

2022

## Lived Experience of Female Veterans and Civilian Workplace Integration

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Angela Karnes Padrón

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Lived Experience of Female Veterans and Civilian Workplace Integration

by

Angela Karnes Padrón

MS, University of Phoenix, 2009

BS, Park University, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial-Organizational Psychology

Walden University

May 2022

## Abstract

This phenomenological study used Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explore the lived experiences of female veterans throughout their military transition phases to their postmilitary experiences, including successfully obtaining civilian employment. The purpose was to increase understanding of the unique experiences and needs of females during this transition and learn the success factors leading to gaining employment. This can help deter the increasing unemployment, depression, stress, and anxiety rates for female veterans. The social identities while in the military and postmilitary were studied to understand the catalysts to female transition issues. A semistructured interview was conducted with eight female veterans that had transitioned from military service within 3 years. They all had at least 4 years active duty with an honorable discharge. The data was analyzed to uncover the following superordinate with subordinate themes: experiences during the military around support systems and navigating the culture and mindset; gender differences regarding the difference in treatment and perceptions related to gender; preparation for transition relating to building networks, transition programs, and being planful; actual transition experience associated to the struggles and lessons learned; and postmilitary experiences as they relate to military/civilian identity and mindset. The findings of this study may be useful to those seeking to support military organizations, transitional organizations, local communities, and future transitioning female service members through social change.

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## Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my husband, Rodolfo “Rodi” Padron. While my name is on this work, you were the one holding the household together and loving our boys throughout. When asked if I should embark on this journey, you said, “why wouldn’t you?” I love you dearly and you inspire me every day as the most courageous person I know.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents. To my amazing and inspiring papa, Ron, who has always shown me love and affection and truly inspires me to be a better human with the strongest of wills and kindest of hearts. To my strong mother, Roxanne, who always demonstrated that hard work and running the household can be done together. Your work ethic has always been an example to never have excuses. To my awesome second mother, Kathy, who embraced me immediately with all the kindness and love a mother could have. I have always said you were an angel sent to our family. To the Marine in my family, Floyd, who has the deep loyalty and gentle heart of a Labrador and works hard every day without excuses. To my dear mother-in-law, Daisy, who loves so fiercely and protects those she loves with the heart of lioness and the poise of a queen. To my loving father-in-law, Rodolfo, who has spent a lifetime loving and serving his family through hard work, creativity, and entrepreneurship. I love you all dearly, and I am the most fortunate person to have you all as examples in my life and get to call you my parents.

I must dedicate this to my hearts, my sons Dylan (22) and Phoenix (2). You two are the reason I do everything I do, and you have been on this journey right alongside me.

You have foregone hugs, snuggles, walks, and quality time and your sacrifices will be remembered for as long as I can. Dylan, you are the reason I joined the military and had the opportunity to see a whole new world. Phoenix, you give our lives renewed purpose and meaning; we adore you truly. I hope to make you both proud as your mother. I cherish and love you as much as a person can, my two amazing humans. To my stepdaughter, Jordan. Your beautiful spirit and immediate embrace have always inspired me to grow and fight hard to learn more about becoming a better person on this journey. I love you and you'll never walk alone dolly. To my baby sister, Jillian. I love you like a daughter and encourage you to keep strong, stay true to yourself, and find your happiness and fulfillment. Our memories together are still just beginning.

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Finally, I dedicate this to the men and women that are serving our country or have served our country. You are not alone, your voices are mighty, and you make an impact every day! For as long as I am alive, I will work to pay forward what the military has provided for me on my path and will work on my slice of influence to make the struggles a little less and the path a little more clear.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Women have been serving in the U.S. military in some capacity for several decades and supporting it for centuries. With gender rights and civil movements, equality has been a major societal focus, and with increasing gender equality, there has been an increase in females choosing to join the military. The female population is growing at a faster rate than the male population and subsequently is the fastest growing veteran population.

Regardless of gender, those who join the military eventually have to separate from that service and transition back into the civilian sector once again. This transition may take place after a short term or after a long military career ending in retirement. Whatever the tenure of military service, there is a possibility for identifying with the military culture and a possibility of continuing to identify with the military culture when transitioning back into the civilian sector. This potentially causes the transitioning servicemember dual identities as they officially become a veteran.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the problem that female veterans may face during their transition and afterward and why understanding this transition through lived experiences is important. The research gaps and opportunities are shared to help locate where the research questions can support awareness and gain clarification of a growing field of inquiry. The purpose, significance, and conceptual framework for the study are outlined. The conceptual framework, identified as social identity theory (SIT), is introduced in Chapter 1 and leveraged throughout the remaining chapters. The nature and limitations of the study are also introduced in Chapter 1.

## **Problem Statement**

Female veterans are the fastest growing population among veterans, having reached approximately 2 million. Research regarding the experience of their transition into the civilian workforce is not well understood by the general population (Strong et al., 2018). Furthermore, female veterans have higher unemployment rates than male veterans (Strong et al., 2018). There is not as much information known about the struggle that female veterans face in their transition into civilian life compared to male veterans.

The Disabled American Veterans (DAV, 2014) organization has shared that many women who return from deployment and transition into civilian life suffer hardships in healthcare, employment, finance, housing, and social issues. The DAV (2014) discovered that women are more likely to be unemployed after their military service than their male counterparts. Kleykamp (2013) and Strong et al. (2018) discovered that unemployment for veterans was higher than for nonveterans and that female veterans had higher unemployment rates than male veterans.

The male experience of transitioning into the civilian sector from military service has been researched and shared, and the DAV (2014) has recognized that statistics and recently conducted reports show that there are significant differences in female veterans' experience, although those differences are not well understood by researchers. The chief executive officer of the DAV has stated that Department of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) programs have historically served the needs of men, but women are the fastest growing group of veterans by numbers, and their differing needs call for urgent adaptation (DAV, 2014).

Research has shown that contributing factors could include current VA policies, access to education and employment, support for those with mental illness and sexual trauma, and the social stigma of being a female veteran (Strong et al., 2018). Additionally, female veterans are 3 to 4 times more likely to become homeless than nonveteran females (Washington et al., 2010).

For veterans, workforce transition and assimilation can prove to have lasting effects, regardless of gender. With the lack of specific support for female veterans, there is vulnerability to the system in serving this population, leaving veterans without proper care. As an example, the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (NCVAS, 2013) provided statistics and profiles for female veterans of 9/11 and the differences between previous campaign veterans based on gender. The 9/11 veterans who served predominantly in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) represent the largest number of female veterans.

Research on female military veterans has become more important with the recent growth of the population to 2 million members (DAV, 2014; Strong et al., 2018), which has increased the need for a greater understanding of the differences in the needs of female veterans to offer better postmilitary support. It is known that female veterans have different needs than male veterans, but those needs have not been well studied (NCVAS, 2013). A greater understanding of the distinguishing needs of female veterans could allow for better capacity to serve them in areas such as social programs, healthcare, or employment transition programs.



### **Purpose**

Exploring the experience of a female veteran transitioning into the civilian work sector entailed a qualitative approach that addressed thematic factors such as the approach of integration and relative experience through onboarding to within 3 years post military service. I conducted this study with the aim of understanding the experience that female veterans have in their first 3 years of transition into the civilian work sector and some potential experiences leading to increasing unemployment rates that many female veterans face in comparison to their male veteran counterparts and female nonveteran counterparts.

### **Significance**

The concept of military-to-civilian transition (MCT) is internationally known (Castro et al., 2014) and has been studied previously. The primary contributions to the field consist of differences in the gender experiences of military veterans and the gap in the support between those genders, based on their differences. As mentioned, at approximately 2 million strong, the female veteran group is now the fastest growing veteran population (Strong, et al, 2018). This increase has left many of them without proper healthcare, mental support, and other support services for their unique needs.

Social identity theory (SIT) framed the case study. When people identify themselves with a certain group, they perceive themselves as psychologically entangled with that group and the associated experiences, successes, and failures of that group—in this case, the military group and the civilian group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). People psychologically identify with their group based on how unique their group is compared to

others within a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998). A person's identity would presumably have to change given this theory, and the associated psychological impact of that change remains unknown.

Jasso (2002) described identity theories as having an orientation to self and to a particular group, subgroup, and to categorize in a society of two subgroups. Not only are the military group and the civilian group associated with two different identities, but the construct consists of having female military group identities and female civilian group identities. Jasso went on to explain that the qualitative characteristics of identity theories are considered unorderable characteristics, using examples such as race, ethnicity, country of residence, language, even religion and relating to this case study gender.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Social identification theory involves categorizing gender, age, organizational membership, religion, and other groups that people associate themselves and others into, and most people categorize themselves into more than one (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Van den Broek, 2021). Social identification theory involves the perception of having oneness with or belongingness to specific human categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gurlek & Tuna, 2018), and military veterans, more specifically female veterans, are a category often with a strong sense of belongingness and oneness. Jasso (2002) shared that primordial outcomes of identity theories include multiple ultimate or quasi-ultimate ends, such as the concepts of happiness, self-esteem, self-worth, and status. The civilian population, more specifically the female population in the workplace, has a different categorical identification. This case study aimed to uncover some of the primordial

outcomes such as the experiences that female veterans had regarding happiness, self-esteem, self-worth, or status throughout their transition from military service to their first successful civilian job position.

Identification with the military and identification as a civilian can guide the experience of a female veteran through their transition. When identifying with a certain group, people must perceive themselves as entangled psychologically with that group and the associated experiences, successes, and failures of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gurlek & Turner, 2018). People psychologically identify with their group based partly on how distinguishing the group is from others in a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek, 2021). Moreover, individuals psychologically identify with those with whom they share certain personal characteristics that are comparatively rare (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek, 2021). There is more detailed information available in Chapter 2 of this study.

### **Research Questions**

RQ 1—Qualitative: What are the female military veteran experiences that contribute to military-to-civilian transition?

RQ 2—Qualitative: How do female military veterans who have transitioned to the civilian workforce within the last 3 years describe how their social identity enabled them to successfully transition?

### **Nature of the Study**

This case study used a qualitative approach with a conceptual framework having a phenomenological focus. Qualitative research is rational and consistent in obtaining an

increased awareness of a phenomenon. An example would be the perceptions of female veterans' experience of transitioning from the military to civilian work cultures.

The conceptual framework indicates that individuals construct subjective meaning from their experiences and therefore is aligned with exploring individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. The phenomenological design is aligned with increasing understanding of the unique influential factors that are the female veteran's experience. As a case study, a more in-depth examination of the phenomenon exists within the target sample population (Patton, 2015). The target population was female veterans who had recently (within 3 years) transitioned from their military role to a civilian job.

### **Definitions**

This section includes some of the definitions that may need clarification as used throughout this study. The definitions are intended to provide alignment and understanding of their usage in this research.

*Bracketing*: A process that involves the researcher compartmentalizing any previous experiences or knowledge related to the studied phenomena to collect an unbiased representation of the participants' lived experiences (Chan et al., 2013).

*Commissioned officer*: The highest levels of military members in the ranks of O-1 to O-10, which are designated as leaders of enlisted ranks (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).

*Department of Defense (DoD)*: The DoD represents all branches of the military to include the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines, and Navy (DAV, 2014).

*Enlisted member:* Member in the military with the lowest ranks from E-1 to E-9 and can be comprised of nonleaders (E-1 to E-4) and leaders (E-5 to E-9) in advanced enlisted ranks (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).

*Honorable discharge:* This represents the category of a military veteran who was discharged from their military service, as determined by VA, and helps determine the benefits that the veteran will become eligible for (Szymendera, 2006). The honorable discharge category is the most favorable for the veteran and assumes that there was no bad conduct involved in the discharge (Szymendera, 2006).

*Military sexual trauma:* Occurs when a member serving in the military experiences sexual coercion, sexual assault, or any threatening behavior of a sexual nature (Barth et al., 2016; Mankowski & Everett, 2016).

*Noncommissioned Officer (NCO):* This represents the enlisted ranks that are considered for leadership positions in all military branches (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).

*Nonveteran:* A person who has not served in any military branch of service in an active duty, National Guard, or reservist capacity (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 2013).

*Veterans:* Members who have previously served as active duty members, reservists if called to active duty during their reserve time, or national guardsman in the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, or Navy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

*Veteran identity:* The self-concept that a person uses to identify themselves from their experience within the military (Di Leone et al., 2015).

### **Assumptions**

There were multiple assumptions made throughout this study. It was assumed that the research participants would be truthful about their experiences and that they would answer each question asked of them. The questions asked would be perceived as nonthreatening and would not lead to any incriminating responses. With the lack of research on female veterans, especially their phenomenological experiences, this study provided them with a unique opportunity to speak about their transition experience. Additionally, for this reason, it was assumed that the participants were interested in the purpose of the study and the subsequent findings.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study addressed the lived experiences that female veterans have during their transition from military service to their first civilian workplace following military service. The scope of the study was focused on female veterans who had transitioned and successfully started their first postmilitary job within the last 3 years. The data were collected with semistructured interviews from voluntary participants. These interviews were recorded safely and professionally transcribed. Participants gave permission for this recording and understood that their identities would be safeguarded.

### **Limitations**

Because potential researcher bias was anticipated, deliberate measures were used to prevent this. Due to increased awareness of potential bias, bracketing was used for any personal experiences, and reflective journaling was used throughout data collection, coding, data analysis, and sharing of results and interpretations of the findings.

The study did not include male veterans and their lived experiences through the stages of transition into their civilian workplace. Another limitation to the study was the intentional decision to ensure that the female veterans had transitioned from military service within the last 3 years. This time limitation could have impacted the transferability of the findings and implications for those female veterans from previous eras. Further, the criteria to be active duty for at least 4 years was intended to capture those female veterans who had assimilated their social identities fully into the military organization but could limit the applicability for female veterans who were either not active duty or had less time than 4 years of service.

Challenges could have occurred in this study regarding the nature of recruitment, information sharing, and consent. The personal disclosure of participants or of the researcher, being authentic with responses and experiences, and overall credibility of the research findings could be limitations due to ethical issues (Israel & Hay, 2006). The role of the researcher should also be to avoid exploiting participants, to avoid gathering harmful information, and to respect potential power imbalances (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ensuring anonymity and safeguarding data under lock for at least 5 years could have reassured prospective participants of the study. None of these issues occurred during the interview or subsequent phases.

### **Summary**

This study focused on the phenomenological experiences of female veterans as they transitioned from their military service into their first workplace within 3 years. This allowed for a greater understanding of what female servicemembers may experience as

they go through the transition to the civilian sector and an improved ability to anticipate needs and support specifically for females. Furthermore, research regarding female veterans in general is lacking, and increased awareness of their experiences adds to the totality of understanding any gender differences as they relate to military service, identity, and military to civilian transition.

This study explored those experiences with 8 research participants. Chapter 2 provides a detailed literature review of topics such as female veterans, military-to-civilian transition, and social identity theory. Chapter 3 offers the research design and methodology for this study. This includes areas of ethical considerations, methods of data collection, and qualitative design with consideration of my role as the researcher. In Chapter 4, I share the results of the study following interviews and qualitative data analysis. Finally, Chapter 5 displays an interpretation of the findings, implications, recommendations, and future considerations for related studies.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I integrate and align the literature reviewed for this phenomenological study. I outline the literature that supports the theoretical nature of the study and review the research that relates to the research questions. The purpose of this research study was to provide a greater context for and understanding of the transition from military service to the civilian workforce for female veterans.

In this review, I explore the potential causes behind societal issues such as female veteran unemployment and homelessness, supported by beliefs and attitudes during the reintegration phase into the civilian sector. Influential sources based on Schlossberg's (2011) transition model are explored. The review uncovers themes of military veteran transition experiences. These themes include unemployment, workplace transition, and identity challenges that individuals experience as they shift from military member to veteran and civilian worker. The review summarizes the literature adjoining the phenomenon regarding the transition from military service to the civilian workforce for females.

At present, studies regarding military veterans and their transition into the workforce have mainly involved male veterans, and there are insufficient data to understand the transition for female veterans (DAV, 2014). Male-dominated culture and sexual harassment and assault are contributors to transition challenges (Dichter & True, 2014). The lack of support focusing on female veterans could also be a contributor to the

higher unemployment rates that female veterans have relative to their male veteran counterparts (Strong et al., 2018).

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The search for research articles and data to support my study included multiple databases that provided a variety of recent and relevant articles, including dissertations related to the topic. Databases used for the research for this study included ProQuest, PsycInfo, PsycARTICLES, Google Scholar, Social Science, Sociology, SAGE Journals Online, Mendeley, and Thoreau. Thoreau was also used to recover relevant previously published dissertations. One of the research strategies was to identify recent graduate research on military veterans transitioning into civilian employment and examine research on female veteran transition issues. The research regarding PhD dissertations and graduate studies maintains some standardized practices which currently do not exist (Israel & Hay, 2006). Graduate research recovered articles on military members transitioning into the workspace in the following specific areas: enlisted Army veterans, enlisted female veterans, rural female veterans, Hispanic experiences, noncommissioned officer reintegration, female officer veterans, and combat veterans (Ahern et al., 2015; Floyd, 2020; James, 2017; Szelwach et al., 2011; Wilson, 2015). The studies considered were on similar topics and presented with similar chapter focuses.

Most research articles used were published within the last 5 to 10 years. These articles were specifically sorted to focus on peer-reviewed articles, published research articles, and scholarly journals. The keywords used in the search databases included *female veterans, military workplace transition, veteran workplace struggle, transition,*

*social identity theory, women veterans, military veteran transition, and female veteran transition.* I continued the search for research articles until I had achieved saturation on the topic of female veterans transitioning from the military service to the civilian workforce.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

A conceptual framework provides the foundation to examine problems that arise from literature (Imenda, 2014). It remains unclear whether one specific conceptual framework can entirely depict the full lived experiences of others (Hammond, 2015; Imenda, 2014). Researchers therefore use various models and theories to address career transitions and the transition process, and the study leveraged social identification theory as a foundation.

Social identification theory (SIT) involves categories of gender, age, organizational membership, religion, and so forth with which people associate themselves and others, with most people placing themselves in more than one category (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Van den Broek, 2021). Gurlek and Tuna (2018) stated that this theory is the most effective at distinguishing individuals and their social groups. They went on to state that organizational identity and organizational behavior related to identity form a foundation of social identification theory.

Identification with the military and the development of an identity as a civilian can help create the experience of a female veteran through this transition. When identifying with a certain group, people must perceive themselves as entangled psychologically with that group and the associated experiences, successes, and failures of

the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van den Broek, 2021). People psychologically identify with their group based partly on how distinguishing the group is from others in a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek; 2021). Furthermore, individuals psychologically identify with those with whom they share certain personal characteristics that are comparatively rare (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek, 2021). Van den Broek (2021) went on to explain that the attitudes of members within a group grow less favorable toward those members who are considered out of the group.

This framework indicates that individuals assign subjective meaning to their experiences, which aligns with the research aim of exploring individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of military-to-civilian transition and the factors in female veterans' experience. The phenomenological design of the study increased the understanding of the unique influential factors that affect the female veteran's experience. The study offered an in-depth examination of the phenomenon with the target sample population (Patton, 2015).

The population of interest in this study was female veterans who had recently transitioned from their military role to a civilian job. The experience during transition was studied through the framework of social identification theory and the multiple identities that female military members may have to make the transition to female veterans in the civilian workforce. Social identity theory specifically addresses how people psychologically identify with their group based on how unique their group is relative to others within a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den

Broek, 2021). I sought to understand female veterans' experience during workforce transition by using this theory to explore how they perceive themselves as psychologically entangled with their military identity and their civilian identity and the associated experiences of these groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van den Broek, 2021). The foundational framework that addresses how individuals work within a system and navigate their environment for adaptation and adoption came from Cooper and Caddick (2016). When people identify themselves with a certain group, they perceive themselves as psychologically entangled with that group and the associated experiences, successes, and failures of that group—in this case, the military group and the civilian group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van den Broek, 2021). People psychologically identify with their group based on how unique their group is from others within a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek, 2021). A person's identity would presumably have to change during the military-to-civilian transition.

A model for this study was Schlossberg's transition model, which focuses on coping assets of situation, self, support, and strategy and adult transition (Schlossberg, 2011). Ryan et al. (2011) called these resources the 4 S's, which can enable or impede a transition that the individual considers successful. Schlossberg (2011) said that the first step that a person must take when adapting to a change is knowing the different types of transitions. She shared that the transition types can be categorized as anticipated change, unanticipated change, and nonevents (Schlossberg, 2011). A female veteran can transition from military service to the civilian sector either expectedly, with sometimes several months of preparation for the transition, or can be discharged from military

service with very little notice, depending on their circumstances. The time allotted for preparation can also impact the individual's perception of their transition, which Schlossberg said is key to the transition process. She also claimed that other researchers may not place as much emphasis on the importance of how the individuals perceive their circumstances. As an example, if a person is discharged from the military on short notice due to a disciplinary action, they may have a different perception of the transition from someone who has completed their planned years for a full retirement from the military, often 20 years or more.

In Schlossberg's (2011) transition model, an event leading to the change would be the disciplinary action, and a nonevent might be simply electing to get out of the military; either way can impact the individual's transition and their perception of the transition. Anderson and Goodman (2014) shared that individuals react and respond differently to what is seemingly the same exact transition, which supports a different experience for female veterans transitioning out of the military to the civilian workforce, regardless of whether this fits Schlossberg's definition of anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent.

Researchers have used other conceptual frameworks to examine the topic of veterans transitioning. Alexander (2014) used critical feminist theory to navigate the differences between male and female veterans' lived experiences when transitioning to higher education. Another example is Davis (2008) using feminist theory to describe the basis that gender is a necessary variable that researchers need to appropriately understand lived experiences. Researchers have shared a career "adapt-abilities" competency-based framework for studies where subjects were going through a transition in the middle of

their career (Brown et al., 2012). Researchers have outlined the competencies for this framework and included those that they saw as critical factors in a successful career transition: control, curiosity, commitment, confidence, and concern (Brown et al., 2012). Many military veterans transition from the military to the pursuit of higher education. The focus of military and civilian careers impacts female veterans' identities through their transition.

Models can also be used to support research and case studies. A dissertation on enlisted female veterans transitioning out of the military greatly leveraged the grief model by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (Wilson, 2015). This outlines the stages of grief and associated feelings depicted by denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Although this grief model is well known for the stages of grieving through a loss, specifically death, many researchers have understood it as a transitional model for change in general (McAlearney et al., 2015).

This study presents theoretical implications for the lived experiences expressed by female veterans who have transitioned from the military to working as a civilian. In addressing the impacts and implications of female veterans transitioning and reintegrating into the civilian workforce from serving in the military, this study was aimed to increase general awareness. This increased awareness gave the participants a catalyst for sharing their experience with the incentive that with more awareness, there will be an opportunity for greater understanding of female veteran workplace struggles and transition difficulties and greater support for future transitioning female veterans.

## Background

The databases searched were ProQuest, Social Science, Sociology, EBSCOHost, and Thoreau using the keywords *female veterans*, *workplace transition*, *veteran workplace struggle*, and *female veteran transition*. The current research on workplace transition or integration for military veterans is primarily focused on male veterans. This research has shown there are some variations between female veterans and male veterans and their female and male civilian counterparts overall.

1. The foundational framework that addresses how individuals work within a system and navigate their environment for adaption and adoption came from Cooper et al. (2016).
2. DAV (2014) provided research concerning the culture for female veterans in comparison to men. DAV also shared research on the rapid rate of growth in the female veteran population.
3. McGuire (1984), Mehra et al. (1998), and Van den Broek (2021) described the psychological associations that individuals make with categorical groups. This research helps make the potential distinction between associations with the military group and the civilian group psychologically.
4. NCVAS (2011) helped in understanding the benefits available to female veterans and the utilization of those benefits. There is a greater understanding of the history for female veterans in recent decades.



5. The rationale for using a case study to understand the target sample population and examine the topic at a deeper level through experiential observations and learnings came from the research of Patton (2015).
6. The connection between female veteran unemployment rates and concepts such as social stigma, VA policies, and mental healthcare was made by Strong et al. (2018).
7. Ashforth and Mael (1989), Gurlek and Turner (2018), Tajfel and Turner (1985), and Van den Broek (2021) supported social identification theory, this study's theoretical framework, by outlining the ways in which individuals associate themselves and others into categories. Some of those categories include gender, age, and religion, which helps associate female veterans with their environment.

### **Methodological Literature**

Studies regarding military-to-civilian transition experiences are not well known by the broader population (Strong et al., 2018). Female veterans now have higher unemployment rates than male veterans, and according to the Department of Labor (DOL) and NCVAS, this population is increasing (DOL, 2014; NCVAS, 2013; Strong et al., 2018). The DOL (2014) shared 2013 statistics indicating that 9% of the population was comprised of military veterans and that out of the 21.4 million veterans, 2.2 million were female. The Women's Research and Educational Institute (2006) estimated that by 2020, 10% of all veterans and 20% of veterans under the age of 45 would be female. The number of females serving in the military has continued to grow quickly, and in

2014, they made up 14% of all active-duty military branches (Dichter & True, 2014). In 2018, it was confirmed that at approximately 2 million members strong, female veterans were the fastest growing veteran population (Strong et al., 2018).

### **Qualitative Methodology**

A qualitative methodology was the appropriate approach to better understand and examine the lived experiences of female veterans as they transitioned from their military roles and identities to their civilian roles and identities. A qualitative methodology was used because the female subjects were able to share their life experiences, and the format allowed more opportunity for the participants to express themselves more openly than other methodologies. Gordon (2014) shared that quantitative methodologies can restrict the level of content and depth that a respondent can include in their interview. He also recognized that there is a shortage of qualitative studies done on the experiences of veterans in general.

Strong et al. (2018) described a case study with a 28-year-old female Army Veteran that had transitioned to the civilian sector 4 years prior in which she was able to relay in detail her experiences as it relates to the challenges and difficulty with the transition and the impact of the military identity. This experience was later used to understand ways that social work can support female veterans (Strong et al., 2018). This level of information and context would likely not have been fully realized with a quantitative approach.

Case study research involves studying a case (real-life event/s), is time bound, and has a certain place or location associated (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The case outline in this

study was that of female veterans who are transitioning into the civilian sector. The timing was associated with the transition period from military service to the first post-military civilian position. The location associated was the experiences of the female veterans associated with their time spent in the military service, during the transition period, and the environment of their first civilian workplace.

The approach of the study was phenomenological, and this type of interview offered an interactive process that was focused on uncovering the deeper direct meaning and fundamental nature of a phenomenon (Roberts, 2013). This study was best suited and aligned using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to support the research questions and topics and allowed for a deepened understanding of the lived experiences of female veterans throughout their transition process.

As the example described above with the 28-year-old female Army Veteran, the approach was phenomenological and provided strong detail, which is outlined in narrative form in the study (Strong et al., 2018). The approach was strong in providing context and specificity and the discussion from professionals following it was a helpful approach to understand the researcher's interpretation of the narrative from the female veteran's accounts. A potential drawback to this approach may leave researchers vulnerable to criticism, as their discussions are interpretations from a subjective nature to draw their conclusions from the qualitative material. The researcher assumes this risk when choosing to share the narrative form of a research subject's lived experiences and the professional discussion to follow.

### **Military Veterans' General Issues**

The review uncovered some general veteran issues and themes that could impact the lived experiences of female veterans during their transition from the military service to the civilian workplace. As mentioned, literature regarding military workplace transition or integration for military veterans has been primarily focused on male veterans and their experience with the transition to a civilian workforce. The DAV (2014) however, has provided research about the culture for female veterans as it compares to men. It also displays the fast rate of growth of the female veteran population. The compiled DAV research has also shown that some variations exist between female veterans and male veterans and their female and male civilian counterparts overall.

The literature has found that veterans have higher unemployment rates than non-veterans and struggle with issues like homelessness because of it (Castro et al., 2014; Hamilton et al., 2011; Kleykamp, 2013; Washington et al., 2010). The literature also shows that post-military support and community programs are tailored to and mainly service male veteran populations (DAV, 2014; NCVAS, 2010; NCVAS, 2013).

A study using 11 veterans from the United Kingdom described their transition into the workforce using three different areas: characteristics of a military life; loss as experienced upon return to civilian life; and the attempt to bridge the gap between these two lives (Brunger et al., 2013). Brunger however recognizes that the research was limited to male former service members and female veterans were not included.

Using contemporary sociological theory, Higate (2001) describes institutionalization as a factor similar among service members and seeks to relate the

displacement to the homelessness that some ex-servicemembers experience. Higate shares that the rigorous integrations processes that civilian recruits initially go through to transition into the military and study the “resettlement” that they go through when transitioning back to the civilian sector after their military service.

### **Military Veterans’ Identity**

As established through the theoretical foundation, an individual’s identity was the platform for examining the transition of female veterans from military service to civilian work. To understand the impact of their transition and lived experiences through the transition, a basic understanding of the identity of veterans was necessary. Understanding how prior military members identify themselves through their link to military service and how that sense of identity impacts their identity as a civilian and veteran was necessary.

A veteran identity can be explored by examining three areas: identity as it relates to identity theory, military and civilian cultural differences and similarities, and how identity strain can occur between competing identities like a military and civilian identity. This approach helped to uncover potential factors that can support a transition or create difficulty for the female veteran experience through the transition process.

### **Theory of Veteran Identity**

Understanding the concept of identity is foundational for anyone researching the experiences of military veterans. A veteran identity is an ex-service member’s own self-concept derived from their lived experiences while in the military (Di Leone et al., 2015). During military service everything from the specific job title/role, branch of service, and an attained rank makes up a person’s identity (Cogan, 2015). As an example, a retired

Colonel leading a nursing unit may see themselves as a Colonel, a high-ranking nurse in their civilian life as well. If this self-identity conflicts with the reality of the civilian structure, like becoming a nurse at a more tactile level, there could be a struggle with multiple identities. Powell and Baker (2014) highlighted a common theme across various theories of identity relating to individuals possessing multiple identities to establish and maintain relationships with members of various social groups and sub-/cultures.

From the onset of military experiences during the recruitment and integrating phases of basic training and job training or skill building, there are deliberate processes designed to indoctrinate members into the military culture (Cooper et al., 2018). Cooper et al. referred to this process as a forced separation from an individual's civilian identity into their new military identity. Individuals begin to identify themselves early as military service members.

Their new culture is the foundation of a military member's identity and their self-concept, how they perceive themselves (Demers, 2013). The sense of identity may become stronger the longer the member remains in military service within the military culture. There are military jobs that are not necessarily within the core of the military structure and therefore culture. As an example, a military recruiter may find themselves in a small town far from a military installation. Their experience of the military culture may be limited compared with the members that live and report to work daily on a military installation. Therefore, their identity may be more pliable to the transition to a civilian worker than those living and working as service members within the core military culture.

To understand the professional identity of female veterans, specifically enlisted war veterans, it was discovered that females strategically adopted more masculine identities to better align with the dominant masculine cultural traits (Pawelczyk, 2014). Woodward and Winter (2006) use the term military femininity to describe the identity that females struggle with serving alongside male counterparts. Spychala (2016) says the experiences that females have during combat is not taken as seriously compared to males during combat and the struggles that civilians face. This difference in perception dates back to the Army Nurses of World War II (Spychala). This strategy is to develop what female veterans consider to be adapting and blending to the process of the military culture. The adapting and blending process is familiar to any individual seeking alignment to their established culture. This adopted identity can come at a cost, but the perceived reward is that of acceptance and respect from colleagues.

Once out of the military and into the civilian sector, there are distinct identities between females and males and their willingness to identify as a veteran. Many researchers discovered through quantitative and qualitative methodologies that females were less likely to identify themselves as a veteran than their male counterparts (Alexander, 2014; Barno et al., 2015; Ender et al., 2015; Zephyrin, 2016). The data showed that 55% of males responded as a veteran, while 30% of females responded as a veteran (Burdett et al., 2012). Despite some of the advantages to being identified as a veteran, the number of veterans in general willing to identify as such in the workplace warrants further examination. Approximately 70% of females in a civilian workforce chose not to identify as a veteran, however the literature shows some contrasting views of

female veterans. Di Leone et al., (2015) used the variables of identity centrality and positive regard for veteran identity for 407 female veterans to discover a favorable impression for female veterans. Another contrasting view for female veterans came from researchers discovering that 95% were proud to be veterans; but, during the transition to assimilate to their civilian environments and new culture many would not identify as a veteran but adopt multiple identities (Alexander, 2014; Barno et al., 2015; Ender et al., 2015). These researchers found a positive association with the participants' current age and the duration of their military service, meaning if they had experienced combat or deployments there may be a different veteran identity association than those that did not experience combat. (Barno et al., 2015). The identity of female veterans correlated with their choice to either use or view of Veteran's Affairs (VA) for health care. The stronger the view for VA health care, the greater self-identity for female veterans, as assuming a relationship with the military by extension through the VA. This contrasts those veterans that do not have any lingering association with their military service. This is a beginning to understand female veteran's self-concept and identity to their military service and their conflicting and/or secondary identity as a civilian veteran.

### **Identity Through Culture**

As explained, a veteran's identity is directly associated with their military experiences and the military culture. It is necessary to understand the foundational differences between a military culture and a civilian culture into which a veteran is transitioning to better understand the identity conflicts. Serving means having high integrity and a greater character and quality of person to be able to service in the military.



Having high integrity and character can be a part of military culture and often an individual's identity while serving. There is a strong kindship, usually referred to as camaraderie among those members within the culture. Therefore, veterans are conditioned to having experiences with their comrades and colleagues that they perceive as distinguishing them from the civilian population (Lancaster & Hart, 2015). Only .05% out of the 1% that choose to join the military make it through the rigorous constraints and restrictions necessary to be a part of the culture (Hazle et al., 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011), further supporting the elite nature and closeness of those members that can become a member of the military culture.

There are also distinct values and principles that guide the military culture that are not as obviously and regularly shared in the civilian culture. As an example, the United States Air Force has the core values of *Integrity First*, *Service Before Self*, and *Excellence in All We Do* (White, 2015). These values are ingrained into recruits and incumbents and reinforced through the tenure of military service. The other branches each have their distinct but similar values and guiding principles used to support the mission objectives that can influence a strong identification with the culture. These shared values and principles drive behaviors and beliefs to form a military member's lived experience (Westphal and Convoy, 2015). This can steer military members towards familiar surroundings and preferences when in the civilian sector. As an example, researchers found that veterans preferred structure as they knew it in the military much more than what they find unfamiliar in the civilian culture, there was no distinction for female veterans made (Bennett et al., 2015; Kukla et al., 2015). Additionally, hiring managers

were found to be less likely to hire veterans because of their perceptions of the difference in military and civilian cultures, leading to a potential impression of rigidity or inflexibility from civilian managers to their veteran colleagues (Stone & Stone, 2015).

These differences and the conflict that veterans experience between the two cultures has led to what McAllister et al. (2015) calls the veteran identity strain (Vet-IS). These researchers associated the inhibiting strain the veteran's experience as increasing unemployment (McAllister et al., 2015). There is a clear correlation to homelessness, depression, and other veteran struggles without an ability to secure civilian employment. McAllister's research consisted of 90% male participants, not a true population sample consistent with the ratio of male to female veterans.

Contrastingly, there is also a desire to hire veterans due to their very traits and characteristics adopted from their military culture and identity. Organizations are increasingly deeming themselves as veteran friendly and working to appeal to a veteran's identity to take advantage of the benefits that a veteran can bring to their work objectives and civilian culture (Heineman, 2016). Again, no distinction was made for female veterans; however, Wilson (2015) found that enlisted female veterans had difficulty with their identities during the transition period due to a fear of starting over when redeveloping a new identity as a veteran and a civilian. For this reason, James (2016), Wilson (2015) and Haecker (2014) recommended that there be more research studies that look at the identity among the female veteran population specifically to determine further distinction.

### **Female Military Veteran Issues**

As mentioned, even with research terms like *military veteran transition* and *military workplace transition*, articles discussing female veterans brought limited results. There was a noticeable increase regarding female veterans with more recent military campaigns like Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Afghanistan (NCVAS, 2015; Nunnink, et al., 2010). This was aligned with an increase in the female military recruits and eventually veteran population overall.

Dichter and True (2014) discovered gender-based experiences including a male dominated culture in the military, having the responsibility of caring for family members, increased potential for sexual harassment and assault often contributed to women departing the military. DAV (2014) provides research around the culture for female veterans as it compares to men. It also shares the research around the rapid rate of growth in the female veteran population.

The connection between female veteran unemployment rates and concepts like social stigma, Veteran's Administration policies, and mental healthcare is made by Strong et al. (2018). Further examination of military veteran identity suggests that a female veteran's identity can contribute to the high level of stress during the transition between military and civilian sectors (Demers, 2013). Demers described how there are so few research articles involving female veterans compared to male veterans and understanding the identity that female veterans have has become difficult. Gender harassment was one of the major stressors that female veterans expressed, and the stigmas contribute to their associated identity (Demers, 2013).

## **Mental Health**

An estimated 93% of female veterans have experienced a traumatic event in their lifetimes (Williams et al., 2018). More females have served in or near combat zones and have had more combat disabilities or sexual trauma with less access to care than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2012; Segal & Lane, 2016). The impact on female veteran's mental health could be correlated to this increase of exposure to traumatic issues with less of an ability to get support with the lasting impact of the trauma.

Williams et al. (2018) discovered that female veterans have a rate of depression rate of 29% in their lives and male veterans had a rate of 16% and female veterans had a 21% post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rate while civilian females had a rate of 5%, increasing their mental health morbidity. Veterans have higher unemployment rates due to the complex nature of their injuries, which include mental health issues like PTSD and depression (Dillahunt-Aspillaga et al., 2014). Due to only reported numbers (those willing to self-report), mental health issues like PTSD and traumatic brain injuries (TBI) occur in 1 of every 6 military veterans, and potentially greater numbers if there was not a fear of loss of rank or stature when it relates to self-reporting mental health issues (Jones & Breen 2015; Kranke et al., 2015; Sharp et al., 2015; White House, 2012).

Female veteran's mental health challenges have more devastating impacts than male veterans (Prokos & Cabage, 2015). Following research, Zephyrin (2016) promoted that healthcare providers needed to have a better understanding of impacts that serving in the military can have on female veteran's overall mental well-being. This could be a correlation to the increasing female veteran unemployment rates, as compared to male

veteran unemployment rates. However, the access to healthcare variable is still a factor. Researchers have recognized that veteran healthcare services are focused on the needs of male veterans (Bergman et al., 2015; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). The Veteran's Administration is not accommodating the needs of female veterans according to the women's overall mental health assessment of needs (WOMAN) survey results (Kimerling et al., 2015b). Mental health challenges are a prevalent issue for female veterans impacting their employment, compounded by a healthcare system that does not fully accommodate female needs and provide access comparable to male veterans.

### **Military Veteran Employment Transition**

With a lack of understanding female veteran complexity due to lack of focused research, identity conflicts between two potentially very different cultures, potential mental health issues and lack of access, and an increased population having experienced combat and other traumatic events employment transition could be a challenge as female veterans move away from their military service. Veterans often feel tremendous pressure to get civilian employment just following their military service, while others seek higher education (Moore, 2015). These stressors and those associated with the built-in comforts of military culture like guaranteed paychecks and allowances, excellent healthcare available, and a typically set schedule and routine are often hard to come by in the civilian sector.

### **Female Veteran Workplace Transition**

Studies have shown that the unemployment rates for female veterans are greater than both female civilians and male veterans. Kleykamp (2013) disclosed that the

unemployment rate for female veterans (13.7%) was almost double the unemployment rate of civilian females (7.3%) with no military history. One of the causes of this disparity for female veterans is that their ability to transfer their experience into civilian credentials may be due to having more specialized training for their military career field (Mankowski & Everett, 2016). Further research has shown that employers could value civilian experience more highly than military experience for females (MacLean, 2016). MacLean also found that there was a gap in understanding the military occupations, particularly as they relate and transfer to a civilian equivalent. There may be a perception that hiring managers do not view military members as being similar in the role of customer, client, patient etc. The inability for hiring managers, recruiters, and human resource professionals to understand the thousands of occupations in the military have a civilian equivalent can expressly create an unemployment problem for female or male veterans (Stone & Stone, 2015).

Although unemployment challenges are working against female veterans, when they do successfully transition to the workforce, they are more likely than civilian females to obtain a professional or management position (NCVAS, 2013). This is possibly due to the recognizable leadership qualities often needed to be a military member. During a research study using retired veteran's resumes, it was noted that veteran's terminology could be confusing for civilian employers, that knowledge and skills were weakly represented, and veterans failed to highlight their leadership experiences from their military career (Arendt and Sapp, 2014). This was not distinguished by gender and the research regarding female veteran workplace transition

remains scarce. However, the inability to translate and transfer attained experiences into civilian knowledge, skills, and abilities limits employment prospects and opportunities leading to the still increasing unemployment rates for female veterans.

### **Summary**

A review of the literature found multiple articles uncovering the aspects of social identification theory, military culture, military identity, female veteran identity, military transition, and female and military workplace transition. As the number of female veterans continues to increase, the various studies and articles regarding their transition will increase.

As a result of the review on military identity, there was a strong theme to compare military culture with civilian culture as a strong contributor to veterans having multiple or conflicting identities upon transition between cultures. The discoveries were related to the specific challenges of military culture identity compared to that of civilian culture (Bennett et al., 2015; Kukla et al., 2015; McAllister et al., 2015; Wilson, 2015; Haecker, 2014; Heineman, 2016; Lancaster & Hart, 2015; James, 2017; Hazle et al., 2012; Pew Research Center, 2011). The conceptual framework review uncovered the social identity theory and the relevance and nature of social identity theory as it relates to the topic of female veterans transitioning with some associated models. Those models included Kübler-Ross' (1969) Grief Model, also referred to as the stages of grief and the Schlossberg's (2011) Transition Model. Imenda's (2014) research explained that a specified theoretical framework can give researchers the viewpoint to study a

phenomenon such as the lived experiences of female veterans through their perceived social identities as a military member and a civilian member.

Among the challenges that veterans face, particularly female veterans, mental health was identified as a leading category. The mental health barriers for female veterans included almost everyone (93%) having suffered a traumatic event in their lifetime and having higher mental health morbidity rates with depression and PTSD being increased (Williams et al., 2018). It was discovered that more female veterans have been either in combat zone or near them and experienced sexual assault than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2012; Segal & Lane, 2016). This was one of the leading contributors to transition challenges.

Another leading transition challenge is the ability to successful transition to civilian employment for veterans. The research was limited on distinguishing female veterans from the military veteran population; however, the employment challenges were vast enough to develop themes. One of those themes was the lack of ability of veterans to translate and transfer their knowledge, skills, experience, and abilities to appeal to civilian employers (Mankowski & Everett, 2016; MacLean, 2016; Arendt & Sapp, 2014). Civilian employers were also found to confuse military occupations and experience with transferrable and translatable civilian occupations and abilities (Stone & Stone, 2015).

The potential for conflicting or multiple identities with the vastly different military and civilian cultures, propensity towards mental health struggles, and known employment transition issues for veterans can create a difficult experience for female veterans transitioning from their military service to the civilian work force. The noted



lack of access to mental health support for female veterans (Kimerling et al., 2015b; Pew Research Center, 2012) multiplies the potential impact along with the lack of emphasis on female veteran needs (Strong et al., 2018; DAV, 2014).

Chapter 3 will provide an explanation regarding the qualitative methodology for this phenomenological case study. The focus of the chapter will be to examine the research questions with respect to the procedures to be used to collect data and analyze the data for the specified female veteran population. The details related to the data sources to be used will refer to potential reliability factors, limitations, and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The previous chapters have outlined the research focus and emphasized the problem based on current literature and research. It has been discovered that although there is a substantial amount of data and research on male veterans and the veteran transition process, there remains a deficiency in the level of research and focus on female veterans overall, including workplace transition and integration (DAV, 2013; NCVAS, 2013, 2015; Strong et al., 2018). This chapter addresses the research design and elements of the methodology that was used to examine the lived experiences of female veterans from their military careers to their first civilian workplace. I outline the research questions and describe the sample population, data sources, and strategies for data collection with ethical considerations.

This study addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1—Qualitative: What are the female military veteran experiences that contribute to military-to-civilian transition?

RQ 2—Qualitative: How do female military veterans who have transitioned to the civilian workforce within the last 3 years describe how their social identity enabled them to successfully transition?

I collected data to identify ways to potentially address the challenges that members of the female veteran population experience during and following their transition into the civilian workforce. This awareness was attained by understanding the perspective on the lived experiences of female veterans while trying to gain employment

in the civilian workforce immediately following military service. The research integrated social identity theory with the expressed lived experiences of the research participants. As mentioned in Chapter 2, military veterans often struggle with making the transition from a military identity, which they adopted from a unique military culture, to a newly adopted civilian and veteran identity (Cooper et al., 2018; Demers, 2013).

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological approach was used to explore the experience of a female veteran transitioning into the civilian work sector. The study was conducted to understand the lived experience that female veterans have within their first 36 months of transition into the civilian work sector. It was also conducted to understand the unemployment rates that many female veterans face in comparison to their male veteran counterparts and female nonveteran counterparts. The phenomenological approach was most appropriate to understand the lived experiences of these female military veterans. The transcendental design was appropriate for this study, as it included bracketing, which required compartmentalizing my own experience and potential biases regarding the research topic and setting aside that experience and bias (Chan, 2013).

The phenomenological approach was conducted through a transcendental or hermeneutic design (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The transcendental design is more descriptive in nature than the hermeneutic design, which is interpretive (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Bracketing was important to approaching the research without bias or predisposed notions.

### **Statement of Problem**

As mentioned, the population of female veterans has been growing at a faster rate than the population of male veterans, having reached about 2 million (Strong et al., 2018). The concept of military-to-civilian transition (MCT) is internationally known (Castro et al., 2014) and has been studied previously. The primary contributions to the field involve differences in the gender experiences of military veterans and the gap in support between genders, based on their differences. At approximately 2 million strong, female veterans are now the fastest growing veteran population (Strong et al., 2018). This increase has left many of them without healthcare, mental support, and other support services tailored for their unique needs.

The experience of female veterans during their transition into the civilian workforce is not understood by the general population (Strong et al., 2018). The problem increases in the workplace, as female veterans have a higher unemployment rate than males (Strong et al., 2018). As a result of the lack of emphasis and delineation between female and male veterans, there has not been a lot of information discovered or researched regarding the struggle that female veterans encounter in their transition into the civilian sector (Strong et al., 2018).

In addition to higher unemployment rates, many female veterans struggle with healthcare, finances, housing, and social issues during their transition into civilian life (DAV, 2014). In fact, female veterans are more prone to being unemployed following their military service than their male counterparts (DAV, 2014; Kleykamp, 2013). The male veteran experience of transitioning into the civilian sector from military service has

been focused on with published research, and the DAV (2014) recognizes that there are significant differences in female veterans' experience, though the differences are not well understood by researchers. The chief executive officer of the DAV has revealed that DoD and VA programs have traditionally served the needs of males, and with the population of female veterans growing, their different needs call for urgent adaptation (DAV, 2014).

Research shows that some contributing factors to the struggles of female veterans could be current VA policies, access to education and employment, support of mental illness and sexual trauma, and the social stigma of being a female veteran (Strong et al., 2018). Female veterans are also 3 to 4 times more likely to become homeless than nonveteran females (Washington et al., 2010). Lack of awareness of the experience of female veterans may perpetuate such patterns.

### **Role of Researcher**

In a qualitative study, the role of the researcher is vital from the design to the interviews to the data collection. A researcher must intentionally listen to their research participants with an unbiased ability to stay focused on the research questions. The researcher must be able to create a semistructured set of questions, adjusting questions or clarifying them as needed to capture phenomenological lived experiences as the study requires.

The role of the researcher in a study such as this one is to provide a safe and comfortable environment that allows participants to express themselves freely. I took the transcribed notes from the interviews and coded and analyzed the data. I bracketed my

prior experiences and biases to provide clean and unbiased interviews and analyses of the data.

I was responsible for arranging transcription services to ensure that there was an unbiased filter of the data. A field guide was used to track responses to interview questions and participants' body language. I was responsible for ensuring that the process was secure and sensitive to protect the participants, as well as for ensuring that it upheld the agreed-upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) process.

## **Methodology**

### **Target Population and Participation Selection**

Due to the qualitative research having a phenomenological approach, the target population and participant selection created a sample with the necessity of willingness to share lived experiences regarding personal and sensitive subject matter. The target population consisted of female veterans who were within their first 3 years of leaving their military service.

Purposeful and snowball sampling was used to target eight qualifying research participants. This target of eight participants reached data saturation. Curtis et al. (2000) described sampling for qualitative research as a process to generate a product where there can be conflicting criteria for subject selection and confidence that no further important ideas will emerge with future interviews. Purposeful sampling was used to be certain that the specified criteria needed to collect the data to answer the research questions were met (Robinson, 2014). The participants were from enlisted and commissioned military service, and all had at least 4 years of active military service. These criteria were applied

because I sought to properly assess the social identity theory grounded within the research. Some participants referred other qualified research participants; this is referred to as snowball sampling and supported the design.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The targeted population focused on nonprofit veteran-affiliated organizations and Survey Monkey to seek volunteers for interviews. Survey Monkey advertised my criteria and research focus for the coordination of interviews. Making contacts through nonprofit veteran-affiliated organizations was the approach that provided qualified research participants. The criteria for the sample included the following: (a) gender—female; (b) military service rank—enlisted ranks of E-4 to E-9/commissioned ranks of O-3 to O-6; (c) honorable discharge; and (d) transition from military to civilian workforce within the past 3 years. This insured the participant had at least 4 years in the military service and focused on the research questions. The criteria for excluded populations included the following: (a) gender—male; (b) nonveterans; (c) time in service (TIS)—less than 4 years; (d) any female veteran known to me; and (e) currently employed status. The letters and numbers associated with the participant's rank are within the military rank structure. These were used to reach the 4-year time in service requirement and identify a veteran's last pay grade and authoritative position before leaving the military (Redmond et al., 2015).

### **Sample Size**

The widespread understanding of data saturation indicates that saturation has occurred when the research has reached a point where no more new information that is

relevant to the research questions comes from the data (Charmaz, 2014). Sobel (2001) stated it in another way, explaining that to determine the sampling size for qualitative studies, a researcher must determine adequacy and appropriateness with analytical redundancy while one or more interviews would not be enough to make further contributions to the research questions being answered. Qualitative sampling is intended to support analytic generalizations and to have smaller sizes with more extensive research in each sample, as qualitative studies provide more data per sample than quantitative studies generally (Curtis et al., 2000). The concept of data saturation refers to the point at which collected data no longer create additional theoretical insights or reveal new properties of core categories (Charmaz, 2014). A set of 10 questions with subset questions was asked of participants (see Appendix A).

## **Procedures**

### **Informed Consent**

The research inclusion criteria were confirmed with each prospective participant upon initiation. Upon confirmation that the participant met the criteria, an explanation of informed consent and scheduling of the interview commenced. The informed consent and the preapproved questions were sent after initiation and before the scheduled interview. A signed copy of the informed consent was needed prior to the interview, and scheduling allowed time for the necessary correspondence. Part of the explanation was that the interview would be recorded with Otter.ai software or via the virtual platform of either Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams, and one interview was a recorded phone call.



Interviews were conducted within a 2-month window as qualified and screened participants were discovered. The format of interviews was one on one, and interviews were recorded with Otter.ai software or a virtual platform.

## **Instrument**

### **Interview Guide**

Interviews are pivotal to a phenomenological approach to qualitative data collection. Unorderable characteristics for qualitative studies can include military branch, country, race, ethnicity, and religion (Jasso, 2002). The unorderable characteristic categories can increase groups and subgroups (Jasso). Additionally, primordial outcomes make up diverse ultimate or quasi-ultimate ends such as the qualities of satisfaction, happiness, fulfilled, self-esteem, and status (Jasso). According to Jasso, the qualities said to be more common to social identity theories are self-conceptualization, self-enhancement, self-esteem, and status. These characteristics were included in the interview guide (see Appendix A).

The interview guide consisted of 10 overall questions (see Appendix A). The interview guide was structured to allow participants the ability to expand on certain topics that they found important or relevant and allowed me the ability to hone-in more closely on research interests as the interview allowed. Prior to any interviews, the questions were screened with a female Air Force veteran, a female active-duty Army officer, and a female Army veteran. This was done to ensure that the questions were comprehensive and relatable. Fassinger (2005) contended that pilot-testing questions prior to interviewing is helpful for qualitative research.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Data Security**

The data associated with the interviews and research study were secured with me at my place of residence. To protect the confidentiality of the research participants, numeric codes were assigned to each person (RP1, RP2, etc.). Transcriptions were conducted by Otter.ai or a virtual platform, and the service promised strict confidentiality and secure transmission of recordings and documents to protect the participant's information. The associated study materials will be secured at my residence for 5 years after the study completion and will then be destroyed to an unrecoverable state.

### **Data Analysis**

The research data collected were analyzed through coding and writing memos. I analyzed and compared the transcriptions from the recordings to either Otter.ai or the virtual platform used for the interview to ensure accuracy. A memo of impressions and findings was conducted after each transcription. I collected impressions and themes immediately following the interviews. A summarization of themes and findings was collected from the transcription and just following each interview.

The coding of data collected from the interviews created an interpretive representation of the phenomenon to be analyzed. The coding involved investigating each line of collected data to interpret the studied phenomenon of the military-to-workforce transition experience through the female veteran participants' own words during the interviews.

Theoretical coding took place during analysis because Charmaz (2014) shared that theoretical coding happens with focused coding and that theory can be developed through the theoretical codes formulated. Then, to manage the amount of data from Otter.ai and the virtual platforms, the NVivo software was used for organizing the data after the transcription was compared to the recordings of interviews.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research participants and process were protected in a manner that ensured that ethical standards were adhered to and created a safe environment for collecting qualitative data. Education and training were required for me to begin a study that involved the participation of human subjects. The coursework emphasized that a researcher must abide by the ethical principles of fairness, justice, and respect (American Psychological Association, 2010).

As mentioned, interview bracketing was used due to me being a female veteran and because the avoidance of bias and preserving the integrity of the science was critical. No participants known to me were included in the study to take further precaution on bias. To further ensure participant confidentiality, an alphanumeric code was used to identify each research participant in order of the interviews conducted chronologically (i.e., RP1 to RP8). Only volunteers were permitted to participate in the study to prevent any potential appearance of bias or pressure to participate. As part of the interview procedure (see Appendix A), participants were also instructed that they could pause to ask questions or withdraw from the interview without reprisal and their information would be destroyed. Each participant was required to sign a receipt acknowledging the

informed consent and indicating that they understood their rights as a research participant.

A nondisclosure agreement was required from Otter.ai prior to using transcription services for the recorded interviews. The transcripts, bracketed journal, and consent forms will be kept on a password-protected computer that is only accessible by me for 5 years and then permanently deleted and removed.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the methodology used in research and design for the qualitative phenomenological study. The chapter further outlined the informed consent process, data collection as it relates to a targeted population and recruitment procedures, and data analysis. The next chapter focuses on the research findings from the data collected.

## Chapter 4: Data Collection and Analysis

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of female veterans as they transition from their military career to their first postmilitary employment. The focus was on the transition experience within 3 years of transitioning for those who had held an active-duty military position for at least 4 years. The purpose was to understand the transition process for an individual who could be assumed to have established a social identity in the military culture. The research questions were as follows:

RQ 1—Qualitative: What are the female military veteran experiences that contribute to military-to-civilian transition?

RQ 2—Qualitative: How do female military veterans who have transitioned to the civilian workforce within the last 3 years describe how their social identity enabled them to successfully transition?

This chapter outlines the setting for data collection and the demographics of the research participants and gives an analysis of the data collected regarding the experiences of female veterans as they transitioned from their military service to their first postmilitary civilian workplace. In this chapter, I also share the results of the data collection and any adjustments made to the proposed plan to ensure that credibility and trustworthiness were upheld.

### **Setting**

I coordinated and conducted **semi-structured** interviews through Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and a phone call, which was in accord with my IRB approval. Each person who

was qualified also agreed to the voluntary consent form approved by the IRB. I read the summary of consent at the onset of each interview and prior to any research questions being asked.

My personal and professional experience, as well as my personal interests, aided the outlining of the research design and strategy. As a military veteran, I served on active duty in the U.S. Air Force and had personally made the transition from the military culture into the postmilitary workforce. By leveraging the military community that I still have access to and a strong interest in understanding the military, veteran, and female veteran community, I had an intrinsic motivation to objectively answer my research questions.

My familiarity with the military community and its jargon was a bigger challenge during data collection. As each participant used familiar military acronyms or phrases that are or were consistent with my own military experience, I was hesitant to seek clarification or ask for an expansion of their interpretation of a phrase due to the shared experiences. Charmaz (2014) cautioned researchers that participants must share their experiences in their own words, and researchers should try to not presume that they know exactly what participants mean when using common terms. I pushed through my hesitancy and sought clarification or a shared understanding even when dealing with familiar terms or military jargon. This allowed a deeper overall understanding of their experiences and offered opportunities for follow-on questions.

Another notable environmental challenge was that some participants were impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic, and their experiences may have been

altered by some employment limitations or having to work remotely. Due to the pandemic, some participants expressed that as they were transitioning, there were not as many jobs available potentially as there might have been otherwise. The participants were all successfully employed after their military service, but their lived experiences had some variations depending on when they started their transitions, as some transitioned prior to the pandemic and others transitioned during the pandemic.

### **Recruitment Efforts**

There were two approaches used for participant recruitment, and one was successful in ensuring that there were eight eligible study participants. The first method was to leverage the survey platform SurveyMonkey to recruit participants as a screening tool. The recruitment criteria were put into survey format, and respondents were offered the opportunity to reach out if they were interested in participating in an interview process.

Over 1,200 people had access to the screening survey, and out of that number, only two provided their own contact information for me to reach out to them. The limitations of these resources were insurmountable. Respondents could not provide their contact information except for a deliberate addition to an open text box format; I was unable to access their contact information in any other way. Therefore, the many who answered “yes” to the question of whether they were interested in participating in a research study were unable to be reached. The two who chose to leave their contact information were not eligible due to either the active-duty criteria or not having successfully attained a postmilitary civilian job yet.

The successful method of recruitment was leveraging the professional website LinkedIn and going through military veteran organizations such as Vet2Industry, Military Women's Collective, and Women of the Military. The founders or partners of these organizations shared my recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) and offered support through their networks. I immediately had several candidates whom I was screening for eligibility until I reached my final eight research participants.

### **Demographics**

The study participants were diverse in their military experience and leadership level by paygrade. The participants consisted of two noncommissioned officers (paygrades of E-5 to E-6), one senior noncommissioned officer (paygrades of E-7 to E-9), three company grade officers (paygrades of O-1 to O-3), and two field grade officers (paygrades of O-4 to O-6). The participants were also four retired and four nonretired members of the military. Two of the participants had between 4.5 and 5.5 years of active duty, two participants had 12-17 years of active duty, and four retirees had 24-27 years of active duty service. This diversity created a well-rounded set of experiences and data. Table 1 displays demographics of the research participants.



**Table 1***Participants' Demographics (N = 8)*

Participant	Branch	Years on active duty	Rank category	Time to employment
RP1	Navy	26	Senior NCO	7.5 months
RP2	Army	12	NCO	Immediately
RP3	Navy	4.5	CGO	4 months
RP4	Army	5.5	CGO	6 months
RP5	Air Force	17	CGO	Immediately
RP6	Navy	26	FGO	2 weeks
RP7	Army	27	FGO	Immediately
RP8	Navy	24	NCO	Immediately

### **Data Collection**

As an aim to add awareness and knowledge to the industrial and organizational psychology field regarding veterans, specifically female veterans, I wanted to study their recent transition experience and those factors that contributed to a successful postmilitary employment. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with female veterans meeting the original inclusion criteria. All of them had transitioned from their military careers within the past 3 years, each had served in a military branch on active duty for at least 4 years, and each had success in obtaining postmilitary civilian employment. The interviews conducted were all less than 60 minutes in length and were video-recorded (or, in the case of one participant, audio-recorded via phone call). Permission was granted for these recordings with each participant prior to starting the recording process through the

Microsoft Teams software or through Otter. I used the paid software Otter to record and provide more accurate transcripts for coding later.

The interviews were conducted using the approved semistructured interview guide with a subsequent 10 questions. As a female veteran, I made an intentional effort to identify any potential personal biases or interpretations of the information being collected or questions being asked. I used bracketing to ensure that the data remained objective and unbiased. I was also aware of my own nonverbal expressions and responses during the interview process. I made sure to keep field notes during the interview process and provide a brief explanation to the participants that I would be taking notes throughout the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research guidelines provide an incremental approach that aids in data analysis to create superordinate and subordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). The superordinate themes encompassed several subordinate themes that could include more detail to support with data analysis.

Each of the recorded interviews was transcribed through either Microsoft Teams or Otter and checked for accuracy between the recordings and transcriptions. The interview transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify themes throughout the entire dataset. Transcripts were analyzed using the thematic content analysis approach from Braun and Clarke (2006), which consisted of six steps: (a) acquainting myself with the data, (b) creating preliminary codes, (c) examining data for superordinate and subordinate

themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) identifying by naming themes, and (f) capturing those identified themes.

The first step of familiarizing myself with the data consisted of listening to the interviews and transcribing those interviews, along with rereading, rewatching, and reviewing the video and audio recordings. During this step, I made notes and began to capture early impressions.

The next step included learning the framework of the NVivo software program and how to create codes and relationships within this system. I was then able to create my project with transcriptions uploaded and coded into the preliminary superordinate and subordinate codes. The initial codes were determined based on the interview questions while focusing on the research questions. Once initial codes were developed, additional codes were created in a logical manner as themes emerged. Each transcript was coded by identifying segments of text that were relevant to the research questions.

When the coding was completed in NVivo, the next step was to look for themes. An analysis began for associated quotes from each transcript to identify themes. Patterns were identified from the codes and associated quotes that were important or interesting, which could potentially support answers to the research questions. Themes were then defined to convey the reasons for the study results.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In all research studies, trustworthiness is a vital concept, and within qualitative research studies, it focuses on four major components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016). These are the necessary

components to validate the trustworthiness of the research and ultimately the results.

Credibility can be established at different steps throughout the process of data collection, ensuring that the data are appropriate.

A member check was established by offering the study participants the chance to add any further information regarding the study topic at the end of the interviews and following the interviews. This was a chance for them to assess their own responses to questions that were asked during their interview. This also helped to ensure the intent of their original responses or make updates as they felt necessary. Three participants declined to revisit their responses and shared that they felt comfortable with the process. The other five participants reviewed their responses, and only two had something to change to ensure their original intention.

Transferability is proving that the results from a study can be applied to similar settings, scenarios, subjects, and populations. To achieve transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended having a broad informative context regarding data collection experiences. Transferability can be subjective, and this should be strived for as much as possible. Transferability was constrained in this study due to the homogenous nature of the gender and military branch of the participants.

Confirmability ensures that the collected data and results are not due to the bias of the researcher or participants. Confirmability, however, also considers qualitative research to include the assumption of at least a minimal amount of bias. This study attained confirmability through data triangulation, transferability, and member checks. Those elements allowed for a reduction of researcher bias as much as possible. The

information provided in this study can help outline the study situation to allow others to make the decision of whether this study encompasses transferability or not.

Dependability is the in-depth description of the methodology and research design, which allows the study to be repeated. This research study demonstrated that the research outcomes were reliable and were able to be replicated. Dependability was established by conducting a methodical literature search and review through current literature regarding military veterans, female veterans, veterans' transition, and employment challenges post military. Multiple steps were incorporated to preserve the data collection process. As an example, the interview transcripts were reviewed against the audio/video recordings and reviewed for a greater contextual understanding. Another example was the security maintained; the participants' interview information and recordings were stored in a password-protected device to maintain the confidentiality of the participants with pseudonyms to protect their identities. The steps taken helped to establish an audit trail and allow for as much reduction as possible in researcher and participant bias and improve the overall trustworthiness of the study.

## **Results**

There were five superordinate themes that derived from the data analysis. From those superordinate themes, 11 subordinate themes were created. The superordinate themes that emerged were feelings about military service, gender differences, transition preparation for postmilitary employment, transition experience, and after transition experience. The narratives and experiences of the eight research participants will be shared to illuminate the experiences that led to these themes and the subordinate themes

of support system/relationships, navigating cultural experience and mindset, differing treatment, perceptions, struggles during transition, lessons learned, networking: community building, transition programs, preparation: being planful, military/civilian identity, and mindset, and to support answering the research questions.

To show a comprehensive overview of the results, I will share some narratives of each research participant and some overall themes and quotes that directly relate to the research questions being studied. The overarching narrative of the lived experiences of some of the female veteran participants was that their transition from the military was a welcomed change; others expressed they left the military because they had to and would not have made that choice freely if they were able to. Some participants shared that when they separated or retired from the military, the fundamental nature of their military identity was changed or lost through the process. Some participants were able to describe this alteration or loss directly, while others could speak to it descriptively and/or contextually.

The conceptual framework of social identity theory (SIT) pertains to when members of a particular group have a sense of belonging and often adopt the group's beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, language, and other facets of identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). These associations become inundated into a member's social identity through cognitive, evaluative, and emotional means, which include some of the most fundamental elements of culture: loyalty and commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). When a member is no longer considered to be inside of a particular group, a part or their whole social identity associated with that group is severely altered or missing.

### **RQ 1: What Are the Female Military Veteran Experiences That Contribute to Military-to-Civilian Transition?**

There were several themes related to the contributions of the lived experiences that female veterans had regarding their military to civilian transition. Military culture as a group is fundamentally bound by core values, traditions, beliefs, attitudes, norms, language and more. This creates what many of the research participants described as an “unspoken bond” between the members of the group. Some members did not want to associate themselves as civilians because they only associated themselves as a military member or military veteran, regardless of their transition into the civilian sector. The strength of the loyalty to the military group was evident in many narratives and the identity to the military culture described was still strong regardless of the time since transition. This strong sense of loyalty and commitment to a group that a member is no longer a part of can lead to dual social identities, in this case a military social identity and a civilian social identity.

The interview question related to their identity as a veteran created a varying interpretation of the word “identity” and further explanation was needed to make an association to the context of how they identified within the military culture or civilian culture. Although this initial confusion or clarification was needed, the responses from participants lent to the themes associated with the elements of SIT.

Descriptions of identity in missing the members of their military culture, creating connections with the veteran community upon transition, and differences between cultures became strong and apparent early in the interviewing process. It also became

apparent that the characteristics associated with SIT from the participant's military experience supported them and even became a factor contributing to a successful post-military employment.

The themes most closely related to this research question were as follows:

- feelings about military experience, with the subordinate themes of support system/relationships, navigating cultural experience and mindset;
- gender differences, with the subordinate themes of differing treatment and perceptions; and
- transition experience, with the subordinate themes of struggles with transition and lessons learned.

These will be explained with reference to their subordinate themes but primarily circulate around the overall description of why participants joined the military, left the military, the impact of those decisions, and lasting impressions from their active duty experiences within the military culture.

**RQ 2: How Do Female Military Veterans Who Have Transitioned to the Civilian Workforce Within the Last 3 Years Describe How Their Social Identity Enabled Them to Successfully Transition?**

The described experiences that led to successful post-military employment led to several themes and processes that could be replicated. There were strong commonalities for those female veterans securing employment with very little time unemployed between their discharge or retirement from military service. Their associated military identity created ways to help them succeed in gaining this employment primarily, while there



were some noted drawbacks or unknowns to this social identity. Their individual journeys through the military identity to the civilian identity show a narrative of struggle and discovery in some cases.

All the participants interviewed leveraged either networking within the military or veteran communities, subscribed to a transition program, or had an association with a veteran transition organization. Many of the participants were not only strongly associated with a veteran service organization but attributed their association as a success factor for their future employment. A reason there could have been such a strong association with these service organizations is due to the recruiting approach of leveraging LinkedIn veteran groups which also had ties to the service organizations. Regardless of the recruiting approach, there is a fast-growing number of these organizations and currently over 45,000 veteran service organizations exist through communities within the United States. Several participants mentioned this growing statistic and how many they were personally aware of. While most expressed the benefits of these organizations, some mentioned that it could also be very overwhelming when initially trying to transition into the civilian workforce.

The themes most closely related to this research question were as follows:

- transition preparation leading to employment, with the subordinate themes of networking: community building, transition programs, and preparation: being planful
- after military transition experience with the subordinate themes of military/civilian identity and mindset

**Table 2***Superordinate Themes and Subordinate Themes*

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Feelings about military service	Support system: Relationships Navigating cultural experience
Gender differences	Differing treatment Perceptions
Transition experience	Struggles with transition Lessons learned
Transition preparation leading to employment	Networking: Community building Transition programs Preparation: Being planful
After military transition experience	Community building Military and civilian identity

**Superordinate Theme 1: Feelings About Military Service**

The first superordinate theme describes the feelings the participants had about their military service experience. The questions began covering reasons for joining the military, reasons for leaving the military, followed by the participant's overall military experience while they were serving on active duty. The themes to emerge from these interviews were strongly linked to support systems/relationships and navigating cultural experience and mindset.

### *Support System/Relationships*

The strong subordinate theme of support system/relationships stems from the wide-expressed cultural trait in the military of the concept of community, camaraderie, and referred to here as an “unspoken bond” between those that have served in the military and those that have not served, non-veteran civilians. Many military members and veterans describe the connections they have with those that have served as something that cannot be replicated or is difficult to replicate with non-veteran civilians that have not experienced military service. This can prove challenging when transitioning and then the reintegration into the civilian sector.

This theme appears throughout the studied transition phenomena as most participants expressed missing their military counterparts or attributed finding veterans for support to have a common language, bond, and most describe it as a community, during their transition phase and into the post-transition phase of civilian reintegration. This was also an attribution to what the participants found to be a factor of success towards finding post-military employment and one of the major overarching themes of the study.

RP1 felt fortunate to have been around the great people she was stationed with over the years. RP3 mentioned,

I had a great group of people, my sailors would go above and beyond with less resources than they needed, and they did the best they could. A couple of leaders were very solid, and one was mentoring me towards how to transition well.

RP3 shared, “It sounds cliché’ but I miss the camaraderie; I miss the unspoken bond.

Fortunately, my husband is in the next room and that helps.” RP4 shared,

The support system that was no longer accessible after the transition. All of my college friends were in the military, some are getting out now but that whole support system was our community. That was a tough one and no one can really understand what you’re going through, it’s such a difference and that separates and isolates you as you’re going through it. A lot of the support systems/networks are geared towards men. There are certain things that put you in a box again and I didn’t want to go through that again.

RP5 shared, “Being in Colorado, I was now surrounded by large amounts of Air Force officers and now surrounded by my blue brothers and sisters.” RP6 shared,

It doesn’t matter how long you have served, if you went to a party and you could find a member, male or female, and pick right up where you left off in the military with them and have those conversations because you share that bond.

RP6 also shared, “My chain of command allowed me to take classes and focus on transition.” RP7 explained,

The only real struggle culturally with the transition was as a counselor I am not really interacting with people like I was every day in the Army. So, I miss the inability to interact with my peers like I used to.

RP8 mentioned,

I leveraged my network after losing my job and I had another one within 5 hours. My network that I text with from these non-profits are truly a family that I trust and made my transition so much better.

There's that family aspect to military members and veterans. We have that ability to know what each other is talking about. If I was to get hired in a civilian company, I would find the veterans to talk to and do informational interviews with. I call it targeted networking to learn more about the position and company.

### *Navigating Cultural Experience and Mindset*

Female veterans described their experiences of integrating into the military culture, adopting the military identity, and the overall summarization of their time spent within their military culture. The mindsets they had and those perceived of their military counterparts are described to gain an understanding of the lived experience that led toward adopting a military identity and insight into what led to the onset of the military to civilian transition.

RP1 expressed,

Being given a leadership position early on and was fortunate with the sailors that worked for me throughout my 26 years. I never got in trouble while in the military. I joined the military to mainly pay for school and travel the world and was able to be stationed in Italy, Hawaii, and Colorado and travel several other places.

RP2 shared,

I wanted to join after 9-11 happened to follow in my dad's footsteps, get tuition assistance, and travel the world. I was an Army Medic in Special Operations, high operations tempo and that was difficult to start a family.

Those organizations, including skill bridge internship was not through my naval organization. There is a gap between what is happening to support veterans and what is known internally. A recruiter reached out on LinkedIn and that is how I learned about the skill bridge program and taught me about consulting and translating language to the civilian workplace. I asked the recruiter for information to give to my supervisors and leadership in the Navy to apply for the program.

RP3 mentioned,

I went on a deployment, went through some rough stuff personally and a few months later the Navy wanted to move me, but my support network was here. They moved me anyway because the needs of the Navy are more important and when I got to my ship, I realized immediately that my job was irrelevant and didn't pertain to this ship. After hearing a speaker from 10 years ago relay the same problems I was dealing with, I realized also that the issues [in the Navy] had been longstanding and I am a solutions-oriented person and there was not a solution. I felt very disillusioned and disappointed [with the military experience] and said I don't want to do this for the rest of my life.

RP3 also noted, "Overall, the experience was fine. The allocation of funds was frustrating, and we were the lowest priority at the time." RP4 shared,

I knew this wasn't going to be lifelong; I had incredible experiences for 5 years and then I could not see a path for me to stay in [the military] and be a mom. My husband is active duty as well. The level of control that the military has over your life does not allow for flexibility or autonomy.

RP5 expressed,

I was Air National Guard, and Air Force ROTC cadet, and going to school full-time to commission for 5 years, so when I commissioned active duty in 2008, it was my first time having one job. I came-in with a "guardsman mentality" of working 16-hour days and juggling several things and wondered "how are people complaining about their work?". When I went active duty, I got my masters degree with all my new spare time. I got into the company grade officer (CGO) council, and I learned cross-fit.

RP5 also described,

I had a slightly negative experience my second half of my career. My first 4 years, I could bloom where I was planted and find something positive about anywhere I was at. I had gotten used to choosing what career field I was in, where I was stationed, and what my major was. When I joined after 9/11 because I could physically and mentally help, it meant that I wanted to support in the way I wanted to. When I got stationed at Peterson AFB, CO and it was a very small logistics group. They started doing captain promotion boards, why I don't know, because they hired too many captains and they don't know what to do with them now.

RP6 shared,

The military gave me confidence, that I didn't get in school. Not everyone is cut out for college, and I got to go into the military and experience all these opportunities and travel the world. I thank God that I joined the military; I have had nothing but amazing opportunities. I'm very, very, glad that I served and retired. There were rough patches and as I rose in ranks, the respect levels increased. The military enabled me to learn from my mistakes and be a better leader.

RP7 shared,

It was an adventure. I got to do a lot of different things. I got to go airborne school. I got to be a battalion commander in a battalion that had never had a female commanding before.

RP7 added,

In order to get promoted to Colonel in my unit, you had to complete Army War College, which is the equivalent to a masters degree. After completing the first year I realized I just wanted to get a masters that pertains more to what I want to do on the outside of the military.

RP8 described,

I joined to give back and I just needed to get out after 24 years, my body was done. I was single for my first part of the military, and I got to go to amazing places and enjoyed the travel aspect a lot and the friendships.



## **Superordinate Theme 2: Gender Differences**

Most participants expressed differences in their military experiences due to being a female regarding work competency, treatment, perceptions, and stigmas. Some of the participants mentioned having to repress their femininity or felt judged by it. Women in the military are urged to subjugate their femininity due to their work environments and the mission needs of the military (Reppert et al., 2014). Demers (2013) shared females in western society have similar traits that female military members are encouraged to downplay; the sense of being nurturing, acting passive or submissive (mainly towards males), being attractive, and appearing fragile. The downplaying or feeling of having to suppress a part of ourselves has an impact. Many participants described the impact of suppressing their femininity or being challenged due to being a female had on them or their careers. These experiences were shared freely and without a research question associated to gender differences, they freely shared unsolicited and unprompted.

### ***Differing Treatment***

This subordinate theme of differing treatment distinguishes what experiences led to a behavior change for either the participants or those within the military toward them as a result of being female, or male in one stance, and seemingly no other related characteristic. The subordinate of perceptions (below) helps to add further dimension to these described experiences.

RP2 shared,

There are not a lot of female role models, no one that anyone could identify that was a solid role model. I actually asked around to see if anyone could point out a

female role model and no one really could. Most women were either never married, were divorced, or are single mothers. On the other hand, it's very difficult to find support for my husband, support is for the wives' club. My husband is not going to be knitting with the wives and there is nothing else to support husbands.

RP5 shared, "I had one kid slip me shit when I was a maintainer and I saw him later on in my career, so that was awkward. The point is to treat people respectfully." RP5 also expressed,

My squadron commander only had 53 people and was a straight-up (expletive). He was trying to give the male officers opportunities to shine. I was the only female there and we went to school together and they were getting the opportunities. I thought he was trying to give me opportunities to give back to the base and I was told this by the SNCO mentors and a few others.

So, I was trying to latch on to find anything to give me a sense of identity while this was going on and I wanted to be reassured that this was normal. I was the only enlisted female vehicle mechanic in the state of Oregon and California when I was there, you would think I would have been used to and would have known when a man was gaslighting me. But I didn't because I had an amazing shop, I had the best experience when I was enlisted.

RP5 continued,

I was at the forefront of all these different things and while deployed I got a call from someone saying the results of the captain promotion board was in and I was

rated as a “P”, which is just promote. Why wasn’t I a “definitely promote”? I wasn’t sure, so I wanted some advice and went to the Wing Commander because I had worked for him. I had never had any feedback that was negative or any way showing my performance was lacking. I had a masters degree, working on my doctorate and had done really well. My push statement on my Office Performance Review (OPR) was “ready for increased responsibility”. I had no idea that not a good push statement. The Wing Commander encouraged her that it would be fine because the promotion rates were like 95%. I hadn’t heard anything from anyone through a new assignment, deployment, and then redeployment and then to PCS and deploy again. While deployed my group commander called to tell me that I was not selected to Captain and the release was coming out the next day and wanted me to know. She said we are 100% sure this is a clerical error. The only reason why I was not promoted they [the group] said was because of the push statement from the squadron commander. Some members that were promoted had Article 15s and other issues. I ended up taking my chances going into the guard or reserve because if I had stayed in I would have been forced out due to my rank anyway.

There are 5 of us [only other common denominator is female] at 5 different bases that didn’t get promoted and all these other guys with DUI’s and Article 15s that get to be a captain, there’s something wrong with this. I filed a congressional inquiry and talked to this prior squadron commander. He said my priorities were elsewhere and that he had share it with her in impromptu feedback sessions. I said

to him, “none of this tracks, no one has ever given me this feedback and they would not have given me leadership positions if I was performing subpar” and eventually he said “well, at some point every woman needs to learn her place”. I knew at that point that it was more of a him thing and not a me thing.

RP6 described,

When I was young (E-3/4), there were no female leaders, chiefs in uniforms. I saw a mannequin with a uniform with all the rank and I saw all these possibilities when I looked at it. And then a young [male] sailor came up to me and said, “you’re never going to do that”. And I think because he told me that, I knew I was going to achieve it. I have always been that way, my whole life. There was a lot of people on my path that have told me I couldn’t [because I’m a female] or “go back to the kitchen”. There were plenty and I thought, “you’ll watch me”.

RP7 shared,

I started to notice that a senior leader would talk with me about the husband and the kids and there was no serious conversation about work and then pull the males aside and they would get into deeper conversations and more work related ones. I wanted to talk about those things, and I realized I got left out a lot.

### ***Perceptions***

The theme of perceptions is distinguished by the perceived difference in how we are seen based-on our gender difference. There are many expressed stigmas, biases, and a sense of being discriminated against due to being a female military member in what is wide described as a male-dominated organization. The experiences described are those

where a direct behavior or result cannot be tangibly pinpointed or were secondhand information but that the strong perception is noted to create a difference between genders within a team or organization. The differing treatment (above) descriptions had an associated behavior change. The cultural implication of behaviors and perceptions can equally have an impact on the human dynamic, trust levels, and group development.

RP1 expressed,

I “heard a lot of stories about females getting assaulted or violated” but I did not directly experience that. It wasn’t easy or hard being in the military for me but I “heard other females had it much harder” than I did. I was in a technical field and felt judged immediately that “she’s a female, what would she know?” until I proved myself to be competent. There was a perception that “she’s a female, so she must be a pushover” until I let my attitude overcome that stigma.

RP4 explained,

It was challenging and the military puts you in situations to learn and grow, which was incredible. I met a lot of great people. Challenging being the only woman in many of the jobs I had was tough.

Being the only female, it was challenging because I was representing my entire sex. It weighs on you over time. Femininity and certain parts, in order to adapt and be effective, you really can’t let those feminine traits show. They are less appropriate. Any type of emotional “weakness” can be dismissed as “feminine weakness” and perceived as “you’re an ineffective leader”. It gets taxing on you, and I know a lot of other women feel the same way.

RP5 said, “Why is it always men getting to make decisions that affect others? I was getting treated like trash.” RP7 explained,

As the first female commander of the battalion there were struggles. Early-on there were struggles as well being seen as the “typical Army Officer” and if you’re a petite female you’re not fitting their image and they don’t take you as seriously. It was easier to get through it with the people I worked with but the people above me perceived me as something different because I didn’t fit their mold. Generally, as a woman, at least my generation, you’re always trying to fit this role and then at some point I had to realize I have to be who I am and just be that. But I did think that I was naïve to think people put me in that category, I didn’t recognize until later [in my career] that if I missed a promotion or opportunity, it was because I was female. Originally, I would think it was my skillset or something to do with me.

RP7 also shared, “I went from a male dominated field to a female dominated field and it was assumed that I was competent. It was a 180 degree difference, I felt validated.” RP8 stated,

Being a woman in the military can be powerful but I noticed the feeling of invisibility and not hearing my voice. Which is why I created my non-profit Women’s Military Collective, to help give women a voice. There’s way more organizations and support that are geared for men and they forget that there is a percentage that are women and other minorities. When I was younger, I was seeing things with rose-colored glasses and then I realized when I got older that

there really needs to be a change. There isn't enough focus on the women in the military. In a group with men if I said an idea there might be nothing but if a man suggested it later it was considered a great idea. There weren't advocates to say that I already said that. I didn't like feeling like my voice was relevant or wanted. It impacted me so much that it made me want to start this non-profit. Women share with me all the time that they are not feeling heard. You have to make it know that you're not going to stand for it.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: Transition Experience**

Participants shared their experience for the phase from the time they learned they would be transitioning from the military until their first post-military employment. This superordinate theme had two subordinate themes emerge; Struggles During Transition and recognized Lessons Learned. There were notable struggles during transition and one of those was unplanned and able to be minimally controlled: the global pandemic, COVID-19. The struggles during transition and lessons learned during the transition experience describe the mindset of the participants, their surroundings, and create a setting for the environment of which female veterans could anticipate during their specific transition period. The themes start to show the process from the initial military identity and experience while in the military into the phase where they realize they are separating or retiring and the challenge that this phase can bring.

#### ***Struggles During Transition***

The struggles during transition clearly vary by each person's situation and an onslaught of variables. The global pandemic, COVID-19 was a universal variable that

had a moderate to large impact on transitioning military members. Many members were trying to seek jobs at a time when businesses were either closing due to restrictions or not hiring to save for the future. These participants found employment successfully regardless and have lessons more closely related to the cultural integration into the civilian workforce. The personal adjustments and exchanges are described and demonstrate the seemingly two different social identities at play; military identity and civilian identity.

RP1 shared,

I am from New York, and you can't take New York out of me, so some people can't handle that. I have had a rough time engaging with these people [civilians]. They don't pay attention and they move at a different pace.

RP2 said,

I felt that education was a very difficult part of my transition. The education center was closed or virtual and resources were hard to come by. Until someone recommended LinkedIn for networking. Felt like no one wanted to connect with me and I had to learn my new identity. I had to learn how to do the online networking process.

RP3 said,

I had known for almost 18 months that I was getting out because my resignation took a year. I brought up [to my leadership] on my own to participate in a program to transition smoothly and had to make the case to my leadership as to



why they should let me do that. Some were not on board with the decision. The Navy doesn't take advantage of these programs.

RP3 added,

The female manager had never worked with a military person and was very nervous about working with someone from the military.

I felt comfortable with the job I was doing in the civilian world. I get to be creative and collaborative. Being in the military world, you just get it, it's unspoken within military culture.

RP4 mentioned,

It was pretty challenging because there is a lot of guilt for leaving because I really cared about the people in my unit that I was supporting. You're trying to still do what you need to do and take care of what you need to transition. I had a great boss and that helped. I was trying to still be a team player. I went through the Army's transition program at the very beginning of COVID. The Army adjusted to doing it virtually during the pandemic. During that time, I really just wanted to take a break and take time off to search for a job. Just wanted a couple of months to take a break. I got out when a lot of businesses had a hiring freeze, so it was a world problem of timing for me with the pandemic.

RP5 shared,

My transition was very difficult. I had applied to over 285 civil service jobs. I did the smartest thing and got my VA paperwork started before I separated. Then I

was able to go into the reserves right away. I was a college graduate that couldn't get a GS-7 job. I had a very negative experience.

RP6 shared,

The military does a really good job of bringing people in, but it sometimes does not do a good job of supporting people when they leave. It's up to non-profits and a bunch of other people to do that part.

RP7 mentioned, "The pace of the work and the type of the work was a struggle getting used to. The different workplace culture. Time management of my day was different but overall, the transition was positive." RP8 shared,

It's a roller coaster; you're stressed about providing for my family, how can I pay for my house, what do I want to be when I grow up? and all of that takes time.

There needs to be a reverse boot camp, 5-days of TAP was useless and BS. It made me upset.

### ***Lessons Learned***

The subordinate theme of lessons learned illustrates the noted areas where participants had a struggle but either mentioned learning as a result of it or needing to continue learning a lesson from the struggle during the transition phase. Some of these lessons are founded in a struggle of movement from a military mindset or social identity to that of a civilian and changing environments to being among civilians. Many participants mentioned through the transition process that they had to figure out their "why", find direction, or even relearn who they wanted to be "when they grew up".

RP1 described,

I was selling myself short and had to hear from others that her leadership and managerial skills transferred. Went back to hands-on technical skills, she did not want the leadership roles, and was challenged to learn how to be at that level again. I had to learn the civilian translation for the words she knew in the Navy. The hardest part for me is learning the civilian equivalency is to the Navy, to learn patience, and that I have to be careful how to tell someone the truth [in the civilian workforce], “they don’t really want honesty”. In a struggle to relate with civilians, I “called these people out because we’re on a team and why am I the only one speaking?” Their excuse was introversion. I did not feel my extroversion should have to suffer because of that. I got called a bully for that. I apologized to them and said, “you have to understand, I’m not used to working on a team and it just being ‘I, by myself. If you don’t want to work on this team then pull out’”. I was tired of everyone getting the same grade, but she was putting in all the work during this certification course.

I also have to learn how to be patient because “people don’t know how to follow directions, people are rushing, and not listening”. People just do their own thing and now I have to be held up because they won’t read or listen. “That stuff kills me.”

RP2 shared,

The hard part is that we wait until we’re into our transition period that we start to prepare for it, even though we all know it is going to happen at some point. Still trying to figure out my ‘why’. I was taking too much advice and getting

overwhelmed and getting pulled into many different directions and needed to step back and look at everything herself. I said yes to many things and panicked because I didn't have an interview, any idea what was going to happen, and just started to apply to anything, started the reserves.

RP2 continued,

I was really letting my rank hold me back initially and was downplaying what I was capable of and a crutch because I wasn't even a Senior NCO. Until she found her "why" and connected to her passion about combating sex trafficking and getting a fellowship in DC, and now in a doctoral program. I don't see a lot of enlisted in these programs, our voices don't matter. It took the transition to realize that we make up the majority of the military and have a voice.

RP3 learned,

Recognizing that I do have skills; I am a hard worker. Almost a year later, I can recognize some and it took a while to realize I have some skills.

I am resilient during the entire service and that I was a good officer, I took care of my people.

RP5 explained,

The biggest struggle in transition was learning how to interact. It's not that they don't care what you did in the military, it's that they don't know about it. Most of us don't know the elevator speech and we're pretty confident individuals. I still need to take a step back sometimes and it's definitely made me more humble.

RP6 added,

I have to learn to be patient with myself and with and with others. Not everything goes as fast as I want it to go. Not everyone works as fast as I want them to. Civilians work at a different pace. We are judged as “she hit the ground running” and that’s how we show our worth [in the military] when we take over command. We make a huge impact. That’s the military mindset to jump in and fix it and then move along and keep fixing it. Civilians don’t have to do that.

RP8 learned, “I am stronger than I realize, my voice matters, and people actually listen to me.”

#### **Superordinate Theme 4: Transition Preparation Leading to Employment**

The theme of transition preparation leading to employment has 3 strong emerging subordinate themes: networking: community building, transition programs, and preparation: being planful. Initially capturing networking and transition programs together proved to be too much data and amplified the many differences between these two strong themes. The transition preparation fuels the second research question to gain an understanding of what the circumstances and catalysts for finding employment after the female veterans separated or retired from military service. Every participant leveraged either networking: community building or transition programs and attribute that to what led to their successful transition into the civilian workforce. Many participants focused on military veteran networking and community building and transition programs with veteran mentor and speaks, while other participants mentioned the benefits of specifically seeking non-military civilians for networking and mentorship through transition programs.

### ***Networking: Community Building***

This prevalent theme is noteworthy, as the military is often associated with concepts like camaraderie and the unique bond that military members and veterans often have. The research participants describe this bond and the impact of having this unique community to leverage, and associates this a success factor towards post-military employment.

Also noteworthy, was the prevalence on focusing on non-military civilians for networking and community building. The insight to realize that the transitioning member does not know what they don't know at the transition phase was strongly suggested and networking with those that had gone through the transition can be greatly supportive and beneficial, as well as those that have lived on that other side, strictly within the civilian social constructs or specifically in the career path that a participant is interested in pursuing.

RP1 shared,

The military offered me a LinkedIn premier trial for 1 year for networking for my transition. Several organizations for networking were used and Veterati specializing in veterans mentoring transitioning vets. You can pick a mentor by industry and often you end up friends with them. Other local organizations, meet locally. Woven is a group of women vets talking with one another. An organization called Vets2Industry and other organizations including networking with civilians to understand how they look at leadership and try to understand their mindset.

RP2 mentioned, "I used several different organizations for networking." RP4 shared, "I leveraged friends for resume support, but the shared experiences were the main piece to help with the transition." RP6 said, "I am helping female veterans' transition and I've found people don't help the junior enlisted with their transition. I don't know if anyone is grabbing out to them." RP7 reported,

You have to build relationships with people on the outside now and get to know those in the profession you want to get into. You have to find your own resources and find people to help you get into that space. Finding the connections outside the military is important. When I looked at my LinkedIn it was all people in the military and I needed to find people in my profession and that's what helped me. Just 1-2 to help me understand what it would be like to be a counselor.

RP8 shared,

The people I met from there and I interact with them so much they are part of my family and I rely on them and so blessed to have them in my life. I highly recommend Woven: Women Veteran's Network that can help bridge women through the transition and then peer groups after the transition. You can meet with them and talk with them. Vets2Industry was who I started with, and I still volunteer with them. A lot of people that I consider friends are the people from Vets2Industry. Without them I don't know if I would still be here because it's really lonely. People don't understand that it can be really lonely, and we think we have to do it on our own and we don't.

### ***Transition Programs***

There are countless established transition programs that have been in place for service members planning for separation or retirement. There is also a strong trend of new transition programs or non-profit organizations that have emerged in hopes to support a community like the veterans as they are reintegrating back into the civilian sector. RP 6 mentioned that it would be a waste of talent to not focus on reintegrating veterans into the local communities because there has been such a focus on developing their talents while they were in service.

It was also mentioned several times during the interviews that Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) are in great abundance, and many participants specifically mentioned that there are over 45,000 nationwide ready to assist veterans. Some of these organizations are through virtual platforms, some are nationwide, while others are embedded in local communities. Several noted that this was a positive trend for our service members and mentioned that it can be overwhelming having this many options. It was also noted that service members do not know where to begin. Others noted that people often have not figured-out where they want to focus towards their second career and the advice of so many can create a struggle to find the intrinsic purpose, or their “why”.

RP1 described,

I looked at services that veterans could apply to and had plenty of time to research different programs. I used a program called Operation New Uniform that helps with changing mindset, interview tips. Women in CyberSecurity apprenticeship



and Smoothstack to support women and give them skills. They supported me getting certifications because civilian jobs required those certifications even though she had the other requirements.

RP2 explained,

I volunteered to a couple of non-organizations local to DC. Honed skills and grew network and learned what type of work I'm really passionate about. They opened doors to veteran's service organization to do the Simon Sinek training to figure out why, another gave myself and even my husband business suits. A lot of resources and people wanting to help. Post 9/11 veterans have a lot of resources, and many are unfortunately not available to other veterans of different war campaign eras

RP2 mentioned,

I leveraged the skill bridge program, that allows veterans to intern with a civilian company before their transition. The program was created to mitigate unemployment. I did not get hired by her internship but had a job right away due to networking and virtual mentoring with members of different industries.

RP3 noted, "As a veteran I have been able to participate in all of these programs. As a college kid, I would not have had access to any of that." RP4 shared, "Went to Command Purpose workshops and it was very helpful to hear from successful people and how they found their way. Having the shared experience with other women who were super accomplished helped me gain confidence. That was paramount." RP5 mentioned, "I am very thankful for Facebook and LinkedIn forums. I used the Air Force Association and

the Northwest Veteran locally. The VA was no help at all and the DAV was to some extent.” RP6 shared,

I did the LinkedIn forums, TAP class, USO. Because of that I was employed 2 weeks into my terminal. I have already changed jobs twice. They say the average veteran changes jobs 3 times in the first year. I used LinkedIn for everything. I used the USO pathfinder program and had a mentor for a year. If I wanted to be an entrepreneur, she was a source of inspiration. Hire4Heroes was great and so many others. I took an executive TAP class, job interview classes, so many contacts and organizations that want to help veterans move on. The Veteran Mentor Project whose brother committed suicide, a non-profit in California.

RP8 shared,

I did the entire 6-month skill bridge internship program. Due to restructuring myself and my counterpart both were let go. I rallied my network and got hired to another job within 5 hours. I stayed with that company for about 3 months because it was not what I wanted to do. Currently unemployed and just got accepted for a certification program at Texas A&E.

There are 45,000 non-profits out there and I ran into virtual workshops. I found a whole new tribe of people. The Commit Foundation, you get an executive coach and go through something to pursue your purpose. Leadership Transition Institute helped me to narrow in on my focus. There are other local ones and it's overwhelming because they don't know where to start. Veterati is for mentoring transitioning military members. American Corporate Partners for a year long

mentorship, depending on what direction you want to go. Four Block is 10-12 weeks focuses on elevator pitches, resumes, meeting different companies.

### **Preparation: Being Planful**

The theme of preparing: being planful emerged with several participants mentioning taking specific time to intentionally do an activity or take a class towards the goal of transitioning smoothly. Many of the female veterans shared a strategic approach to their transition which included focus areas like education geared toward a potential next career, classes towards adapting to civilian culture or business, financial planning and budgeting, and securing housing and VA disability income.

RP1 noted,

The first 6 months was research and LinkedIn learning to learn corporate language “out of military jargon” to “civilian speak”. After 6 months I decided to sign up with Hire Heroes and USO for resume support and companies that are hiring. USO offers a lot, including an application and building a timeline. Setup VA disability claims and took advantage of a good amount of leave stored up. House hunting, job hunting and terminal to stack up leave to prepare for transition.

RP2 said that it helps financially filing with VA before transitioning because she had her first check within a couple weeks after getting out of the military. RP5 shared, “I knew from the first time I got out that I needed to do things for myself to prepare and have my own ducks in an order to ensure I could pay for myself.” RP6 described,

I started planning and preparing 2 years prior. I did research to find out how many veterans actually plan for their transition, and it was a very small number.

Part of this preparation was to get my third degree in anticipation for my next career. I timed the masters to be done during my transition. I also got my Project Management certification for the process. The military has taught us to always make ourselves better and so I'm always wondering, "what can I do next?"

RP7 shared,

It took about 3 years between the decision to leave and when I actually left. Then it was about situating myself for my next career as a counselor through classes and going through an internship. Financially I was trying to situate so there wasn't a huge gap between jobs.

RP8 stated,

You have to go and figure it out on your own. You have to own your own transition. People don't know what they don't know at this stage, so it can get overwhelming out there. How do you choose which non-profit to use? There just so many. You have to figure out your focus first because if you know what that is then you can start to figure out which non-profit works best for you.

### **Superordinate Theme 5: After Military Transition Experience**

This theme describes the phase of time where participants were officially separated or retired and began their social identity as a veteran or civilian. Each of the participants shared that they identify as a veteran and offered a way that being a veteran has helped them obtain employment. They also descriptively shared examples of their

mindsets after transition or those of the people in their civilian environments and formed veteran communities.

### **Military and Civilian Identity**

The theme of military and civilian identity can be captured through the study and in the other themes and narratives. This data specifically captures the experiences associated directly with identity and often speaking directly about it. RP 4 mentioned the gap in society between those that have served in the military and those that have not and wanting to help remedy this division.

Although every participant shared that they identify as a veteran, some participants shared the potential drawbacks towards employment as it relates to identifying as a veteran in the civilian workforce. The main reasons for identifying as a veteran is the social identity associated with the community and the pride in oneself for having served in the military. Many wanted to share openly that they were a veteran and wanted to challenge non-veteran civilians if they assumed that the male in their lives were the members who served.

A uniqueness of experiences has led to some identifying stronger socially as a military member and others as a civilian with a veteran identity. Some still feel like they are transitioning and figuring out the new civilian environment with which they are now living in. This is captured through the culmination of their experiences through the transition and notably through the narratives supporting this theme.

RP1 described,

I got retirement pay very quickly but VA disability pay took a very long time to come in. Fortunately, I budgeted well in advance for the transition. I changed my mindset to ensure I got a job that had hours where I could be with my daughter more often. I had to go back and forth trying to get a job because of different apprenticeships and one with the hours I needed.

When asked about identifying as a veteran, RP1 said,

Hell yes, every chance I get I tell people I'm a veteran. I know not a lot of women aren't doing that [identifying as a veteran], they get out and don't want nothing to do with it. People still ask what year my husband was in the service, and I have to correct them. I try to cut it off before they assume it was a male in my family.

RP2 still feels like she's transitioning. The job she's in now isn't something she was trained to do and is "still navigating the waters and figuring it out." Transitioning felt like a full-time job on its own trying to get prepared. RP2 mentioned,

The first 6 months of the transition was trying to figure out what is my "why" and I ended up learning everyone else's why until someone finally taught me how to look for my own "why". That helped me hone-in on the research and direction of my employment search. We think the direction we had in the military is the direction we should take in the civilian world. We don't have to do what we did then.

RP2 said that through the fellowship in DC she has learned that leadership wants the enlisted perspective. "Even though many start sharing through blogs and podcasts, they need more of an enlisted voice [in public policy]."

RP 3 contributed,

Yes, I identify as a veteran because I worked my butt off to be a vet and I might not have been happy with everything while I was in but I am proud of my service and all of the women that served before me.

RP4 mentioned, "I still have not found my job, I am a very creative person, and I am not quite there yet with what I want to do with my life." RP4 continued,

It's my identity, if you don't know that about me, you're missing 10 years of my life. There's a divide between those that served and those that didn't in ways that I would love to help not have such a wide gap. I think it's important that other people look at me and see someone that served, it's important and something I want to talk about.

RP5 mentioned,

They call us "citizen-Airman" or "citizen-Soldier" because we really are a citizen first but we're living a dual lifestyle, especially the longer we are mobilized. I had to turn off my drill-instructor voice for the civilians. It's not motivating for them, even as a fitness instructor. When teaching yoga, I started locking the door and put a sign out that "if you're late, we'll see you next week". Somebody started complaining about it. I had to ask the front desk [representative] and my supervisor to support me. It was a total disaster. I needed to get people to know me. It's different when people are paying me to be there. Dealing with people at the wine bar was a transition challenge too. It was a range of people to interact

with and an opportunity to hone my customer service skills. The first 45 days were really rough.

RP5 later shared,

I had already had two toxic leaders [while serving in the military]; I was done with civil service. I go by a veteran, and I am proud to share it. My service allows me to connect with a community here that does not have a high amount of veterans. I represent veterans in my community. We want to create a climate where veterans feel they can come home to Oregon and feel supported.

RP6 reported,

Yes, I identify because I like the responses I get from people. People refer to my husband like he served, and he has to say, “my wife is the one who served”. I want everyone to know I served my country, I retired, I want to inspire other girls to do the same.

RP6 described,

I still have my uniforms hanging up in my closet. I haven’t gotten rid of them because I am thinking that I could get called back up at any time. When I got my first retirement check I was surprised “I really did it” and I keep waiting for the shoe to drop.

I don’t identify as a civilian. I will never identify myself as a civilian. When I had a break in service when I was young, everyone would say “you’re so stiff and rigid”. My dad was like you need to go back into the military and that’s where I blossomed. I believe the military has so much to offer. I wish more people did



more service; society would be better off. I'm a retired military veteran, yes, I'm a civilian but I am a retired military veteran first.

RP7 described,

I identify as a veteran; I'm not sure other people do. Women veterans are more invisible and that's frustrating because we're not recognized as a veteran sometimes. What the military stands for is what I identify with, the values, the sense of defending the constitution, the higher purpose, the sacrifices that we do for the love of our country, higher power things. The things that I did as an individual is part of a tradition from all the prior before me.

RP8 shared,

Oh yeah, I identify as a veteran, and I wish someone would challenge me in veteran parking one day when my husband isn't there so I can show them my retired military ID card. I know it'll be a man or an older woman that'll try to tell me not to park in that spot. I served honorably for half of my life. I want my daughter to know that the things I did in the military were for her. I want her to know she can do anything.

### **Mindset**

The theme of mindset emerged early and throughout the study. This focuses on the described mindsets of the female veteran participants, those in civilian society, and those within the military to create a picture towards both research questions and increase awareness of the phenomena of the lived experiences of female veterans. The insight shared within this theme feeds the other themes and depicts potential cultural

implications of perceptions, biases, and lack of understanding of military veterans, particularly female veterans. Which potentially feeds into why military veterans form a community among themselves after their transition.

RP1 noted,

If people hear I'm a vet, they want to help me even more. That has helped with the transition. In the corporate world, it's all about I did this, and I did that and I made this. It's still taking me a while to get out of the mindset of team and into the [civilian] mindset of "I."

I should have taken more classes about dealing with the corporate world, being more patient, talking with people without making them uncomfortable or intimidated. I have to be very intentional and deliberate and think hard to not upset people. There should be courses for dealing with civilians beyond the resume.

RP2 shared,

We have to realize that we have freedom now. I went to ask my boss what her left and right limits were, and she put it back on me to say what she was wanting to do. The supervisor said, "We hired you for your expertise, so we want you to tell us what you would like to do". This was a very different experience than the military that tells us everything to do and where to go and when to be there.

RP2 contributed,

The camaraderie is huge, we connect on a different level when we have the unique experiences that we do in the military, that's willing to help one another. I

knew there would be people that wanted to help me because I am a veteran. I don't want other veterans to struggle the way I did. I know some veterans that may not identify as a veteran, and I want to pay it forward and help people get through their struggles.

RP3 contributed, "I was ready to shed that part of my life and ready to close the book on that part of my life." RP3 said,

It is awesome [getting out]. My husband is also transitioning. We love it. It is a weight off our shoulders. Without the mental strain, we're already feeling a night and day difference from what we were feeling before [while in the military]. I was feeling anxious for everything in my prevue, including all of the classified information on the ship. I was always waiting for the "gotcha moment" and feeling like I'm always on-call. Now my boss tells me to turn my phone off and to stop answering emails after hours. That anxiety that I just couldn't get rid of is gone now. I couldn't even do the reserves because I was dreading one weekend of the month all month long. I am very fortunate to get a disability rating and VA healthcare and have employment. I have almost anger at the Navy for all the crap, so why would I want to hang out with them for one weekend a month.

I have a lot to thank the Navy for; my best friend, my husband, things I would have never done or seen but when I needed the most care and support was when I was yanked from my duty station. It wasn't about the person; it was about the billets. I was in therapy, in denial and all this other stuff and my leaders were taking care of me, but the warfare community at large was not taking care of me. I

am not alone in this feeling; we're hemorrhaging at the 0-3 level. So many from my peer group are getting out. It's a mismanagement/misallocation of training and resources.

There are things as leaders in the military that we would never do in the civilian world. The infantilizing of adults like safety briefs each Friday would never happen in the civilian world.

I had to realize, who am I now? From High School until I got out it was all about getting into the military and being the best officer. So now what am I going to do?

That was hard.

RP3 mentioned,

Family and friends supporting me was the biggest contribution to a successful transition. Went through a couple transition programs, Commit based on a book from Stanford to help build mental models of what I want to do. That was great. The Skill Bridge program was definitely helpful. I found the non-profit on my own, but it was helpful going through. Just finished a fellowship called the Dogtag Fellowship, which helps vets find renewed purpose in life. They focused on holistic health, and it was incredible.

RP4 reported,

I didn't know what I wanted to do, I still don't. That was challenging trying to find out if I have any of the qualifications for any of the jobs I am looking for. Challenging to articulate what I actually did versus what my teams did because we never talk about ourselves, the military culture is so team oriented and I didn't

know what the civilian culture expected of me. That was really negative, I lost a lot of confidence. I thought I did all the right requirements needed to get jobs and to not get any response was really challenging. In the military there is so much mutual respect given, that to not get any response at all is normal in the civilian world and in the military, you would never just leave someone hanging, it was very horrible. It is still shocking to me. I had to unlearn and uncover things while I was adapting to my circumstances to learn what do I want to do, without really know what I want to do. I knew I had experience that not many people could compare it to and hard to talk about and how do I articulate it to my job now. The stakes aren't the same, I couldn't compare, and there's no way that a translation could.

RP4 reported,

Part of having a successful transition is outside of having employment but finding where you find purpose. Is it volunteering, supporting non-profits/start-ups, stays connected to where I started in the military? I got to spend time doing what I enjoy doing. It wasn't about employment for me.

RP4 shared,

I'm unhappy if I don't directly have an impact on people's lives, I have to be the one to take action to do that. In the military it is built-in and always there, but I make that for myself in the civilian world. Life doesn't give you that structure to do that. The importance of community and I am still learning a lot and I have a long way to keep learning.

RP5 contributed,

I knew how to interact with civilians because I spent many years with them. I found it difficult to connect with some of my leadership because they had never had experience with guardsman or reservist and didn't matter that I was an active duty officer at the time, they saw my experience before this position.

RP5 later shared,

I needed to begin establishing my own career. I ended up in the city government, Parks and Recreation. I knew I'd get veteran's preference to become a fitness instructor. Then I ran into a winemaker and began a winemaking program. I wanted to try a few different things. I still didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I knew I hated my job and my life [as a reservist] until my mobilization [activating to active duty]. I was the first employee at my Parks and Recreation that they hired from the military so I don't know if that helped me or hindered because they didn't know what they would get.

RP5 noted,

Even though I was activated, I was technically a reservist, I got no benefits for transition, no Skill Bridge program, nothing. We don't get that, no matter how long we have been mobilized and activated. Their Transition Assistance Program (TAP) class is a check block. It says to guardsman and reservists that have been activated, "thank you for your contribution playing Air Force but the government doesn't think your contributions were enough to get these programs" even if you

retire. After spending 17 years activated, it is still considered a separation but no benefits.

RP5 mentioned,

I salvaged my career and be able to retire. It took me 2.5 years to build my life back from being passed over for captain. I had to rebuild my life. After the struggles, I was a Lt Col in the reserves, a GS 12 Air Reserve Technician. I knew how to survive. I am pretty resourceful, and I can survive the majority of situations.

RP5 shared, “You can use all those different additional duties to help build your resume.

My duty as a physical training leader led to my fitness instructor job on the outside.” RP6

explained, “My job now is part time and it’s perfect for me. I can see my family more and not be away like I was in the military.” RP6 said,

I had to mentally prepare for this, I have spent my whole life in the military.

People have always said you’ll know when you need to get out and I reached a point where I was ready to retire. I would have probably made O-6 and I knew I didn’t want to move again and change my son’s school, move our home of 9 years, we were too settled. I would’ve those years with my son and the increase in pay was not worth it overall. I had been doing investments my whole life, I have been preparing for this my whole life.

These non-profits and other companies help support our transition because they know the sheer talent and time that has been invested in veterans. It would be a waste of time to not use those talents. Military members are taught to assimilate

very quickly and moving every couple year builds resiliency. If you take advantage of everything the military provides for you, you'll have everything you need. You have to go get it though. No one is going to tell you to do it, you have to do it yourself.

RP6 shared,

My husband had a heart attack, and the Navy has come through for us and paid for everything. I am so grateful for the Navy and everything they are still doing for us even though I am retired, they are taking care of us. It is so comforting to know that we are taken care of, even still.

RP7 mentioned,

The other thing that is still hard is that people don't really ask about my service. It'd be nice if people could be curious about it. The people in the military aren't going to care, once you say you're leaving you're dead to them.

RP7 also shared that the military gave her confidence. When she was approaching a challenging situation, she could say to herself and others, "If I defended the country, I can do this too." RP7 described,

When I got out in my 20s it was a disaster but this time, I got out I had a lot more insight into the process and did much better. I should have stood up for myself more while I was in, advocated for myself. I don't regret anything I did in the military; I just think there is this level of devaluation of women. I was better than I was led to believe when I was in the military. I was better, stronger, more competent. I learned there are many other organizations that do appreciate me.



RP7 also described,

As a transition assistance advisor there are so many resources that people don't even know exist and there aren't a lot of people making the connections with transitioning members. People have to find stuff on their own, but they don't always know where to go. I don't know how effective some of those programs are. It's a major transition, a lot of people have no clue what to do.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 shared the results and subsequent narratives from the lived experiences of female veterans as it relates to the two studied research questions. The five superordinate themes described were Feelings About Military Service, Gender Differences, Transition Experience, Transition Preparation Leading to Employment, and After Military Transition Experience. The 11 subordinate themes from those were Support System/Relationships, Navigating Cultural Experience and Mindset, Differing Treatment, Perceptions, Struggles During Transition, Lessons Learned, Networking: Community Building, Transition Programs, Preparation: Being Planful, Military/Civilian Identity, and Mindset. Chapter 5 will consist of the interpretation of the study findings, limitations of the study, recommendations as a result of the study, and any social or societal implications.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This study explored the experience of a female veteran as she transitions from her military service into her civilian workplace. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to analyze thematic factors related to understanding the experience that female veterans had within their first 3 years of transition into the civilian workplace.

This research focused on the phenomena of the female veteran's social identity and experience during her military service, the transition phase, and the after-transition phase to include a successful postmilitary employment experience. Because qualitative research is an approach to obtain an increased awareness of a phenomenon, it was very important to study not only the phenomena related to the lived experiences, but also those experiences that contributed to successful employment after participants' military service.

The conceptual framework submits that individuals form their own subjective meaning of their experiences, which aligned with exploring these female veterans' experiences as the phenomena of interest. The phenomenological design is aligned with increasing understanding of the unique influential factors that are the female veteran's experience and those that contributed toward their employment.

The data collected and analyzed emerged with five superordinate themes—feelings about military service, gender differences, transition experience, transition preparation leading to employment, and after military transition experience—and 11 subordinate themes: support system/relationships, navigating cultural experience and mindset, differing treatment, perceptions, struggles during transition, lessons learned,

networking: community building, transition programs, preparation: being planful, military/civilian identity, and mindset.

The key findings also include a variety of experiences in the military that were reportedly associated with having a strong support system and social identity, and the differences in being female within that social construct. Other key findings were the similarities in how female veterans approached their separation or retirement from the military in preparation for their civilian career. The female veteran participants had strong similarities in their after-transition experience, including the feeling of strong veteran communities and a lack of understanding socially among nonveteran civilians. In Chapter 5, I share my interpretation of the findings, implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings from this study confirm and extend the current research literature presented in Chapter 2: Literature Review to address the concerns that female veterans' lived experience during their military-to-civilian transition is not well known and is rarely researched. Presently, there are countless studies regarding military veterans and their transition into the workforce, but they have mainly consisted of male veterans, and there have been insufficient data to understand the transition for female veterans (DAV, 2014). The lack of understanding and research focusing on female veterans could also be a contributor toward the higher unemployment rates that female veterans have compared to their male veteran counterparts (Strong et al., 2018).

As the conceptual framework, social identification theory involves individuals categorizing themselves by gender, age group, organizational membership, religion, and many other features that they can also associate with more than one category (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Van den Broek, 2021). In this study, I looked at the potential for a social identity within the military (organizational membership) and studied how this social identity transitions to the civilian workforce.

### **Superordinate Theme 1: Feelings About Military Service**

The participants were asked about their reasons for joining and exiting the military, as well as their overall experience while they were in the military. Most of the participants joined for travel, adventure, school/tuition assistance, and/or a military family member. What they experienced while they were in the military culture was uniquely theirs, but two subordinate themes emerged from their descriptions: (a) support system/relationships and (b) navigating the military culture and mindset.

The military is widely known for its sense of community and camaraderie, and members within the organization often refer to one another in terms such as “comrades,” “brother,” “sister,” and “family.” Veterans are conditioned to having experiences with their peers and colleagues that they perceive as distinguishing them from the civilian population (Lancaster & Hart, 2015). The participants expressed this as something that they experienced but also something that they lost as a result of becoming a civilian or veteran. In other terms, these members experienced being part of an in-group and socially identifying as a member internally, which felt communal, and as many shared, like a

family, to being part of the out-group and no longer associated directly. The indirect social identity was now that of veteran or civilian.

The military has a very clear pattern for how it indoctrinates members into the organization and starts the process of social identity integration for the associated members: basic training. The term *basic training* is also synonymous with “boot camp” and is an intentional process for indoctrination into the military organization. It is recognized that there are physical and mental requirements to be an associated member.

Individuals begin to identify themselves early as military service members. Their new culture is the foundation of a military member’s identity and their self-concept, or how they perceive themselves (Demers, 2013). The sense of identity may become stronger the longer the member remains in military service within the military culture. Each military branch has a set of core values that is taught during this indoctrination stage and is reinforced for a member’s entire service with the military. A strong social identity is made based not only on the military, but also on the actual branch of the military. Those members from specific branches have their own social identities related to members of that branch, but military members, and eventual veterans, find the overall association the membership that they identify with.

The variance of experiences while serving in the military is vast. Most participants considered their time in military service as a beneficial one with clearly stated advantages. Others described unfortunate circumstances that led to reasons for exiting their service. There seems to be a difference between the support services for veterans and those for military service members transitioning. Some participants

expressed that they had to look after themselves as they were going to transition and find their own resources.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Gender Differences**

The findings reflected that gender was also a social identity construct that the participants had beyond their social identity as a military member. The data indicated the ways that gender was impacted within the organizational membership of the military, and some associations in the civilian sector were described. The willingness of participants to share their experiences as females in the military culture, without a designated question or prompt, displayed the importance of this identifier and set of experiences. Davis (2008) used feminist theory to describe the basis that gender is a necessary variable that researchers need to properly understand the lived experiences within their social constructs. As one of the strongest themes to emerge overall, these females described differences in treatment and perceptions regarding being female in the military, and perceptions that others had toward them about being female in the military.

The female veterans shared their experiences as leaders and the challenges associated with being a female leader. Many of them shared that they felt that they had to assimilate or try to fit a certain mold that typical feminine traits do not fill. The repression of a natural state can lead to energy expenditure and an adoption of the new assimilated traits (i.e., more masculine, less feminine). Some participants also shared that there was a lack of female role models and wanted to become someone others could look to. In other cases, being female may have been a catalyst for the eventual decision to exit the military. Some described missing out on important promotions or opportunities.

These impacts and descriptions of experiences depict the impact of the social identity on the person's esteem. Each of these participants was able to move through the challenges in some facet as they transitioned out and found employment, and these experiences had lasting impressions. One participant shared that when she went from the military, a "male-dominated field," to her counseling career, a "female-dominated field," she suddenly felt validated and more confident. She described it as a 180-degree difference in experiences, and it felt good. This tells of an impact that was noticeable beyond the military experience itself. Other females noted that they felt that they would be judged, or their career could be impacted if they started a family. They noted that males do not have to concern themselves with this. One person got out specifically to start a family, and another mentioned the reflex of saying "no" when asked if she wanted to start a family by a civilian employer, even though she really did but did not want to miss out on the job opportunity.

This reflex and these stigmas led to not disclosing a part of an individual's life for fear that the stigma or judgement would impact them. It is another form of repression. The repression of feminine traits and the repression of goals or desires to have a family can lead to a lack of true identity and a lack of alignment with personal and professional goals. These associations could be consistent with the increased depression rates that female veterans have. Williams et al. (2018) revealed that female veterans have a depression rate of 29% in their lives and male veterans have a rate of 16%. He added that female veterans had a 21% posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rate while civilian females had a rate of 5%, which increases their overall mental health morbidity.

After conducting his own research, Zephyrin (2016) endorsed that healthcare providers need to have an increased awareness of the impacts that military service can have on female veterans' overall mental well-being. The social identity of trying to fit a mold, assimilate, or repress parts of oneself could have this kind of impact. One participant said that she pushed back on males early on in her career to show them that she was not a pushover and did not have to deal with issues as much as she moved up in rank. When seen as incompetent in a technical field because she was female, she was able to show others that she could do the technical work that they could. She expressed, "I had to prove myself but when I did, I didn't have to put up with much."

The data from this study revealed that females strategically adopted more masculine identities to assimilate and align with the dominant masculine cultural traits (Pawelczyk, 2014). Woodward and Winter (2006) used the term *military femininity* in describing the identity that females struggle with while serving alongside male counterparts. Spsychala (2016) found that the experiences that females have during combat are not taken as seriously compared to those of males during combat or even compared to the struggles that civilians face. The disparity in perception goes back to the Army Nurses of World War II (Spsychala, 2016). The strategy for most is to develop what female veterans considered to be adapting and blending to the process of the military culture. This is an assimilation to the social identity of their established culture. Some participants expressed having to withhold starting their families, display more masculine traits, or repress or hide their natural feminine traits in order to gain respect. One person shared that if it is not the mold of a military officer to have feminine traits, then female



officers have to repress those traits if they want others to see them as an officer, and even then, it is challenging to get respect. A person's social identity has to assimilate to the expectations and assumptions of others, and the true self makes the alteration.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: Transition Experience**

The phase of transition was discussed and shared from the time that the research participants were aware that they were going to separate or retire until their first postmilitary employment. For many, this postmilitary employment happened soon after their military service was officially over. During the transition, many participants shared the challenges that they faced and how they overcame those. As a result, the two subordinate themes to emerge from these experiences were struggles with transition and lessons learned. The struggles and subsequent lessons speak to and give rise to some of the military culture and mindset, as well as the overall transition experiences of service members in total.

For many, the struggle to assimilate to civilian culture from the military was around the difference in the pace or operations tempo, which speaks to cultural mindset. A few participants mentioned having to adjust to the perspective that things do not happen in the civilian workplace as quickly as they wanted them to and that the magnitude of the impact of the work is very different. Instead of working to make sure that lives were safe and missions were secured, they were working to keep a business producing profits, and that took a mental adjustment. The fulfilling nature has to adjust to a different kind of mission and may impact a person's intrinsic motivation.

It was noted by a few participants that the veteran population does a better job at supporting the transitioning member than the military community. RP6 shared, “The military does a really good job of bringing people in, but it sometimes does not do a good job of supporting people when they leave. It’s up to nonprofits and a bunch of other people to do that part.” Another person described that they had to build a business case to their military leadership to take part in a program for transitioning members. A different participant added that there is a large gap between what the veteran community does to support transitioning members and what the military leaders know about that. Much of the transition is left to the transitioning member and is not widely understood within the military culture. Notably, a participant shared that “once the military member shares that they are leaving [by separation or retirement], you’re dead to the military and it is on you to figure out the rest.” Some participants spoke to having to juggle figuring out their transition path on their own while still working their military mission at the same time. They wanted those things to be separated so that they could do a good job at either of them. One participant had guilt for leaving their military team but really needed the separate space to focus on their own next steps and could not find a way to do both. This continues to speak to a need for a separation of the transition process from still working the regular military mission.

Some participants mentioned that they had been selling themselves short or realized that their skillsets were greater and more valuable to the civilian workplace than they realized. The challenge of translating the skills attained from military service is something that most veterans have struggled with at some point. Some realized that their

leadership skills translated over but admitted not being able to articulate some of these skills or “unlearn military jargon” to make the transition smoother. Veterans often have reported having to help civilian managers and colleagues understand their language during the relearning and assimilation process. A couple of participants mentioned that they struggled with adjusting from a team-focused mindset in the military to a self-focused mindset in the civilian workplace and wanted to learn more patience and customer service skills.

The expressed shared experiences show a pattern of the need to assimilate language and cultural mindset and norms through the social identity phase. Trying to fit in and find a place in society socially is the struggle, and often, these members find more in common with other veterans and gravitate toward their veteran communities or going into a government position where the language and culture are more closely aligned with their military social identity.

#### **Superordinate Theme 4: Transition Preparation Leading to Employment**

The theme of transition preparation leading to employment and the following superordinate theme speak most directly to Research Question 2: How do female veterans who have transitioned within the last 3 years describe how their social identity enabled them to successfully transition? For some, this phase began well in advance of actual separation or retirement, and others shared that they found themselves in the middle of transition without any preparation. The subordinate themes that emerged through the interviews were networking: community building, transition programs, and preparation: being planful. Because veterans have higher unemployment rates than nonveteran

civilians, sometimes due to mental health issues such as PTSD and depression (Dillahunt-Aspillaga et al., 2014), having insight to how these eight female veteran participants secured postmilitary employment and prepared in advance was valuable.

Most of the female veterans shared that they found networking to be their biggest asset in preparation for transition. People identify psychologically with those that they share personal characteristics that might be considered comparatively rare (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek, 2021). Many of the participants leveraged veteran groups for networking, while some leveraged networking with non-veteran civilians deliberately. Since the social identity at this point is still that of a military member, the veteran community offered a safe space where the participants could be more of themselves, speak a similar language and as many expressed have an immediate unspoken bond that they could not find with nonveteran civilians. There was expressed comfort and mutual understanding with the community of veterans, regardless of the branch of military service. Many participants shared that they specifically sought networking with female veterans to have an even closer relatedness and bond, given potential common struggles with their experiences while serving and having similar social identities as both females and military organizational membership. Interestingly, the participants that shared they sought non-veteran civilians to network with deliberately wanted to do so to “understand how they view leadership”, seeking an understanding of their mindset and expectations, or to learn the civilian workplace deliberately. I interpret this as a focus on wanting to assimilate toward a civilian, or new veteran, social identity

and find ways of adapting toward their new environments as to not find themselves in the out-group or judged for having come from a different social construct.

The female veteran participants shared immediately and often that they leveraged transition programs as well. The participants mentioned that there are over 45,000 veterans service organizations (VSO) that support transitioning members in various ways. Many of them used the transition programs for networking purposes but also for learning how to translate their skills into civilian jargon, updated resumes, learning interviewing skills and some programs even offered free business suits to transitioning members. Many of the transition programs offered veteran or civilian mentors to meet with periodically and some of the participants were themselves a part of these organizations as a mentor and supporting others. One participant runs a nonprofit organization herself, while some others volunteer and work on behalf of transition programs. The most notable programs mentioned were the skill bridge program that allows service members the last 6 months of their military service to intern at a job that they are interested in. The military leadership must sign-off on the application to allow for this space to occur. Some of our participants found success through their program and found immediate employment while others used it for learning skills but did not eventually get a full time position through that internship. Another noteworthy transition program is the formally used program that military service branches use called transition assistance program or TAP. This allows transitioning members 3-5 days of classes to gain understanding on civilian work life. The participants expressed mixed reviews on how beneficial this program is and mentioned that it does not fully prepare for a transition. Many participants mentioned

that they did not know where to start in their preparation. Several said they didn't know what they wanted to be when they grew up or asked themselves, "who am I now?". This speaks to social identity and relearning our renewed civilian identity but through the lens of someone that has experienced a military social identity for at least 4 years full-time and up to 27 years full-time.

As part of being planful many participants shared that they went to school or took specific classes in anticipation of their separation or retirement. Alexander (2014) used the critical feminist theory to explore the variances between male and female veterans' lived experiences when transitioning to higher education. A few of the participants added a master's degree to their resume while preparing for transition and others worked on certifications specifically targeting their desired civilian career.

Researchers used a career "*adapt-abilities*" competency-based structure for research studies where subjects had been transitioning towards the middle of their career (Brown et al., 2012). The competencies laid out in this framework were what they considered critical factors for a successful career transition and included: control, curiosity, commitment, confidence, and concern (Brown et al., 2012). The participants shared varying levels of control throughout their transition. Some chose freely to leave the service and had greater control of the preparation while others were left juggling their military careers and the same time, they were working on transition preparation. The curiosity levels led these female veterans to seek out education, veteran and civilian networks, and transition programs in hopes of understanding their new chapter in life and as presupposed earlier, seeking an understanding of what could be their new social

identities, in other words, their role in the civilian society. Their commitment to pursuing their transition with a deliberate preparation was apparent throughout their shared experiences and confidence through this transition process waned at times for some and got steam at times for others. Some participants expressed not feeling confident or even concerned when securing post-military employment and this often led to multiple job changes in the first year following military transition. Trying to figure out what will be fulfilling or as some expressed, figuring out their “why” and focusing on that could lead to trying different jobs and careers until one feels more fitting and fulfilling. Confidence seemed to be achieved for some that felt comfortable in their new career choice while others explicitly said they had been employed but not successfully and that they were still seeking other ways to be more fulfilled.

### **Superordinate Theme 5: After Transition Experience**

The strong theme of after transition experience also directly focuses on Research Question 2: How do female veterans who have transitioned within the last 3 years describe how their social identity enabled them to successfully transition? The phase of transition that this focused on was from the time participants were employed. Most of the research participants had employment soon after their separation or retirement from their military service. The emerging themes from this were military/civilian identity and mindset. These subordinate themes could be found in all phases of the transition and were most notable in this part of the participants experience.

When identifying as a member of an organization or group, an individual has to see themselves as intertwined psychologically with the organization or group and the

accompanying experiences, successes, and failures of that specific organization or group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van den Broek, 2021). People psychologically identify with their group based partly on how distinguishing the group is from others in a social context (McGuire, 1984; Mehra et al., 1998; Van den Broek; 2021). Van den Broek goes on to explain that the attitudes of members within a group grow less favorable towards those members that are considered out of the group.

The process that military members go through during transition takes them through being part of an out group and then integrated into the military in group and then part of the military out group and potentially a civilian out group and potentially a veteran in group. This can obviously be very confusing and unsettling psychologically much like what might have been experienced during the integration phase of basic training and training/military indoctrination.

From the onset of military experiences during the recruitment and integrating phases of basic training and job training or skill building, there are deliberate processes designed to indoctrinate members into the military culture (Cooper et al., 2018). Cooper et al. considered this process an imposed separation from a person's civilian identity to their new military identity. This considers the social construct that goes along with identity and how people associate themselves socially with the military with force through basic training and reinforcement throughout training and onto different military assignments. This imposed separation does not always occur as quickly or by force when reintegrating back into the civilian culture. RP 8 shared that there should be a "reverse boot camp", another term for basic training. This could allow individuals the time to



properly detach their military social identity and relearn their civilian identities as a veteran. The deliberate nature with which a person is brought into the military culture is not the deliberate nature with which they leave the military culture.

Strong et al. (2018) made the correlation between female veteran unemployment rates and mindsets like social stigma, Veteran's Administration policies, and mental healthcare. Research on military veteran identity suggests that a female veteran's identity can be a factor to the high level of stress during their transition between military and civilian sectors (Demers, 2013). Demers described how there are very few research articles or studies focused on female veterans compared to male veterans, so understanding the identity that female veterans have has been challenging. Gender harassment was found to be the major stressor that female veterans conveyed, and the stigmas associated contribute to their associated identity (Demers). The stigmas and possible stress associated were shared by the research participants throughout their military experiences.

Powell and Baker (2014) highlighted a common theme among a variety of identity related theories regarding individuals having more than one identity to obtain and sustain relationships with members of various social groups and organizations. When asked if each of the participants identified as a veteran, all of them said yes. Many of them went on to explain that they were proud of their service and proud to share with others that they were military veterans. Researchers found that 95% of female veterans were proud to be veterans; but, during the transition to integrate back into their civilian environments many female veterans would not identify as a veteran but rather adopt

multiple identities (Alexander, 2014; Barno et al., 2015; Ender et al., 2015). This dual or multiple identities were shared as potentially beneficial or a barrier when seeking employment depending on the hiring manager or company's mindset towards the military or knowledge of veterans. Many participants shared that identifying as a veteran helped them with their transition or made it easier to get employment. Some participants explained that while trying to get employment they felt the person they were interviewing with or trying to get hired by had not worked with veterans before and might be dismayed by the proposition.

Through previous quantitative and qualitative methodologies, research had shown that females were less likely to identify themselves as a veteran than their male counterparts (Alexander, 2014; Barno et al., 2015; Ender et al., 2015; Zephyrin, 2016). This data also revealed that 55% of males responded as a veteran, and 30% of females responded as a veteran (Burdett et al., 2012). Additionally, researchers found that about 70% of females in a civilian workforce chose not to identify as a veteran, but the literature shows some contrasting views of female veterans. This study clearly shows the contrasting view that all participants identified as a veteran in society but also share their identity at their civilian workplaces. The previous research dates back most recently to 2016 and there may be a shift in mindset through willingness to share and openness to hire military veterans.

Some mindset shifts that the participants mentioned were going from the military culture where there is team focus to the civilian culture where there is a focus on self. Also mentioned was a lack of attention to detail and not paying attention to instructions

as an introduction to civilian mindset, where the military mindset strongly focuses on strict attention to detail and understanding instructions due to the magnitude of the mission. Another participant shared that in seeking to understand the expectations of her new boss she asked about her limits and boundaries. To her surprise, the boss was not focused on that but was wanting to know her expertise and how she can support the civilian job function. Other adjustments in mindset were around having more freedom and less regiment while learning new time management skills. All of these mindset shifts come from direct lived experiences in the new culture while learning the new social identity.

### **Implications**

This study was carried out to make an impact on social change for the lives of the transitioning military service members, female veterans, and the communities with which these members currently reside in or will reside in following their transitions in the future. A conceptual framework provides the foundation to examine problems that evolve from literature (Imenda, 2014). Current research still demonstrates that it is unclear if one specific conceptual framework could completely depict the whole lived experiences of others (Hammond, 2015; Imenda, 2014) but the insights gained on the social identity of female veterans has increased the knowledge of military veterans from a shortage of qualitative research overall and the knowledge of female veterans. The research also contributes to the field of I/O Psychology and supports the veteran community through research and awareness.

Although there are more veteran service organizations and awareness of female veterans could potentially be increasing as the population increases, the key findings of this study identify that there are large divides in what female veterans need to fully psychologically transition and seamlessly assimilate to their new environments and their social identity as they reintegrate into their civilian society and post-military workplace.

Researchers have acknowledged that military veteran healthcare services are tailored to the needs of male veterans (Bergman et al., 2015; Rivera & Johnson, 2014). According to the women's overall mental health assessment of needs (WOMAN) survey results, the Veteran's Administration is not assisting the needs of female veterans appropriately either (Kimerling et al., 2015b). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, female veterans are more likely to have depression and PTSD than male veterans. Therefore, the compounding effect of a healthcare system that is not fully accommodating female needs leads to a societal issue stemming from a lack of awareness of what those needs are. This study provided some insight into some of the specific needs female veterans uniquely have. The differences in gender treatment and perceptions lends insight into the lived experiences of female veterans and personalized support societally could assist them during their transition.

When asked if the participants had any advice for female military members that would transition in the future, they responded with a distillation of what they learned or what worked for them.

RP1 offered this advice to others that will transition: "Start early, know your worth, save money." RP2 offered advice to women veterans:

You do not have to apologize to say that you want to have a family. I was asked if I planned on starting a family and my first instinct was to say “no” because of the stigma of not getting a job and that could hinder my chances of getting the job.

You should not have to apologize for wanting to start a family.

RP3 offered this advice:

File your VA claim; don't leave money on the table. If it happened in the service, it is service connected. Use LinkedIn, network, there's no shame in looking for others. Women in the military are already a very small population, claim that title and help each other out.

RP5 shared, “Build a LinkedIn profile, ask for help, get involved. If you don't feel you're a veteran, you've got to find the good like any bad relationship and find the good in it.”

RP6 said, “Just do your homework. Read and research, talk to people, connect with people to do letters of reference.” RP7 mentioned,

Good transitions come with preparation. As much as you can prepare is the best thing to do. Start with the simple things like making a budget, have 3- months income ready. Financial stress is the biggest hurdle and if you can mitigate that it will be a big stress reliever. Make sure you get your military records and medical records in order. Use the VA and get your disability rating if it applies to you. Get connected to the VA and use your resources. If you're looking for a different career, get connections and do the legwork to understand the new field and find your support people.

RP8 offered, “Get with Military Women’s Collective because I know exactly what you’re going through. Contact me to have somebody sitting next to you on the roller coaster.”

These messages of advice offer the opportunity for social change and the potential impact in society when, as many participants mentioned, society does not strongly know what female veterans are going through and therefore cannot fully understand how to help or support them. The biggest contribution of this study was to give a voice to the female veteran participants as they represented a growing population of female military members to transition for generations to come. These participants each volunteered their time and shared openly their experiences in the goal of helping those that will follow them through the difficult stages of transition displayed in this study. Understanding the unique military experiences that lead into transition, the transition experiences that lead to preparation for transition, and the experiences following transition can help individuals, communities, and organizations, including military organizations to give rise to the greater needs and gaps described.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were limitations to this study as anticipated. The study still described the lived experiences of female veterans as they transitioned to the postmilitary workplace however, the criteria was deliberately to study the phenomena of those experiences as it relates to female veterans to better understand their unique struggles and differences in experiences. This did not include male veterans and their lived experiences through the stages of transition into their civilian workplace.

Another limitation to the study was the deliberate choice to ensure that the female veterans had transitioned from their military service either by separation or retirement from active duty within the last 3 years. This time limitation could impact the transferability of the findings and implications for those female veterans from previous eras. The criteria to be active duty for at least 4 years was intended to capture those female veterans that can assimilated their social identities fully into the military organization but could limit the applicability for female veterans that were either not active duty or has less time than 4 years.

As a female veteran researcher, I anticipated potential bias and although I took deliberate measures to prevent this, I must mention it as a potential limitation. The data could have been interpreted differently potentially by a non-veteran researcher however unlikely due to increased awareness of potential biases led to bracketing of any personal biases and reflective journaling throughout the data collection, coding, data analysis, and sharing of results and interpretations of the findings.

With these potential limitations, this study provides an overall awareness of the lived experiences of female veterans throughout their transition process leading to successful employment in a postmilitary workplace. It also gives rise to potential gaps to address and areas where future transitioning female veterans can focus to increase their chances of successful postmilitary employment.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The focuses of this area will be on primary findings of this study and recommendations for future studies. Several recommendations can be made from this study and the experiences shared by the participants.

#### **Recommendations Based on Findings**

It became evident that although the military deliberately integrates members socially and psychologically, they do not have a deliberate approach towards reintegrating members back into the civilian culture. This causes social identities to become dual or multiple and can lead to the many examples of having to relearn civilian life described earlier in this chapter. A reintegration process would allow military members, female or male the opportunity to engage and work among civilian counterparts, understand culture and mindset of leadership, business, work tempo, and civilian society at large. Although the skill bridge program attempts to provide a 6 month internship at a civilian job, it does not prepare members psychologically for the new social identity and it is not consistently known, and perhaps endorsed if known, among military leaders. The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) class is 3-5 days and falls short on psychologically reintegrating members into civilian society and also focuses on resumes, interviews, setting up jobs.

Another recommendation would be to have a strong process in place to signify when gender differences are observed and seek to gain a culture change initiative around an equitable and diverse force. This has happened in small pockets of the military with the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Act, which allowed homosexuals and those with



same sex partners to disclose to the military and receive benefits without discrimination. Social movements within the United States have attempted to gain equality for women in the workplace and research shows that there is still work to be done. The military offers offices like Equal Opportunity and the Inspector General when complaints need to be filed but this seemingly falls short when it comes to educating our military forces on the impacts of beliefs, unconscious biases, prejudice, or sexual discrimination.

Organizations like the Veterans Affairs and Disabled American Veterans, as well as community organizations have more work to do when it comes to tailoring support services and benefits towards the needs of women. The male veteran experience of transitioning into the civilian culture from military service has been a research focus for some time now and the DAV (2014) acknowledges that there are substantial differences in female veterans' experience, but also recognize that the differences are not well known by researchers.

The Chief Executive Officer of the DAV reveals that the Department of Defense (DoD) and Veteran's Affairs (VA) programs traditionally serve the needs of males and with female growing faster their different needs call for urgent adaptation (DAV, 2014). Since the VA and DAV have admitted to some extent that their focus has been on male veterans and with the growing population of female veterans, their increasing depression, PTSD, and unemployment rates, the need for change is prompted. Education throughout these organizations and communities is needed to give rise to the unique struggles that female veterans have faced during their military service and the unique stigmas and biases they face in the civilian workforce.

### **Future Research Recommended**

The future research recommended could close the gap further on understanding the uniqueness that female veterans face not only during their transition into the civilian workplace but holistically. An understanding of recent mindset shifts in society regarding female veterans, junior enlisted female veterans, particular branches of the military and how those compare, and a comparison of retired and separated female veteran experiences. And, although qualitative studies are greatly needed to understand the overall military and veteran populations, some correlation studies could lend great value in understanding female veteran's experiences as well.

The previous research on cultural mindset and stigmas related to female veterans dates back to 2016 and there may be a shift in mindset through willingness to share and openness to hire military veterans. More recent research could suggest any potential areas where mindset might be shifting or where gender biases could be getting better or worsening. This information could be valuable internally to military branches and to those support organizations throughout transition and thereafter.

Although this study had a diverse sample population of various military branches, retired and separated, and paygrades further qualitative studies could focus on the junior enlisted female veterans. This would lend to a potential follow-on correlate study comparing the experiences of retired female veterans or commissioned officers to notice different areas of struggles, varying contributors to stress, or an overall difference in the lived experience of being in the military, transitioning, and reintegrating into civilian society. Additionally, a focus on each of the military branches could be studied and then

a correlate study to understand the different experiences female veterans had as well. Understanding the impact that the COVID-19 global pandemic had on transition could be studied further. It was mentioned a potential hindrance for some participants of this study but could become a greater focus of phenomena.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this study was to give rise and understand the lived experiences of female veterans as they transition from their military service to their postmilitary employment. The purpose was to understand the potential contributing factors that not only may be causing the increasing depression and unemployment for female veterans but to understand some ways that female veterans can increase their chances of successfully getting postmilitary employment. A greater understanding was achieved on not only these purposes but understanding the lived experiences as it was being female within the military culture and throughout the transition experience and some associated differences in treatment, stigmas, and perceptions surrounding these phenomena.

The research questions were studied, and clear themes emerged. The first research question more closely related to the themes of feelings about military, gender differences, and transition experience while the second research question more closely related to the themes of transition preparation leading to employment and after military transition experience. Each of these themes brought to light the experiences of the phases of transition from socially identifying as a member within a military organization, the preparation of transitioning from that organization to reintegrate into the civilian workplace, and the adjustments and challenges with associating as either a civilian or

veteran and no longer being socially intertwined within the military social construct. The impact of each of these phases was examined and since each of the participants had successfully gained post-military employment, their mindsets, resources, and strategy to do so were also studied.

The divide between what is known in the military for veteran support and what is offered through copious transition programs and service organizations remains an issue. The gap in psychologically preparing and reintegrating female veterans into society remains an issue and causes additional and preventable hardship. With awareness and understanding communities and military organizations can take the female veterans that have served their country proudly and care for them in appropriate and deliberate ways to ensure their success is not only through employment after their service but success in fully reintegrating and transitioning psychologically.

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## Appendix A: Interview Procedure

Interviewee Code Number:

Interview Date:    /    /   

Start Time:

End Time:

Your participation in this research study is appreciated and very important to gain an understanding of the experience that female veterans have from their military service to within their first three years after transitioning into the civilian workforce. An increased understanding of the struggles, coping resources, and skills that enabled a successful transition may service future female veterans transitioning. To ensure your confidentiality and regarding privacy concerns, your identity will not be shared in any way and will remain protected. At any point during the interview, you have the right to pause the process and ask questions or you may choose to stop the interview and your information will not be included in the study and will be destroyed. As a reminder, there are safeguards in place to ensure your confidentiality and this session will be recorded. Do you have any concerns or questions before we get started with the interview?

1. What led to your decision to start your military service?
2. What led to your decision to end your military service?
3. Please describe your experience before you transitioned from your military service.

4. Please describe your experience during the transition from your military service to the civilian workforce.
5. Please describe your experience after your transition from your military service to the civilian workforce.
6. Please describe the struggles you had during your transition from the military to the civilian workforce.
7. Please describe the experiences that supported your transition into the civilian workforce.
8. Do you currently identify as a military veteran?
  - (a.) What experiences led to you identifying as a military member?
  - (b.) If not, what experiences led to you not identifying as a military member?
9. In what ways has your identity allowed you to successfully transition from the military to the civilian workforce?
10. What have you learned about yourself as a result of going through the transition from the military to the civilian workforce?

Before we conclude this interview, do you have any advice you would like to offer to females that will transition into the civilian sector, or do you have any comments or thoughts you would like added to the study? Thank you again for your time and participation.

## Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Recruitment E-mail:

Dear [Insert Participant's Name],

My name is Angela Karnes-Padron, and I am a Doctoral student at Walden University in the Industrial/ Organizational Psychology Program. I am presently conducting qualitative research for a Doctoral degree and I need your help in participating in this important study. The topic being studied is the "Lived Experience of Female Veterans and Civilian Workplace Integration". You are invited to participate in this qualitative research study because you are a female veteran that has transitioned from your military service to the civilian workforce. To participate in this study you must meet the following criteria:

1. A military veteran
2. Be a female
3. Having served as an active duty member in one of the four primary branches of government, U.S. Air force, U.S. Army, U. S. Navy or U.S. Marine Corps, for 4 years or longer.
4. Having served in the enlisted ranks of E-4 to E-9 or commissioned ranks of O-3 to O-6.
5. Complete an informed consent form acknowledging and indicating participation in the study was voluntary at their free will. (Form will be provided on the date of the interview).
6. Have an honorable discharge from active duty military service within the past 3 years.

A one-on-one semi-structured interview that will last no longer than 60 minutes will be conducted in order to describe your transition from the military to the civilian workforce by participating in or utilizing employment programs in order to seek or maintain employment. You will have the right not respond to interview questions, stop the interview, and/or withdraw from the study at any time, The interview will take place in an agreed upon location, virtually or in person, such as a local community center, private library room or an approved place or location of your choice. You are encouraged to ask any questions, at any time, that will help you understand the study.

Your name or identity will be presented in the data or any reports that emerge from the study. No names will be attached to records or notes from the interview or observations. You will be assigned a pseudo name. All information will remain in locked files only accessible by me, the researcher.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me or email me.

Thank you!

Respectfully,

Angela Karnes-Padron

Doctoral Candidate

Walden University: Industrial/Organizational Psychology

## Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer



*FEMALE  
VETERAN  
RESEARCH  
PARTICIPANTS  
NEEDED*

If you have served active duty in the US military and have transitioned into the civilian workforce within the last 3 years you could be very valuable to research!

Research on female veterans is scarce and understanding all military experiences through research is also very rare. We need your support to understand these unique experiences with a short interview (no more than 1 hour) to support female veterans and service members.

Please contact me at [REDACTED] or through LinkedIn to volunteer or please share with someone who may be interested in helping the veteran community.

