management roles in various male-dominated organizations because of career barriers (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Catalyst, 2021a; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Additional research is needed on the experiences of retired senior enlisted women leaders who served in the military and how they overcame barriers to success in a male-dominated organization. The unknown elements of success and how senior enlisted women leaders in the military overcame career barriers and achieved success are gaps in the literature (Wanigasekara, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, had served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming

barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 13 retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data.

This literature review details a gap in the literature on how female leaders navigate promotion barriers to success in male-dominated organizations. Significant research emphasizes barriers that hinder women's career progression to senior-leadership roles. Researchers have expressed that navigating the labyrinth and the glass ceiling are some of the subtle barriers of complex elements that impede the career progression of women to senior-leadership positions (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019; Kwaku Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015; Madaan & Pradhan, 2017; Soleymanpour Omran et al., 2015; Vasconcelos, 2018). The organization of the literature review is a narrative explanation of barriers that impede women's success, creating a deficit of women in leadership roles in male-dominated organizations and practices that women have used to overcome these barriers to achieve success. Chapter 2 is divided into nine major sections covering the literature search strategy; conceptual philosophy and the ideology of transcendental phenomenology, conceptual framework, and methodology; current research on study population; overview of military organization and gender discrimination; literature on relevant topics on gender bias and how they impact women's careers, which are divided into organizational, societal, and individual categories; a final summary of Chapter 2; and a brief introduction to Chapter 3.

### Literature Search Strategy

The strategy to collect pertinent literature involved qualitative and quantitative peer-reviewed research on barriers to female career progression and advancement. Information was gathered from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government databases, and dissertations in databases accessed through Walden University's online library and government websites. Articles were reviewed and selected from the following databases: Emerald, Google Scholar, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and SAGE Journals online. An estimated 250 sources were examined, ranging from 1983 to 2022. I used the following search terms to identify literature to review: *career development, inequality, women and military leadership, mentor, mentee, developmental network, women leaders, military women, male-dominated jobs and female leaders, and women career success and male-dominated jobs, phenomenology, women career barriers, female career progression, U.S military women, global leadership, successful women, women thriving, women leaders, women career progression, women career barriers, women's career advancement, informal and formal networks, informal network, formal network, mentoring, sponsoring, and career resilience.*

The scope of my literature review extended from seminal works to peer-reviewed current literature. Few peer-reviewed studies contained results from examining enlisted women in the U.S. Navy. Additionally, few peer-reviewed studies have shown results on how women transcend barriers to achieving a senior-leadership role—obtaining data from adequate sources required expanding the focus to other studies on women in other

military forces and nonmilitary organizations. I expanded the periodical ranges to incorporate essential studies. Research over 10 years old offered a historical overview of the topic and reflected influential studies and theoretical perspectives.

### **Conceptual Framework**

CR derived from London's (1983) career motivation concept of CR, identity, and insight. CR is a gradual learning process of grit, flexibility, and success despite challenges, shifting events, and disruptions (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). CR is vital for perseverance, sustainability, and success (Patterson & Patterson, 2001). The challenges for leaders are to accept responsibility, remain strong, and act with courage, honor, and conviction in the face of adversity. The heart of resilience is using resources to overcome adversity, achieve goals, succeed, and become a better version of oneself. The conceptual framework was developed while focusing on women leaders' CR with the support of developmental networks using several factors presented in this study.

The concepts in CR is relevant to this research were derived from Mishra and McDonald's (2017) study, which suggested that personal and contextual factors are positively correlated with success. Personal factors include traits and characteristics such as grit, persistence, career history, education, training, attitudes, and actions (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Contextual factors include workplace support, training development programs and policies, and internal and external networks of friends, family, and community. According to scholars, collaborations with the networks have been known to provide positive outcomes such as advancement, work satisfaction, and career success

(Biju et al., 2021; Chanland & Murphy, 2018; Duarte et al., 2017; Southwick et al., 2014). Early intervention training, persistence, continuous learning, and networking allow women to counteract the barriers that have the potential to impede their career progression (Rossier et al., 2017). But it is important to distinguish that the factors leading to success may differ depending on their personality, challenges, resources, and environment (Southwick et al., 2014). Personal and contextual factors may help understand how U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women overcame adversity and succeeded in a male-dominated organization.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study consists of various government documents, professional books, and journals. In this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study, I addressed U.S. Navy senior enlisted women's career barriers and practices and how they overcame them to succeed in a male-dominated organization. The literature review includes studies from the literature search that related to the purpose of the study and created a conceptual framework. The information for this review included gender bias and career barriers, career barriers for women in male-dominated organizations, military and career barriers, and women overcoming career barriers. I used multiple databases to conduct an extensive, internet-based review of the study. The literature review included literature associated with the conceptual framework that served as the lens for this study.

## **Gender Bias and Career Barriers**

Gender discrimination arises for working women globally, particularly for women working in male-dominated organizations (Alqahtani, 2020; Auster & Prasad, 2016; Sabharwal, 2013; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Numerous researchers have observed that women continue to encounter gender-connected issues that restrict promotion to senior-leadership positions (Askehave & Zethsen, 2014; Diehl et al., 2020; Parcheta et al., 2013; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Underrepresentation of women exists in leadership at senior levels of management in all career fields: commercial, military, industrial, and public (Glass & Cook, 2016). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), women represent 57.4% of the workforce.

The underrepresentation of women is a global phenomenon affecting women in all professions. Even with attempts by policymakers to eliminate gender discrimination from the labor force, gender discrimination, as it relates to advancement, remains common in all work organizations (Holton & Dent, 2016; Rahim et al., 2018). Women are well-educated, skilled, and competent in organizational leadership; however, gender and other gender-related obstacles prevent them from rising to leadership positions (Wynn, 2016). Military women are significantly vulnerable to gender discrimination when working in a male-dominated culture due to the history, low representation of women, government support, and physical limitations (Marenčinová, 2018).

## **Women in Male-Dominated Organizations and Career Barriers**

Organizational, cultural, societal, economic, and policy barriers play an essential role in defining male and female career opportunities. These barriers, recognized as institutional barriers, inhibit women's contributions to leadership roles and are entrenched across many generations (Alqahtani, 2020; Cozza & Parnter, 2022; Mekasha, 2017) in various job sectors. Institutional barriers are rooted in cultural beliefs about gender, workplace structures, practices, and actions that unintentionally favor men. Various academic, business, industry, and government studies worldwide agreed that women faced organizational barriers (Cozza & Parnter, 2022; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). These barriers are influenced by societal, governmental, internal organization, and organizational norms (Akkaya, 2020; Johns, 2013). Societal, organizational, and individual gender barriers have prevented women from succeeding or advancing in leadership (Diehl et al., 2020). Organizational practices create an imbalance that enhances recruitment, retention, and promotion of men over women (Oakley, 2000). Organizational culture impedes advancement for women (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Akkaya, 2020; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021; Schwanke, 2013). Behavioral and cultural problems caused by stereotyping, tokenism, power, and ideal leadership styles also impede women from becoming leaders (Oakley, 2000).

### **Male Dominance**

Numerous studies have recognized male dominance as the underlying reason for sexual harassment (Dresden et al., 2018), which has been used to preserve manhood and

gender status inequalities (Stockdale et al., 1999). Gruber and Morgan (2005) defined numerically as the ratio of men within an organization, while normative is considered the cultural norm of masculinity. They suggested that both elements contributed to harassment. (Gruber & Morgan, 2005). Several studies have shown that when there are more males than females in an organization, it tends to be male-dominated, and the incidence of sexual harassment against women increases (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014; Stockdale et al., 1999). Women who work in male-dominated occupations have experienced more sexual harassment than women who are not considered minorities in their company (Gutek & Cohen, 1987).

### **Crabs in the Barrel Syndrome**

Crabs in the barrel syndrome (CBS) is a mentality and behavior associated with specific group members, such as women and minorities, who were perceived to have violated known social customs to help and support (Miller & Borgida, 2016). Crabs in the barrel syndrome is a group of individuals who undermine other attempts at success. Crabs in the barrel syndrome is a metaphor for undermining the behavior of oppressed groups (Miller & Borgida, 2016). Crabs in the barrel syndrome have three overlapping motivations: envy, competitiveness, and burden. Scholars have suggested that the glass ceiling is like the crabs in a bucket that prevent women from advancing to top leadership regardless of their accomplishments and expertise (Miller, 2019). Though women have made significant strides in representation in management and professional careers, researchers have suggested that invisible career barriers persist for women, particularly in

top management positions (Krissetyanti, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

The crab in the barrel mentality did not have a problem with gender discrimination, unlike the glass ceiling, discrimination against men and women, regardless of gender (Aydın & Oğuzhan, 2019).

### **Glass Ceiling**

The glass ceiling phenomenon continues to pique the interest of scholars (Akkaya, 2020; Ballakrishnen et al., 2019; Cook & Glass, 2015; Glass & Cook, 2016; Jackson & O’Callaghan, 2009; Jackson et al., 2014). The term *glass ceiling*, coined in 1984, was mostly used to describe inequities between men and women (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Baxter and Wright (2000) suggested that the glass ceiling allows women to attain management roles. However, women were limited from advancing due to invisible barriers. The glass ceiling is an emblem relating to obstacles such as discrimination that have contributed to the lack of visibility and inclusion of women in leadership roles (Akkaya, 2020; Hoyt, 2010; Morrison et al., 1987).

### **Good Old Boy Network**

Network processes have been scrutinized based on gender and racial equality in the U.S. workforce. Removing legal barriers to discrimination from network processes would not eradicate discrimination during the civil rights movement (Loury, 1977). How people were matched to their occupations through sponsorship by word of mouth ensured White males had unequal access to senior positions (McDonald, 2011). The shadow structure, first coined by Kanter (1977), described how employees built alliances, traded

organizational resources, and managed their organizational status. Sociologists understood the shadow structure by analyzing informal networks in that informal networks provide benefits that enhance professional, personal, and social goals (McGuire, 2002). Network scholars described informal networks as social resources to help workers bypass formal procedures and provide a flow of information and power to help people advance to leadership positions. However, women were less likely than men to be central in work-based networks and had high status and diverse networks (Ibarra, 1992). Network features influence other social capital access depending on the studied resources (McGuire, 2002). Therefore, networks' gender and race composition align with access to job opportunities and status. Other studies have shown that networks provide better career outcomes for white men than women (McDonald, 2011).

In contrast, men are essential to attaining gender equality. Due to the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions, men usually exert inconsistent influence inside their firms. With their help, men can advance efforts to have a stronger influence and eliminate gender inequalities (Kerr & Pollack, 2022). Even with advocating for gender equality, men face backlash and experience barriers such as apathy, fear, and ignorance. Scholars conducted interviews with men who supported gender equality. The results showed that 74% of people said apathy was one reason men do not act, 74% of men feared they would lose status and receive negative judgments from other men if women achieved equality, and 51% believed this was due to ignorance and a lack of awareness of gender bias (Kerr & Pollack, 2022). According to scholars,

94% of men experience masculine anxiety at work, which may inhibit them from challenging gender bias behaviors in the workplace (DiMuccio & Knowles, 2020).

### **Queen Bee**

Queen Bee is where females overcome gender barriers in a male-dominated culture to achieve career success. Queen bee was a pejorative term to describe a woman who has achieved career success in male-dominated organizations by adapting to a masculine culture and segregating from other women preventing them from developing and advancing (Derks et al., 2016; Şengül et al., 2019; Sobczak, 2018). Instead of advocating and supporting other women against gender bias, the queen bee accepted the masculine cultural norms and shunned other women in the organization. Their behavior was deemed a potential barrier to women advancing in the workplace due to a lack of sponsorship (Namie, 2017, 2021).

These women overlooked the status quo of gender inequalities making barriers invisible when women achieve career success despite the challenges and barriers they must overcome. This behavior/attitude makes it appear like the barriers did not exist when women contributed to gender discrimination. Faniko et al. (2016) suggested that women who have achieved career success in male-dominated organizations isolated themselves from other women. Women were less successful in the organization by conforming to stereotypical masculine behavior and regarding themselves as more masculine than other women, contributing to gender disparity.

According to scholars, 65% of women bullied in the workplace were women and mostly were victimized by other women (Namie, 2021). Rather than engaging in overt aggression, researchers suggested that women used their social intelligence to control their relationships and ruined the reputations of other women (Crick et al., 2002). Queen bee syndrome is a form of discrimination that impacts a women's career path to success. The study suggested that 90% of the time, queen bees choose other females as targets. Queen bee behavior may have contributed to validating current gender inequalities, which may be the most detrimental aspect of this phenomenon (Derks,2016). An example of queen bees provided by Derks et al.validated current gender inequality by being over critical and harsh of junior women enabling stereotypes of women as less motivated and committed than their junior male counterparts.

According to Andrew (2022), there are four reasons women do not assist women. First, an unseen natural norm governs relationships, authority, and self-esteem. To have good network connections among women, each woman's self-esteem and power must be of equal significance in the eyes of the other. The second is queen bee syndrome, which occurs when a female leader places less emphasis on relationships and does not devote the time necessary to engage with younger women. Women are at a competitive disadvantage compared to men in various occupations (Derks et al., 2016). Debebe (2017) discovered that women who achieve career success in male-dominated organizations considered selection procedures acceptable even with signs of gender prejudice.

Studies on barriers continue to evolve over the years on the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Debebe, 2017). Understanding the experiences of women who have overcome these barriers is essential. It is necessary to share their stories to learn how to mitigate these barriers if they arise during their careers. However, organizations have implemented policies and laws to support these barriers. These barriers have evolved from visible to invisible, making it challenging to navigate to achieve career success (Ambri et al., 2019).

### **Labyrinth**

Rather than being denied leadership roles, navigating the labyrinth, introduced by Eagly and Carli (2018), is another analogy that describes women's barriers to achieving leadership in organizations. The labyrinth symbolizes women's journeys, filled with multiple barriers that stifle their leadership opportunities throughout their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Hill et al., 2016), that they must overcome to become leaders. The labyrinth concept best characterizes women's challenges in reaching high leadership levels. Carli and Eagly (2016) mentioned that research has implemented a labyrinth when explaining the female leadership path. The labyrinth idea signifies a challenging but maneuverable path to top leadership for women. This view suggests that women can achieve leadership positions; however, they must recognize how to do so cleverly. The trial encompasses bias-related barriers stemming from viewpoints on position, race, and gender (Baker, 2014; Carli & Eagly, 2016). To navigate the labyrinth required, women leaders must acquire tools and techniques to overcome existing barriers (Johns, 2013).

Navigating the labyrinth required understanding all the barriers and how successful women overcame them (Johns, 2013). Baker (2014) mentioned that women must create and develop their leadership style regardless of societal norms for women to achieve success. When obtaining top leadership positions, understanding the labyrinth's factors becomes essential to navigating gender inequality produced by these elements (Gipson et al., 2017).

Researchers who implemented the modern labyrinth idea as a metaphor for the glass ceiling phenomenon realized the significance of understanding the glass ceiling's effects on women in leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Reasons established to describe the lack of women in higher leadership include cultural, societal, legal, educational, and organizational factors (Berkery et al., 2013). Confronting these challenges does not continually thwart women from achieving higher leadership positions. The components generate a labyrinth to top leadership positions that women were meticulously passed through to achieve senior-leadership positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Each component supported one of three categories believed to explain the barriers related to establishing a glass ceiling: (a) corporate practices, (b) social and cultural causes, and (c) structural and cultural justifications. Social and cultural causes, which involve categorizing and preferred leadership styles, offer the most relevant explanations for gender-related barriers influencing female promotion (Johns, 2013). Acknowledging that behavior and leadership type have a substantial impact on promotion emphasizes the necessity to

investigate the behaviors and leadership qualities of successful female leaders to determine how they navigate the path of leadership.

### **Superior Performance**

All leaders expect superior performance, but it may be crucial for women in their career progression, as the performance bar may be higher for women than men. To combat gender biases and be perceived as equally competitive, women must dramatically outperform men in organizations (Herbst, 2020). As a result of repeatedly proving their credibility, women emphasized the importance of over-performing to counter negative assumptions, especially in male environments. The notion that a woman would not succeed was maintained by treating occurrences of success as though they were not attributable to the woman herself or by viewing a woman's achievement as an exception due to exceptional circumstances (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

In addition to superior performance as an effective means for women to subvert gender-related expectations was the importance of developing a specialized area of expertise. Working harder than male peers and developing unique skills and expertise were demonstrated through this strategy. Even when their triumphs were evident, women were sometimes considered incapable of excelling in male-dominated professional areas (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Women who have successfully reached the senior suite described seeking visible and potentially career-enhancing opportunities to promote mobility and gain external recognition.

### **Double Bind/Catch-22**

Researchers have argued that the gender gap is due, in part, to male-oriented characteristics in organizations still being the standard. Eagly and Carli (2018) stated that several studies have shown that people associate men and women with different traits based on gender. Men are traditionally associated with assertiveness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, dominance, independence, and confidence. Women are associated with being nurturing and respectful, too sensitive to make challenging decisions, and too weak to be strong leaders. When a woman performs a job that a man usually holds, these cliché standards can be challenging. Women face discrepancies between their characteristically regarded identity and the essential personality for the job. The disparities between conventional women's qualities and those demonstrated by authority put female leaders in what is commonly known as a double bind/catch-22.

Catch-22 is defined as a generalization that people hold around gender traits conflicting with the behavior thought to be fundamental to success in a particular job. At the same time, Cheryan and Markus (2020) stated that masculine defaults consist of ideas, beliefs, collaboration styles, standards, artifacts, and principles that may not necessarily discriminate by gender but can create more obstacles for women than men. Firestone (2014) suggested that for women to succeed in male-dominated organizations, they must develop characteristics associated with male leaders, such as determination, assertiveness, and effectiveness. For women to succeed, they must develop stereotypical masculine behavior and appearances. However, these attributes could raise women's risk

of backlash (Ballakrishnen et al., 2019) and gender harassment (Catalyst, 2021b; Leskinen et al., 2015). When women succeed in leadership positions, they are compared to their male partners. Women were assumed to have violated the traditional and societal gender standards when serving in the roles traditionally filled by men (Leskinen et al., 2015).

The challenge for women leaders was navigating how they were expected to behave due to their gender-role stereotype and the traditionally consistent behavior with leadership, which is inherently male. However, women whose behavior aligned with their gender-role expectations were favored but disregarded due to the behaviors not indicative of being a leader (Heilman & Chen, 2005; Jaffe, 2014; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Jaffe (2014) mentioned that behavioral research demonstrated that implicit gender unfairness persisted and negatively affected women in leadership. This process required women leaders to compromise in balancing being liked and perceived as competent, making it difficult for them to succeed as leaders if their behaviors were not consistent with their genders. However, women had to prove their qualifications continually and were subject to stricter scrutiny of their capabilities (Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

### **Societal Barriers**

According to research in social psychology, gender bias/stereotypes are defined as inaccurate, clichéd generalizations about different gender roles (Xu et al., 2019). Social constructionist theories assert that gender inequality is connected to people in society,

their communication, social roles, and their choosing to be in those roles (Bardekjian et al., 2019). In addition to the social construction, men are viewed as the dominant gender because they are assertive and confident. In contrast, society views women as nurturers due to their historical role in caring for the home and family (Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

Xu et al. (2019) mentioned that stereotypes/biases are shaped through hidden and visible interactions in the media or stories based on the Cinderella complex. The Cinderella complex was based on a relatable and memorable story depicting women as nurturing and caring and men as confident and strong. These roles were based on social norms and behavioral traits associated with each gender (Alqahtani, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Eagly, 1987; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The expectations or norms explain desirable qualities or behavioral attributes for each gender (Eagly, 1987). These expectations are derived from traditional gender-based standards on social roles in society, with men serving as sole providers in the home and women taking care of the home (Alqahtani, 2020; Eagly, 1987; Eagly et al., 2000; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). According to Cheryan and Markus (2020), masculine default was a form of stereotype/bias in which the traits and behaviors associated with the male gender role were regarded as standard. Leadership and gender bias were based on the perception of the relationship between gender traits and the nature of the roles men and women chose to occupy (Eagly, 1987).

Researchers surveyed 4,573 Americans on which traits society values for each

gender. The study's findings suggested no agreement on society's expectations for men and women (Walker et al., 2020). However, some patterns surfaced in which people associated strength and ambition with valued traits for men, and compassion and responsibility were valued traits for women. Women were overlooked for promotions and not recognized due to the perception that gender roles influenced leadership performance (Morrison et al., 1987; Powell, 1999). Therefore, the perception of female leadership effectiveness was governed by gender stereotypes of male behaviors and leadership styles. Women found it challenging to overcome invisible barriers ingrained in the organization's culture, structure, and operation that unconsciously benefit men while restricting women (Ibarra et al., 2013). Second-generation gender bias was one of the obstacles women had to navigate that affected their journey to leadership opportunities.

### **Types of Stereotypes**

Descriptive stereotypes and prescriptive stereotypes represent two primary types of ascribing gender roles to males and females, which are utilized to describe barriers that disseminate the glass ceiling. These two stereotypes portrayed a traditional perception of female performance that signifies what women are like and how they should perform (Alqahtani, 2020; Zehnter et al., 2018). Eagly and Karau (2002) applied the concepts of descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes in research to determine what causes the continuation of the glass ceiling that prevents women from developing into senior leaders. In substantiating a role congruency theory of prejudice toward women leaders, the researchers determined that discrepancies in the female gender and leadership roles

create two forms of prejudice that lead to adverse promotion opportunities for women.

Gipson et al. (2017) noted that descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes are pervasive and lead to biased judgments. Furthermore, stereotypes were at the core of role congruity theory to explain why women were underrepresented in senior-leadership roles.

**Descriptive Stereotypes.** Descriptive stereotypes describe expectations about characteristics women have. Labels of this nature consisted of beliefs about the characteristics, performance, and conduct that characterize men and women (Alqahtani, 2020; Heilman, 2012). For example, Zehnter et al. (2018) demonstrated that women were depicted as communal (e.g., kind, caring) as opposed to being depicted as agentic (e.g., assertive, independent). Scholars indicated that women were likelier to be labeled warm and nurturing (Wessel et al., 2014). However, these traits did not fit the characteristics required to succeed in a male-dominant job.

The defining aspect of stereotyping women usually triggers prejudice in a work environment when women are considered unsuitable or inappropriate to work in traditionally male roles, which discrimination results from performance assessment norms based on masculine standards. Therefore, women were adversely assessed when they worked in traditionally masculine positions. Incorporating masculine stereotypic elements into the promotion selection process negatively affects women not considered to possess essential male characteristics (Alqahtani, 2020; Gipson et al., 2017).

**Prescriptive Stereotypes.** Prescriptive stereotypes describe expectations about the characteristics that society expects women to have. Stereotypes of this nature consist

of the belief that women were particularly fit for the domestic domain and should be feminine, communal, maternal, and warm (Alqahtani, 2020; Miller & Borgida, 2016). Although women were expected to have these characteristics, they were considered incompetent for the workforce when viewed as overly feminine, communal, maternal, or warm. When female leaders do not demonstrate the expected characteristics, they are perceived as too masculine, agentic, or incompetent and are evaluated less favorably because they violate gender norms of femininity (Miller & Borgida, 2016). The prescriptive aspect of stereotyping women prompted discrimination in a work environment when women demonstrated behaviors opposite of what is expected to be female behavior.

However, women who complied with perceived standardized feminine behavior may have faced adverse consequences when being considered for promotion. Ascribing descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes of women in leadership establishes a catch-22 for female leaders. In catch-22, the qualities respected in leaders are not the typical traits that women were required to have and prove. Women who demonstrated the typical behaviors were expected to be considered competent for leadership. If women demonstrated the typical behaviors aligned with competent leadership, they were viewed as too masculine and denied that their performance did not align with customary gender norms (Miller & Borgida, 2016).

Nevertheless, from a stereotypical point of view, leadership roles are naturally associated exclusively with males. Female gender roles do not naturally align with

leadership roles. This bias presented a catch-22 for female leaders (Kaiser & Wallace, 2016). Concerning descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes, women in leadership were disadvantaged if they adjusted to the typical gender role and were deprived if they conformed to the agentic leadership role. Gender labeling created a significant barrier to promoting women in leadership, no matter the gender role women incorporated into their leadership style (Bierema, 2016). This researcher acknowledged that women who conformed to expected gender roles missed the mark in satisfying leadership roles. If a woman adapted to either side of presumed or accepted normal behavior, she often experienced heightened prejudice and discrimination.

### **A Woman's Voice/Speak Up**

In the self-silencing theory, women mute their voices, behaviors, and emotions to maintain interpersonal relationships (Maji & Dixit, 2019). Within organizational literature, voice has been defined as having input or influence (Jack & Dill, 1992). Settles et al. (2007) showed that voice contributed to poor work environments due to perceptions of a lack of personal agency, worth, and contribution to organization policies, procedures, and outcomes, which were vital for women. According to Heath et al. (2018), female leaders reported having few role models, feeling outnumbered in boardrooms, alone, unsupported, and unable to speak on their perspectives at meetings. Women who work in

male-dominated environments lack confidence, support, and encouragement (Einarsdottir et al., 2018).

Women who perceived more voice in departmental matters, even in negative organizational contexts, showed higher self-confidence, job satisfaction, and achievement than those with less voice. Ibarra et al. (2013) mentioned that an effective way to support women as they progressed into leadership roles was to provide a foundation in the sense of the purpose of leadership rather than focus on how women are perceived. Dahlvig and Longman (2010) revealed that it was vital that women leaders stand for a purpose. Dahlvig and Longman (2014) mentioned that women reported taking on leadership positions if they had a sense of purpose overseeing others or being allowed to serve as a mentor. Women who spoke up rather than remained silent demonstrated an attempt to improve and help others by mentoring them. Mentors inspire their mentees to seek opportunities by providing valuable advice for career advancement and resilience (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017).

### **Individual Barriers**

Many researchers have commented on the fine line those female leaders must walk to avoid negative evaluations and develop a style with which their male counterparts are comfortable, all while staying within a narrow band of acceptable behavior. The identity threat they experienced impacted women who were often compelled to implement a self-presentation strategy to depict an image that enhanced their role. Scholars described it as a process in which individuals seek to create a specific

impression on others to elicit specific reactions (Singh et al., 2002).

Although both men and women can benefit from impression management, the literature suggests that impression management behaviors were rewarded more for women than men. As women navigated through the double bind, they used ambiguous behaviors to fit into a male-dominated organizational environment and sought ways to develop authority (Eagly & Carli, 2018; O'Neil et al., 2015). Women were often regarded as less knowledgeable than their male colleagues, and the impression management technique of self-promotion was used effectively to counteract those perceptions.

However, researchers mentioned that different impression management tactics served different impression management goals. Individuals manage their behavior and personal characteristics in the presence of others to create an authentic brand for their audience based on their goal for the interaction (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Women have used impression management to be liked, appear competent, convey prominence, and influence, and promote conformity in others (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007) to avoid prevailing assumptions about their gender. Women exhibited feminine behaviors but not overly feminine, and masculine but not overly masculine to prove their credibility as leaders (Morrison et al., 1987). Women have also used impression management to craft a leadership identity that makes them feel genuine and prevents disapproval (Ibarra et al., 2013). By constructing a desired social identity, women's choice of actions can impact the result of a situation and how they are identified and regarded by others (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Singh et al., 2002). Additionally, impression management has been shown

to develop women's overall experiences of competency and support their success and advancement within organizations (Bolino et al., 2016).

### **Intentional Invisibility**

Leadership is often more challenging for women, as organizational contexts have been primarily against women who hold traditionally masculine roles or exhibit stereotypical male behaviors. To be seen as credible and influential and to gain the cooperation of others, women must be viewed as likable. Women learned to blend dominance with empathy and projected authority to increase being perceived as likable while staying within a narrow band of acceptable behavior (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). Women in this circumstance faced a double bind and functioned effectively in their leadership roles. They had to display adaptive behaviors.

Several researchers have called for studies identifying conditions under which double bind can be lessened. One promising strategy is a behavioral technique known as self-monitoring, which may be more beneficial for women. Studies have also shown that self-monitoring may be an effective strategy in overcoming negative gender stereotypes, particularly when women hold a role that is nontraditional to gender (Flynn & Ames, 2006; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Studies have shown a positive association between self-monitoring and work-related outcomes associated with performance and advancement ability (Flynn & Ames, 2006; Kilduff et al., 2017). Research also indicated that people with high self-monitoring abilities are likelier to become leaders (Leone, 2021; O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). Self-monitoring involves close observation of social cues and accurately

assessing social situations. This skill was beneficial to women in organizations when navigating gender norms. It allowed them to adjust their behavior and adapt it to the behaviors of those around them, projecting an appropriate response based on the situation (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011).

Women were high self-monitors and modified how and when they displayed behaviors necessary to conform to the masculine managerial stereotype (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2011). High self-monitoring women were also more successful, exerted more influence, and were perceived as effective and valuable leaders (Flynn & Ames, 2006; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). This process suggested that self-monitoring may play a key role in resolving the subtle discrimination that can disadvantage women in organizations and serve as a crucial factor to consider in understanding how women mitigate the effects of institutional barriers.

### **Work-Life Balance**

Women leaders are adept at juggling various responsibilities at work and home (Brue & Brue, 2018). For the past several decades, women in the labor force pursued higher levels of education from 1970 to 2019, noting that women between the ages of 25 to 64 who obtained a college degree tripled while males merely doubled (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics mentioned that women were likely to work full-time all year since the 1970s, while women with family responsibilities increased significantly.

According to the women participants, the most challenging component of juggling job and family is dealing with cultural expectations about mothering (Groysberg & Connolly, 2014; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017). Senior leaders emphasized that balancing family and business life necessitates a strong network of allies behind the scenes (Groysberg & Connolly, 2014). According to Porter (2014), many women kept their networks separate for fear of harming their image. Some never mention their families at work because they do not want to appear unprofessional. Porter mentioned that choosing when, where, and how to be available for business is a constant problem, especially for executives with families.

Managing a family and a career can be particularly challenging for military personnel. Military personnel are expected to be flexible to unpredictable schedules, be on call 24 hours a day and be ready for deployment at a moment's notice. These requirements can be challenging for single, married, and dual-serviced parents with a family plan for these contingencies. Single parents cannot expect their tour of duty to be close family members, and dual military parents must decide the best location where their children would reside while deployed (Clever & Segal, 2013). Military parents' most challenging balancing act was long months of separation in battle zones or other rotational foreign deployments (Bensahel et al., 2015). Scholars suggested that organizations can also provide benefits to employees that support their responsibility, such as childcare, allowing them to devote more time and resources to professional

responsibilities, which may influence others' perspectives and attractiveness as network contacts (Woehler et al., 2020).

Although staffing needs are a priority of the military and its mission, personnel managers considered requests from dual-service parents to keep the family together (Clever & Segal, 2013). Pregnancy and maternity leave policies might make it difficult for women to combine the physical demands of their military career (Bensahel et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Bensahel et al. (2015), female soldier participants reported that pregnant females “were not seen as real soldiers” or “deemed a burden and liability to their organization” due to their medical limitations impacting their military duties (p. 15). Other participants in the study reported being told early in their careers, “If you want to be successful, you should not have kids” (p. 15). Women should balance maintaining a household, pursuing their dream job, and succeeding.

In contrast, Porter (2014) and Boateng and Osei-Hwedie (2017) explained that success is not achieved alone and that having a network is essential. Porter's (2014) study revealed that partners could assist women in keeping their focus on what counts, budgeting their time and energy, living a healthy lifestyle, and making careful but often complex decisions about the job, vacation, household management, and community involvement.

### **Military Women and Career Barriers**

In the 1920s, women encompassed only 21% of the total workforce. Currently, 57% of all women work, comprising over half of the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, 2021). Even though women have made immense progress in the workforce, they have continued to fall behind men's promotion and pay in work organizations (Akkaya, 2020; Alqahtani, 2020; Diehl et al., 2020). Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) suggested that gender inequality in organizations is complex within organizations, processes, and policies.

For over 70 years, women's roles in the military have evolved at a rate that matches, if not exceeds, that of society (Trobaugh, 2018). It has taken various policies to allow women a chance at equality in the workforce. For example, the 1948 Armed Service Integration Act allowed women to serve in the military. The 1964 Civil Rights Act banned gender discrimination (Mitroff & Bonoma, 1978). The March 1994 policy allowed women to serve on combat ships (Naval History and Heritage Command, 2021). The December 2015 policy enacted by Defense Secretary Carter allowed women to serve in all jobs, including combat (Tobia, 2015). There have been many positive results from these implemented policies, such as women succeeding, excelling, and making history in their careers as the first women.

While these policies may have helped, Trobaugh (2018) mentioned that policymakers did not consider the persistent bias against women serving in the armed forces. Policymakers were not working alongside the women; these policies were created to help. Policymakers were not aware of how gender bias is manifested in the organization. However, leaders worked alongside these women and may have been aware of gender bias; instead, it manifested blatantly or somewhat. These everyday occurrences

were manifestations of ingrained biases that inhibit women from performing their professions efficiently (Trobaugh, 2018). These daily occurrences create barriers to women succeeding in male-dominated organizations such as the military. However, there is little uncertainty in 2020 that gender inequality will continue in work environments (Trobaugh, 2018). A constant battle persists for women to achieve equality in rank, pay, and status in the modern workforce.

Many studies have shown that gender bias in decision-making can be widespread, harmful, and pervasive. They can lead to different outcomes for women and hurt the organization's decisions (Chang & Milkman, 2020). Participating in deliberate and unintentional gender bias originated from societal norms and gender stereotyping leadership behaviors inhibited women from achieving top leadership positions (Auster & Prasad, 2016). Women faced barriers to attaining senior-leadership positions in work environments where gendered views of leadership, such as the "think manager-think male" and "think crisis-think female" concepts prevail (Diehl et al., 2020; Parcheta et al., 2013; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Gender-role stereotyping involves viewing influential leaders as those who demonstrate behaviors typically attributed to males. They establish barriers for women in leadership that limit the number of women who reach senior-leadership roles (Dwivedi et al., 2018).

Numerous scholars have indicated that the main barriers to female promotion result from social beliefs and mindsets correlated with managing the expectations of women inside the workforce (Alqahtani, 2020; Coder & Spiller, 2013; Marenčinová,

2018; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Boone et al. (2013) recognized stereotyping and perception of female traits as two of women's most critical workplace barriers. Scholars have posited that societal views and attitudes expressed by personnel in work organizations result in unequal treatment of female workers. Women encountered gender inequality in leadership, pay, and status despite being equally qualified and more educated than males (Graff et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017b).

Gender inequality frequently manifests in the workplace as gender discrimination and gender bias inhibit women from attaining the same status as men in the same or comparable work areas. Survey data showed that approximately 42% of employed women have reported confronting discrimination in the workplace due to gender (Pew Research Center's, 2017a). Additionally, women are twice as likely as men to encounter specific gender discrimination in the workplace. Certain types of discrimination experienced by women relate to variations in pay, promotion, perceived competency, and a lack of support in the same job fields (Parker & Funk, 2020).

One primary type of gender inequality is the promotion disparity between men and women employed in the career fields. Women who work in male organizations are susceptible to experiencing inequality in the scope of promotion. According to scholars, women have demonstrated the talent and competency to excel in leadership as their male coworkers; however, few women have achieved pay and status equal to most males (Parker & Funk, 2020). Although few women have overcome barriers that hinder

promotion to senior leadership, an underrepresentation of women leaders continues in top leadership positions (Auster & Prasad, 2016).

Baldwin (1997) examined the military population of promotion decisions impacting middle-level naval officers. Theories of individual discrimination, institutional racism/sexism, human capital shortages, and inaccessibility to informal white male networks suggest that the promotion rates of men should exceed those of women. Until 1975, women were prohibited from serving on non-ocean-going tugs and harbor vessels. Baldwin extracted data from yearly Military Equal Opportunity Assessment reports for each rank investigated. The data include the population of middle-grade line officers considered for promotion between 1984 and 1993—more than 75,000 officers—data prior to 1984 not available. Data over 10 years show that men were promoted to commander and captain at a higher rate than women. However, men's rates were lower than women's at the lieutenant level and about identical to female rates as captain.

Braun et al. (2015) examined the literature on recruiting and retaining military women in research studies as an underrepresented and potentially marginalized population. The results produced 10 articles that addressed research recruitment and retention challenges and strategies in underrepresented populations, providing an effective context for research recruitment and retention in military settings. Braun et al. stated that research with military women is often challenged by logistical, cultural, social, ethical, and methodological issues, hindering exploring potentially sensitive issues.

Researchers must account for deployments and military training exercises in seeking participants for research.

Reddy et al. (2017) sought to understand the gender prejudices women confront as they advance to well-deserved senior positions in male-dominated organizations. The study focused solely on gender-related assumptions and ignored other diversity difficulties encountered in leadership roles. The study's findings showed that women, like men, require mentors and leadership training to achieve their goals. It was also discovered that for women to advance in the organization, men must adjust their opinions of women and evaluate their valuable contributions without bias. Thus, a safe environment for experimentation, knowledge, learning, and community participation is essential in women's leadership development programs.

According to the Government Accountability Office (2020) literature review research, the number of female service members has grown marginally over the past 15 years; statistics and studies suggest attrition of female military service members at increased levels, and they are more likely to separate for various reasons. According to their findings, women confronted obstacles in crucial assignments that may limit their capacity to advance to senior leadership, such as work-life balance, gender bias, and corporate culture. Current researchers found similar barriers in their study that may hinder women's ability to achieve career success. They were gender bias, work-life balance, societal and organizational culture, and imposter syndrome (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

Daniel et al. (2019) contributed to awareness about the connections between trying to report life experiences, psychological pain, and commitment motives among many active-duty military service members. The authors used a cross-sectional survey to disclose a sex-based armed services equality of opportunity breach to their command chain. Daniel et al. (2019) claimed that while most studies focus on reducing sexual assault and sexual workplace discrimination, their findings indicated that developing a complete knowledge of individuals' experience with information disclosure is crucial.

The Office of People Analytics has been performing the federally mandated sex divisions survey of active-duty personnel mandated by Title 10 U.S. Code Section 481 for the past 30 years (Davis et al., 2017). Although some progress has been achieved, the researchers claimed that the 2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active-Duty Members revealed a significant rise in sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and gender bias in the Navy (Davis et al., 2017). Trobaugh (2018) created an online survey to evaluate areas where gender bias prevails and impedes women from succeeding in the Army culture. While this study used surveys to capture perceptions of the phenomenon to recommend policy changes, scholars have used interviews to capture the lived experiences to recommend policy changes within their organization (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). Their study results concluded that policy updates are needed to be all-inclusive of job opportunities in the service.

Parker's (2020) survey conducted in 2017 revealed that women working in majority-male organizations are more likely to claim their gender has made it more difficult for them to advance at work. Organizations are less likely to believe women are treated fairly in personal affairs and report gender discrimination at greater rates (Parker, 2020). In contrast, a study revealed that the participants' responses indicate a disconnect between primarily positive perceptions of advancement opportunities for women, low levels of gender bias, diversity initiatives, and the actual outcomes regarding the number of women in top leadership roles (DeSimone, 2021). The researchers described that those participants consistently espouse a strong sense of personal responsibility and a perception that barriers they encounter are self-inflicted (Anjum et al., 2019; DeSimone, 2021).

Dichter and True (2015) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with women veterans who served in the military and why they left. The study focused on how women made decisions and dealt with their experiences. Hunger, violence, assault, addictions, racism, gender bias, and other socioeconomic situations affecting women's lives were all identified as systems of discrimination both within and without service in the military that often led to personal choices to enlist or separate from the military (Dichter & True, 2015).

Scholars have suggested that it is vital for the military to continue to analyze the success of its programs and laws through frequent and systematic surveys to minimize and eventually eradicate sex crimes, sexual misconduct, and gender bias inside the

military (Daniel et al., 2019; Government Accountability Office, 2020). Other scholars acknowledged the continuation of gender equality but provided little guidance on overcoming barriers to promotion (Marenčinová, 2018; Peters et al., 2015; Smith & Rosenstein, 2017).

Women's management and leadership representation have grown, but gender prejudices have not (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Promotion chances adversely impact women who work in male-dominated organizations. According to Catalyst (2018b, 2021d), women in male-dominant organizations face challenges from widespread stereotypes and fewer mentoring opportunities. In addition, male-dominant occupations emphasize masculine stereotypes that make it challenging for women to succeed. Historically, the military has been male-dominated due to how traditions and society influenced masculine ideas and practices that have shaped the culture (Gustavsen, 2013; Marenčinová, 2018). For women in the military, gender stereotyping impedes performance and prevents them from being successful. Archer (2012) mentioned that gender stereotyping impedes female Marines' performance, adversely influencing perceived talents and opportunities and creating a culture of double standards.

According to Smith and Rosenstein (2017), women's lack of career persistence in nontraditional sectors such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is linked to social psychological concerns such as self-efficacy, stereotype threat, and bias. The researchers gathered work-life balance surveys from U.S. Naval Academy students. Their quantitative investigation revealed a gender gap in career ambitions and influences

from male and female non-U.S. Naval Academy classmates but not their families or commanders.

Vasconcelos (2018) mentioned that gender-related issues that impede the advancement of women in the workforce, such as gendered work organizations, emotions, and work-life balance, have been progressively highlighted in research since the late 1970s. According to Barańczuk (2019), the study suggested that emotions such as neuroticism were associated with problematic strategies such as optimism, disengagement, and emotion-focused coping. In contrast, extraversion was correlated with support-seeking, problem-solving, and cognitive restructuring when combined with conscientiousness. The armed forces instinctively demonstrate a male-gendered workforce, male superiority, and dominant culture. Gipson et al. (2017) suggested that role incongruity is one of the most significant barriers to women in male-dominant occupations. They implied that conventional gender expectations and beliefs of gender roles present challenges for women seeking leadership and advancement opportunities because women often perform contrary to prescribed roles.

The Canadian military struggled to attract and retain women into its ranks. Therefore, Matheson and Lyle (2017) used institutional ethnography to examine how policies and practices impacted people's daily lives and determined how those people could create change. Their study showed there is an unequal representation of senior women leaders. While this issue may be partly due to male-dominated military culture,

there is evidence that military leadership training prevents women from rising through the ranks (Matheson & Lyle, 2017).

Şengül et al. (2019) created a model based on how leaders' and peers' behaviors affect the performance and well-being of women in the military. The researchers discussed the conditions that lead to successful women's integration and those that lead to failures, such as gender stereotypes. They recommended research on how leaders can minimize dysfunctional behaviors and support the well-being and performance of all their people, including women.

Including available opportunities and work environments or cultures among diverse sectors of their workforces can assist organizations in turning diversity goals into actual practice. Current studies align with this suggestion. The Government Accountability Office (2020) study proposed that firms use qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and surveys to assess employee experiences. Qualitative researchers seek to understand their participants' world by structuring their research to learn about them and their lived experiences related to a phenomenon. (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; DeSimone, 2021; Lapan & Smith, 2022; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). In contrast, quantitative researchers were interested in broader generalities that persist beyond specific circumstances (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020).

There is limited research on career barriers and ways to increase female promotion in the military. The overwhelming majority of empirical research shows that women are underrepresented in male-dominated organizations and at the highest levels of

leadership (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; DeSimone, 2021; Holton & Dent, 2016; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021; Schuh et al., 2013; Wilson, 2015). Researchers have examined military growth among officers and minorities (Matheson & Lyle, 2017). There is limited research on understanding the lived experiences of the U.S. Navy enlisted population regarding gender bias.

### **Gender-Role Stereotyping and the Military**

Military leadership positions were a solid example of describing roles in masculine terms. The military is primarily a male-gendered organization where women experience various obstacles and gender-related problems not suffered by male colleagues when competing for leadership positions (Alqahtani, 2020; Marenčinová, 2018). Therefore, clichéd gender-based beliefs regarding women negated attributes considered essential for optimal performance as a leader in the military (Pafford & Schaefer, 2017). Pafford and Schaefer (2017) suggested that gender stereotypes express that the beliefs of male and female leaders differ on various methods relevant to successful leader performance in the military. For example, all leaders expect to have masculine traits to be successful. Men are positively received when they behave as masculine because it is consistent with a male's societal role. However, when they assert masculine traits, they are received negatively and not viewed as an effective leader when they behave in this manner because agentic behavior is inconsistent with the societal role.

Gender stereotyping in military work affects female leaders because differences in social views have not triggered shifts in behavior concerning gender stereotyping (Baker,

2014). Descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes are two essential gender stereotypes in the literature that assign acceptable male and female leadership characteristics and behaviors. Gender discrimination originated from these forms of stereotyping and negatively influenced presumed performance criteria. There are two categorizations of stereotypes: (a) descriptive and (b) prescriptive stereotypes represent two important ways of attributing gender roles to males and females. They are used to describe barriers that preserve the glass ceiling. These two labels illustrate a mutual understanding of female behavior that denotes what women are like and how they should behave (Heilman, 2012; Zehnter et al., 2018).

### **Women Overcoming Career Barriers**

Current researchers have conducted qualitative phenomenological studies to explore the lived experiences of businesswomen who overcame gender barriers in male-dominated organizations to achieve success (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; Jogulu & Franken, 2022; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). These researchers suggested that gender regulations and procedures in the workplace and barriers from superiors, coworkers, and society were significant challenges for women. In addition, women must contend with limitations imposed on them by their families and themselves (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). Despite the barriers, businesswomen were supported by their sponsors, mentors, leadership development programs, self-branding,

flexibility, and networking to overcome hurdles and attain self-actualization (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

In contrast, researchers stated that cross-cultural networking plays a role in businesswomen leveraging networks to achieve success (Jogulu & Franken, 2022). Evidence suggests that both shared networking behaviors similar to and different from Malaysian and Australian women leveraging networks. Study results concluded that Australian women networked outside their organization while Asian women networked within their organization (Jogulu & Franken, 2022). Also, comparing Malaysian and Australian women navigating gender bias, evidence showed that Australian women used learning as a resource to challenge the status quo. In contrast, Malaysian women learned to be discreet (Jogulu & Franken, 2022). Scholars suggested that understanding women's careers across cultures was critical since diversity variables such as gender, cultural background, tenure, and age shaped and explained women's professional paths. Additionally, cultural differences in societal elements may create different employment opportunities, obstacles, and experiences for women than for men (Jogulu & Franken, 2022).

### **Networks**

According to Jayachandran (2020), updated policies and shifts in social norms have reduced prevalent bias and discrimination against women. Throughout history, deliberate prejudice against women has been experienced in the workforce; intelligent and respected valued professionals have constrained women's contributions and

advancement. The persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles has drawn attention to what literature calls a “leaky pipeline.” The pipeline theory posits that women are underrepresented in leadership roles due to a small number of women in senior leadership to help mold women aspiring to be leaders, leaving a deficit of female representation (Bergman, 2019; Heinrichs & Sonnabend, 2022). The pipeline barriers that hindered the progression of women to leadership included a lack of successful women visible as role models and mentors and little or no access to informal communication networks (Johns, 2013; Mekasha, 2017). People have become leaders through encountering progressively more challenging roles, experimenting with new behaviors, and learning from mentors. In leadership development, an essential facet of mentoring is that it may help navigate career barriers (Johns, 2013; Mekasha, 2017).

According to Osi and Teng-Calleja (2021), one participant mentioned that their mentor provided them with insights about the organization and how to handle the business in crisis by remaining cool. Another participant mentioned that her mentor helped influence her way of thinking. Role models and mentors provided aspiring leaders with the necessary styles and behaviors to experiment with and evaluate according to their standards and others’ reactions (Chen et al., 2021; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Ibarra et al., 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2018; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). Mentors help to encourage leadership behaviors or actions, thus encouraging or discouraging subsequent behaviors. Such affirmations allow a person’s confidence and leadership capabilities to grow, and opportunities to demonstrate them become more likely to succeed. Stoeger et

al.'s (2020) career development study confirmed talent development research findings on how mentoring must address each mentee's unique developmental trajectory. According to these findings, mentees require different mentors and mentoring activities at different stages of their careers (Stoeger et al., 2020). Mentors help aspiring leaders in informal yet influential ways, such as by providing key contacts, sharing meaningful meeting opportunities, and actively helping their mentees seek future career opportunities. However, given the infrequency of women in upper leadership positions, there are usually not enough female mentors to exhibit successful and influential female leadership (Chen et al., 2021; Ibarra et al., 2013).

Researchers suggested that women and men were equally likely to have mentors. Women may have benefited less than men from this arrangement because men have access to leaders with power and influence prepared to advocate on their behalf. This is why men outperform women in promotions (Ang, 2019). Men's networks provide more informal help than women's, and women generally have weaker access to key informal mentoring relationships and available development opportunities than their male counterparts (Castrillon, 2019). Access to significant networks is essential to moving up the leadership ladder. According to Yang et al. (2019), women with a strong network of other women who can share career advice are three times more likely to achieve success than women who do not have such support.

## **Grit**

CR is a complex concept known as an ability, attitude, habit, or coping mechanism to overcome barriers (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Career barriers have been known to prevent a person from achieving career goals (Blayney et al., 2021). Life is not without challenges, but how a person overcomes them could be described as perseverance, hard work, tenacity, and persistence. Duckworth et al. (2007) coined “grit” to describe perseverance and passion in reaching long-term goals. Scholars have characterized grit as zeal, persistence, and hard work (Blayney et al., 2021; Duckworth et al., 2007; Vardhan & Mahato, 2019).

There are various reasons an individual joins the military. Some support their family, attend school, acquire job skills, and seek a specific leadership position while serving. Blayney et al. (2021) mentioned individual experiences as they make professional decisions and act primarily to improve the quality of their position and promotion. Personality, personal circumstances, familial position, and other factors can influence career success. According to scholars, individuals who demonstrated perseverance and consistency were likelier to attain career success (Vardhan & Mahato, 2019). Like organizations with mission statements to achieve long-term goals, it is up to an individual to be committed to a vision to achieve success.

Numerous studies have focused on the lived experiences of businesswomen and career barriers to success in male-dominated organizations. The study results were similar in those women who achieved success and related to personal traits that helped them

navigate the cultural, organizational, and work-life balance pressures (see Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Cho et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). In contrast, a person can be their worst enemy (DeSimone, 2021). This study's results suggested that women's personality traits have created barriers to success. People with grit did not waver from their ambitions in opposition, criticism, or hurdles; instead, they had the strength and remained persistent (Duckworth, 2016; Kannangara et al., 2018; Popoola & Karadas, 2022).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature review described the elements contributing to barriers businesswomen face while employed in a male-dominated organization. Thus far, some women have been relentlessly overcoming these barriers and found ways to achieve senior-leadership roles. Although the literature addressed certain behaviors to mitigate these challenges, there remains a gap in understanding U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women's lived experiences in overcoming challenges to achieve career success and resilience in a male-dominated organization. This transcendental phenomenological study filled this knowledge gap by investigating the lived experiences of U.S. Navy senior enlisted women who overcame professional obstacles to achieve success in a male-dominated organization. Scholars proposed that future qualitative research looks in-depth at leaders' experiences in the workplace and what motivates them (Dichter & True, 2015; Dzubinski et al., 2019; Government Accountability Office, 2020; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). This study may assist military organizations in transforming their policies into

practice and help servicewomen navigate career obstacles to succeed. This chapter provided an exhaustive overview of the literature concerning businesswomen overcoming career barriers to success in male-dominated organizations. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design, sampling process, instruments, and procedures used.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants must have retired, served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. This chapter covers the research design, research approach, methodology, the study's trustworthiness, transferability, and conclusions. In the section on research design, I examine the study's essential concepts, provide an overview of the study question, and provide a context for the research design. In the second portion, I describe my job as a researcher, my professional and personal ties with the participants, and biases and ethical considerations. The approach for selecting participants, instrumentation, methods, and data analysis are covered in the next section. Last, this chapter addresses the trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and reliability of the methodology I applied in this study and the ethical processes employed during the investigation and summary.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this transcendental phenomenological research, I sought to comprehend the encounters of U.S. retired Navy enlisted women leaders who overcame career obstacles and achieved success in a male-dominated company. I employed the two questions to direct my research on the personal experience of recruited women who overcame

professional hurdles and career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated company:

- How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7- E9) understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?
- How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?

### **Research Tradition**

The qualitative research methodology is naturalistic and interpretive. Attempting to make sense of or interpret events based on the meanings people assign to them, qualitative researchers examine phenomena in their natural environments (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research focuses on learning how individuals build, make sense of, and characterize their experiences (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Qualitative research is used to comprehend elements of social life by providing meaning and comprehension of phenomena (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014). Qualitative research is a multi-method design involving empirical data (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). It focuses on the subjective meanings and objective behaviors of individuals' experiences (see Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research is an iterative process in which the scientific community gains better knowledge by generating new meaningful distinctions by getting closer to the subject being examined (Alase, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019). The iterative process consists of interviews, collecting data, and analyzing the data collected

from participants. The methods used to collect data are focus groups, interviews, observations, and open questionnaires (Samuels, 2019).

Other research methods include quantitative and mixed methods, in which data are collected and analyzed differently (Yin, 2018). The quantitative research methodology is numerical data driven by testing hypotheses, looking at cause and effect, using specific variables, and making predictions on large and randomly selected participants (Apuke, 2017). The methods used to collect data are surveys, questions, and structured observation (Samuels, 2019). A quantitative study seeks to answer research questions of who, how much, what, where, when, and how. Quantitative analysis was unsuitable for this study because it did not fully measure the essence of lived experiences based on the phenomenon. Mixed method research encompasses qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, procedures, and interpretation methods and is framed within a theory or philosophy and a phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Mixed methods provide breadth and depth to a studied phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods enhances the understanding of the research problem more than a single approach. Though mixed methods may provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, the time and money resources were limited to use this method to complete this study.

### **Research Design**

I chose a phenomenological method to understand what it is like for recruited women and their encounters overcoming professional hurdles to succeed in a male-

dominated company. Phenomenological research comprehends the essence of a phenomenon's meanings and principles as they are experienced (Creely, 2018). The core idea of phenomenological research is to investigate the meanings that participants identify with their experiences (see Dahlberg, 2006; Giorgi, 2010). A phenomenological method allows researchers to utilize the study questions as a mirror to comprehend a phenomenon from a participant's perspective (see van Manen, 1990). Similar researchers have used a phenomenological lens to understand the experiences of how businesswomen managed to navigate career barriers to success in male-dominated industries (see Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; DeSimone, 2021; Lapan & Smith, 2022; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). Using a phenomenological method allowed me to gain insight into the participants' experiences based on the information revealed throughout the data collection (see van Manen, 1990).

There are five primary qualitative methods from which researchers might pick—narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Based on my research topic and what I wanted to know about the phenomenon, I concluded that the phenomenological technique suited my study. The study of narratives concerned the meaning that individuals gain from their experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). A grounded theory technique allows academicians to create a hypothesis based on commonalities among members of a researched group (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Ethnographer study strategies are longitudinal, requiring groups to be observed in many contexts or circumstances (see Moustakas, 1994). Finally, a case study focuses on a

specific population within the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). I discarded four alternatives because they did not match the study's understanding of lived experiences. A phenomenological approach was the most appropriate for understanding common or shared experiences while focusing on a specific phenomenon (see Moustakas, 1994; Usher & Jackson, 2014; van Manen, 2017).

Transcendental phenomenology was the best research design for this topic. This study focused on honoring the participants' voices and conveying their experiences as Navy senior retired enlisted women leaders who achieved post-career success in a male-dominated organization. Transcendental phenomenology is driven by what is presented rather than what researchers hope to find based on theories or presumptions about a phenomenon (Howell, 2012). Transcendental phenomenology is concerned with comprehending and portraying the lived participants' experiences (see Moustakas, 1994), and it employs the epoché process. Transcendental phenomenological research is focused on understanding lived experiences (Guenther, 2019).

### **Role of the Researcher**

Throughout the project, I understood my role as a researcher as I examined, stored, and processed the data. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the research instrument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) as a tool for data gathering and interpreting lived experiences (Luse et al., 2012). I recruited volunteers for the study by employing a flyer on Facebook. All participants in the study were screened by completing a demographic questionnaire to participate in the study and signing a consent form. All participants in

the study participated in a semistructured interview using the Zoom platform, where the interviews were recorded and transcribed. I analyzed the data to extract themes to answer each research question. After performing data analysis, I drafted a comprehensive summary of the analysis report for evaluation.

As a researcher, interviewer, and a veteran Navy senior enlisted leader concentrating on a specific demographic within the military community, I had no supervisory, instructional, or professional relationship with the participants in this study. I invoked epoché and positioning throughout the entire research process to minimize subjectivity and prejudice. Positioning necessitates a grasp of personal beliefs and biases, which should be analyzed and addressed throughout the entire process of a study (Flick, 2018). In qualitative studies, there is a delicate balance between objectivism and subjectivism (see van Manen, 1990). As an objective researcher, I remained faithful to what the participants conveyed and subjective to extract rich, textural interpretations from the data received from participants. My ideals and prejudices were addressed and bracketed throughout the study as I worked to comprehend the encounters of U.S. retired Navy senior enlisted women who surmounted obstacles to achieving success in a male-dominated workplace.

Ethical concerns were addressed during the study's inception and prior to its execution. The research plan and consent form were presented to Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval before conducting the study (approval no. 05-31-22-0725737). Walden IRB reviewed and approved this study's

research plan and consent form. No incentives were offered to those who participated in the study.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, had served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 13 retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data.

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The criteria for participants consisted of retired senior enlisted women who served 20 years or more in pay grades E7-E9, deployed on land or sea, overcame career barriers, and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. Those excluded from this study included reservists, individuals who did not serve on active duty in the Navy did not serve 20 years or more, were not deployed on land or sea, and were not retired. A qualitative researcher recruits people who can supply information (data) to address the study topic (Peat et al., 2020). The most crucial idea of a qualitative research study is not identifying how many persons have encountered the phenomenon but discovering the

experience and meaning of the phenomenon under study in detail (Campbell et al., 2020; Englander, 2012). I utilized a purposive sampling strategy as the best method to select participants. The grounds for using a purposive technique were founded on the concept that, given the study's objectives, distinct types of people may hold different and important viewpoints regarding the ideas and topics under consideration and must be included in the sample (Campbell et al., 2020).

To ensure only qualified personnel were selected for the study, participants received an email copy of the interviewee demographics questionnaire (see Appendix A) and consent form. I reviewed data from the demographic questionnaire to determine eligible participants and to provide background information. Demographic questions provide a researcher with background information on their participants (Allen et al., 2017). This information allows a researcher to describe the participants in the study effectively. Demographic questions serve as a basis for a researcher to interpret the data in the context of the broader study problem (Allen et al., 2017).

Qualitative research has no strict sample size rules (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). It relies on the research's objective, what is at stake, what is beneficial, what is credible, and what line of research can be completed within the timeframe and with the resources available. The sample size for the current study consisted of 13 U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women. There were 14 potential participants, but one was disqualified because she did not meet the study requirements.

### **Data Saturation**

Scholars have suggested that saturation is not a one-size-fits-all concept due to study designs that are not comprehensive (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Many scholars are cautious about stating a number that would constitute a sufficient sampling size for research (Marshall et al., 2013). This process is due to the numerous factors that tie into saturation in qualitative studies, such as population characteristics, sample selection criteria, the data collection method, and study resources. However, according to Creswell and Creswell (2017) and Polkinghorne (1989), saturation guidelines for phenomenological studies use between five to 25 participants. In contrast, researchers have suggested a sample size of 10 to 15 for phenomenological studies (Daniel, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Morse, 1995; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, the planned sample size for this study was 10 to 15 participants or until data saturation was reached.

### **Instrumentation**

Semistructured interviews and digital audio recordings were the primary data-collecting tools in this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. The semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix C) fostered conversations and encouraged participants to answer open-ended questions during the one-on-one interviews. When appropriate, follow-up prompts (for example, “Tell me more about that.”) were used to clarify or further explore the participants’ statements. I designed interview questions to gather participants’ perspectives and fully comprehend the

encounters of U.S. Navy retired senior women leaders (E7-E9) in the United States who overcame career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The foundation for the interview questions was derived from similar phenomenological studies that focused on the challenges women face in male-dominated organizations that achieve success (Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). The interview protocol (see Appendix C) included an introduction to the study, research questions, and a conclusion. The research questions served as the foundation by comprehensively describing the participants' experiences with the studied phenomena. The interview protocol ensured a consistent process for each interview between me and the participant.

Interviews are one of the most used qualitative data collection methods in research (Bergman, 2019). Conducting face-to-face interviews has an 80% response rate (Singleton & Straits, 2005). It is considered the best practice to gather data to answer open-ended questions to obtain current information and explore the phenomena for transcendental phenomenological studies (Singleton & Straits, 2005). Other people's viewpoints and experiences can help us better understand learning, teaching, and other educationally related social phenomena. Video conference, phone, and written interviews were low-cost options for collecting participant data compared to in-person interviews, including travel, lodging, administrative, and participant expenses. I used online video conference platforms like Zoom to conduct face-to-face, semistructured interviews and transcribe data. Audio and written interviews were available for those who opted out of video conference interviews.

## **Expert Validation**

An expert validation test was needed to assess the research interview protocol. An expert validation test allowed me to have experts review the interview protocol to identify any potential problems in the interview questions. A well-developed interview protocol enhances reliability (Yin, 2018). In comparison, Singleton and Straits (2005) posited that reliability achieves consistent results of measurements. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended semi-structured interview questions used in the expert evaluation test to eliminate potential problems and ensure the interview protocol's reliability to gather consistent results and align with the research study. After reviewing the existing literature, I designed the interview guide (see Appendix B), which included the central question: "Please, tell me about your experiences and how you became a senior enlisted leader."

I used Facebook to request three senior enlisted women in pay grades E7-E9 who served 20 years or more and had been deployed on land or sea. I emailed them the participation letter to review my interview protocol and provide feedback. The interview questions were designed to address the research questions (see Appendix B) during the interview process. I provided the experts with an abbreviated proposal consisting of the problem statement, purpose statement, and interview protocol. Feedback from the expert validators was implemented.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Data were collected from 13 U.S. Navy senior enlisted women who were: (a) retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9, (b) deployed land or sea, (c) served 20 years or more on active duty, and (d) experienced career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. After receiving IRB approval on May 31, 2022, I requested and received approval from administrators of Facebook groups to post research flyers on women veterans.' Navy retired chiefs' social media sites on June 1, 2022. No recruitment flyers were posted to official Navy or Department of Defense social media sites. I posted participant recruitment flyers with my contact information on Facebook on June 1, 2022. No monetary gifts were provided to participate in this study.

I used my Walden's email account to receive and send correspondence with research participants. The initial email requested participants' availability to conduct the interview. It consisted of a consent form and demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to complete and return to me within three days. I was flexible with the participants based on their availability to interview. After the participants contacted me to volunteer for the study, Google Voice was used to communicate via text or call.

The data collection event lasted two weeks, with the first interview on June 8, 2022, and the last on June 20, 2022. I collected the data by conducting one semi-structured interview with each participant. I provided the participants with full disclosure of the purpose of the interviews using a digital audio recorder to collect data efficiently.

The duration of each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. I recorded the interviews using Zoom and an audiotape recorder on my iPhone 12 Pro Max as a backup. I also used a notepad to jot down any notes during the interview. I utilized the interview protocol to provide consistent debriefing for each participant.

After the interviews, I reiterated the purpose of the study and the documentation process to all participants. I thanked the participants for participating and encouraged them to provide feedback and ask questions. I emailed a copy of the transcript summary to each interview participant. This process allowed any clarification of the data collected from the participants. There were no changes to the transcribed interview data.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

A data analysis plan provides the reader with information on how and why a study is conducted to explore the phenomena being studied. The data analysis plan consists of the type of data gathered, the research instrument, the study's design, and any software used to organize and analyze the data (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a modified version of van Kaam's transcendental phenomenological data analysis technique to analyze the participants' interview responses.

This transcendental phenomenological study's data collection was derived from a first-person perspective during one-on-one interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for patterns, themes, and contextual meanings (Bevan, 2014). Merriam and Grenier (2019) and Moustakas (1994) mentioned that a critical element of transcendental phenomenology is clearly explaining the phenomenon through reflection

as defined, understood, and experienced by the study participants. Experts reviewed this study's interview protocol. The researcher developed an interview protocol to explore the lived experiences of retired senior enlisted women leaders' career barriers and success in a male-dominated organization. In a qualitative investigation, the researcher is the sole instrument in obtaining, analyzing, and providing context to the lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a qualitative researcher, several processes required me to step outside of myself through bracketing and creative variation to analyze the data in new ways.

Moustakas (1994) modified van Kaam's technique as this phenomenological study's primary data analysis strategy. A handful of essential phases distinguished this analysis strategy. The first was the level of depth necessary for the study. The following is a high-level overview of the many phases of the modified van Kaam analysis.

1. Horizontalization: Treat all information equally; no quotation or extract is more valuable than the others. This process is the stage at which one begins the primary classification and categorizing process by noting every quotation pertinent to the perspective under inquiry.
2. Reduction and elimination: This process takes the list of quotes and asks two questions: (a) How essential is this quote to the participant's experiences and perceptions? (b) Can we distill this quote into its underlying meaning? If the response to the two questions is no, the quotation is removed—these aid in

distinguishing the experience's invariant elements from redundant and supplementary information.

3. Thematize the invariant constituents: I began investigating latent meanings and categorizing excerpts depending on those hidden meanings using the excerpts and statements that completed the two-question exam. The groups established themes that represented each participant's experience.
4. Checking the themes against the data: After creating the themes, I compared them to the dataset. This step ensured that the concepts reflected the participants' experiences and aided in telling the participants' stories.
5. Create individual textural descriptions: I wrote distinct textual descriptions for each participant. Those were all explanations that included actual statements and snippets from the participant.
6. Create individual structural descriptions: This phase necessitated the use of innovative variety. I created individual structural descriptions for each participant. I evaluated participants' psychological, sociological, and cultural experiences on what they said. This step was when the data's significant interpretation was developed.
7. Create composite textural descriptions: This step creates a table describing each participant's concepts. This composite description summarized participants' statements throughout their interviews and highlighted the phenomenon's familiar theme: lived experience. This step assisted in outlining the recurring and

noticeable themes among all participants, which is what was needed specifically.

8. Create composite structural descriptions: This was when the intellectual, economic, and cultural links between all the participants' experiences were examined. This step was the section in which an explanation of the common aspects of their experiences was given. Participants may have come from low socioeconomic origins or could have been of a specific race. Whether aspects were common made no difference; what mattered was that they were considered. This step was when they stated the most critical components of their encounters and what factors shaped their experiences.
9. Create a composite structural-textural description: This is also a synthesis step. This step was when a combination of the textural and structural description provided a thorough comprehension of the phenomena. This step distilled the lived experience.

Protecting the sanctity of the participants' voices is critical, so it is frequently chosen as the best data analysis strategy for phenomenological research investigations. It thoroughly explains participants' lived encounters with the phenomena without changing their narratives, experiences, or tales. These attributes aid in understanding the lived experiences of how military enlisted women developed into leaders and overcame challenges and barriers to achieve CR in U.S. military organizations.

**Software**

During the interview process, I used Zoom to collect and transcribe data. Zoom transcription service was adequate but not entirely accurate. Zoom could not transcribe military jargon, ranks, and command names. Therefore, I used the audio portion of the Zoom interviews and uploaded it into NVivo to review and transcribe to the best of my ability. NVivo12 with transcription service was utilized to store, transcribe, and analyze data electronically.

**Issues of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

Credibility derives from various perspectives, including a purposive sampling of a population and researcher bias. I used a transcendental phenomenological design with interviews as the only data source. Data saturation was accomplished when participants' responses revealed similar experiences and themes of the phenomena studied. To mitigate any errors in credibility and trustworthiness, I ensured member checking by providing a summary of the analyzed data.

**Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to supply evidence that may be applied to other contexts, times, situations, and populations. In this study, U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women leaders described their lived experiences overcoming career barriers and achieving career success in a male-dominated

organization. Facebook were used to recruit the participants, and Zoom to conduct interviews.

### **Dependability**

The study protocol outlined the data collection process, and an audit trail was provided so that other researchers could comprehend the steps taken. An in-depth description of the participants' experiences was collected and analyzed using NVivo. The more information participants shared, the more reliable the data became.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is a process using corroboration to verify the researcher's interpretation and findings derived from the data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). Epoché is a procedure in which the researcher preserves impartiality or suspends/brackets judgment to concentrate on the participants' experiences. I applied epoché throughout this research study to minimize bias and ensure trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The phenomenological transcendental technique was used to comprehend participants' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon. As a result, study participants could have felt hesitant to share specifics about their experiences. In qualitative data, the researcher is expected to preserve the well-being and safety of study participants (Dooly et al., 2017; Elliott & Resnik, 2019). The Walden IRB governs human subjects' research (Antes et al., 2018). I received approval from the IRB to conduct research before recruiting participants. To ensure ethical practices for protecting

human participants, I complied with Walden's 40 ethical standards by completing forms "A" and "C."

I posted recruitment flyers on Facebook to solicit participants who wished to volunteer in this study. No flyers were posted on any Navy or Department of Defense - affiliated social media pages. The relationships between me and the participants were not impacted. Participants were free to opt out of the study without fear of retaliation. No minors or vulnerable populations were recruited in this study. In addition to this study, participants must have been U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved career success in a male-dominated organization. The individuals excluded from this study were those who did not serve on active duty in the Navy, served less than 20 years, were not deployed, were not retired, or were reservists. I used Walden's consent form, which did not require or ask participants to waive any rights.

The consent form and the research flyer included the researcher's name, school email address, and Google Voice phone number if they had any questions, comments, or concerns for the researcher before, during, or after participating in the data collection process. The researcher emailed the consent form to participants and asked them to reply with the words "I consent" and provide a date and time to interview if they wished to proceed. I tailored Walden's consent form for grade five to seven reading levels. The consent form used was in understandable language. If there was anything the participant did not understand, I explained it thoroughly before they signed the consent form. None

of the participants had any issues understanding the consent form as it was written. I had not identified any foreseeable risks or discomforts. Participants' rights and privacy were protected. No harm went beyond everyday life because the participants had lived these experiences. The consent did include a description of the anticipated benefits to the participants. This study may help junior enlisted women understand that barriers are difficult to navigate in the military. However, with grit, persistence, and a supportive network, barriers can be overcome, and they can succeed in a male-dominated organization.

The participants chose the level of privacy by choosing a location that would provide them privacy. As the researcher, I conducted the interviews in my home office with closed doors to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of all data collected. I assigned each participant a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and to protect and hide their identity. Examples of pseudonyms used were chief petty officer (CPO) one and chief petty officer two. All data acquired during this research project were kept confidential, with restricted access granted only to me as the researcher, the Walden dissertation committee, and others connected with the research study who needed to know (Ross et al., 2018).

I stored all electronic data on a password-protected complex drive/cloud. According to Walden's policy, all hard copies of data should be locked in a home office safe to be destroyed after five years. After completing them as part of the IRB

requirement, I provided participants with a one- to two-page summary of results or a PowerPoint prepared to at fifth-grade level.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the methodology for this study. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations.

Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of retired senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 13 U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide I created with 12 follow-up questions. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted using a purposively selected sample. A modified version of van Kaam's analysis method was utilized to analyze the collected data. In Chapter 4, I discuss the findings and explanation of the data. I also discuss the trustworthiness and ethical consideration issues for the participants.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, had served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semistructured face-to-face interviews with 13 retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data. In this chapter, I discuss the field test, research setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness, and the study results.

### **Field Test**

Field testing in a phenomenological study might reveal potential reliability, validity, and generalizability difficulties (Beck, 2014). I conducted a field test from May 9 through May 29, 2022, to evaluate the interview questions' clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. Three subject matter experts with experience in various job specialties in a male-dominated organization helped test the efficacy of the interview questions to determine if they were easily understandable, broad enough to extract sufficiently rich and thick material and data, and correctly matched with the study topic's research questions. The interview questions, problem statement, purpose statement, and research

questions were emailed to field test experts to examine the interview questions' relevance and application. The experts needed to evaluate the alignment of the research objectives with the 10 open-ended semi-structured interview questions and provide feedback and suggestions for improvement.

The first expert was a retired master chief who served 30 years as a culinary specialist in the Navy and resided in Washington, DC. She suggested revising or rearranging some questions. She added that if they had any barriers, they should share them and how they have experienced their journey as senior enlisted women. She added, "Please define the barrier." She mentioned this addition was because some barriers may be race-related, and other women misuse their sexuality to get ahead. She also recommended that for research question two, add this question and make it the first question, "Please define what success means to you."

The second expert was a retired senior chief who served 26 years in the Navy as an intelligence specialist and resided in Tennessee. She suggested changes to Research Question 1: How do U.S. Navy enlisted women (E7- E9) use their experiences to overcome career barriers in a male-dominated organization? She suggested reframing one or more of the questions to ask if any males or females assisted or supported the career to overcome barriers. She also suggested asking the participants their opinion on how the Navy or other large organizations can help to remove those experienced barriers.

The third expert was a retired chief who served 23 years in the Navy as a hospital corpsman and resided in North Carolina. She did not provide suggestions and stated they

were very open-ended and vague enough, stating, “You will get some interesting responses.” Based on their suggestions, I updated the initial number of interview questions from 10 to 12 with a follow-up question for participants to add any additional information I may not have addressed in the interview.

### **Setting**

The study was conducted via Zoom. I was in Washington State, and the participants were from Washington, DC, Washington State, Tennessee, Texas, Georgia, Florida, and California. I conducted the study in 2022 during the summer after the height of COVID-19 subsided; scheduling interviews with participants during this timeframe required flexibility. Initially, I planned to recruit 10–15 participants for my study. I was able to recruit 13 participants.

### **Demographics**

Fourteen volunteers agreed to participate in this study. After I conducted the screening process, one participant was disqualified because she did not meet the study requirement of being retired. The 13 participants who met the study requirements were U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women leaders in pay grades E7-E9. There were four CPOs, six senior SCPOs, and three master chief petty officers. The participants worked in various job specialties: administration, law enforcement, logistics, medical, and internet technology. The retired participants served 20 to 30 years in the Navy. From 1989–1993, six of 13 participants served when women could not serve on combatant ships. On March 7, 1994, nine of 13 served when women were authorized to serve on combatant ships. All

participants served during Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001–2014. Ten of 13 completed four or more deployments during their careers. Twelve of the 13 participants served as leading chief petty officers (LCPO). Nine of the 13 participants were African American. All participants had some college education or obtained degrees. The participants' ages ranged from 38–65 years old. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric identifier from CPO1 to CPO13 to protect their identities (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participants' Demographics*

Participants	Leadership Role	Rating	Years Served	Number of Deployments	Ethnicity	Education	Age	Location
CPO1	LCPO	SKCS	20	5	Hispanic	Bachelor degree	55-64	Texas
CPO2	LCPO	ITCS	23	8	African American	Bachelor degree	35-44	Washington D.C
CPO3	LCPO	ABFC	20	8	Hispanic	Associate degree	35-44	Washington State
CPO4	LCPO	ITCS	20	5	African American	Some college	45-54	Texas
CPO5	CCC	NCCS	21	5	White	Bachelor degree	35-44	Florida
CPO6	LCPO	CSCS	25	6	African American	Bachelor degree	45-54	Texas
CPO7	LCPO	CSC	20	5	African American	Some college	45-54	Florida
CPO8	LCPO	HMC	20	3	African American	Bachelor degree	45-54	Tennessee
CPO9	DLCPO	SHCM	30	4	African American	Advanced degree	45-54	Texas
CPO10	LCPO	MAC	22	7	African American	Advanced degree	45-54	Georgia
CPO11	LCPO	LSCS	24	2	African American	Bachelor degree	45-54	California
CPO12	LCPO	NCCM	29	0	White	Associate degree	65 or older	Florida
CPO13	LCPO	CSCM	30	5	African American	Advanced degree	45-54	Washington D.C

**Data Collection**

I collected data from 13 U.S Navy senior enlisted women who were: (a) retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9, (b) deployed on land or sea, (c) served 20 years or more on active duty, and (d) experienced career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. After the participants contacted me to volunteer to participate in the study, I utilized Google Voice to communicate via text or call and Walden's email account to receive and send research participants' correspondence. The initial email requested participants' availability to conduct the

interviews. It consisted of a consent form and a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) that they had to complete and return to me within three days. I was flexible with the participants based on their availability to interview.

The data collection process lasted 2 weeks, with the first interview on June 8, 2022, and the last on June 20, 2022. I utilized the interview protocol to maintain consistency during all interviews. The interview protocol consisted of an introduction, stating the purpose of the study, asking interview questions and probing questions, and finishing with concluding remarks. I collected data by conducting one semistructured interview with each participant using Zoom. The participants could choose an interview location that would provide the most privacy. I provided participants with full disclosure of the purpose of the interviews and explained that I would be using a digital audio recorder to collect data efficiently. Interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. I recorded the interviews using Zoom and an audiotape recorder on my iPhone 12 Pro Max as a backup. I also used a notepad to jot down any notes during the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

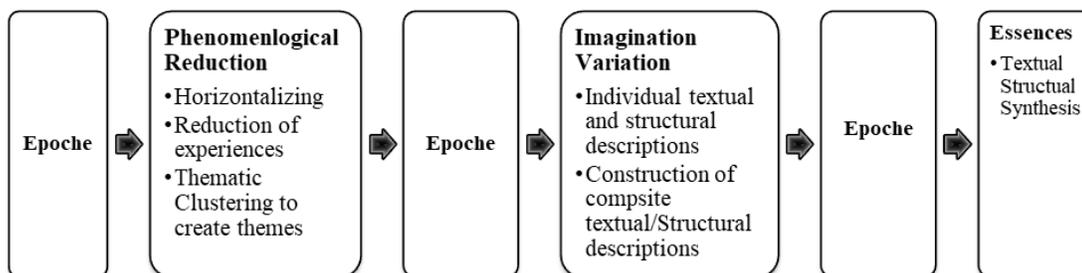
I analyzed data for this transcendental phenomenological study employing the modified van Kamm approach developed by Moustakas (1994). The process started after downloading the transcripts and recordings of the 13 research interviews from the Zoom cloud. Zoom transcription service was adequate but not entirely accurate. Zoom could not transcribe military jargon, ranks, and command names or keep pace with participants' accents or those who spoke fast during the interviews. Therefore, I purchased a 1-year

NVivo12 license with a transcription subscription from the NVivo website. I uploaded the audio portion of the Zoom interviews onto NVivo12. I used the NVivo12 service to transcribe the interviews verbatim to document the participants' responses and explore the essence of their lived experiences.

After transcribing the interview transcripts, I provided the participants with copies to verify their transcriptions. Then I assigned each transcript a unique ID (e.g., CPO1) and hid all identifiable information. I utilized a modified version of van Kaam's approach developed by Moustakas (1994) in conjunction with NVivo12 Pro for Windows, a qualitative data analysis software tool that assisted the data analysis. Moustakas's modified van Kaam method (Figure 2) included horizontalization phenomenological reduction; thematizing; individual textural and structural description; composite textural and structural description; and textural and structural synthesis. In all these steps, I collected and analyzed data and described the meanings of lived experiences while keeping the epoché process in mind.

**Figure 2**

*Data Analysis Procedures*



I began the analysis with the epoché/bracketing process or reflection on the participants' experiences. In this step, I examined my ideas, knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about the data and the study results and put them aside. According to Moustakas (1994), the epoché process enables researchers to reflect on their prior knowledge and understanding by bracketing their experiences. Moustakas suggested that researchers reflect on their personal experiences with a phenomenon to control those experiences' influences. Therefore, I reflected on what I knew about the phenomena and put those ideas aside throughout the study to develop meaning from the participants' perspectives.

After the epoché process, I began the phenomenological reduction process. I started with the horizontalization process. I reviewed each transcript and listened to audio frequently to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts while transcribing. I focused on the research questions and the participants' responses during this process. I analyzed each participant's transcript during horizontalization to categorize and prepare the data for the phenomenological reduction phase. According to Moustakas (1994), horizontalization is repeatedly reading interview transcripts to identify significant statements and group those statements into themes. I read every sentence equally and highlighted significant statements about their lived experience. I then removed statements that did not answer the research questions to develop expressive themes.

I transitioned to the reduction of experiences phase, using the NVivo 12 software to facilitate the data analysis. I coded the data to capture the participants' actual spoken

words. Some of the codes for Research Question 1 included barriers defined (CPO1 stated, “I think a lot of the barriers is being female.”) and barriers with organization and people (CPO4 mentioned that some barriers are leaders who are not inclusive to all groups). Some of the codes for Research Question 2 included success (CPO10 stated, “I made it to retirement, so that is successful”) and personal attributes (CPO7 mentioned that her experience as a mother contributed to her success because sailors would seek her out for advice on family and other issues).

Subsequently, in the thematic clustering phase, I focused on grouping the horizons into themes and arranging the themes into textual descriptions. I reviewed the texts looking for overlapping or repetitive words and words and phrases with similar, dissimilar, and relevant meanings. The statements that did not answer the research questions were eliminated, which aligns with phenomenological reduction. Examples of statements that were not used are as follows: CPO10 “The hair, these ponytails just flipping and flapping: Every time I see one, even though I am retired, it makes me mad. It makes me mad because you see them swinging side by side.” CPO6 stated,

One of my cousins called and told me that my dad had passed away from cancer, and I didn't cry. I didn't know him to shed a tear. Hey, I hope you know he said his prayers before his damn deathbed because I did not give a shit at that time, and I still don't today.

After completing phenomenological reduction, I began the imagination variation phase. I used participant quotes to describe their lived experiences. Each participant's

responses yielded individual textual descriptions. According to Moustakas (1994), in transcendental phenomenological analysis, textual descriptions provide the “what” of the experiences. In contrast, structural descriptions provide how the experience of the phenomenon evolved. I created consistent themes from participants’ quotes to include organizational culture, roller coaster of emotions, barriers broken, success is a team effort, right time, right people, right place, characteristics, and success. For composite textual and structural descriptions, I combined the core concepts to show what was experienced by the participants.

Finally, I synthesized textual and structural descriptions to create meaning and essence of the participants’ lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) suggested that synthesizing composite textual and structural descriptions should consist of the researcher’s understanding of the data by synthesizing both composite textual and structural descriptions to create meanings of the phenomenon. I identified seven themes and four subthemes capturing participants’ lived experiences. The results sections, organized by research questions, provide descriptions of themes and subthemes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

I selected participants who met the eligibility for this study. The requirement for this study was to be a retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted woman, served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, overcame career barriers, and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. I verified each participant to ensure they met the study requirements by reviewing the demographics questionnaire (see Appendix A) when they

contacted me to volunteer. One participant was disqualified from participating in the study because she was not retired. I completed the member-checking strategy by summarizing the study's findings and providing the participants with a written summary.

### **Dependability**

According to Lincoln et al. (1985), dependability is consistency. Dependability is demonstrated by providing a trail of clear, detailed, and sequential descriptions of all procedures and methods used in a study so that other researchers can replicate each step seamlessly (Nowell et al., 2017). For this study, I utilized NVivo12 Pro software to achieve reliability. Using the NVivo database allowed me to keep an audit trail consistent in analyzing data. The program served as a depository for the interview questions and the participants' responses. I was also able to construct, save, and document the research codes and themes with the help of the application. The methods and processes utilized in analyzing the research outcomes were identified with the help of the information I provided.

### **Confirmability**

Lincoln et al. (1985) mentioned that conformability helps mitigate researcher bias and supports confirmability. Confirmability is corroboration to validate the researcher's interpretation and findings based on the data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). I used NVivo to maintain an audit trail to organize, store, and analyze the data, mitigate researcher bias, and support confirmability. I used thematic analysis to create categories and themes. I used epoché to reduce bias and ensure dependability. Epoché is a method

researchers use to discard all preconceived notions and beliefs about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research is the ability of the researcher to supply evidence that may be applied to other contexts, times, situations, and populations (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The collected data led to the values placed on the participants' lived experiences to improve the transferability of the findings.

Therefore, transferability was improved by thoroughly describing the research background and assumptions of the study. I used social media to recruit study participants who met the study's requirements and were willing to describe their experiences. The participants were retired U.S. Navy chiefs who had completed 20 years or more in the military. The participants lived in Georgia, Tennessee, Washington, D.C., California, Texas, Florida, and Washington. Detailed descriptions were shared from this research study describing how Navy retired senior enlisted women leaders described their experiences overcoming career barriers and achieving career success in a male-dominated organization. Sharing this information could allow future researchers to model their research after this study to achieve comparable results.

### **Credibility**

Credibility derives from various perspectives, including purposive population sampling, researcher bias, and the interview process (Cope, 2014). Morse (2015) stated that qualitative researchers' credibility procedures strengthen dependability and their

relationship to the triangulation process. I used a transcendental phenomenological design with interviews as the only data source. Therefore, triangulation did not apply to the data analysis in this study.

I selected the participants according to the eligibility criteria for this study. The eligibility requirement for this study was to be a retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted woman who overcame career barriers and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. When participants contacted me to volunteer, I verified each participant who met the study requirements by reviewing the demographics questionnaire (see Appendix A).

I collected data from 13 retired senior enlisted military women leaders using interviews. To mitigate any errors in credibility and trustworthiness, I gave the participants a summary of the study's results after analyzing the data. Member checking enabled participants to review the researcher's analysis of how their lived experiences were interpreted and if they were accurately captured and described. Data saturation was accomplished when participants' responses shared similar experiences and themes of the phenomena studied (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## **Results**

For this study, I used Zoom to conduct 13 semi-structured interviews to capture the essence of the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. Figure 3 includes some of the most frequently used words from the interviews. My interpretation of the data gathered from the responses of the 13 participants for research questions one



- IQ1: Please share a detailed account of your path to senior leadership during your time in the Navy.
- IQ2: What experiences defined your journey as a senior enlisted Navy woman?
- IQ3: How do these experiences make you feel?
- IQ4: What does a ‘barrier’ mean to you?
- IQ5: Please share any barriers you have experienced in your journey as a senior enlisted woman and describe the most challenging barriers.
- IQ6: Please share how you conquered the barriers in your journey as a senior enlisted woman and how the Navy or other large organizations can change to remove experienced barriers.
- IQ13: Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss barriers or success? Is there anything that I have not addressed in this interview?

For U.S Navy retired senior enlisted women in this study, their experiences of overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization included the first theme, organizational culture, with four subthemes: (1) being a woman, (2) lack of change agents and unsupportive leadership, (3) lack of sisterhood, and (4) underrepresentation. The second theme is a roller coaster of emotions. The third theme, barriers broken, includes three subthemes, (5) the meaning of barriers, (6) being fierce, persistent, and hard work, and (7) supportive relationships. The category for theme one and subthemes was unsupportive people and organization. The category of unsupportive people and

organization was created because the participants mentioned that the culture of the organization where they served consisted of gender bias, unsupportive leadership, and lack of change agents, and women who did not support other women created barriers for them (see Table 2).

### Theme 1: Organizational Cultural

**Table 2**

#### *Organizational Cultural*

Code(s)	Categories	Subtheme(s)	Participants
Barriers are being a woman in itself; Being a female in a male-dominated organization dealing with sexual harassment/assault; not having a voice or being heard; sexual innuendos/jokes; gender bias; motherhood, undermined authority	Organization/people	1. Being a woman	13
Barriers with leadership not being supportive, No support from the top down, lack of change agents, and good old boy network	Organization/ Unsupportive peers and leaders	2. Lack of change agents/unsupportive people	13
Barriers with female chiefs include some did not take the time to support/mentor other women, crab in a barrel/queen bee syndrome, lack of sisterhood	Organization/ unsupportive women	3. Lack of sisterhood	13
Being the only female senior leader at their command	Organization/Lack of female CPOs	4. Underrepresentation	13

**Subtheme 1: Being a Woman.** All participants shared their experiences of being a woman as a barrier because of gender bias and family sacrifices. Their voices were silenced; they endured a lack of job or leadership opportunities, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. CPO11 stated:

I would make suggestions about something, and it would be ignored, and then a male would say the exact same thing that I had just said, not more than 10 minutes ago. And everybody is praising them and how great of an idea it is.

CPO13 stated,

Being a female senior enlisted my voice was not heard, or if I had a great idea, it would be kind of discredited it. But if a male said the same thing, he would get all the praise. Oh, that is a great idea. And you know, all of the accolades. And so, I mean, I have even had male workers get awards like a Navy achievement award for all the work that I did.

CPO1 stated, "I think a lot of the barriers is being female." CPO3 stated, "Sexual harassment on a daily basis, stupid jokes." CPO13 expressed:

I just feel like a barrier is being a senior enlisted woman in the military period or in the Navy period because a lot of times there were duty stations that I could not go to or it took me a very long time, for example, to be an LCPO on a ship.

CPO13 stated,

When I did become an LCPO and was in meetings, I was the LCPO of my division, but there were some male departmental LCPOs over the whole supply department. And so, a lot of times when we were in critical meetings, I noticed that they were always going to him for whatever issues needed to be resolved or anything that was regarding my department.

All participants also expressed that being a mother was challenging because of the stereotype of being pregnant or being a single mother. CPO12 stated that her commander tried to get her discharged from the Navy for being pregnant. She ended up getting out of the Navy because of a family decision and returned to serve 15 months later. CPO7 stated

that being a single mother with childcare was challenging because of the odd hours she had to work. She also stated that at a particular overseas command, her supervisor assigned her to put turkeys in the oven at 3:00 a.m. on Thanksgiving day. She recalled leaving her kids at home while they were sleeping to go to work to complete her assigned duties. CPO9 stated that after seeing how other women were treated for having children, she wanted to ensure a solid family care plan. She also mentioned that the stigma of just wearing the pregnancy uniform created a stereotype for women. She also mentioned that the Navy had improved the policies for pregnant women, but the stigma is still present. CPO2 stated:

I felt like when I may have needed to take a break because something was going on with my daughter, it probably would have been best for me to take leave and just deal with it. I never wanted to come off as weak. So, I would push myself and push myself and push myself, and ultimately the only person that paid the price for my decision to take those duty stations and continue to push myself is my daughter. Moreover, now here I am, retired. She is grown, and our relationship still suffers.

### **Subtheme 2: Lack of Change Agents and Unsupportive Leadership.**

Unsupportive leadership and a lack of change agents are barriers while working in a male-dominated organization. U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women, at some time throughout their careers, had leaders who were not supportive of their career goals and the organization. They believed that the barriers created by leadership made job

assignments/duties difficult for leaders who do not lead as change agents in the organization. CPO2 stated, “The biggest barrier is when you do not have support from the top down.” She mentioned that it does not matter how good you are at your job or how many great ideas a person may have. No support from leadership is the biggest barrier. CPO11 stated that because a command has the training, leaders do not enforce the training at the organization. She stated, “With leadership at the top. If their mindsets are not changed, no one else is going to be changed. And that is who is training the people coming up. So, then it is a vicious cycle.” CPO11 described her experience with one of her command master chief (CMC) when she tried to correct him for something he did wrong. CPO11 stated,

One of my command master chief called me the she-devil. Because I pulled him aside to let him know he was doing something wrong or that I felt it was wrong, I pulled him aside and talked to him and said, “Hey, do you think that right now what you are doing is best for this command?” And I gave him examples of what was going on. And his answer was that he changed my picture on his phone to a she-devil because I called him out.

CPO 10 stated:

When I made chief petty officer, I went through our, you know, rituals. And then, when I came to the other side, I noticed a difference. It is like what we preach and teach; We do not follow—some of us.

CPO 7 stated that a male chief she had known for years informed her that a fight almost broke out during her chief initiation season. The reason was that the chief she had known for years was the only person in the CPO mess who prevented another chief from pouring spitty water on her. CPO7 stated,

When I was going through the initiation process for chief, I later found out that one male had to stop another male from pouring spitty water on me, but the male that stopped the other male was someone I had known for years. So, he stopped the other male, who had spit in his water and was getting ready to pour the spitty water on me because we were blindfolded and we were kneeling, and he was getting ready to pour that water on me. The chief I had known for years was like, What the fuck are you doing, man? And they had to stop because he was ready to pour his spitty water on me. He spit in the water and was ready to pour it on me. And I thought, God Lee, I got to work with this person, man.

CPO5 stated how people were treated during the chief initiation season and how her leadership did nothing to address the issue. CPO5 stated,

I was just out doing some training during the season. So, I just happened to be overhearing part of the training, and the chiefs were making fun of people because of their accents and telling them that they were dumb because they could not say a particular word. I said something to my master chief, like, this is a little over the top. But I let him tell me we do not get involved in other people's seasons, which I do not think was the right answer.

CPO4 mentioned that some barriers are leaders who are not inclusive to all groups:

After sharing my career goals with my department head, I was told that I should focus more on being a wife and mother vice striving for the next best leadership role/assignment. This left me perplexed because I am not the only leader who is married with kids, but you felt the need to share this with me as guidance towards my future endeavors.

**Subtheme 3: Lack of Sisterhood.** The lack of sisterhood is a barrier because they felt like women did not support each other at some point in their careers. CPO6 expressed that some women leaders did not take the time to groom them when they were present. CPO6 stated, “matter of fact, none of the women I have met in the military that was higher ranking did not groom us. Period. It was the men.” CPO12 stated, “when I first came in because women were afraid to speak up because of what might happen, but women must support women, and women have to train men to support women. We already support men.” The women believed there was a crab-grabber or queen bee mentality where women did not want to help them because they did not want to see others advance higher than themselves. CPO9 stated:

As I am pondering back through my journey going through my career while in the Navy is that it was many challenges occurred and unnecessary situations with female leaders. I do not know why that is. I know that there was a lot of jealousy. It was almost a thing I did not want you to get higher than me.

Although the participants mentioned that women needed to support other women, data also revealed that other women supported women depending on where they were stationed during their careers.

**Subtheme 4: Underrepresentation.** This was a barrier because the participants mentioned they were the only female chiefs in their organization or lacked female representation. They expressed feeling inadequate and undermined and that their voices were not heard. CPO1 saw it as an obligation to choose between retiring to spend time with their family or staying in to help and be a voice for the junior enlisted women. She was the only female chief at her command at the time. All participants mentioned that they were the only female chiefs at their command sometime during their career, and it was difficult to have their voices heard and support their sailors. CPO10 stated, “Well, my own position is it like a male-dominated field, and they didn’t tend to listen to us females as most of my command. I was the only female senior enlisted, for the most part.” CPO11 stated, “You know, majority of the commands that I went to, I was the only female chief. It is an uphill battle.” The participants stated that when they presented their ideas, no one recognized them, but when a male said the same thing, he was recognized for the same ideas. Although the participants experienced being the only women at their command and a challenge to have their voices heard, data revealed that barriers could be broken while women are underrepresented. CPO12 and CPO13 described their careers as the only chiefs and senior enlisted women at most of their commands. They mentioned that as they made rank, they were determined to be a voice for all who did not have one.

Both advanced to master chiefs and initiated change in their community for the Navy to become a better organization.

### **Theme 2: Roller Coaster of Emotions**

The theme was created because the participants expressed different emotions about facing and overcoming barriers during their careers (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Roller Coaster of Emotions*

Code(s)	Category	Theme	Participants
Feelings with dealing with barriers include being angry; inspired; sad, pissed off; happy; emotional; a roller coaster of emotions	Emotions	2. Roller coaster of emotions	13

All participants expressed experiencing various emotions throughout their careers dealing with barriers (see Table 3). CPO2 shared her experience, “Of course, in the beginning, you are really sensitive to it. You know, I used to take everything personal.” CPO4 stated, “Most of my experiences make me proud, and I have a moment where some experiences could have taken me into a place of despair and disappointment.” CPO6 said, “Some made me feel like I was opening a new world. Some experiences made me feel like, do I want to deal with certain things?” CPO11 expressed, “It makes me mad and makes me mad, and it saddens me that we are still in this state in this day and age. You know, how many times do we have to prove ourselves? You work hard; you do what you are supposed to do.”

CPO12 conveyed that being “Ticked off is what it made me feel. It made me feel inspired. It just made me fight harder.” The participants expressed that with having to

make decisions and dealing with challenges, most of them expressed joy when they overcame a barrier. Others were left torn and angry because of their experience; others viewed it as a lesson that helped them develop a thick skin.

### **Theme 3: Barriers Broken**

The theme was created because the participants expressed that supportive people and attributes to overcoming barriers. As presented in Table 4, all participants' responses were about their experiences of attributes and supportive people in breaking barriers in a male-dominated organization.

**Table 4**

#### *Barriers Broken*

Code(s)	Categories	Subthemes	Participants
Barriers/meaning-holding period to grow/develop, obstacle, something I can/will overcome, temporary, glass half empty half full, something you can chip away at	Perception of barriers	5. Meaning of barriers	13
barriers broken by hard work, studying, learning the instructions inside/out, being stubborn/hard-headed, persistent, being consistent, being fierce, standing my ground, using my voice, exercising, praying, taking mental health days	Personal attributes	6. Being fierce, persistent, and hard work	13
Barriers are broken with supportive people, sea momma/sea daddy (mentors), friends, leadership, coworkers, significant other	Supportive people	7. Supportive relationships	13

**Subtheme 5: Meaning of Barriers.** All the participants described what a barrier meant to them. They saw it as an obstacle they had to work hard to overcome, while others viewed it as a barrier that prevented them from achieving their goals. One participant described barriers as a holding period. CPO4 stated, "My barriers at times meant that I was in a holding period or waiting room, waiting my turn." CPO2 expressed, "I do not see barriers as roadblocks. I see them as a lesson in you figuring out a new way to overcome it." CPO5 stated, "A barrier is, I think, both self and group inflicted." CPO8

viewed barriers as “the glass half empty and then half full,” and CPO9 viewed the barrier from different angles. She stated that depending on “which side of the angle that you look at it, you can see that that barrier has a crack. And if I just tap into that crack a little longer and a little harder, that barrier will be broken.” While there were varied responses concerning what a barrier is, all 13 participants shared a similarity that a barrier is a temporary obstacle due to motivation, determination, and support.

**Subtheme 6: Being Fierce, Persistent, and Hard Work.** All participants described being fierce, persistent, and hard work as ways they overcame their barriers in a male-dominated organization. They mentioned that their family and friends, using humor, praying, using their voices, standing their ground, and taking a mental health day helped them overcome barriers. CPO6 and CPO7 stated that they prayed a lot. CPO11 mentioned that she chose to fight and conquer barriers because she knew junior enlisted females were watching her as people talked about her and criticized her that she could not accomplish something. She wanted to inspire them to tell them “not to listen to people and that no matter the obstacles, you can overcome them.” CPO9 stated:

It is using your voice. At times it is not always the popular thing to do to be the one that would speak up and speak out at times to be outspoken. But you are not doing it for you. You are not doing it to gain attention. You are not doing it to get a pat on your back. But you are doing it for those that are coming behind you.

All the participants also believed that studying, working hard, and taking undesirable jobs were ways to advance and overcome barriers. CPO3 believed working hard helped her

gain the respect of everyone she worked with and believed it was a significant factor in her advancement. CPO2 expressed, “I always knew in a being in a male-dominated field. I always felt like I had to prove myself just a little bit more or any time someone tried to make it easy for me.” CPO11 expressed that as women leaders, “When we excel, they feel like it was given to us, even though we have to work 5 to 10 times harder just to get recognized just to, you know, just to get a seat at the table.” The participants commented that they were in the 21st century, still hearing about the first women, and wanted to know why. They also stated that the Navy had not selected a female to serve as master chief of the Navy.

**Subtheme 7: Supportive Relationships.** All participants expressed that good leadership could help silenced voices be heard. They also believed that during their careers, they had good leadership and supportive people who were positive role models and change agents to emulate. CPO13 stated she experienced good leadership at her duty stations as a junior sailor. She embodied what she learned from her leadership and implemented it to help others as her leadership helped her. She stated, “They really follow the guidelines and set the example for being in leadership positions.” Three participants expressed wanting to give up or leave the military but overcame the barriers because of their family or mentors who provided advice. CPO6 stated, “If it was not for my mom telling me to push myself and my (sea daddy) mentor, I would have gotten the hell out.” CPO7 stated, “I remember calling home and telling my family and my girl’s godmother that I did not want to do this anymore. And I was ready to get out at 12

years.” CPO13 believed that if it were not for her sea momma (mentor), who challenged and pushed her to study and obtain her qualifications, she would have been forced to leave due to high-year tenure. Several participants who served in commands with civilians described that civilians appointed as leaders/supervisors created barriers for them. They believed that leaders at their commands should be captains and above to provide top cover support due to their knowledge of the military organization. Overall, all the participants believed that good leaders, friends, family, subordinates, coworkers, and mentors who supported their hard work, motivation, persistence, and grit contributed to overcoming career barriers.

### **Research Question 2 Results**

Research question two, “How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of their experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?” was formulated to explore the lived experiences and meaning of success and the impact that contributed to U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women’s success in a male-dominated organization. The following interview prompts helped elicit responses from the participants.

- IQ7: How do you define success?
- IQ8: What experiences contributed to your success as a senior enlisted woman?
- IQ9: Please share some of the successes you experienced in the Navy as a senior enlisted woman.

- IQ10: Please share the most beneficial characteristics or persons that have helped you succeed as a senior enlisted woman in a male-dominated organization.
- IQ11: What advice would you offer to a woman aspiring to achieve a top leadership position in a male-dominated organization?
- IQ12: What advantages do you feel being a woman provided you on your path to senior leadership?
- IQ13: Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss barriers or success? Is there anything that I have not addressed in this interview?

For research question two, 4 distinct themes emerged because of the data analysis gathered from the responses of the 13 participants. The participants' experiences of achieving success in a male-dominated organization included four main themes: (4) success is a team effort, (5) right time, people, and place, (6) characteristics, and (7) success.

#### **Theme 4: Success is a Team Effort**

The category of helpful people was derived from the participants' experiences of having helpful people such as their mentors, enemies, family, friends, coworkers, and subordinates who contributed to their success. Therefore, theme four, success is a team effort, was created because the participants mentioned that they helped their friends, coworkers, and organizations succeed; thus, their support network helped them succeed in their careers (see Table 5).

**Table 5***Success is a Team Effort*

Code(s)	Category	Theme	Participants
People that contributed to my success-people (sailors), family, sea momma, sea daddy (mentors), friends, coworkers, subordinates, and supportive leaders; success is a team effort. I helped and supported people/organizations to reach their goals	Helpful people	4. Success is a team effort	13

The fourth theme for research question two was that success is a team effort. All participants experienced achieving success in a male-dominated organization. All participants described how they supported other people and organizations and had support from family, friends, coworkers, mentors (I.e., sea momma or sea daddy), and subordinates who contributed to their success (see Table 5). CPO1 stated, “I had guidance, and I had people looking out for me just like, you know, I helped and looked out for others.” CPO5 stated, “Just having some great supportive friends that I made in the mess.” CPO6 stated, “My people, my people, and my mentor, the people that used to work for me, they always had my back.” CPO2 stated,

My mentors were amazing. They just constantly poured into me. Like even when I doubted myself, they continuously knew how great I was, how I was going to be so amazing, and I could do it if I just got out of my way. So, yeah, it was definitely the mentors for me, and it would be the junior people that would tell me how much I aspire to them. Success is a team effort. All participants contributed to their success when people they mentored during their careers reached out and thanked them for their success.

CPO3 stated,

I think for me, the best thing was when I would have my junior sailors still reach out to me and tell me, hey, chief, you know, I advanced, or I made the board and know or advancing. And getting qualified, I think that was a big help, you know, knowing that I was actually contributing to someone else being successful and helping them. Just as much as friends, family, and mentors can aid in achieving success.

CPO7 mentioned that her adversaries also contributed to her success. She described one of her incidents where she had to stand her ground with a male chief who was known to create a toxic work environment for other female chiefs and junior sailors at the command and got away with being disrespectful to women, including female master chiefs who were higher ranking than he was. After standing her ground and addressing his behavior in the chiefs' mess, the male chief was reprimanded. The male chief changed his behavior, thus, improving the command's morale and work environment.

### **Theme 5: Right Time, People, and Place**

The category people, place, and time was developed from the participants' experiences of people, place, and time contributing to their success. Theme two was created because the participants mentioned they were at the right place and time to meet the right people to achieve success. The U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women data related to the fifth theme, right time, people, and place, experience in achieving success

in a male-dominated organization. The participants said that the right circumstances contributed to their success. CPO9 expressed, “The experiences that contributed to my success was being in the right place at the right time.” CPO6 stated,

Being at the right place at the right time. That is my vantage is knowing when to be at the right place at the right time—knowing when to keep this closed up (mouth) and opened (mind). And look, because if you do not, you will miss a lot.

### **Theme 6: Characteristics**

Theme six was created based on the participants’ experiences and personalities that enabled them to succeed and help others achieve success. The category of personal attributes was created based on the participants’ responses to the attributes that enabled them to succeed (see Table 6). Some examples of these attributes were life experiences, being approachable, hard work, and having grit.

**Table 6**

*Characteristics*

Code(s)	Category	Theme	Participants
Life experience, always doing the right thing all the time, mentoring/training their junior sailors, thick skin, stubbornness, willingness to learn, approachability, grit, honesty, and being consistent	Experiences/personality	6. Characteristics	13

The U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women data related to the sixth theme, characteristics, in achieving success in a male-dominated organization, shared that honesty, willingness to learn, communication, and life experiences are some characteristics that contributed to their success. They mentioned that their personality

evolved from trusting people to being vigilant in dealing with people over the years. They learned to trust people who did what they said they would do. CPO1 said, "I like to think that the people are people I would talk to, like be honest and truthful and giving me the feedback not to sugarcoat stuff." CPO2 remarked, "I never thought I was too good to get help, to learn from somebody. Always being able to listen and take constructive criticism and actually do something with it." CPO7 mentioned that her experience as a mother contributed to her success because sailors would seek her out for advice on family and other issues. CPO10 reported, "Honesty. Straight forward. Does not tell you what you want to hear; tells you what you need to hear." CPO9 stated that being challenged and studying were two characteristics that contributed to her success. While life experiences and circumstances such as being a mother, learning, and constructive feedback served as some of the characteristics in achieving success, the participants also described grit and fighting as other characteristics that contributed to their success or winning for the betterment of others. CPO11 stated,

I think about my tenacity and the fact that I do not back down, especially when I know I am right. Even when sometimes I am wrong, I still do not back down. But, you know, I was up for the fight, and I believe that that was why I was able to succeed. You follow the precepts, or you go through the ladder, and you take a look and see, this is what I have to do so I can excel. And then you realize, you know, early on that you have to do more to excel. You have to do more, you know, and then you get labels. So, if you are a strong-minded woman and you are

direct, and you do not take anybody's crap, oh, you are a ball buster, you are a bitch.

CPO12 stated,

And I had to fight it. You know, the guys, not just the guys, the senior enlisted to accept women as equals that it was hard on some of those ships. But by fighting for equality between men and women because they really did try to suppress us, but by fighting for equality, equal treatment, equal jobs, and equal everything regardless of our gender. That was one of those fights that I finally ended up winning. So, women are now in places that they never would have been without women like me fighting for that.

### **Theme 7: Success**

The category, success meaning, was developed because the participants defined what success meant to them. Theme four was created based on how participants described their experiences of success of retiring, being at peace, helping others, and watching others succeed and achieve their goals. The U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women data described retirement, being promoted to chief, senior chief, or master chief, passing command assessments, their organizations being awarded best of its class due to their leadership, helping junior sailors succeed, being at peace, happy, and learning as elements that meant success to them. All participants also mentioned retirement, being a part of creating policies for the betterment of future women leaders, no captains mast, and staying out of trouble were also successes to them. CPO1 stated, "achieving the goal that

I set for myself, I mean, I made it senior chief.” CPO2 stated, “as a leader, to me, success was more of watching those under my charge be successful for whether they advance.”

CPO10 stated, “I made it to retirement, so that is successful.” CPO12 stated,

When I joined the Navy, my goal was to be a master chief. That was my goal and as well as, of course, making master chief. That was my biggest achievement was making master chief and then sitting on the Women’s Council.

The sense of success for all participants was similar such as being promoted to the next pay grade and helping organizations and sailors achieve success; all participants provided an abstract meaning of what success meant to them, such as learning, happiness, joy, and leaving a legacy behind. CPO6, CPO7, and CPO8 shared their abstract meaning of success. CPO6 stated,

Well, when you can retire, you got to damn work. Hell, and you can be at peace. It does not matter how much money you got. You could be the richest and most powerful person on the planet. But if you do not have peace. Yeah, I am sorry, it is not going to happen, and it is not going to work, but as long as you got peace, you can live life to the best of your ability.

CPO7 said,

Success is learning from your failures; success is slowly or swiftly removing your barriers that are in front of you. Success is being able to provide for your family. Success is happiness. Success is finding that spiritual, emotional, and mental connection.

CPO8 stated,

I define success as happiness, being happy with your job, being happy with the decision that you made, knowing that if you should leave that an organization will be better for it, and you help to contribute to that. Success to me is being prideful. Most people probably say, well, it is all about the money. It is not about the money itself. For me, I am simple girl, and it is just the fact that I'm just happy, and I noted that I put forth something and that somebody will remember me by.

### **Composite Textural Descriptions**

The composite textural description depicts the experience's fundamental components. This summary includes only the central and thematic aspects shared by all participants' perceptions of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women overcoming career barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization. The participants joined the Navy after high school in search of a better life and to gain knowledge and skills they could use once they transitioned from the Navy. Their goals were to advance as high as possible and make a difference while serving.

While embarking on their Naval journey as senior enlisted women, new equal opportunity policies and training were implemented during their tenure to help change the culture to prevent gender bias and harassment in the military. Participants mentioned that their journey to become a senior enlisted leader in a male-dominated environment was not without trials, tribulations, and a roller coaster of emotions. The organizational culture, leadership, and people of the commands where the participants served prevented

women from succeeding because of gender bias barriers. Some of the issues that derived throughout their journey were that some people did not want to see them succeed because some men and women believed women did not have what it took to be a leader in the Navy. Some of the bias stemmed from women getting pregnant, being a mother, or just using their looks to advance without having any knowledge or skills. Therefore, people did everything they could to create barriers to deter them from advancing in leadership positions or roles.

However, just as there are people who create barriers, there are people who help women overcome the barriers. The participants mentioned that they have not only been motivated to overcome the barriers but also helped people and organizations succeed, and they had support from people who have helped them succeed in male-dominated organizations.

### **Composite Structural Descriptions**

The composite structural description shows the participants' lived experiences of the underlying factors and contexts. Participants mentioned that people, place, and time influenced their barriers and success in male-dominated organizations. People in the form of self, leadership, subordinates, enemies, and coworkers contributed to creating or eliminating barriers for them to succeed. Participants shared similar thoughts that meeting the right people at the right time contributed to their success. They also mentioned time as an element that enabled them to develop into leaders while being mentored by supportive people. Participants mentioned that fierce hard work and persistence enabled

them to overcome career barriers and succeed. The participants did not allow anyone's judgment about them to deter them from accomplishing their goals and helping people. Participants mentioned that they experienced various emotions throughout their careers and that sometimes their thinking got in their way, creating barriers for themselves. However, self-care, such as vacations, praying, and exercising, helped them manage their negative self-talk and stressful situations. Participants mentioned that organizational culture has evolved with updated equal opportunity policies and laws; however, more work must be done to eradicate gender bias, sexual assault, and harassment in the military. Participants suggested that people were not being change agents within the organization by holding people accountable for their actions or following policies and laws. Women are still being harassed, sexually assaulted, and discriminated against, creating underrepresentation and attrition of women serving in the military who could potentially become leaders.

People such as their family, friends, coworkers, leaders, and mentors played an integral role in achieving success in a male-dominated organization. However, the participants mentioned that success to them meant helping people succeed to become leaders and advance or accomplish their goals. They also mentioned that accomplishing their goals of advancing in rank to a leadership position, achieving peace, or retiring contributed to self, individual, and team effort.

### **Synthesis of Textural and Structural Descriptions**

Thirteen humble, selfless, ingenious, and fierce women respectively embarked on their naval journey between 1989 and 1996, intending to serve their country honorably, advance in rank as high as possible, and advance into leadership positions. While on their journey in the Navy, each participant experienced various emotions and faced similar career barriers while accomplishing their goals. Participants mentioned that people, being a mother, a woman, organizational culture, and time created barriers impeding their career growth. Participants felt their voices were not being heard; they lacked support from some of their peers and leadership, were underrepresented, and dealt with sexual harassment and assault. They stated that some of their leaders viewed women as a burden at the commands they served because they were women, a mother and that some women used their looks to get what they wanted or got pregnant to get out of duty or work.

Although women have been allowed to serve in the military, in 2022, with updated policies, regulations, and laws, based on this study's results, women continue to experience barriers in male-dominated organizations. However, the participants stated that their tenacity, grit, and the right people at the right time and place facilitated their success in a male-dominated organization. All the participants either had support from family, friends, and mentors, listened to and heeded the advice they were provided, or used their barriers as their strength, motivation, and determination to do what needed to be done to overcome them. Some examples of the participants' successes included helping others accomplish their goals, achieving peace, advancing to leadership positions,

leaving a legacy, and retiring. The participants believed that the eye of the beholder determines success.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I presented an analysis of the data concerning the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) to explore their experiences of overcoming career barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization. There were 13 interview questions to examine the barriers, their impact, and how the participants overcame them in a male-dominated organization. They also explored the experiences and meaning of the success of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who achieved success in a male-dominated organization.

There were two research questions used in this study. Research question one: “How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?” In this study, the results revealed that women who worked in male-dominated organizations did experience some barriers. Some barriers experienced were self-inflicted due to their attitudes; individuals or groups caused others. The participants believed that they overcame the barriers using their strength, motivation, and determination to do what was needed to overcome the barriers and follow the advice of people who supported them.

Research question two: “How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of their experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?” Some participants described the meaning of success as being able to retire, being

promoted to the next pay grade, and helping organizations and sailors achieve success. At the same time, other participants provided an abstract meaning of what success meant to them, such as learning, providing for their family, having peace, or leaving a legacy once they retired. Chapter 5 provides a detailed interpretation of the study findings, limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusions.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants were retired, had served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to navigate male-dominated organizations. Transcendental phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of senior enlisted women who achieved career success by overcoming barriers in male-dominated organizations. Semistructured face-to-face interviews with 13 retired senior enlisted military women in grades E7-E9 were used to collect data. A transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me to: (a) explore the human experience by focusing on the overall experience, (b) recognize the purpose and significance related to the experience, (c) acquire first-hand descriptions of life experiences using semi-structured interviews, (d) acknowledge that the information of the life experience is critical for newfound information, and (e) consider obligation as the researcher (Husserl, 1964; Sokolowski, 2000) because I framed the research questions and problems. For Research Question 1, there were three main themes and seven subthemes: (a) organizational culture, (b) roller coaster of emotions, and (c) barriers broken. The subthemes that emerged from the themes were: (a) being a woman, (b) lack of sisterhood, (c) underrepresentation, (d) lack of change agents and unsupportive relationships, (e) meaning of barriers, (f) being fierce, persistent, and hard work, (g)

supportive relationships. For Research Question 2, four distinct themes emerged: (a) success as a team effort, (b) right time, people, and place, (c) characteristics, and (d) success.

## **Interpretations of Findings**

### **Research Question 1: Experiences of Barriers**

Research Question 1 was developed to explore the type of barriers experienced, their impact, and the methods the participants used to overcome them in a male-dominated organization. Findings from the semistructured interview transcripts led to three themes and seven subthemes. Theme 1 is organizational culture, with four subthemes: (a) being a woman, (b) lack of change agents and unsupportive leadership, (c) lack of sisterhood, and (d) underrepresentation. The second theme is a roller coaster of emotions. The third theme, broken barriers, includes three subthemes: (a) the meaning of barriers, (b) being fierce, persistent, and hard work, and (c) supportive relationships. In the following section, I explain how the findings for Research Question 1 confirm and extend the previous research discussed in Chapter 2.

#### **Theme 1: Organizational Culture**

The first theme was organizational culture. All the participants experienced gender bias, underrepresentation, sexual harassment, unsupportive leadership, a lack of change agents, and women who did not support other women within their organizations. Researchers have found that gender discrimination occurs for working women worldwide, especially in male-dominated organizations (Alqahtani, 2020; Auster &

Prasad, 2016; Sabharwal, 2013; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Organizational cultural, sociological, economic, and regulatory constraints are crucial in determining professional options for men and women. Various academic, business industries, and government studies worldwide agreed that women faced organizational barriers (Cozza & Parnter, 2022; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). These obstacles, characterized as institutional impediments, impede women's participation in leadership positions and have persisted for many generations (Alqahtani, 2020; Cozza & Parnter, 2022; Johns, 2013; Mekasha, 2017) in various job sectors. Institutional barriers are rooted in cultural beliefs about gender, workplace structures, practices, and actions that unintentionally favor men. Women in leadership typically report experiencing more friction related to time constraints than strain constraints (Brue, 2018). In addition, it appeared that work-related commitments interfered with family life more than family life interfered with obligations related to work.

**Subtheme 1: Being a Woman.** The first subtheme was being a woman. The participants shared their experiences of being a woman as a barrier because of gender bias and family obligations. Participants described balancing home and work with caring for their children as challenging due to the negative stigma associated with being a mother or pregnant. All participants mentioned that they had to make family sacrifices due to odd and extended duty hours, deployments, and unplanned mission requirements. All participants mentioned that finding people to watch their children and balance work and life was difficult due to their sporadic schedules. They mentioned that they received

support from friends and family to help them manage their work life. Women in leadership positions are skilled at balancing various duties at work and home (Brue & Brue, 2018), but balancing family and business life necessitates a strong network of allies behind the scenes (Groysberg & Connolly, 2014).

Participants also described their experiences of being sexually harassed, assaulted, or dealing with sexual innuendos at work daily. Women working in majority-male organizations are also more likely to claim their gender had made it more difficult for them to advance at work (Parker, 2020). Women who work in male-dominated organizations experience expectations and perceptions regarding women's leadership qualities in society and gender stereotypes such as being a mother (Catalyst, 2021d). Approximately 37% of women working in primarily male-dominated organizations report being considered incompetent due to gender (Parker, 2020). All participants mentioned that their male leaders would bypass them to speak to their male coworkers about a project they were assigned, or they would make recommendations during a meeting and be ignored. However, their male coworkers were rewarded or praised when they said the same information. CPO11 stated,

I would make suggestions about something, and it would be ignored, and then a male would say the exact same thing that I had just said, not more than 10 minutes ago. And everybody is praising them and how great of an idea it is.

Policy updates are needed to be inclusive of job opportunities (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). The data confirm that the successful development and integration of women leaders in the military is needed.

**Subtheme 2: Lack of Change Agents and Unsupportive Relationships.** The second subtheme that emerged was the lack of change agents and unsupportive relationships. All participants responded that working in a male-dominated organization was challenging because some of their peers and leadership would not follow the rules and regulations or set a good example for junior sailors. The participants also responded that they had leaders and peers who were unsupportive of their career goals and made it difficult to accomplish the organization's goals at some of their commands. CPO11 stated, "If leadership at the top mindsets are not changed, no one else will change, creating a vicious cycle." She described an experience where she corrected her command master chief because he was violating policy. Instead of correcting his deficiency, he called her a she-devil and changed her photo on his work cell phone to a she-devil. These everyday occurrences were manifestations of ingrained biases that inhibit women from performing their professions efficiently (see Trobaugh, 2018). Studies have also shown that gender bias in decision-making can be widespread, harmful, and pervasive (Chang & Milkman, 2020). This bias can lead to different outcomes for women and hurt the organization's decisions.

In contrast, Kerr and Pollack (2022) suggested that men advocate eliminating gender bias experience barriers. However, 74% of men experienced apathy and fear, and

51% were unaware of gender inequality. CPO 7 mentioned that a male chief she had known for years informed her that a fight almost broke out during her chief initiation season. The reason was that the chief she had known for years was the only person in the CPO mess who prevented a male chief from pouring spitty water on her. CPO7 stated,

When I was going through the initiation process for chief, I later found out that one male had to stop another male from pouring spitty water on me, but the male that stopped the other male was someone I had known for years. So, he stopped the other male, who had spit in his water and was getting ready to pour the spitty water on me because we were blindfolded and we were kneeling, and he was getting ready to pour that water on me. The chief I had known for years was like, “What the fuck are you doing, man?” And they had to stop because he was ready to pour his spitty water on me.

**Subtheme 3: Lack of Sisterhood.** The third subtheme was the lack of sisterhood. All participants responded that this was a barrier at some of their commands because women did not support women, especially when they were junior sailors. The participants also responded that some women at their command made it difficult for them. CPO6 expressed that none of the women leaders took the time to groom them; men mentored her throughout her career. According to scholars, men’s networks provide more informal help than women’s networks do, and women generally have weaker access to key informal mentoring relationships and available development opportunities than their male counterparts (Castrillon, 2019). Andrews (2022) suggested four reasons women do not

support women. The first is that there is an invisible natural rule that regulates relationships, authority, and self-respect. For a good relationship between women to be feasible, the self-esteem and power of each woman must be of equal importance in the eyes of the other. The second is queen bee syndrome, where a female leader places less emphasis on relationships; she may not invest the time required to build connections with junior women. Queen bee syndrome is a form of discrimination that impacts a women's career path to success (Namie, 2021), which may have validated existing gender inequities (Derks et al., 2016). The third explanation is that, due to the challenges women experience in their careers and corporate settings and their hard-won success, their attitude toward other women is that if they worked hard to get where they are, then other women should have to work hard too. Last, senior women leaders are often overburdened with everyday obligations and lack time to mentor and encourage junior women. However, women with a strong network of other women who can provide career guidance are three times more likely to succeed than women without such support (Yang et al., 2019).

**Subtheme 4: Underrepresentation.** The fourth subtheme was underrepresentation as a barrier. All participants responded that they were the only female chief in their organization during the majority of their careers. All participants responded that being the only female chief made it difficult for their voices to be heard and support their junior sailors under their charge. The underrepresentation of women is a global problem that impacts all industries. As of February 2022, 32,427 active-duty Navy

sailors serving as SEL in pay grades E7-E9, and only 4,194 (13%) were female (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2022a, 2022b). Despite the best efforts of lawmakers to eradicate gender bias in the workplace, discrimination against women remains at all levels of management (Holton & Dent, 2016; Rahim et al., 2018). This study's results indicate that underrepresentation was a barrier. Female leaders have reported having few role models, feeling outnumbered in boardrooms, feeling alone, unsupported, and unable to speak on their viewpoints at meetings (Heath et al., 2018). According to the pipeline theory, the lack of female leaders is due to female role models in upper management underrepresentation (Bergman, 2019; Heinrichs & Sonnabend, 2022). Lack of access to informal communication networks and a shortage of visible successful female role models were two main obstacles impeding women's advancement to leadership positions (Johns, 2013; Mekasha, 2017). Though the underrepresentation of women occurs at senior levels of leadership in the U.S. military, of the three primary branches of military service (i.e., Army, Navy, and Air Force), the U.S. Navy has the lowest overall proportion of women at the highest levels of leadership (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2022b).

### **Theme 2: Roller Coaster of Emotions**

The second theme that emerged was the roller coaster of emotions. All the participants responded that they experienced an array of emotions in dealing with barriers and overcoming them. When dealing with their barriers, they experienced anger, frustration, and sadness; when they overcame them, they experienced happiness, joy, and

inspiration. All participants mentioned that during their careers, they had to fight not just for themselves but for their junior and senior sailors. Research has been gradually highlighting gendered work organizations, emotions, and work–life balance as factors that prevent women from advancing in the workforce since the late 1970s (Vasconcelos, 2018). These results may extend knowledge of the emotions experienced by women who work in male-dominated organizations. Future research could explore the impact of emotions on women’s performance, personality, and health in a male-dominated organization.

### **Theme 3: Barriers Broken**

The third theme that emerged was barriers broken. All participants responded that they leaned on their significant other, family, and people outside their organization to navigate the obstacles at their organizations throughout their careers. The participants also responded that their positive self-talk, stubbornness, and self-care also aided in them breaking barriers. Eagly and Carli’s (2018) analogy of “navigating the labyrinth” is another way to discuss women’s problems when becoming organizational leaders. The labyrinth is a metaphor for the path women must take to become leaders, which is full of obstacles that limit their chances of becoming leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Hill et al., 2016), and they must be creative in overcoming barriers.

**Subtheme 5: Meaning of Barriers.** The fifth subtheme that emerged was the meaning of barriers. All participants responded with abstract but similar meanings of what constitutes a barrier. All participants saw barriers as an obstacle they had to work

hard to overcome and something they would overcome. At the same time, the participants mentioned that in their careers, they saw a barrier as something that prevented them from achieving their goals or as a holding pattern until they gained the skills needed to progress. Women confront obstacles in crucial assignments that may limit their capacity to advance to senior leadership, such as work–life balance, gender bias, and corporate culture (Gipson et al., 2017). CPO2 stated, “I do not see barriers as roadblocks. I see them as a lesson in you figuring out a new way to overcome it.” CPO5 stated, “A barrier is, I think, both self and group inflicted.” Women in previous studies similarly embraced a strong sense of personal responsibility and a perception that barriers they encounter are self-inflicted (Anjum et al., 2019; DeSimone, 2021).

**Subtheme 6: Being Fierce, Persistent, and Hard Work.** The sixth subtheme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interview was fierce, persistent, and hard work. All participants responded that they had to study, learn all the regulations and policies, and work hard because they were challenged to know their job every day. The participants responded that learning the instructions enabled them to become confident to stand their ground and become the go-to person at some of their organizations. The participants also responded that hanging with friends and family, using humor, taking a mental health day, praying, and doing self-care routines enabled them to overcome barriers. Personality, personal circumstances, familial status, and other variables can impact professional performance. According to researchers, those who showed tenacity and consistency were likelier to achieve professional success (Vardhan

& Mahato, 2019). According to Parker's (2020) study, participants were asked how often they felt they must prove themselves at work to be respected by their coworkers. Of the women in majority-male workplaces, 25% said they must do this all the time, compared with 13% of women in majority-female workplaces. CPO3 believed working hard helped her gain the respect of everyone she worked with and believed it was a significant factor in her advancement.

The perception that a woman would not succeed was reinforced by characterizing instances of success as though they were irrelevant to the woman herself or by portraying a woman's achievements as an exception due to unique circumstances (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). CPO11 expressed that as women leaders, "When we excel, they feel like it was given to us, even though we have to work 5 to 10 times harder just to get recognized just to, you know, just to get a seat at the table." According to scholars, it may be crucial for women in their career progression, as the performance bar may be higher for women than men (Herbst, 2020). To combat gender biases and be perceived as equally competitive, women need to outperform males in performance dramatically (Herbst, 2020). As a result of repeatedly proving their credibility, women emphasized the importance of over-performing to counter negative assumptions, especially in male-dominated environments. Blayney et al. (2021) stated individual experiences when individuals make professional judgments and act to better their standing and advancement.

**Subtheme 7: Supportive Relationships.** The seventh subtheme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interviews was supportive relationships. All participants responded that supportive people such as friends, family, mentors, and leadership enabled the participants to overcome barriers in a male-dominated organization. In leadership development, an essential facet of mentoring is that it may help navigate career barriers. The participants would have given up without supportive people to help them during challenging times. CPO6 stated, “If not for my mom telling me to push myself and my sea daddy (mentor), I would have gotten the hell out.” CPO13 believed she would have been forced to leave due to her high-year tenure if not for her sea momma (mentor), who challenged and pushed her to study and obtain her qualifications. People have become leaders through encountering progressively more challenging roles, experimenting with new behaviors, and learning from mentors (Mekasha, 2017). Reddy et al.’s (2017) study gained an understanding of the gender biases women face when they ascend to top positions in male-dominated enterprises. The study focused exclusively on gender-based stereotypes and suggested that women, like men, need mentors and leadership training to reach their goals. In their research, scholars have suggested that sponsors, mentors, leadership development programs, self-branding, adaptability, and networking help businesswomen overcome obstacles to success and fulfillment (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

**Research Question 2: Experiences of Success**

Research question two explored the lived experiences and meaning of success and the impact that contributed to U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women's success in a male-dominated organization. Findings from the semi-structured interview transcripts analysis for research question two consist of four themes. The fourth theme was success is a team effort; the fifth theme was the right time, people, and place; the sixth was characteristics; and the seventh was success. In the following section, I explain how the findings for research question two confirm and extend the previous research discussed in Chapter 2.

**Theme 4: Success is a Team Effort**

The fourth theme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interview was a success is a team effort. All participants responded that helpful people such as their mentors, adversaries, family, friends, coworkers, and subordinates contributed to their success. CPO7 mentioned that her adversaries contributed to her success. She described one of her incidents where she had to stand her ground with a male chief. The male chief was known to create a toxic work environment for female chiefs and junior sailors at the command. He got away with disrespecting women, including female master chiefs who were higher ranking than he was. After standing her ground and addressing his behavior in the chiefs' mess, the male chief was reprimanded. The male chief changed his behavior, thus, improving the command's morale and work environment. CPO1 stated, "I had guidance, and I had people looking out for me just like,

you know, I helped and looked out for others.” Mentors and sponsors, or developmental networks, and the impact of leaders as mentors have a significant role in women’s retention in the military and career success (Bensahel et al., 2015; Boateng & Osei-Hwedie, 2017).

### **Theme 5: Right Time, People, and Place**

The fifth theme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interviews was the right time, people, and place. All participants responded that being at the right place to meet the right people at the right time contributed to their success. Mentoring success is contingent on a variety of resource-related factors. Financial, social, cultural, didactic, time, equipment-related, infrastructural, and motivational resources are among them (Stoeger et al., 2020). Mentors inspire their mentees to seek opportunities by providing valuable advice for career advancement and resilience (Arora & Rangnekar, 2014; Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). CPO6 mentioned that being at the right place at the right time was her advantage in achieving success. She expressed that knowing when to keep her mouth closed and mind open enabled her to learn. According to Osi and Teng-Calleja’s (2021) research, one of their participants mentioned that their mentor gave them insights or learnings about the organization and how to conduct business in times of crisis by maintaining their composure. According to scholars, mentees require different mentors and mentoring activities at different stages of their careers (Stoeger et al., 2020).

**Theme 6: Characteristics**

The sixth theme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interviews was characteristics. All participants responded that their life experiences, being approachable, and having grit enabled them to succeed. Life is not without difficulties, but overcoming them may be characterized by perseverance, hard work, resilience, and persistence (Duckworth et al., 2007). Individuals with grit do not abandon their goals in the face of resistance, criticism, or obstacles; instead, they have fortitude and stay tenacious (Duckworth, 2016; Kannangara et al., 2018; Popoola & Karadas, 2022). CPO12 mentioned that during her career, she had to fight for equality for women; she stated: “So, women are now in places that they would never have been without women like me fighting.”

According to scholars, personalities associated with the feeling of obligation and kindness are openness and conscientiousness. The personality of openness is characterized by independent thought, a readiness to assess unfamiliar concepts, and a desire to try new things. Conscientiousness is commitment, persistence, and goal-oriented (Smith et al., 2019). According to researchers, personal traits help contribute to the success of businesswomen who experienced cultural, organizational, and work-life barriers in a male-dominated organization (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Cho et al., 2019; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021).

**Theme 7: Success**

The seventh theme that emerged from the analyzed data from the semi-structured interviews was the meaning of success. I was honored to interview 13 humble, fearless, intelligent, and selfless women who shared their journey of joining the Navy to serve and defend their country. They described their goals and what they wanted to accomplish, such as making it to the highest rank possible and helping people achieve their goals. When asked the question, “How do you define success?” The women gave similar answers to what success meant to them. Although their journey was filled with obstacles, success for them was being promoted, having a good network of people, and helping others advance and succeed personally and professionally. CPO7 stated:

Success is learning from your failures; success is slowly or swiftly removing your barriers that are in front of you. Success is being able to provide for your family. Success is happiness. Success is finding that spiritual, emotional, and mental connection.

Two participants were the first in their career field and considered this success. All participants also mentioned that success for them was learning as much as possible to develop into good leaders; training their junior sailors to leave a legacy behind; providing for their families; retiring without any incidents on their record; being happy; and having peace. The findings for this theme suggest that success is subjective to the individual perception and goals and that the participants did overcome career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. Like organizations with mission statements to

achieve long-term goals, it is up to an individual to be committed to a vision to achieve success (Blayney et al., 2021; Duckworth et al., 2007; Vardhan & Mahato, 2019).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Institutional impediments are based on cultural beliefs about gender and workplace structures, procedures, and actions that unintentionally favor men. Researchers from universities, corporations, and government agencies worldwide came to the same conclusion: women still encounter gender barriers at work (Cozza & Parnter, 2022; Remington & Kitterlin-Lynch, 2018). According to Mishra and McDonald (2017), CR is a complex learning process to endure, adapt, and thrive in one's professional life despite obstacles, shifts, and disruptions positively related to success. The concept consists of two factors that influence how individuals deal with barriers: the first being personal and the second contextual. Personal factors include traits and characteristics such as grit, persistence, career history, education and training, attitudes, and actions (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Contextual factors include workplace support, training development programs and policies, and internal and external networks of friends, family, and community.

According to scholars, collaborations with the networks have been known to provide positive outcomes such as advancement, work satisfaction, and career success (Biju et al., 2021; Chanland & Murphy, 2018; Duarte et al., 2017; Southwick et al., 2014). Data support that personal and contextual factors contributed to participants' success in a male-dominated organization. The analyzed data from this study support that

personal factors such as grit and motivation, studying, attending college, helping people, and learning from others contributed to overcoming their barriers and achieving success. The analyzed data from this study also suggests that contextual factors such as people who supported them and served as leaders, mentors, friends, family, subordinates, and people inside and outside their internal and external networks aided their success and overcoming career barriers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations are potential study flaws beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). This research required access to and an agreement to participate in this study. U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved success in male-dominated organizations were selected because of their positions and roles. The participation of these women allowed insight into their successes and challenges. One limitation factor was methodology due to the generalizability of the results to the sample size. The results cannot be generalized across all military organizations. The experiences of the U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women leaders could differ from other women depending on when and where they served, their culture, and their education. Due to unplanned deployments and mission requirements, active-duty personnel were not selected to complete this study in a reasonable timeframe. Another factor was that I had to remain flexible in scheduling interviews. Data collection occurred at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made scheduling interviews challenging due to people returning to the office or traveling for leisure or work.

The potential for bias in the research outcomes may be because I am a retired U.S. Navy senior enlisted leader who served in a male-dominated organization. I bracketed/epoché my bias and assumptions of what I thought I knew about the studied phenomena. The epoché technique raised consciousness and encouraged the researcher to observe the participants' life events as if they were happening for the first time (see Husserl, 1964; Moustakas, 1994). Before analyzing the data, I bracketed and reflected on any potential presumptions and reviewed all data as if I was listening or reading it for the first time. Ravitch and Carl (2016) and Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested that researchers must ensure their bias does not overshadow their study's data collection and analysis process. The transferability of the results, data, and information collected may be used in other military organizations. Moustakas's modified van Kaam technique was used as this phenomenology's primary data analysis strategy, coupled with the NVivo database, to maintain dependability.

### **Recommendations**

This study revealed the effectiveness of CR in overcoming career barriers and achieving success. Thus, the following recommendations are presented:

- This study's participants were retired women who served in the Navy between 1976-2022. Some updates occurred with military policies and organizational culture during the timeframe the participants served. Future research should be conducted with active-duty women, either junior or senior enlisted, or office pay grades that joined the military after 2022.

- This study included two participants who were the first in their career field. Future research should be conducted to explore how women are breaking barriers to becoming the first in their career field.
- In this study, participants expressed needing to take undesirable duty stations, work long hours, and spend time away from their families. Future research should be conducted to explore the lived experiences of military women leaders' careers and how the impact of family sacrifices affected family relationships.
- Future research could explore the impact of barriers and emotions on women's performance, personality, and health in a male-dominated organization.

### **Implications**

This research learned about retired senior enlisted military, female leaders in the United States and how they defined career success and provided techniques for overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization. The data revealed that the effectiveness of CR and personal and contextual factors contributed to the participants overcoming career barriers and achieving success. The following implications for positive social change, practice, and theory are recommended based on the findings.

#### **Implications for Military Leaders' Positive Social Change**

Positive social change happens when thinking, behavior, social interactions, and organizations are modified to enhance individuals, organizations, and society (Bhatt,

2022). I compared previous research and my study and found positive social changes. My study serves as a qualitative confirmation of the positive changes that people who support others in their personal and professional endeavors contribute to positive social change.

On the individual level, military leaders should be inspired to incorporate strategies to support, develop, and mentor women leaders and be change agents for policies and regulations that support equal opportunity. Women leaders should build a network with men and women outside and inside their organizations to help them with personal and professional challenges. Women leaders should incorporate mentoring sessions to help build junior women's professional network. The findings may contribute to positive social change by inspiring military leaders to further develop senior enlisted women in the Navy.

### **Implication for Military Organizational Practice**

The results of this study may contribute to the understanding of senior women leaders overcoming career barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization. The analyzed data from this study suggested that underrepresentation, lack of support from leaders, gender bias, and sexual harassment were some of the barriers that the participants experienced during their career. The participants expressed that when they crossed paths with good mentors and supportive leaders who trained, supported, and encouraged enabled them to overcome barriers to advance to senior leadership roles and achieve success. Findings from my study generally confirmed Chen et al. (2021) findings of organizational practices that better prepare women for leadership roles, such as

mentors, leaders, and an environment that encourages and supports female leadership development.

### **Implications for Theory**

Career resilience is learning to endure, adapt and thrive despite obstacles and disruptions in an individual's career (Mirsha & McDonald, 2017). Findings from my study generally confirmed Mirsha and McDonald (2017) findings of CR, two concepts of personal and contextual factors, were positively associated with career success. All participants described some personal factors such as persistence, education, career history, life experiences, training, and personality that enabled them to overcome barriers and achieve success. As for contextual factors, the participants described supportive people as leaders, subordinates, mentors, friends, and family who helped by listening, offering advice, or assisting in enabling them to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

Working in organizations dominated by men may be challenging for women. The Government Accountability Office (2020) research suggested that organizations utilize qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and surveys to assess employee experiences. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study was to explore the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The participants in this study were retired, served 20 years or more on active duty, deployed on land or sea, and found it challenging to

navigate male-dominated organizations. The research questions used for this study were:

- Research Question One: How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7- E9) understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?
- Research Question Two: How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of their lived experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?

As a result of this study, for research question one, there were three main themes:

(a) organizational culture, (b) roller coaster of emotions, and (c) barriers broken.

Additionally, there were seven subthemes: (a) being a woman, (b) lack of sisterhood, (c) underrepresentation, (d) lack of change agents and unsupportive relationships, (e) meaning of barriers, (f) being fierce, persistent, and hard work, and (g) supportive relationships. For research question two, four distinct themes emerged: (a) success is a team effort, (b) right time, people, and place, (c) characteristics, and (d) success.

My interpretation of the data found that some of the barriers experienced by the participants were their voices not being heard, lack of support, underrepresentation, sexual harassment, and assault. All the participants listened and heeded the advice their family and friends provided, or they used their barriers as their strength, motivation, and determination to do what needed to be done to overcome them. The eye of the beholder determines success; all participants either shared similar experiences, definitions, or abstract meanings of success. The findings of this study confirm and extend the literature

that women overcame career barriers and achieved success in male-dominated organizations (Adams-Harmon & Greer-Williams, 2020; Anjum et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; Jogulu & Franken, 2022; Osi & Teng-Calleja, 2021). The CR concept was used to explore how CR-related factors contribute to success. Data from this study support that personal and contextual factors of the CR framework contributed to the success of women who overcame career barriers and achieved success. Positive social change implications for practices were recommended for organizations, military leaders, and women leaders. In this study, the results suggested that some women overcame barriers and succeeded as the first women in their career field and wondered when a woman would serve as the first master chief of the Navy. A recommendation for future research is to explore the lived experiences of women who overcame career barriers and became the first in their career field in the military.

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## Appendix A: Demographics Questionnaire

Directions: Please answer the following demographic questions. Please fill out the blank lines with your response and questions with a circle; please put a checkmark next to the answer that best describes your status.

1. What was your leadership role or job title? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What was your rating? \_\_\_\_\_
3. When did you join the military?
4. When did you retire?
5. Did you deploy either overseas or on a U.S. Navy Vessel? Yes  No
6. Did you experience any gender bias/discrimination during your career? Yes  No
7. Did you achieve success during your career?
8. How many deployments did you complete during your tenure in the military?
9. How old are you?
  - 18-24
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55-64
  - 65 or older
10. What is your marital status?
  - Now married

- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married

11. Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Other. Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Are you a citizen of the United States?

- Yes, born in the United States
- Yes, born in Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Marianas
- Yes, born abroad to U.S. citizen parents or parents.
- Yes, U.S. citizens by naturalization.
- No, not a U.S. citizen.

13. What is your highest level of education completed?

- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example, GED)

- Some college, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Advanced degree (for example, Master's, Professional, or Doctorate)

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interviewee Identifier (Participants' Pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Interview**

#### **Introductory Protocol**

Hello, my name is Angela Campbell, and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am a U.S. Navy retired senior chief petty officer who served for 26 years. I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation in management. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this study. I want to digitally record our conversation during this interview to facilitate notetaking and data analysis. Thank you for agreeing to participate. Your experience is a very critical component of this study. I have planned this interview to last between 60 to 90 minutes. Once the interview is complete, it will be transcribed. During this interview, I will have several questions that I would like to cover pertaining to senior enlisted women overcoming career barriers and achieving success in a male-dominated organization. You may end this interview anytime; all gathered data are confidential. Before we start, do you have any questions or concerns that have not been addressed? Is it okay for me to begin recording the interview? Thank you,

#### **Introduction**

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone with much to share about overcoming career barriers. This study aims to

understand individual experiences and identify advancement elements conducive to mitigating career barriers for senior enlisted females serving in the United States Navy. The research focuses on identifying common perceived obstacles and advantages that have helped pave your promotion path to a senior enlisted female leader within the U.S. Navy. You will be advised that the confidentiality of the information you provide will be limited by disclosing any information that falls under mandatory reporting.

### **Interview Questions**

***Research Question 1.*** How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7- E9) understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?

1. Please share a detailed account of your path to senior leadership during your time in the Navy.
2. What experiences defined your journey as a senior enlisted Navy woman?
3. How do these experiences make you feel?
4. What does a ‘barrier’ mean to you?
5. Please share any barriers you have experienced in your journey as a senior enlisted woman and describe the barriers that were the most challenging.
6. Please share how you conquered the barriers in your journey as a senior enlisted woman and how the Navy or other large organizations can change to remove experienced barriers.

***Research Question 2.*** How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make

meaning of experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?

1. How do you define success?
2. What experiences contributed to your success as a senior enlisted woman?
3. Please share some of the successes you experienced in the Navy as a senior enlisted woman.
4. Please share the most beneficial characteristics or persons that have helped you succeed as a senior enlisted woman in a male-dominated organization.
5. What advice would you offer to a woman aspiring to achieve a top leadership position in a male-dominated organization?
6. What advantages do you feel being a woman provided you on your path to senior leadership?

**Final Question**

7. Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss barriers or success? Anything that I have not addressed in this interview?

Thank you, and I appreciate that you took the time to contribute to necessary research on women overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization. My contact information is on the consent form; please contact me if you have any questions.

### Appendix C: Expert Validation

Hello, Retired [Rank] [Name of Evaluator],

I request your participation in a field study in my doctoral research study on the underrepresentation of U.S. Navy senior enlisted women in a male-dominated organization. This study explores the experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. The field study contains 10 interview questions on the lived experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women.

This study will explore the experiences of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9 in the United States, overcame career barriers, and succeeded in a male-dominated organization. The purpose of this field study is to test the relevancy, open-ended, and applicability of the interview questions through the expertise of qualified retired senior enlisted women who served in pay grades E7-E9. The findings could uncover information that may lead the military to gain insights into integrating and developing women leaders and enhancing policies. It may also lead women who overcame barriers to mentor and assist other women in all stages of their careers. The main research questions for this study are: Research question one: How do U.S. Navy senior enlisted women (E7- E9) make meaning of experiences for overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization? Research question two: How do U.S. Navy senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?" The 10 interview questions are below.

***Research question one.*** How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7- E9)

understand their experiences overcoming career barriers in a male-dominated organization?

1. Please share your journey in the Navy and how you became a senior enlisted woman.
2. What experiences describe your journey as a U.S. Navy senior enlisted woman?
3. How do you make sense of these experiences?
4. Please share the barriers you have experienced in your journey as a senior enlisted woman.
5. Please share how you conquered the barriers in your journey as a senior enlisted woman.

**Research question two.** How do U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women (E7-E9) make meaning of experiences of success in a male-dominated organization?

1. What experiences contributed to your success as a senior enlisted woman?
2. What are some successes you experienced in the Navy as a senior enlisted woman?
3. Please share the most beneficial characteristics that have helped you succeed as a senior enlisted woman in a male-dominated organization.
4. What advice would you offer to a woman aspiring to achieve a top leadership position in a male-dominated organization?
5. How do you define success?

This study will be a qualitative phenomenological study that includes interviewing U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who overcame career barriers and achieved success in a male-dominated organization. The recruitment procedure will

comprise a purposeful sample of U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women. The participants must be U.S. Navy retired senior enlisted women who served 20 years or more on land or sea. Data collection will include 10 semi-structured open-ended interview questions. I will transcribe and code the interview questions. Then I will analyze the data extracted from the interview questions with NVivo software.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this field study and supporting my doctoral research as a qualified U.S. Navy senior enlisted woman. Please review, critique, and comment on the 10 interview questions to determine if they are open-ended and if they establish alignment between the research question and interview questions via email. I also request that you offer feedback and suggestions for improvement. Thank you for your assistance.