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Veterans' Experience With Social Acceptance After Beginning Civilian Employment

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MPhil, Walden University, 2020

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial and Organizational Psychology

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Abstract

When an individual feels excluded from a group that they seek to be a part of, they experience negative physiological and psychological outcomes. The innate human need to be socially accepted is identified and described in elements of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and McClelland's human motivation theory. Social acceptance has also been shown to play an integral role in areas of communication, organizational commitment, performance, and team cohesiveness. However, it is not known if social acceptance directly impacts a veteran's ability and desire to maintain civilian employment after transitioning from active-duty service. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to understand veterans' experiences with social acceptance after retiring from the military and beginning civilian employment. Data were gathered through semi structured interviews with 12 participants who had retired from the military and secured civilian employment within the past 12 months. Results from this study revealed that when an individual's experience with being socially accepted is positive, their attitude is positive, and they feel good about the organization they are part of. Additionally, three themes emerged from the data that supported this revelation: value, belonging, and contribution. The results of this study can lead to positive social change through being used to provide a framework for helping organizations better understand social acceptance to effectively leverage the experience, skills, and training that military veterans bring to their roles, which in turn can increase levels of engagement, retention, and productivity.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the men and women who have served, are currently serving, and will make the decision to serve in the United States military. Your personal sacrifices during service are an inspiration and allow every citizen of this great country to not only enjoy many freedoms, but also feel protected while doing so. Additionally, it takes a great deal of courage to end a career of service and to start over in a potentially new place, with a new company, surrounded by new people. It is my sincere desire that each of you embrace and leverage that courage as you start the next chapter of your life, and display that same level of commitment, excellence, and service in order to make a positive impact on those around you.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I have to give a huge thank you to my loving wife, Trish, who has supported me on this journey over the last few years. Her love, encouragement, and belief in me (even when I might not have believed in myself) has been steadfast and unwavering. She was willing to sacrifice many date nights, trips to the mall, and even weekends to allow me the time to sit in my office and work on a research project that has a great deal of meaning to me. I could not have done this without her unconditional love, and I am forever grateful!

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Jane Coddington, my dissertation chair, and Dr. Kimberly Cox, my initial dissertation chair, for their guidance, support, and wisdom throughout this process. During the course of working on this project, I experienced numerous setbacks and unexpected circumstances. And during those times, they made sure to always check in on me, helped to keep me focused, and most importantly never gave up on me. I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Susana Verdinelli, who always took the time to provide valuable feedback and guidance to help ensure I completed the best possible project I could. Finally, I would like to thank the participants of this study who took time out of their schedules to share personal experiences which provided invaluable data that can now be shared with others who are at similar stages in their own journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Upon beginning civilian employment, veterans may experience things that were not prevalent in the military environment, such as feeling stifled by corporate expectations, misconceptions, and misunderstandings (Minnis, 2017). Previous qualitative research has shown that almost half of the 26 veterans studied who were employed in various management positions quit within the first 12 months of beginning their employment in the civilian sector (Ford, 2017). Other qualitative researchers have provided relevant insight into and an understanding of what factors might directly affect a veteran's ability to maintain long-term civilian employment (Harrod et al., 2017). Their results revealed that the majority of the veterans experienced issues, such as not feeling that they were accepted into the new group, feeling that they had been demoted when compared to the level of responsibility they had in the military, and feeling like they could not relate to their civilian peers.

To further explore the phenomenon of social acceptance, the goal of this study was to seek to a better understanding of how social acceptance is perceived among veterans in the civilian workforce and how those perceptions differ from what those same veterans experienced while on active duty. The findings from this study could be utilized to better prepare veterans for maintaining both meaningful and successful employment after their military career. The data from the current study could be used to help corporations improve processes and systems to better integrate veterans into the workplace, while capitalizing on their abilities, knowledge, and skills.

In this first chapter, I provide the reader an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the background and potential social implications of the study. Additionally, the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, and nature of the study are discussed. I also present the significance of this study so that all the elements of this chapter build the foundation for the rest of the study.

Background

The need to be accepted by one's peer group is a basic and fundamental element that has been proven to influence and affect both behaviors and actions in the construct of human motivation (Rudolph & Bohn, 2014). This need has been studied and shown to begin in childhood and reveal itself through prosocial behaviors that are aimed at receiving positive accolades, which the individual truly believes increased the likelihood that they would be accepted into their peer group (Rudolph & Bohn, 2014). Along with influencing behavior, individuals can experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress when they experience social exclusion versus social acceptance within the peer group (Steers et al., 2016).

Although the need for social acceptance among one's peer group begins in childhood, it continues into adulthood as reflected in one study that indicated that adult individuals comply with instructions from those in positions of authority or who maintain an elevated social status simply to avoid social exclusion (Latimer & Ginis, 2005). When it comes to social exclusion, loneliness can be experienced in which a person believes that the relationships they have are not congruent with the social relationships they would prefer to experience (Mellor et al., 2008). Additional research has shown that individuals

display behaviors of increased helping and partnering as well as better relationships with their coworkers when they feel socially accepted into an organization (Kyei-Poku, 2014).

There is current research that describes and validates the fact that the need to be socially accepted exists as well as the behaviors that individuals display in an attempt to gain a certain level of acceptance from others. However, Harrod et al. (2017) noted in their study that "a better understanding of the difficulties some Veterans face when trying to maintain employment is also needed" (p. 265). I conducted the current study to address this existing gap in the literature.

Within the context of human motivation, research has shown that the need for social acceptance influences an individuals' behaviors (Rudolph & Bohn, 2014). Not only does the need for social acceptance influence behaviors, but it can also cause an individual to experience feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress when not met (Steers et al., 2016). These fundamental constructs helped to establish the need for the current study, specifically concerning veterans' experiences with social acceptance after transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce.

Problem Statement

The concept of social acceptance, along with the many ways it can affect and directly impact a person's behavior, has been researched for more than 60 years; however, with regard to how veterans experience this phenomenon of social acceptance, it has been stated that additional research could be beneficial in understanding the difficulties some veterans face when trying to maintain civilian employment (Harrod et al., 2017). Therefore, I conducted the current study to allow veterans the opportunity to

describe their experiences with social acceptance after they have started civilian employment to provide insight into their difficulties and add to the current body of literature.

While serving on active duty in the military, members experience social acceptance throughout their career, such as when they first join the service, obtain certain ranks, or are promoted into certain positions. An example of being socially accepted in the United States Air Force (USAF; 2018), based on one's rank alone, are organizations, such as the Airmen's Group, the First Sergeant's Council, the Top 3, or the Chief's Group. However, once a veteran becomes a civilian employee in an organization, they may feel a lower level of social acceptance due to being considered just another employee without the acceptance and camaraderie they enjoyed in the military (Davis & Minnis, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe how military veterans experience their individual, unique need for social acceptance within the area of civilian sector employment. More specifically, this study focused on the participants' feelings about how they were welcomed into their new environment as a valuable, contributing team member. Furthermore, the participants were given the opportunity to describe the similarities or differences between elements in the military and corporate environments that they felt most directly contributed to their specific experience of social acceptance.

Research Questions

After reviewing the current literature on social acceptance, veteran employment, and veterans transitioning from the military to the civilian workforce, I developed two specific research questions that guided this study:

Research Question: How do veterans who are employed in the civilian sector describe their experiences of social acceptance?

Subquestion: How do veterans describe the similarities and differences between their experiences of social acceptance in their military career and their new civilian career?

Theoretical Framework

To establish fundamental, operational guidance for both the literature review and data analysis, it is important for the researcher to identify and define the theoretical framework (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). For this study and the specific topic of one's need for social acceptance, I used Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs and McClelland's human motivation theory (McClelland & Steele, 1973), which includes the topic of need for affiliation, as the theoretical framework. With respect to the need for affiliation within the construct of human motivation, a fundamental premise is that people have an innate need to feel both accepted and liked by others. I combined these two theories to form a framework that was relevant to this study from a perspective of social acceptance in the two distinct environments of active-duty military service and civilian employment as well as when an individual transitions from one to the other. The military has developed and embodies a history and strong tradition of social acceptance amongst the service

members, while the civilian sector has varied challenges in this area that could make adaptation and integration difficult. A detailed explanation of these two theories is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I conducted a qualitative study to accomplish the overall objective of determining how a particular, defined population (i.e., veterans) conveys their experiences and perceptions of social acceptance in a civilian sector employment environment. A phenomenological study design was employed to gather relevant data from veterans with regards to their experience and understanding of social acceptance in the civilian organizations where they are employed (see Moustakas, 1994; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To reduce any potential perception of bias in participant selection and help identify participants who met the specified criterion, I used both purposeful and criterion-based sampling procedures. Additionally, I conducted semi structured interviews with veterans who had been employed by a for-profit organization for a minimum of 12 months. These interviews were conducted in a private office not far from their civilian place of employment in Las Vegas, Nevada. Once the data were gathered, I analyzed them using van Kaam's structure as modified by Moustakas (1994) to reveal and verify themes. Organizations could potentially utilize the meaningful data gathered, analyzed, and reported in the findings of this study to assist with the integration and retention of veterans.

Definitions

Active-duty military: An individual who is serving in the military on a full-time basis and is subject to deployment at any time (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012).

Organizational culture: From an organizational perspective, this includes a combination of expectations, philosophies, and a set of values that guide the behavior of its employees (Greaves, 2020).

Social acceptance: When other people within the organization demonstrate approval of an individual's inclusion into a particular relationship or group. The result of this act of acceptance indicates the level of individual, relational value in the eyes of the other group members (Kim et al., 2019).

Veteran: A person who served on active duty and who has been discharged or released from active-duty service under any classification other than dishonorable (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019).

Assumptions

Within the context of this study, I assumed that veterans would answer the interview questions in an honest manner based on their individual experiences and perceptions. With that being the case, there was little reason to doubt the sincerity of the participants and the responses they provided, which in turn established the credibility of the data.

My second assumption was that although the responses of the participants were made in good faith and the result of what they truly experienced, with regards to social acceptance, the responses may not have been factual statements. Each individual

provided responses to the questions based on their particular experience and that resulted in feelings about their particular scenario, which made it a truth to them but not necessarily a provable fact. However, the phenomenological approach to research is founded on the subjective realities of the individuals, which provided the context for the resultant data.

Scope and Delimitations

The focus of the research questions in this phenomenological study was the experiences of veterans who transitioned into the civilian workforce regarding the aspect of social acceptance in this new environment. Additionally, the main objective of this study was to gain valuable data from the experiences of these veterans with social acceptance and the similarities and differences they perceived between the military and civilian work environments related to social acceptance. The phenomenological design allowed me to gather essential data that were then used as the foundation for further research on this topic.

In this study, I excluded veterans who separated from the military but did not retire, from the population selected for participation to eliminate as much participant bias as possible with respect to separation from the military (which could have resulted from poor performance, disciplinary actions, etc.). Additionally, only those veterans who had been employed for a minimum of 12 months in the for-profit sector were selected as participants; those veterans who did not meet the minimum employment requirement of 12 months were excluded. The potential of transferability exists for readers who have

made the transition of retiring from active-duty military into civilian employment while having had similar experiences postmilitary employment.

Limitations

When determining the potential biases that could influence the perspective and views of this study, I identified several areas that needed to be both addressed and considered throughout the process of conducting the study and analyzing the data. The first bias that I acknowledged was the fact that I served in the USAF for a total of 26 years, so I am a veteran who retired and made the transition into civilian employment. To mitigate this bias, I stayed mindful of the fact that this research has everything to do with the experiences of the participants, and my own opinions, views, or perceptions could not be included in the data. This was achieved by ensuring the data provided by the participants remained consistent with what was actually said and recorded without any additions or deletions that might arise from my personal emotions. Additionally, I provide further details of how I maintained both the focus and quality of the data in the Issues of Trustworthiness section of Chapter 3.

The other bias that needed to be addressed was the fact that when I made the transition into civilian employment, I worked for an organization that employed many veterans and was hired by a civilian manager who was a veteran. Although my experience with the transition to civilian employment was rather smooth and lasted almost 10 years, I could not interject my experiences into the answers of the participating veterans in this study. This bias was controlled for by detaching my personal corporate experience from that of the participants regardless of the type of information they

provided. If either one of these biases influenced the study, in either the process of conducting it or the interpretation of the data, it could cause the entire study to be unreliable.

Significance

After conducting an exhaustive review of the current literature on social acceptance, I determined that the relationship between lack of social acceptance and anxiety, depression, and stress is well documented (see Steers et al., 2016). To gain an invaluable and unique perspective on how veterans experience social acceptance after beginning civilian employment, this study was conducted in a private office that was located within 2 miles of their civilian workplace. With the high number of military personnel retiring and leaving the armed forces each year, this study directly contributes to positive social change, specifically in the field of industrial/organizational psychology, from the perspective that the resultant data could be utilized to positively affect both the policies and practices of civilian organizations with regards to the hiring integration and retention of veterans.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how veterans experienced social acceptance after beginning employment in the civilian sector. Ample research has been conducted on social acceptance and the way in which it can affect behaviors (Kyei-Poku, 2014; Rudolph & Bohn, 2014; Steers et al., 2016); however, more research is needed on how the phenomenon of social acceptance is experienced by veterans in their employment postmilitary (Harrod et al., 2017). The intent of this

qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the unique worldviews of each participant in their own words.

In Chapter 2, I will review the current literature as it relates to social acceptance as well as the search strategy and databases used to obtain the literature. Additionally, a more in-depth explanation of the theoretical framework will be provided along with further description of the specific elements relevant to this study. I will also provide a detailed explanation of the various components that are foundational to understanding the basics of an organization and workplace, such as climate, culture, and organizational structure.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When a veteran makes the transition from serving in active duty into civilian employment, they may experience a lower level of social acceptance in that environment compared to the military environment (Davis & Minnis, 2017). The need to be socially accepted by one's peer group is directly correlated to prosocial behaviors and actions, which are used to gain social acceptance within the group (Rudolph & Bohn, 2014). Another important aspect of social acceptance is that when an individual strives for inclusion, but encounters exclusion, feelings such as anxiety, depression, and stress can be experienced (Steers et al., 2016). I conducted this qualitative, phenomenological study to explore the experience of veterans as it relates to social acceptance after transitioning from active-duty service into civilian employment.

In this chapter, I discuss the literature search strategy and the theoretical foundations of the study before moving on to a review of the literature on the study topic. The literature search strategy was founded upon the use of both databases and a combination of keywords and terms that were relevant to this study. Additionally, I describe the theoretical framework used in this study that served as the basis for shaping the fundamental acknowledgement that social acceptance truly exists within society. In the Literature Review section, the reader is provided with valuable information on relevant ideas and concepts, such as climate, culture, and social acceptance, that supported the current study.

Literature Search Strategy

To conduct meaningful research while obtaining the most recent and relevant data, I used the Walden University Library as the starting point. EBSCOhost was accessed and used to conduct inquires in specific databases, including APA PsycARTICLES, APA PsycBOOKS, APA PsycEXTRA, and APA PsycINFO. These databases also provided the opportunity to search and review other resources provided by the American Psychological Association.

The next step in my search strategy was to identify and use keywords and terms that allowed for focusing and narrowing the scope of relevant scholarly articles and publications. The keywords and terms used were *acceptance, active duty, civilian employment, meaningful employment, military environment, onboarding, social acceptance, transition, veteran integration, veteran employment,* and *veterans' experience*. Use of these keywords and terms yielded research that reinforced, supplemented, and supported the premise of the topic under study.

Theoretical Foundation

In selecting and defining a theoretical framework, it is important for the researcher to focus on the fact that it serves as the foundation that guides the literature review and resultant data analysis (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Humans' need for social acceptance is associated and most congruent with the elements of not only Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs but also McClelland's human motivation theory (McClelland & Steele, 1973), and more specifically, the need for affiliation. The most notable aspect

of human motivation theory is that the actions and behaviors of individuals are motivated by the underlying, inherent need to be accepted by others in their social environment.

Hierarchy of Needs

In the hierarchy of needs theory, Maslow (1958) described how an individual experiences environments and ultimately situations in life based on how well or poorly their levels of needs are addressed. The six levels of needs in the theory, in hierarchical order, are physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, self-actualization, and intrinsic values, and these needs directly correlate and contribute to how individuals perceive their experiences (Guest, 2014). France (2016) pointed out that while an individual is serving on active duty, the lower-level needs of physiological, safety, and belonging are met with very little effort on the part of the individual. The military provides it active-duty members with ample opportunity to stretch and grow beyond what the individual might have thought was even possible, thus also fulfilling the self-esteem need (France, 2016). In another study, LePage (2020) found that the civilian employment retention rates of the veteran group who participated were as low as 20%–35%, and two of the identified factors for retention were supportive leadership and peer/social support programs.

Another aspect of this theory that made it not only relevant but also critical to the current study, is the specific need of self-actualization. Self-actualization is a desire one has to become the best version of themselves by realizing their own potential (Krems et al., 2017). Within the need of self-actualization, there are 15 characteristics: creativity, objective life analysis, humor, ethical principles, equal treatment of others, being acceptive of both others and oneself, spontaneity, focus on the now, high-level

experiences, assigning value to privacy, handling issues objectively, embracing the

concept of service before self, acknowledging gratitude, having a small yet very close

circle of friends, and resist following the masses (Mucedola, 2015). The characteristics of

self-actualization listed above are fundamental elements of military service and are

embedded into many aspects of military training and operations as reflected in its

mission, purpose, strategy, values, and vision. One of the more notable characteristics of

self-actualization as it relates to the basis of military service is that an individual who

achieves self-actualization has a genuine desire to serve, address problems that are much

bigger than what they are experiencing, and is very compassionate towards everyone

(Winston, 2018). In a related study, Krems et al. (2017) noted that the elements of

affiliation and status seeking were reflected as important in the participants' self-

actualizing. Thus, without being socially accepted, a military member who has

transitioned into civilian employment may not have the opportunity to experience self-

actualization.

Human Motivation Theory

A fundamental aspect of human motivation theory is that people have an inherent

need to feel liked and accepted by others (McClelland & Steele, 1973). To obtain a

satisfactory level of acceptance, individuals are motivated to behave in certain ways, and

those behaviors are shaped biologically, culturally, and situationally. A combination of

these needs and behaviors directly affect the way a person acts and perceives the level of

acceptance they are experiencing (Healy, 2016). Olson (2020) revealed that when older

adult veterans felt they experienced a lack of social acceptance (in the labor force, social

settings, etc.), that sense of exclusion exacerbated posttraumatic stress symptoms. In another study of veterans, an increase in suicide risk, due to anger and shame, was shown among veterans who felt that they did not fit in and that their attempts at social acceptance and belonging had failed (Rogers et al., 2017).

One of the more notable aspects of the human motivation theory is that the underlying factor in motivation stems from individuals pursuing a meaningful life (McClelland & Steele, 1973). Within the depiction of a meaningful life are the elements of self-discovery and self-transcendence (Winston, 2016), and these elements can be directly influenced by how well one performs on the job. With job performance being one of the most fundamental and rated elements of the work environment, the experience of the individual (perceived as either positive or negative) could create a positive or negative feeling of social acceptance. Another notable aspect of human motivation theory is that the longer an individual goes without a particular need being met, they can then become preoccupied with thoughts of that need (Winston, 2016). This level of distraction while on the job could impact performance and productivity, resulting in a deeper level of not feeling like part of the team.

Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss the following topics that are relevant to this study: culture, organizational structure, social acceptance, and transition. The literature review indicated that the need for social acceptance has been well documented. In addition, current research has shown that when the need for approval and social acceptance is not met, an individual can experience negative feelings, such as anxiety and stress (Steers et

al., 2016). Steers et al. (2016) noted that those with a higher need for approval, such as individuals coming from the military where the environment creates, reinforces, and sustains the importance of social acceptance, may experience a lower self-esteem when this need is not met, which can result in increased feelings of anxiety and depression.

Another important aspect identified and established in the current literature was that there is a valid need to gain a better understanding of and insight into difficulties some veterans experience while trying to keep employment (Harrod et al., 2017). Harrod et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative, exploratory study of 287 purposively sampled participants who completed surveys. After screening those responses, the researchers discovered 32 respondents who were either unemployed or who were in a position where they felt underutilized. After contacting the 32 respondents, 10 agreed to be interviewed using a semi structured approach. Harrod et al. reported several themes that contributed to what these veterans were experiencing, including experiences and perceptions, such as feeling as if they had been demoted in their civilian role, having a sense that that they could not relate to their civilian coworkers and team members, and having difficulty in discovering a clear path for forward progression in their new career.

Additionally, Ford (2017) conducted a study to better understand how veterans perceived their experience of making the transition from military service to civilian employment. The author employed a combination of in-depth, unstructured interviews that were used for a sample size of three executives in various industries, and a small-scale purposeful sampling of 26 final respondents who were in management positions. All the participants were veterans, and the demographics of the group included diversity

in the areas of gender, age, and geographic location. The results of this study showed several perceived issues among the veteran participants that created levels of anxiety, frustration, and feeling somewhat disconnected from the organization. These issues were the veterans feeling like they were hired to check a box or an act of charity versus being hired based on true value; the onboarding time being too short and not having any specifics for veterans where consideration is given to years of experience, training, leadership, etc.; and feeling like companies who advertised themselves as "veteran-friendly" did not truly have any developed and unique programs for attracting and retaining veterans (Ford, 2017).

Culture

When it comes to culture, the military does an excellent job of creating core values that directly impact and shape the climate and culture of the organization regardless of location. As an example, the USAF's (2019) core values are integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do, and every USAF member learns these cultural core values early on in basic military training. To demonstrate the importance of organizational culture, Dextras-Gauthier and Marchand (2017) conducted a study to address the potential connection between a healthy organizational culture and an individual's well-being. Using a multilevel regression analysis of 1,938 employees across 63 different Canadian firms, the results indicated that when the right culture is developed within an organization, the positive development of employee's well-being is supported.

To further illustrate the importance and influence of culture, Winston (2016) stated that when an individual can contribute to a group that they truly feel connected

with, their needs are gratified. Additionally, when the collective culture permits the individual to feel as if they are an accepted and contributing member of the team, the result can be the individual feeling a sense of self-actualization. With this sense of being accepted into an established, thriving culture, the individual is more apt to place the needs of their group over the needs of other groups (Winston, 2016).

Organizational Structure

The element of organizational structure is one that has the potential to affect the overall performance of the organization as well as how the individual contributors fit into the bigger picture and perform as team members and leaders. In fact, the type of organizational structure in place directly impacts and influences both leadership and organizational resiliency (Andersson et al., 2019). This element can also be the biggest contributor to the early stages of shaping a veterans' perceptions of purpose and value after making the transition from active-duty service to the civilian workforce.

To further illustrate how organizational structure can affect employees, Eva et al. (2018) studied the correlation between amounts of structure and employee performance at both the leader and individual contributor levels. The authors conducted a quantitative study and administered a survey to 336 male and female participants, with the majority of respondents being under the age of 50. The results showed that those organizations with lower levels of defined structure in place allowed for servant leaders to thrive. Conversely, when higher levels of formal organizational structure were in place, the servant leaders were put into a position where rules and regulations became the preferred method of managing people and programs versus leading them.

Another important aspect of this element is that employees feel a sense of empowerment within the organization when things like clearly defined roles, purposeful interaction between departments, and the ability to have some degree of autonomous leadership are in place and supported. For example, 151 managers within the banking industry completed a questionnaire on the elements of job characteristics, organizational structure, psychological empowerment, and transformational leadership, and the results revealed that there is a "positive relationship between organizational structure and psychological empowerment" (Shahzad et al., 2018, p. 116). The military organizational structure allows for and encourages empowerment, which may not always be the case in the civilian sector.

Social Acceptance

One important aspect of social acceptance, as discussed earlier, is the fact that it is an inherent need that exists in individuals (McClelland & Steele, 1973). With regards to the work environment, social acceptance has been shown to have a positive correlation to elements such as team member proactivity, in-role job performance, and interpersonal altruism (Deng et al., 2018). These results help support the existence of a link between acceptance and levels of satisfaction in the workplace.

To further illustrate the importance of social acceptance and how the presence or absence of it can affect an individual, Wentzel et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 72 studies to show there was a direct relationship between social acceptance from peers and the level of academic achievement among students. Their results yielded many important data points; two of which provided support for the context of the current study.

First, the correlation between peer social acceptance and academic achievement was both positive and significant, and second was that social acceptance should be considered when discussing academic success as well as cognitive development (Wentzel et al., 2021).

The majority of military members have experienced numerous moves to different locations over the course of their military career, and there are programs in place at each base that make the new members, and their families, feel very welcomed and a part of the unit. Even when military members move to a base overseas, there is still an immediate sense of belonging and familiarity with that new environment. And with a feeling and sense of belonging, one study revealed that there were lower levels of stress among new employees when starting a civilian job (Frögéli et al., 2019).

Transition

One fundamental truth that every military member faces, regardless of length of time served, is the fact that they will eventually make the transition from military life to civilian life. The experience with this transition was studied with 19 participants who were in the process of making the transition from military to civilian life. This study followed the process of narrative analysis and used semi-structured interviews, which consisted of open-ended questions, that allowed the participants to provide answers that were meaningful to them. Results of the study reflected that this transition has the potential to challenge individuals in areas such as financial, personal, professional, social, and even administrative (Grimell, 2017). With the potential challenges in these numerous

areas, the addition of a job transition only increases the likelihood of struggle within the new corporate environment.

The importance of this aspect of transition from military service to the civilian workforce cannot be underestimated or ignored. To be more specific, when a military member becomes a veteran and begins the transition process, the difference between military and civilian culture creates culture shock similar to that experienced by immigrants upon arrival in the United States (Pease et al., 2016). Also, the majority of veterans who retire and transition into the civilian sector are still in their prime and have many more years to devote to a second career; yet they often confront issues such as not possessing enough education or have gone through years of specific military training that does not necessarily translate into a civilian position (Pease et al., 2016). Additionally, research has shown that when making the transition from military to civilian life, a veteran may experience things such as a loss of identity, conflict in culture, and loss of feeling valued for what they can contribute to their new position (Grimell & van den Berg, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

Over the course of the next 5 years, an estimated 10,853 members will be retiring form military active duty with many of them seeking civilian employment (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2017). This large number does not include those individuals who choose to separate from the military prior to reaching eligibility for retirement, so the issue of need for social acceptance among the veteran population will be potentially compounded. Current, albeit limited, research has revealed that some

veterans who make the transition into civilian employment after serving in the military

experience obstacles such as misunderstandings and hindrance by civilian expectations

(Minnis, 2017). In addition, research conducted by Davis and Minnis (2017) noted that

some veterans who transition into civilian employment report that they become just

another employee and experience levels of exclusion versus the social acceptance that is

inherent to military culture. In the next chapter, the methodology used to complete this

qualitative phenomenological study will be described.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this qualitative, phenomenological study, I explored veterans' experience of social acceptance once they had begun employment in the civilian sector. One of the main areas of focus for this study was how veterans perceived their experience of integrating into their new work role in a civilian setting and their feelings of being valuable, contributing members a workplace team. Additionally, the participants were asked to share their individual experiences regarding the differences between the military and civilian work environments that contributed to creating these feelings and experiences.

In this chapter, I discuss the design and methodology of the study. Additionally, I further define my role as the researcher as well as describe how participants were identified and selected and the data collection and analysis processes.

Research Design and Rationale

The basic premise of a phenomenological study is that it aims to gain an understanding of and insight into the way individuals view and experience the reality of their environment (Moustakas, 1994). The description of the participants' experiences allows the data to be analyzed in a meaningful and useful way. In this study, I selected the phenomenological design because it aligned with the goal of gathering data to understand the experiences and feelings of a defined population in their own, natural work setting (see Moustakas, 1994; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The phenomenon studied was social acceptance within a new work environment after a veteran transitions from active-duty service to civilian employment. As outlined in the previous chapter, there have been

numerous studies conducted on the phenomenon of social acceptance and how an individual's perceptions of whether they are accepted into a certain peer group can create either positive or negative experiences and feelings. In the current study, I used criterion and purposeful sampling to reduce the potential bias of participant selection and conducted semi structured interviews to provide an opportunity for participants to provide complete and open answers. The research questions that guided the study were:

Research Question: How do veterans who are employed in the civilian sector describe their experiences of social acceptance?

Subquestion: How do veterans describe the similarities and differences between their experiences of social acceptance in their military career and their new civilian career?

Role of the Researcher

Within the framework of qualitative research, the main role of the researcher is to gather the necessary data, analyze it, draw conclusions, and then provide a summary of the results based on the participants' experience. Another important element of the researcher's role is to be aware of, acknowledge, and identify any biases that could potentially affect the analysis of data and interpretation of results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Being a veteran myself, the main bias that I identified was the fact that I retired after 26 years of military service and was able to transition into civilian employment without experiencing any difficulty or disparate treatment, whether perceived or real.

It is also important to note, that I did not have any type of existing relationship, personal or professional, with the participants because I had no affiliation with the

identified organization that was approached for participant recruitment. Additionally, any type of perceived or actual researcher bias that had the potential to or did surface during the study was managed through the act of full disclosure and the methods identified in Chapter 1. A gift card in the amount of $20 was given to each participant as a small incentive for participating as well as a way of showing appreciation and recognizing the value of their time.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

For this study, I selected 12 veterans, who had been employed for at least 12 months, from a for-profit corporation in Las Vegas, Nevada. The main reason this target population was the focus for recruitment was that they had been exposed to a similar hiring process and had firsthand experiences from the perspective of a veteran. The sample size of 12 was based on Creswell's (2014) review of multiple qualitative studies in which phenomenological studies averaged anywhere from three to 10 participants. Additionally, this number of participants provided a solid starting point to reach theoretical saturation, which is the point in research when no new stories or patterns are discovered (see van Rijnsoever, 2017).

To ensure that the inclusion criteria were met, the participants for this study were identified by the study site's human resources (HR) department through internal means. I sent an email to the HR department that included an overview of the study, its purpose, how the data would be used, and my contact information. The HR department then forwarded my email to the eligible participants they had identified. At that point, the

interested participants contacted me directly to ask any questions and begin the data collection process.

Instrumentation

I used an interview protocol that directly supported this study effort (see Appendix). The interview protocol and the resultant questions were developed by taking into account some of the more common themes in current research on the topic of veterans transitioning from active-duty service to a civilian life. Additionally, I relied on some personal experiences that provided me with perspective on how well the questions were aligned with the intent and objectives of this study. Use of the interview protocol aided me in structuring and conducting the interviews in an organized fashion. The in-person participant interviews were audio recorded and consisted of open-ended questions that allowed each participant the opportunity to provide detailed responses without feeling restricted by being asked a more limited, structured question. The in-person interviews were audio recorded for accuracy purposes and resulted in meaningful data for analysis. Conducting the interviews in person allowed for a sense of engagement and presence for both me as the interviewer and the participant, while adhering to any Center for Disease Control and Prevention restrictions that were in place at the time of the interviews that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview protocol provided consistency and guidance to ensure all participants went through the exact same interview process.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To provide the opportunity to participate in this study to as many veterans within the organization as possible, I sent an invitation to the corporate HR department of a for-profit corporation in Las Vegas, Nevada. The HR department then sent this invitation to all their veteran employees who met the established inclusion criteria. Veteran employees who were interested in participating were asked to contact me directly via email. This process eliminated the need for the use of any type of data agreement with the participating organization because no personal, protected employee information was provided to me for the research study.

Once I received an email from a prospective participant, I contacted them individually to schedule an initial telephone call for the purpose of verifying that they met the requirements for participating in the study. Additionally, the informed consent form was shared with them and discussed during this initial call to ensure that the participants understood the intent of the study, how their data would be used, and their rights as research participants. I emailed the informed consent form to each of the participants and required them to return it to me with an "I consent" acknowledgment box checked and an original or electronic signature included before the interview portion of the study took place. Once the participants' eligibility requirements were verified and they returned completed consent forms, the interviews were scheduled.

The interview portion of the study was conducted in person, which provided both flexibility in scheduling and privacy for the participants. As noted in the completed informed consent form, I audio recorded each interview to support accuracy in the

transcription process. Each interview was scheduled for 1 hour to provide time for the participants to share their perceived experiences in as much detail as possible without feeling rushed. After the interviews took place, I provided each of the participants with a transcript of our conversation within 2 weeks, so they could review and validate the details of the conversation. In the event that there were any changes that needed to be made to the transcript, I requested that the participants submit that data to me within 1 week and allow me the opportunity to contact them for any clarification needed to support accurate transcription.

Data Analysis Plan

To provide a more thoroughly structured process to the analysis of the data, I followed Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction model. Phenomenological reduction was used because provided me with a framework and lens for each participant experience to stand on its own as unique (see Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). This model incorporates the steps of bracketing topics; horizontalization; clustering the data into themes, including textural descriptions of the participants' experience; and organizing those themes into a coherent description of the phenomenon being studied.

The first step in this model, bracketing, is a process that helps to ensure that the topic and question(s) are the sole focus of the research and data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). By taking this guiding approach at the initial, formative stage of data analysis, I was able to ensure that focus was placed on the objectives and purpose of this study. As an example, one step that I took was to evaluate each of the participants' statements for

relevancy to the research questions. With that focus, all efforts that fell outside of the scope of this study were set aside, which helped to maintain the integrity of the study.

The second step in the phenomenological reduction model, horizontalization, created a space for me to initially assign equal value to each of the answers provided by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). One important aspect of being able to achieve horizontalization was for me to identify any personal biases so that I was able to set aside any prejudgments and maintain an open mind when hearing the participants' responses. I spent time reflecting on those impact moments that came to the forefront of my mind as it related to my own experience of transitioning from active-duty service to civilian employment. This step also provided an opportunity to identify significant statements, key words, and common descriptors used by the participants.

The third step of clustering data into themes provided a roadmap for me to begin placing like data into groups that possessed similar assets and liabilities of experiences. The importance of this step could not be overlooked because this is a process that allowed for all the participants' responses to begin to take shape in the form of related themes while allowing me to organize the data. This step also provided an approach to identify statements that were overlapping and redundant, which were then removed in order to further narrow the scope of emerging themes.

The fourth and final step of organizing the themes into a coherent description of the phenomenon being studied was achieved by creating a textural portrait of the phenomenon as a whole. This step in the process required me to spend time not only reviewing the results of the previous three steps but also recognizing the qualities and

perceptions of the participants. As a result of this effort, I was able to construct an accurate textural description of the phenomenon based on the assigned meaning and nature of the experience as detailed by each participant.

Issues of Trustworthiness

When conducting qualitative research, it is critical that the element of trustworthiness is established and achieved in order to make the study acceptable and worthwhile to the reader. In considering how to ensure that the establishment of trustworthiness was an integral part of the qualitative research process, I discuss four overarching categories in this section: data integrity (i.e., dependability); maintaining a balance between what the participants say and how the researcher interprets what is said (i.e., confirmability); ensuring that the findings are communicated in a clear, concise, and meaningful way (i.e., transferability; see Williams & Morrow, 2009), and recording accurate descriptions of the particular phenomenon that allow for believable results to be presented to the reader (i.e., credibility; see Liao & Hitchcock, 2018).

Dependability

In establishing dependability, the researcher needs to clearly define the processes used within a study to a level that would enable "a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results" (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). When defining processes, the researcher should include the design selected as well as the strategy for analysis (Williams & Morrow, 2009). To support this effort, I described the steps of Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction model that were followed and provided

detailed, historical data outlining the progressive steps in the study process in the form of research project milestones.

Confirmability

With regards to confirmability and maintaining the balance between what the participants say and how the researcher interprets what is said mentioned above, I relied heavily on the elements of reflexivity and subjectivity. This balance allowed me to create a mutual construction of meaning by making a clear, concerted effort to ensure the participants' comments were rooted in context (see Williams & Morrow, 2009). In establishing confirmability, it was also important to minimize any researcher bias that might have potentially surfaced during this phase of the study. An important tool that I used during the entirety of this process was that of a subjective (i.e., reflexive) journal in which I provided real time commentary as it occurred. Additionally, I employed the use of a data-oriented audit trail, "which allows any observer to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72).

Transferability

The category of transferability provided me with an opportunity to demonstrate how the results of a particular study could be applied to other scenarios or situations. One of the fundamental elements of transferability is that the results of any particular qualitative study must be understood within the context of how it was conducted (Shenton, 2004). Other noteworthy elements of transferability are that there should be some type of contribution to social change and the results should not only be understood

by the reader but supported by what the participants said as well (Williams & Morrow, 2009). One strategy that I used to establish transferability in the current study was to ensure there was detail in the description of the process, in terms of both context and relevance, during document creation, interview transcription, data analysis, and coding.

Credibility

One of the most effective ways to provide strong results in a qualitative study is by ensuring that credibility within the study is established. To establish credibility in this study, I incorporated several techniques throughout the process. The first technique I used was reflexivity, which speaks to a heightened level of self-awareness on my part, and includes awareness around things, such as assumptions, personal experiences, and biases. The next technique was prolonged engagement, which places an emphasis on the need for me to spend a sufficient amount of time with the participants to gain an in-depth perspective on how they are feeling (see Liao & Hitchcock, 2018). I also employed the technique of saturation to ensure that the sample size was large enough that the data began to become repetitive to the point that no new issues emerged and that any additional data gathering would be redundant (see Hennink et al., 2017).

<div align="center">Ethical Procedures</div>

One of the main concerns throughout the course of the interview portion of this study was to ensure that the participants understood all the elements within the informed consent document. To ensure that this critical step in the process met its intended purpose, I adhered to the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines published in Section 8: Research and Publication, Subsections 8.02 Informed Consent to

Research and 8.03 Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research

(APA, 2021). Since the participants could be relatively new employees at the for-profit

organization, it was important that confidentiality was included in the consent, as well as

their right to withdraw and terminate participation at any time during the process. These

particular elements established a level of trust and comfort, which allowed the

participants to be open and honest in answering all of the interview questions.

Additionally, all of the participants were provided with details of the study both

during a verbal in-brief as well as in writing. Also, the data that were gathered during the

various stages of the study was transferred onto a password-protected computer and paper

copies were secured in a locking cabinet in my home office. And finally, any documents

created during this process will be destroyed by shredding after 5 years of study

completion. Prior to selecting any participants and beginning the actual research, Walden

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) number: 01-26-22-0562884 was obtained

and documented in accordance with the APA guidelines published in Section 8: Research

and Publication, Subsection 8.01 Institutional Approval (APA, 2021).

Summary

This chapter provided both the rationale and methodology for the overall study as

well as the data gathering and analysis plans. The phenomenological approach was

selected as this study aimed to capture feelings and experiences of the participating

veterans who made the transition from active-duty military service to the civilian

workforce. It was also important to note that while I am also a veteran who made the

transition into civilian employment, there were no current, existing relationships with the

participants that would skew my perspective. Results of this study are presented in

Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to explore veterans' personal experiences of social

acceptance after separating from military service and beginning civilian employment.

The main research question that formed the foundation of this study was: How do

veterans who are employed in the civilian sector describe their experiences of social

acceptance? The subquestion was: How do veterans describe the similarities and

differences between their experiences of social acceptance in their military career and

their new civilian career?

I begin this chapter by briefly explaining the setting for the study and the

demographic make-up of the participant group. The chapter will also include descriptions

of the data collection procedures and the data analysis process. Evidence of

trustworthiness will then be described and discussed followed by a detailed reporting of

the study results, including the participants' individual experiences as they relate to the

phenomenon of social acceptance through the eyes of veterans who have transitioned

from military service to civilian employment.

Setting

I recruited participants with the help of the study site's HR department, and the

first step in this process was for them to send an email invitation to participate in the

study, on my behalf, to their employees who met the established inclusion criteria. This

email contained information about the study and my contact information, so interested

employees could respond directly to me. Once the 12 participants were selected, I sent

them the informed consent forms via email, to which they replied, "I consent," to satisfy

the step of obtaining formal consent from each individual participant. With this important step in the process completed, all 12 of the interviews were conducted in-person at a private office space. The first interview was conducted on April 1, 2022, and the final interview took place on June 17, 2022.

Throughout the course of the in-person interview process, there were no known conditions, of either an organizational or personal nature, that impacted or influenced the process of obtaining the results. Each participant arrived at the interview on time and seemed happy to participate. Additionally, the organization had fully opened back up from COVID-19 restrictions (to include hosting major conventions and events), and all the participants appeared to be satisfied with the current state of the organization.

Demographics

The 12 participants in this study were all veterans who had been employed with the study site organization for at least 12 months, and they varied in age from 34–57 years old, the specifics of which can be found in Table 1. Of the 12 participants, six were between the ages of 34–42, four were between the ages of 43–50, and the remaining two were between the ages of 51–57. Additionally, nine of the participants identified as male and three identified as female.

Two other interesting aspects of this participant group were how long they had served on active duty and how long they had been in their current civilian role. All 12 of the participants served a minimum of 8 years on active duty, with two of them serving more than 20 years. All the participants had also been in their civilian roles for at least 24 months at the time the interviews were conducted. The length of time they had all been in

their roles not only met the selection criteria but also provided ample time for each

participant to experience social acceptance well beyond any standard onboarding or in-

processing time.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Time on active duty (years)	Time in current role (months)
P1	Male	43	10	38
P2	Male	46	11	29
P3	Male	36	10	26
P4	Female	34	8	30
P5	Male	51	20	60
P6	Male	42	10	48
P7	Female	48	15	50
P8	Female	41	8	36
P9	Male	57	26	72
P10	Male	40	8	24
P11	Male	42	10	32
P12	Male	50	15	46

Data Collection

The data collection took place over a duration of 10 weeks, which included a

slight delay due to one of the original participants dropping out for personal reasons of

illness. I selected a replacement participant from the original list of qualified candidates

and conducted that final interview. The data were collected by means of asking open-

ended interview questions, which were defined in the interview protocol located in the

Appendix. Since COVID-19 safety concerns were no longer an issue (although we still

followed standard safety precautions), all 12 of the interviews were conducted in person

and in a private office space located approximately 1.5 miles from the study site. I audio

recorded each of the interviews using my personal Sony ICD-PX470 Stereo Digital Voice

Recorder and transcribed them using the built-in transcription playback mode. The only variation in the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 was that each of the interviews lasted approximately 25–30 minutes versus the 60 minutes that were scheduled and available.

Data Analysis

For the important process of data analysis, I followed the four steps of the phenomenological reduction model: bracketing topics, horizontalization, clustering of data, and creating a coherent description of themes that emerged (see Moustakas, 1994). My main reason for using this process in the data analysis phase was that it provided a framework that enabled the experiences of each participant to stand on their own as unique to the individual while also still being able to be collectively analyzed for themes.

For the first step of bracketing, I reviewed the transcripts individually, one question at a time. Following this process allowed me the opportunity to ensure that the responses provided were relevant to each question asked during the interview process. As an example, for the interview question of "Describe the experience you had while going through the initial welcome and on-boarding process as a new employee – In what ways did you feel valued as an individual?" P9 replied,

> I have worked at a couple different organizations over the years, and I have to say that although I was starting over with a new organization, they made me feel like an individual and not just another employee they hired and had to get on board as quick as possible.

In analyzing the context of this answer against the specific question that was asked, I determined that there was alignment and relevancy of the data being provided as compared to the purpose of the study. After reviewing all the interview transcripts, I found there were no discrepant or irrelevant data. The completion of this step allowed me to transition into the second step and begin coding.

Once the interviews were reviewed and the step of bracketing was complete, I began horizontalization by reflecting on the notes I had recorded in my personal journal to reconnect with any potential biases I had identified. This allowed me to create a mindset free of prejudgment based on the emotions of my own experiences in similar situations, and I was able to remain open minded and assign equal value and importance to each individual participant's responses. Keeping in mind the aspect of how important it was to remain neutral during this step, I was able to identify some key words and common descriptors that appeared in the responses of numerous participants. As an example, eight of the participants (P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9, P11, and P12) all used common descriptors to the question of "How were you treated during the overall process?" Some of the common descriptors used were "I honestly felt like I was part of the family," "I was reminded of the teammates I had in the military… they cared," and "They made me feel really comfortable and I knew I made the right choice to work here." Additionally, some of the key words used numerous times by those same participants were "family," "team," "inclusive culture," "like-minded," and "fitting in." There was no discrepant data or outliers noted during this step of analysis.

With the first two steps completed, I was able to move into the process of clustering the data into themes. This step was extremely important with regards to the ability and opportunity it provided to accomplish two main goals: (a) identifying the data that were most closely related and similar in nature and (b) identifying data that were overlapping, repetitive, and redundant. The most impactful result of following this step in the process was that it allowed me to narrow the focus of my efforts and identify themes that were clearer and more focused. Taking the time to move through an effective clustering process provided the opportunity to maintain data integrity by ensuring the scope of this effort focused on aligned, meaningful, and relevant data. In this study, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the participants' responses were remarkably similar in context and assigned meaning. Along with that, however, there were some responses that were repetitive in nature, and by identifying and removing those types of statements, there was also a distinct amount of clarity and succinctness added to the effort of clustering. As a result of getting through this step in the process, three main themes emerged: belonging, value, and contribution.

The final step in phenomenological reduction is to create a textural depiction of the phenomenon being study, which in this case, was social acceptance and how veterans experience this phenomenon after beginning civilian employment. After a thorough review of all the presented data and following the process as described above, I was able to arrive at a textural depiction of this phenomenon while maintaining a coherent description. While the experiences of each participant had many similarities, there were no two experiences that were identical. That said, there were enough commonalities

throughout the data to allow me to create the following textural depiction of the social acceptance phenomenon. Overall, the experiences of the participant group, in both context and meaning, were extremely positive. Each participant felt that the organization made a very concerted effort to not only recognize the value of hiring veterans as part of its team, but it also went above and beyond to recreate that feeling of being part of something bigger than any one individual. Because of the defined steps of the in-processing and onboarding process, the participants were taken back to a time in their military career when they were welcomed to a new base by a designated sponsor. Not only did they have a "wingman" to help them get acclimated to the organization, but they also felt they were hired into positions that would provide them the opportunity to leverage their unique experience and skillset in a way that contributed to the organization. The participants felt that it was very clear how much the organization cared about them, helped them integrate to be part of a productive team, and understood the value they would be able to bring to the organization and customers they serve.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In the following subsections, I provide insight and rationale as to how the strategies of trustworthiness, as described in Chapter 3, were implemented and maintained throughout the study processes. There are four categories of trustworthiness, with the first one being dependability, which focuses on the integrity of the data by maintaining an important balance between what the participants say and how the researcher interprets that (Williams & Morrow, 2009). The next category is confirmability, which focuses on communicating the findings in a manner that is clear,

concise, and has meaning attached to it (Williams & Morrow, 2009). The third category

is transferability, which has a strong emphasis on the importance of accuracy with

regards to the recording of phenomenon descriptions (Williams & Morrow, 2009). The

final category is credibility, which is the result of successfully implementing the other

categories to present the reader with believable results (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018).

Dependability

I established dependability by providing data in two areas. The first area was the

steps I took by following the phenomenological reduction model (see Moustakas, 1994). I

also provided a historical overview of the process, including the steps followed and

associated milestones. There were no adjustments needed to this category because the

process worked according to plan.

Confirmability

To implement and maintain confirmability, I took several important steps that

provided great value regarding this category. One of the first steps I took, prior to

beginning data analysis, was to become acutely aware of any biases that I might have

towards a given topic or response, and these thoughts and any potential biases were

recorded in a personal journal that provided me the opportunity to review and reflect on

them over the course of data analysis. Identifying personal biases provided the space for

analysis to proceed from an objective point of view rather than a subjective one. The next

step was that of ensuring that the participants' comments were taken in context as they

related to the question being answered. This helped to ensure that the data were

interpreted in such a way that allowed it to maintain integrity with the original meaning

assigned by the participant. Finally, I made use of a high-level audit trail that helped to ensure that the steps in the process were being followed as defined. No adjustments were made to this category of trustworthiness.

Transferability

One of the most important aspects of establishing and maintaining transferability is being able to demonstrate how the results of this study can not only be applied to its specific topic and participant group but on a broader scale as well (Shenton, 2004). To support that effort, I presented the framework of this study in a manner that enabled the reader to understand the context of the study and how it was conducted. Another important outcome of maintaining transferability is that it provides the opportunity to present the study in such a way that a contribution to the goal of positive social change can be identified. This was accomplished by presenting the study in a manner that readers can understand and showing that the results are supported by the participants' responses. No adjustments or modifications were needed with regards to this category.

Credibility

For this final category of credibility, I employed three techniques. The first technique was that of reflexivity, which provided me the space to heighten my self-awareness around things such as biases, experiences, and preconceived notions. This aspect was extremely important because, as stated before, it allowed me to approach the study from a position of objectivity while still being able to maintain value of the participant responses by keeping them contextual. Another key technique was being able to spend the allotted time with each participant in a private setting that created the space

for vulnerability, which resulted in quality time versus simply aiming for quantity. This also provided me the opportunity to gain an in-depth perspective of the participants' true experiences and feelings. Lastly, I used the technique of saturation to validate that the sample size was large enough to reach a point where no new data or themes appeared to emerge. As with previous categories, no adjustments were needed regarding credibility.

Results

Three main themes emerged from the interview data: value, belonging, and contribution. After spending time reviewing the current literature on the topics of social acceptance, veteran employment, and veteran transition (from active-duty service into civilian employment), I developed the research question and subquestion. To provide greater detail in the results, the emergent themes are discussed in detail in relation to the research questions in the following subsections.

In response to the research question, the participants' experiences of social acceptance in their employment in the civilian sector appeared to be very positive. As stated earlier, each of the participants had been employed with their current organization for a minimum of 25 months, which provided ample time for them to truly experience the phenomenon of social acceptance within the organization. Table 2 provides a sample of data from the interviews which supports the finding of a positive experience.

Regarding the subquestion, the participants' responses, once again, expressed their experiences of social acceptance as a very positive and familiar experience. The interview protocol allowed each participant the opportunity to provide in-depth examples and feelings with regards to this research question. Again, Table 2 provides some

contextual insight into how the participants truly felt about this aspect of their civilian employment.

Table 2

Coding Sample – Research Question

Code	Description	Example
Value (Theme 1)	Importance, usefulness, and worth	"I truly believe in what you bring to the table and know that you were put here to help make a difference." (P7)
Belonging (Theme 2)	Inclusion, relationships, security, and support	"I'm going to personally see that you get set up for success and feel like part of the team from day 1." (P1)
		"Please know that if you have any questions or need any help, do not hesitate to come to me… and I mean that." (P9)
Contribution (Theme 3)	Achieve, succeed, and together	"I spoke with the boss, and we believe you would be amazing at leading our team in the new integration initiative." (P10)

Theme 1: Value

The first theme that emerged was value which was portrayed as having a feeling of importance, usefulness, and worth. This theme appeared to be expressed with more energy and passion than the other two as the positive emotional experience; and impact on the participants was not only clear in the verbal expression, but the nonverbal as well. To put some more context to this theme, one remark that stood out to me was:

When I first started with the company, my new supervisor told me that he was

genuinely impressed with my military service and the training I received over the

years while on active duty. He then asked if I was comfortable with being a

department trainer… and I had just started! I could tell right away that he valued

what I had to share with other employees, and he seriously wanted to leverage my

experience and training. It was awesome! (P1)

Another commonality among the participants, as it pertained to value, was the

specific recognition of being a veteran they each received from various members of the

organization. The most common theme that the participants expressed during the

interviews was the recognition of their service, commitment, and the amount of specialty

training they had received while on active duty. As an example, one of the participants

stated:

The thing that sticks out to me the most about that time of onboarding was when

the VP of human resources came up to me after I left their office and told me that

she was really excited and thankful to have me in the position of leading a team

and that with my background and experience, she knew they were in amazing

hands. For her to take time to do that, and mean it, really impacted me! (P11)

In each instance, the member responsible for onboarding the participants took the

time to review their application and resume and spent quality time getting to understand

the job they had while on active duty. The impression left on the participants by this

similar experience, reinforced the feeling of value that they had already felt. As an

example, nine of the participants got teary eyed when talking about the experience of

being told things like "I'm so thankful you're here," "it's an honor to be working with you," "having you in our department will definitely make us a more powerful and high performing team." Each of the participants also stated that while they had heard this type of welcome before, this experience in this new organization had a different, deeper, and more real feeling to it.

Theme 2: Belonging

The second theme which emerged from analyzing the data was belonging; that sense of inclusion, relationships, security, and support. Belonging, as it contextually relates to the research question, was based on the overall feeling of experiencing authentic and genuine relationships while going through the in-processing and onboarding process in the new employment setting. Throughout the interviews, then the subsequent data analysis, it was very apparent that the participants felt a sense of belonging, and that feeling was expressed in a consistent manner. During the analysis process, and more specifically the steps of clustering and reduction, the theme and coding of how the participants felt included versus excluded was expressed through some common themes and meaningful expressions.

To further illustrate this theme of belonging that the participants experienced and felt, it is important to hear it in their own words. As an example, one participant stated:

:: One of the most impactful and memorable things that was said to me during the onboarding process was when my immediate supervisor, who I just met, told me that he was genuinely excited and happy to have me as part of the team, thanked me for my service, and then wanted to know more about me. And it felt really

authentic… he wasn't following a script, but really wanted to know about me!

(P4)

Along those same lines, another participant stated:

During my onboarding process, our department Vice President met me downstairs

in the cafeteria for a cup of coffee and just wanted to talk… with no agenda! It

felt real, and it felt nice. It's been a long time since I felt so authentically

welcomed into the family! (P12)

As stated earlier, eight of the participants used key words like family, group,

team, and tribe, while the remaining four participants used descriptive phrases like "had

my back," "had my best interest at heart," and "took the time to care." Throughout the

analysis, and even during the review with each participant, the power in these words, as

well as the way they were said, assigned true meaning to the word belonging. The sense

of belonging portrayed by each of the participants, while not identical, truly came across

in a way that one could see a picture of the experience in their mind.

Theme 3: Contribution

The final theme that emerged was contribution which in the context of the

research was depicted by a feeling of being able to achieve something and make it

successful by acting together with other people. Although no two participants said the

exact same thing, one participant had a profound response that seemed to capture the

voice of all the participants, with regards to contribution, when he said:

I'll never forget the day my boss came to my office and said that he couldn't help

but notice the way I always was so team focused and involved everyone in

completing any task given to us. He also told me that I was the type of leader he

truly admired and could tell I strived to be part of something bigger. Then he said,

"based on that I'm recommending you for promotion to director"! (P6)

The emotion in this statement around recognition for contribution was extremely

powerful and was representative of the feelings of all the participants.

For this theme, it was made noticeably clear by all the participants that they

genuinely believed they were being put in a position to contribute to something bigger

than themselves. To illustrate this point, all the participants said that they were told things

such as "we're going to rely on your expertise in this area," "I'm going to make you the

team leader of this project," "would you mind if I put you in charge of this committee,"

and "we would like you to represent our department." A common feeling expressed by

each participant was that this felt very similar to being in the military by having the

opportunity to make a difference.

Summary

After going through the process of data collection and data analysis in this

chapter, I will now summarize the answers to the research questions which formed the

foundation of this study. With respect to "How do veterans who are employed in the

civilian sector describe their experiences of social acceptance," this group of participants

described their experiences in a very positive light. Although the experiences were not

identical in every aspect, the participants generally felt like they were being treated as

individuals who were also veterans and that their military service (training, ethics, ability

to contribute, thriving in a team environment, etc.), were considered, valued, and not dismissed.

With respect to "How do veterans describe their experiences of social acceptance (similarities or differences) between their military career and their new civilian career," the participant responses were again very positive and shed some light on a couple of areas that stood out across all interviews. The first area that was standard across all interviews was a feeling that the organization truly cared about the fact that these employees had served their country and are veterans. This feeling was created by the fact that the organization had a designated representative in the HR department who specifically managed the veterans hiring and integration efforts for the company. All the participants compared this effort to that of being assigned a "sponsor" at each new assignment or base when they moved. A sponsor in the military is a dedicated person who helps a new team member get settled into the base, take them to their duty section, help them in-process, and make sure their basic needs are met so they can focus on the mission.

The second area that was very thematic in the interviews was that all the participants felt like the years of training and various duty assignments they had were being leveraged by the organization. One of the main factors that created this feeling among all participants was that the departments they were hired into made it a habit to include each of them in things like training plan improvements, strategic planning, presenting at staff meetings, etc. All the participants expressed a great deal of gratitude and a feeling of pride and team because of the way they were provided an opportunity to

contribute to something bigger than themselves once again rather than contribute as a

silent individual behind their desk. In Chapter 5, I will discuss both the interpretations of

the findings as well as study limitations and will provide recommendations and

implications based on the results discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain a more in-depth understanding of how veterans experienced being socially accepted into civilian employment after separating from active-duty service in the military. To be more specific, the focus of this study was exploring the participants' experiences and feelings with respect to how they were welcomed into the organization during onboarding and in processing as well as how they felt about being perceived as a contributing, valuable team member. Additionally, I asked the participants to share their feelings and thoughts on both differences and similarities, if any, between what they experienced in the military and in their new corporate environments.

There were several key findings that emerged from data analysis and interpretation. The first finding emerged in the form of three themes as portrayed by the participants: value, belonging, and contribution. Based on the participants' responses, it was evident that they each had a very positive experience in their own unique way. The next key finding was the fact that the study site organization made a point of recognizing veterans for what they bring to the table in terms of years of specialized training, a team mindset, sound work ethics, etc. As part of that recognition, the organization had employees dedicated to the efforts of recruiting and hiring veterans, which in turn created a positive experience for the participants from the beginning of the onboarding and in-processing phases of integration.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of the current study confirm and more importantly extend knowledge on the topic of social acceptance experienced by veterans after beginning civilian employment. As a starting point, the results of this study build upon previous researchers' findings that more research is warranted to gain additional insight into and understanding of the issues some veterans might experience when attempting to maintain meaningful civilian employment after their military service (see Harrod et al., 2017). The current study findings revealed that having a positive experience with one's social acceptance as an employee does in fact play a key role in feeling valued and having a positive attitude and mindset about the organization. This aspect of the findings aligns with current research that showed how negative feelings, such as anxiety and stress, can be experienced when the social acceptance needs of an individual are not met (see Steers et al., 2016).

Theme 1: Value

The theme of value had to do with the feelings participants experienced with regards to how much worth they brought to the organization, and it was this theme that appeared to be the most positive in terms of how the participants expressed their answers. The current literature reflects the importance of this theme and how the beliefs and feelings of the degree of value an individual experiences is directly correlated to things, such as their job performance, individual altruism, and proactiveness of being a team member (see Deng et al., 2018). To further illustrate the importance of this theme of value, Grimell and van den Berg (2020) found that when veterans transition from military

service to civilian status, they may experience things such as identity loss and not feeling valued in their new role. The participants' responses in this current study revealed that the organization made them feel valued not only as a veteran but as an individual contributor to the team as well. This finding would seem to confirm the potential impact the theme of value has on an individual, which in turn sets the stage for either success or failure.

Theme 2: Belonging

The theme of belonging was concerned with the participants' feelings of true inclusion, relationships, and being part of a team. A common feeling that was shared by all the participants in this study was the fact that they honestly believed and felt that they belonged to a team. This feeling was based on the way they were treated within the organization through the actions and words of leaders and coworkers alike. Ford (2017) reported that participants expressed feelings of disconnectedness and frustration based largely on the fact that they felt as if they were hired to check a demographic box or were given a handout. When new employees do not feel that they belong to the organization, they have increased levels of anxiety and stress (Frögéli et al., 2019). The emergence of Theme 2 and the way it was expressed by the participants confirmed previous studies from the perspective that a lack of feeling that one belongs to a group or team can create negative experiences for the employees (Ford, 2017; Frögéli et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Contribution

The final theme of contribution was related to the participants feeling that they were truly part of something bigger than themselves and experienced success as part of a

group. During the interviews, it became evident that the participants believed they were put in a position to be able to make meaningful contributions to their teams and the organization. These feelings were driven largely by the fact that the participants felt that they were given assignments and tasks that provided them an opportunity to leverage what they learned during their time on active duty. To validate the importance of this theme, it is important to note that Harrod et al. (2017) reported that the veteran participants in their study stated that they experienced feeling as if they had been demoted in their new civilian role and could not clearly see a path forward for advancement. Their study also revealed that the basis for those feelings was a belief and sense that the participants were being underutilized and not provided a true opportunity to contribute.

The participants in this current study did not discuss nor express any feelings related to feelings of inadequacy or having their potential to contribute minimized in any way. One of the benefits of providing individuals the opportunity to contribute to something bigger than themselves in a group setting is the fact that employees will also experience a feeling of gratification of their own individual needs (Winston, 2016). From that perspective, this study and the emergent theme of contribution confirm the importance of creating that type of environment for employees (and in this case, specifically veterans).

The findings of this study also extend knowledge on this topic by adding potential strength to the idea of that being a veteran-friendly organization can positively impact the veterans who are hired by the organization. As an example, Ford (2017) conducted a

study in which the veteran participants described feeling disconnected from the organization, which resulted in some anxiety and stress. According to those participants, these feelings were created by their perception that the organization was simply hiring them to meet certain demographic requirements versus hiring them for the contribution and value they could truly add to the company.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study comprised Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs and McClelland's human motivation theory (McClelland & Steele, 1973). One aspect of human motivation is the fact that individuals have a natural born or innate need to feel that they are not only accepted by others but liked by them as well. Data from the literature review and the results of the current study suggest that this construct of human motivation, and more specifically the need for affiliation, does in fact contribute to the feelings individuals experience in either a positive way (when met) or a negative way (when not met).

To illustrate this point, the participants in this study expressed very positive feelings based on the level of acceptance they perceived once beginning civilian employment. In contrast, two other studies revealed that a lack of veterans feeling socially accepted resulted in an increase of posttraumatic stress symptoms (Olson, 2020) and feeling anger and shame, which contributed to an increased risk of suicide (Rogers et al., 2017). Another study revealed that the longer a need, such as social acceptance, is left unfulfilled, the more an individual can become preoccupied and distracted by thinking

about that need, which can adversely affect things, such as their job performance (Winston, 2016).

Limitations of the Study

This study, like any study, had some limitations. The first limitation was related to the demographics of the participant pool. Of the 12 participants, only three of them (or 25%) were female. This limitation posed the question of whether female participants were appropriately represented for this study. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), in 2020, 56.2% of all women participated in the labor force. Although that number is higher than the percentage of female participants in this study, that same report stated that women accounted for 12.3% of the veteran workforce.

The second limitation had to do with the level of honesty and transparency in the participants' interview responses. Although I had no reason to believe that the participants were not being honest and forthright with the responses they shared, there is always the potential for a study participant to talk in an overly positive manner about their current employer. The reasons for this could be many and varied, but prior to each interview, I reminded the participants of the confidential nature of this study and that none of my notes would be shared. With that reassurance and the design of the survey questions, each participant seemed to be eager and willing to be honest in their responses.

Additionally, I implemented multiple strategies to ensure that trustworthiness was maintained as an integral part of the study process. As discussed in Chapter 3, the four categories that comprise trustworthiness are dependability, confirmability, transferability, and credibility. Although the above limitations were identified, they did not adversely

affect trustworthiness, and no adjustments had to be made regarding any of the four categories of trustworthiness.

Recommendations

The participants in this study reported feeling and believing that they had an overall positive experience with social acceptance after transitioning from military service to civilian employment as it pertains to the study site. Each of the participants made numerous comments that supported this position and provided specific examples for each of the interview questions.

The feelings experienced with circumstances of social acceptance, both positive and negative, have been previously documented in numerous studies, some of which were identified during the literature review in Chapter 2. As an example, Steers et al. (2016) stated that when an individual does not feel socially accepted in their environment, then the negative feelings of anxiety and stress have a much greater potential to increase. Another qualitative study revealed that some of the veterans in the participant group stated they had trouble maintaining civilian employment and attributed that difficulty to not feeling like they fit in as part of the team (Harrod et al., 2017).

The current study revealed that the participants' positive experiences with social acceptance after beginning civilian employment were largely attributed to the fact that the study site organization followed established procedures that mirrored similar military aspects of moving to a new base, including things like recognizing the experience and skills that veterans bring to the organization, assigning the veteran a sponsor who partnered with them through the entire in-processing and onboarding phases of beginning

employment, and supervisors taking the time to get to know and understand the veteran's background. Providing veterans with an experience like what they went through in the military seemed to make a big difference in the feelings and perceptions of social acceptance that this participant group experienced versus the results of previous studies included as part of the literature review.

Additional research is warranted around the relationship between having in-processing and onboarding procedures in place that cater to the veteran community versus including veterans in the general population. More specifically, additional research focused on how veterans experience social acceptance in an organization that has dedicated personnel who recruit, hire, and onboard veterans versus an organization that does not could prove beneficial in adding and contributing to the current body of literature. The participants in this study expressed high levels of satisfaction and positive experiences with social acceptance when starting employment with their current organization. Those experiences appeared to be rooted in the approach that was taken by the company during the stages of welcoming a new veteran employee into the organization. The experiences and feelings expressed by this participant group differ greatly from the participant groups that were part of the studies included in the literature review, which forms the basis and justification for my recommendation of additional research. This topic also appears to potentially be a gap in the current literature that could be addressed by focused research in the future.

Implications

One overarching theme, value, emerged from the current study that has the

potential to make a significant, positive, social impact within an organizational setting.

As mentioned previously, there have been numerous studies previously conducted on the

phenomenon of social acceptance, and those studies revealed that an individual's

experience with social acceptance has the power to create either positive or negative

feelings based on that experience and how the individual perceives the level of

acceptance (Ford, 2017; Frögéli et al., 2019). In this study, the participants shared that

they felt valued, like they belonged, and like they were given the opportunity to

contribute to the organization. These results appear to be more favorable than those of

earlier studies that were discussed as part of the literature review in that this participant

group expressed their feelings in a very positive manner based on their experiences of

positive social acceptance. The one differentiator that emerged as a potential, key

contributing factor in the experiences of this participant group was the fact that the

organization they were most recently hired into made it a point to recognize the fact that

veterans are transitioning from a very different environment and that they bring a great

deal of value to the organization.

Based on the results of this study, an organization that hires veterans and follows

processes and procedures that are tailored to veterans would provide everyone the

opportunity to flourish more as a team by ensuring that veterans feel like valuable team

members. This recognition, in large part, begins with veterans not only being hired for

their background (i.e., experience, training, skill set) but also their mindset and desire to

serve. One way to accomplish this is for organizations to have a well-defined veteran integration process in place and ensure that those employees responsible for implementing and overseeing this process are trained on it and understand its importance.

Conclusion

From the time an individual is welcomed into the military as a new team member, the sense of commitment, camaraderie, loyalty, and service that is instilled in them becomes part of who they are. Throughout the course of a military career, veterans go through a great deal of specialized training in the career field they are serving in. Not only is this training delivered in a traditional classroom environment, but it is also delivered through military deployments and exercises where they gain real-world, practical experiences to complement their academic experiences. The experiences, skills, and training that veterans can readily contribute to any organization that hires them is an asset to be recognized and leveraged instead of potentially minimized and overlooked.

Previous research has shown that when a veteran separates from active-duty service and makes the transition into the civilian workforce, there is a potential to be challenged in a variety of areas, such as administrative, financial, personal, professional, and social (Grimell, 2017). When veterans make this transition, they can experience things like not feeling valued, feeling like they have lost their identity, and struggling with the differences in culture (Grimell & van den Berg, 2020). If these types of experiences and feelings can be eliminated or at least minimized through the efforts of a veteran friendly integration process, then everyone involved would be able to benefit from the rewards of the veterans they hire.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

The following demographic information will be used to further stratify the data collected during the analysis phase:

1. Gender

2. Age

3. Length of Active-Duty service (in years)

4. Date of Separation from Active-Duty service

5. Any previous civilian job experience in another organization prior to your current role?

6. How long have you been in your current, civilian position?

7. How soon did you begin working in your current role after retiring from the military?

8. Describe the experience you had while going through the initial welcome and on-boarding process as a new employee.

    a. In what ways did you feel valued as an individual?

    b. In what ways did you feel you would be valued as a new team member of the company?

    c. How were you treated during the overall process?

9. Tell me about the departmental on-boarding process once you began working in your current position.

    a. In what ways did you feel welcomed as a new team member?

    b. How well do you feel this process set you up for success as a new team member?

    c. How equipped did you feel to begin your new role as a result of this process?

10. What are the most important factors in place that will facilitate your success in your current position?

11. What are the most important factors that are absent that could be detrimental to your success in your current position?

12. Relative to feeling accepted and a part of the group/team:

    a. What are the top 3 *similarities* between the military and your current civilian role?

    b. What are the top 3 *differences* between the military and your current civilian role?

13. How would you describe the level of social acceptance you are experiencing in your current role compared to the military?