

Walden University

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Racism in the Military and Black Servicemembers' Experience: A Phenomenological

Study

by

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MA, Walden University, 2017

BS, Loras College, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Research indicates that racism remains a persistent social issue within American society and continues to permeate many institutions, including the military. While the issue of racism in the United States has garnered awareness, the pervasive and persistent psychological effects of racism on Black and African American service members have not been adequately researched. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to collect data from 16 participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews to examine this topic. Critical race theory and race-based traumatic stress theory were the theoretical frameworks for this study. Findings indicated that racial encounters and discrimination continue to be persistent in the Armed Forces across branches and throughout ranks. Participants reported they experienced some form of racism while serving in the military that included discriminatory jokes and racial comments/slurs, as well as witnessing or experiencing discrimination with promotions. Participants also reported experiencing racism in the military impacted their mental health. This study highlights that racism within the military may adversely affect service members' psychological wellbeing, unit cohesion, mission effectiveness, and trust. This study is essential for positive social change as it identifies areas of racial discrimination within the military and offers strategies to promote awareness and develop training to challenge discriminatory practices effectively.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength to persevere through this journey, continuously directing my path, and opening doors that no man can close.

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Nadia. I hope this inspires you to chase your dreams and accomplish your goals despite the obstacles. You are a force to be reckoned with, and I am so thankful that God blessed me with a daughter like you. I love you so much.

To my parents, friends, and coworkers, thank you for being my accountability partners and pushing me to finish this journey. Your support helped keep me motivated through this process.

Acknowledgments

This journey felt impossible for quite a while, but I have learned that when the path feels insufferable, take a step back, reassess, and push forward. That said, I want to express my sincerest and heartfelt gratitude to my committee chairperson, Dr. Teaonna Watson, who provided me with support, coaching, guidance, and her immense expertise. Dr. Watson has been a fantastic mentor throughout this journey, and I am forever grateful for her stepping in and reviving me when I had all but given up on achieving this feat.

I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Keane, for his invaluable guidance in pushing me to be a succinct writer and supporting me throughout this process. Dr. Keane's expertise and feedback were instrumental in shaping my research and refining my ideas to produce quality research. I am grateful for his time, guidance, and encouragement.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of my family, friends, and coworkers. I am forever grateful to you all and will strive always to make you proud.

Finally, to the participants of this study, I express my sincerest gratitude to you. I am honored and humbled by your courage to speak about your experience and dedication to this study. Your voice was heard, and your experience has been validated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Racism erodes trust and cultivates a tense environment of demoralization and dehumanization for those subjected to it (Caulley, 2020). Institutions that heavily rely on the strength of comradery, such as the military, may cause extensive mental and emotional distress as well as distrust among fellow servicemembers, as well as potential failure of military missions, mainly when survival is entirely dependent upon the ability to trust comrades (Correll, 2022, p. 2). Racism, for the purpose of this study, was defined as a “form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022). Jones and Neblett (2019) posited racism, in all forms, represents a substantial risk to the psychological wellbeing of people of color in the United States (U.S.). Mental Health America uses the terms racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress (RBTS) to describe emotional and mental injuries resulting from racially biased encounters, including hate crimes, ethnic discrimination, and outright racism. This qualitative phenomenological study involved exploring Black and African American service members’ lived experiences with racism in the armed forces in the present day. I addressed whether and how these experiences may have directly or indirectly affected their careers. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2020), racism was prevalent within ranks, and “racial disparity exists for Black/African American Airmen and Space Force professionals in the areas of Armed Forces discipline and career developmental opportunities” (para. 9). Few studies have directly addressed these issues from the perspectives of service members.

Background of the Study

According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC, 2021), race scarcely existed before the 1500s. When it was used, it was used to identify people with a group connection or kinship. Race in the present day is a human invention or social construct that is used to identify physical features, traits, and characteristics (NMAAHC, 2021). Mueller (2018) argued social research often treats race as a social construct and a continuous byproduct of historical racialization. The adoption of race as a social construct has led to the denial, as well as the attainment of rights, benefits, and privileges. These distinct pathways are addressed in Chapter 2.

Those who join the U.S. military are less than 1% of the total population of the U.S. (Bledsoe, 2022). According to Chivvis and Lauji (2022), African Americans account for 12.4% of the U.S. population but make up 16.8% of the military population. African American servicemembers makeup 9% of Active-Duty officers, with only 6.5% making it to the ranks of General (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). Burek (2018) noted when individuals join the military, they give up much of their individuality to become “something bigger than themselves” (p. 3). Each branch of the military has its own ethos, codes, and core values that are instilled and shared by service members, holding them to higher standards and including strict consequences for those who do not align with those values.

Statement of the Problem

While there has been some progression in terms of understanding discriminatory practices among Black Americans in the U.S., this demographic population remains plagued by systemic oppression, particularly those of higher socioeconomic status

(Hudson et al., 2016). Racism is not a new phenomenon, and while research has considered racism's impact on Black Americans, studies have yet to address the influence of overt and covert racism on the psychological wellbeing of Black service members.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine racism in the military and Black service members' lived experiences. I sought to contribute to understanding the lived experiences of Black and African American men and women in the armed forces experiencing incidents of racism and discrimination. This study revealed factors that may be instrumental in terms of developing targeted mental health interventions and strategic educational programs that are designed to address and improve the military culture for Black and African American service members.

Research Question

I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how African American service members experience or have experienced racism while serving in the Armed Forces by examining participants' personal, environmental, and social experiences. The primary research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black and African American service members with racism while serving in the Armed Forces?

Theoretical Framework

I used critical race theory (CRT), which involves examining how the concept of race impacts society at a structural level. The general framework of CRT is that race is socially constructed, and racism against POC is deeply woven into the fibers of society regardless of personal beliefs and prejudices (Simba, 2023). A principle of CRT is that

the systemic nature of racism is responsible for perpetuating racial inequality (George, 2021). Carter (2007) suggested POC may experience psychological trauma and poor mental health resulting from their experiences with racial discrimination.

An additional framework for this study was the theory of race-based traumatic stress (RBTS). The RBTS theory involves racism's link with race-related trauma and poor mental health (Carter, 2006). Furthermore, Carter (2007) claimed experiencing racism can lead to psychological injury. Polanco-Roman et al. (2019) found there is a "significant direct association between racial/ethnic discrimination and stress sensitivity" (p. 763).

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black American service members who may have experienced racism in the military. A phenomenological approach was the best option to collect data. This qualitative approach will lead to in-depth insights regarding the experiences of African American and Black service members who may have experienced racism while serving, how that experience shaped their perceptions of the military, and if their careers were affected as a result of these experiences. Descriptive phenomenological analysis was used for this study. This analysis method is used to understand better true meanings of lived experiences involving a phenomenon of individuals or groups of people (Giorgi, 2009). This involves exposing the meaning of a phenomenon as humans experience it by identifying essential themes (Koivisto et al., 2002). This method involves revealing participants' vivid experiences and meanings regarding a specific phenomenon using open-ended interview questions

(Lee & Lee, 2020).

To better understand the phenomenon of racism in the military, I used qualitative methods with a phenomenological focus using semi-structured interviews with Black and African American armed forces members. Data garnered from participants will then be used to develop and enhance programs that are aimed at addressing racism's impact on service members.

Because racism has played a role in many American wars and continues to have a role in the present day, it was essential to research why this phenomenon is still prevalent in military ranks. While there is significant research on racism and its effects on those who experience it, research is lacking in terms of how racism affects Black and African American service members and their military careers. As such, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how experiencing racism in the military may influence Black and African American service members' careers and psychological wellbeing. This study was intended to be informative as well as a potential tool for developing a Veteran Affairs disability rating that is specific to Black and African American service members' experiences with racism while serving.

Definitions of Terms

African American: People of "African ancestral origins who self-identify or [are] identified by others as African American" (Agyemang, 2005, p. 1016).

Air Force: This branch provides lethal air and space capabilities, transportation, and delivery of troops worldwide (Defense.gov, n.d.).

Anti-Blackness: A two-part formation that both voids Blackness of value while systematically marginalizing Black people and their issues. The first form of anti-Blackness is overt racism.

Army: The Army is the oldest branch in the United States and primarily provides forces for ground protection (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

Black American: People with “sub-Saharan African ancestral origins with brown or black complexion” (Agyemang, 2005, p. 1016).

Coast Guard: A two-pronged branch that operates under Homeland Security during peacetime and the Navy during wartime. This branch provides law and maritime safety enforcement, marine and environmental protection, and military naval support (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

Marines: This branch is a component of the Navy and maintains amphibious and ground combat and general military operations (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

National Guard: Branch of the military which consists of the Army and Air National Guard supporting combat missions, domestic security, homeland security operations, and humanitarian efforts (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

Navy: Branch of the military that operates above and below the water to defend the U.S. and its interests (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

Racial Trauma: A form of racial-based stress that is experienced by POC when exposed to real or perceived dangerous events involving their race (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019).

Racism: According to the APA (2022), racism is a “form of prejudice that assumes that the members of racial categories have distinctive characteristics and that these differences result in some racial groups being inferior to others” (p. 1).

Space Force: The branch that is responsible for training, equipping, and organizing space forces to protect the U.S. and allies’ interests in space (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.).

White Supremacy: The economic, cultural, and political system that sustains “White people’s dominance over virtually all sectors of society and through which implicit and explicit ideas about White people’s superiority are reproduced through everyday dynamics in a wide variety of institutional and social settings” (Grzanka, 2019, p. 479).

Assumptions

This qualitative study included several assumptions about participants. The first assumption was that participants were possibly reluctant to fully share their experiences depending on their rank, base, or career field due to specific responses potentially exposing who they may be. Another assumption was that male participants would be more reserved in terms of their willingness to discuss mental health issues they may have experienced. Watkins (2019) argued that traditional masculine roles often prevent men from sharing personal issues due to restricting emotions, which prevents men from disclosing and seeking assistance. Another assumption was that participants met established criteria and did not withhold or adjust their answers to fit a perceived

outcome. Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth responses to avoid leading participants to answer one way or another.

Scope and Delimitations

I explored the lived experiences of Black and African American service members who experienced racism while serving in the military. This study involved understanding how experiencing racism in the military shapes perceptions, affects psychological and emotional well-being, and impacts careers. Findings from this study may lead to corrective changes involving programs that are aimed at combating racist behaviors, addressing and educating cultures, and facilitating recovery programs and services for ethnic minorities.

I focused solely on recruiting Black and African American male and female service members as participants and excluded other ethnic minorities to ensure reliability. Participants from all ranks, career fields, and eras who had firsthand experience with racism were considered. Potential participants with whom I had personal relationships were excluded to eliminate preexisting biases and maintain validity.

I addressed sensitive and traumatic topics that may pose challenges in terms of finding willing participants. Since this study involved qualitative, structured, and semi-structured interviews, one challenge was the potential and unintentional revictimization of participants that may occur when they revisit racial trauma they experienced while serving in the Armed Forces. Interviews were conducted through videoconferencing in conducive settings. Due to busy work schedules, family life, and geographical distance, video conferencing, email, and phone interviews were used. Interviews were conducted

during sessions over different days to facilitate participant and researcher availability and accommodate geographical separations, time zone conflicts, and irregular work shifts.

A potential barrier with video conferencing was the possibility of unauthorized breaches during participant interviews; however, this did not happen. To combat this, platforms such as Zoom have capabilities that prevent unauthorized access using end-to-end encryption that ensures all communications during meetings cannot be accessed by Zoom or a third party (Secara, 2020). Cremer et al. (2022) argued that using standard commercial cloud services helps mitigate cybersecurity risks. I established rapport and trust by acknowledging potential issues with video interviews so participants felt comfortable honestly detailing their experiences. If participants were uncomfortable, they could withdraw their participation at any time.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations. One such limitation concerns the number of participants in the study. Another limitation involves confidentiality and ethics. Because many participants are currently serving in the military, their responses could have been limited based on their career field, and information could potentially and unintentionally reveal sensitive or classified information; however, this did not happen. While this scenario was unlikely, it remained a potential limitation. An additional limitation is the potential for bias to occur based on participants' responses to questions during interviews. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process to

detail my thoughts, feelings, and potential biases regarding the study and shared it with my dissertation chair.

Significance of the Study

I addressed the lack of research regarding Black and African American experiences with racism in the armed forces. I aimed to capture lived experiences involving racism within military ranks to provide irrefutable accounts that may be used to enhance, develop, and address the trauma that is associated with experiencing racism. Brown et al. (2019) attributed issues in terms of racial apathy, which they defined as nonminorities failing to care about or address racial inequality as a consensus. Documenting the lived experiences of Black and African American service members regarding racism allowed them to share their stories while validating their experiences and contributing to a significant cause.

Summary

This chapter included a brief overview of this qualitative phenomenological study. This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Black and African American service members who experienced incidents of racism or racial discrimination while serving in the military. My goal was to discover, examine, and document participant experiences. Research shows a lack of firsthand accounts of racism in the military. I interviewed Black and African American service members from all branches of the military and geographical locations to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences. Chapter 2 includes an exhaustive review of current literature as the basis of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This phenomenological study was focused on the psychological, social, environmental, and emotional experiences of Black and African American men and women in the Armed Forces who experienced racism during their service. The APA (2022) asserted that racism generally elicits negative emotional responses from members of a racial group as well as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Discrimination against individuals based on race results in violence.

This study engages comprehensively with psychological influences that impact the overall wellbeing of Black and African American service members who experience or have experienced acts of racial discrimination or racial trauma during their Armed Forces careers. While there is adequate literature on the phenomenon of racism, racial discrimination, white supremacy, racial trauma, and African Americans in the Armed Forces, there is a lack of research investigating how these concepts intersect. No scholarly research has been undertaken to directly address the lived experiences of Black and African American service members who are subjected to racism during their service. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological effects on Black and African American service members who have experienced racism in the Armed Forces.

Knowledge from this study will serve as a foundation for further research on the effects of racial trauma on members of other influential organizations, including law enforcement, the Secret Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and universities.

Deficiencies emerged in areas of research that have not yet addressed the issue of racism within the Armed Forces. This review of extant literature involved addressing gaps in the literature and demonstrates the need for conducting this study. First, I summarize CRT and RBTS. Second, I provide an exhaustive thematic assessment of current literature that addresses the problem of racism. Finally, I assess existing literature and explain how the present study was used to address highlighted gaps.

Sources and Literature Search Strategy

Information for this review was gathered using scholarly articles that were published between 2019 and 2024 with data regarding racism, mental health, racial trauma, Armed Forces statistics, historical data on African Americans in the Armed Forces, depression, PTSD, and racial apathy related to African American men and women. Databases that were used to identify peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles were: SAGE Journals, PsycInfo, EBSCOHost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Literature involving racial discrimination, the Armed Forces, and racial trauma were analyzed. Keywords to identify peer-reviewed journal articles for this study were: *African American men, African American women, Black American, career impact, depression, Armed Forces, racism, racial trauma, discrimination, mental healthcare, mental health stigmas, mental wellbeing, military, discrimination, military equal opportunity, military trauma, psychological effects of racism, racism, health, reporting, service members, service-connected disabilities, social construct, and Veteran's Affairs*. Formal research relating to racism is abundant. Keywords were used to narrow down articles to focus more specifically on these topics. Most research has focused on these topics individually.

Few articles have examined the impact of experiencing racism in the Armed Forces and how it affects overall wellbeing of members.

Theoretical Foundation

CRT

This study is based on the CRT, which involves examining how the idea of race impacts society at a structural level (Simba, 2023). Race is socially constructed, with racism against POC deeply woven into society regardless of one's personal beliefs and prejudices (Simba, 2023). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017), CRT is often used to analyze racial trauma. George (2021) argued that race is not real in a biological sense but is socially constructed. CRT acknowledges racism is embedded within societal systems, institutions, and ideologies (George, 2021). Another tenet of CRT is recognizing the systemic nature of racism and its responsibility for perpetuating racial inequalities, along with validating lived experiences of POC (George, 2021). Carter (2007) argued some minorities and ethnic groups suffer psychological trauma as a result of experiencing racial discrimination.

RBTS

The RBTS theory is an additional framework for this study. CRT prompted the development of the theory of RBTS. This secondary framework assisted with interpreting, clarifying, deciphering, and understanding the psychological trauma that Black Americans experiencing racism in the military may endure. The RTBTS theory was founded on the idea that racism is linked to race-related trauma and poor mental health. Since racism is a possible source of traumatic stress, race-based stress (RBS) is

the term used to describe the psychological injury and mental trauma that is sustained due to racial discrimination (Carter, 2007).

Polanco-Roman et al. (2019) found a “significant direct association between racial/ethnic discrimination and stress sensitivity, racial/ethnic discrimination and dissociative symptoms, and racial/ethnic discrimination and depressive symptoms” (p. 763). Increased instances of racial and ethnic discrimination within institutional settings are linked to amplified stress sensitivity (Polanco-Roman et al., 2019). Instances of racial discrimination might be viewed as a direct threat to one’s safety and wellbeing due to well-documented links between detrimental effects of racism and poor mental and physical health outcomes such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, asthma, depression, and anxiety in racialized ethnic groups (CDC, 2021).

Symptoms of RBTS

Symptoms of RBTS are similar to PTSD, including irritability, psychological distress, depression, avoidance, and possible paranoia (Williams, 2015). The most significant difference between PTSD and RBTS is that a traumatic event is not a singular event that can be pinpointed, such as an assault, severe storm, or combat trauma.

Williams (2015) argued racial trauma could originate in subtle microaggressive behaviors, such as being followed around a department store, receiving comments about hair texture, overhearing racial jokes, or hearing about racialized violence (para. 2). More research is needed to explore the impact of racism in the context of African American members of the Armed Forces who have experienced racism during their service after the Civil Rights and Jim Crow era. Carlson et al. (2018) claimed veterans of color have a

higher risk of experiencing racialized discrimination during their military service, leading to negative mental health issues (p. 758). With a decreased focus on PTSD, specifically involving experiences in war zones, POC veterans have higher rates of PTSD than their White counterparts, which suggests unique associations between racial discrimination and PTSD (Carlson et al., 2018, p.758). Carlson et al. (2018) argued experiences involving racial discrimination in the military could potentially be more detrimental in this environment, as loyalty and interdependence are paramount for safety. Due to the nature of the Armed Forces, the ability to trust fellow service members is critical, and “racial division erodes that trust” (Correll, 2022, p. 2).

RBTS Symptom Scale

Loo et al. developed the RRSS to measure exposure to racism toward Asian Americans after the Vietnam War. While the RRSS was developed for the Asian community, the scale can be applied to other ethnic groups. Loo et al. (2001) noted higher rates of PTSD in minority Vietnam veterans, along with other readjustment issues among Hispanics and African Americans when compared to their White counterparts. Loo et al. (2001) suggested there is evidence of poor adjustment post-military in minority combat veterans who were exposed to racism-related instances in the military. Furthermore, Loo et al. (2001) argued the high prevalence of PTSD and other readjustment issues in minority veterans was only partially due to combat exposure; therefore, understanding how experiencing racial prejudices in a military environment may be crucial to understanding how racial discrimination contributes to PTSD in minority veterans. Loo et al. (2001) suggested a single racially biased event, such as

being threatened with injury or death solely based on race, can be considered a traumatic event.

RRSS Categories

The three categories of race-related stressors in the RRSS are exposure to racial prejudice and stigmatization, which is classified as “direct, personal experiences in which one perceives that they have been discriminated against or excluded by virtue of race, subjected to denigration, harassment, dehumanization, or stigmatization on the basis of race” (Loo et al., 2001, p. 504). The second category is bicultural identification, which means identifying with at least two cultures. Loo et al. (2001) study focused on Asian Americans identifying with the Vietnamese culture and people (p. 505). The last category is exposure to a racist environment, such as witnessing comments or behaviors by fellow American military members that are harassing, degrading, or dehumanizing (Loo et al., 2001). As evidenced in previous sections, Black and African American service members have been subjected time and time again to harassing, dehumanizing, and degrading behaviors by fellow military members, which is why the Race-Related Stressor Scale is valuable to this study. The RRSS has demonstrated that stressors related to race account for “20% of the variance in PTSD symptoms over and above combat exposure and Armed Forces rank” (Loo et al., 2001, p. 2).

Statistical Data

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2021), research has shown that the centuries of racism within this country have had a significant impact on communities of color. The prevalence of major depressive disorder (MDD) was higher in Caucasians

(17.9%) than in African Americans (10.4%). An even more significant difference is evident in the chronic nature of the disorder: 56% for African Americans and 38.6% for Caucasians (Bailey et al., 2019). While the incidence of MDD appears to be higher in Caucasians, the long-lasting symptoms of MDD are higher in African Americans. According to Bailey et al. (2019), the reason for this is that only a small percentage of African Americans seek treatment. Other studies have set out to determine the risk factors for depression in African Americans, and they conclude that perceived experiences of racial discrimination are strongly correlated with declining mental and physical health in African Americans (Mpofu et al., 2022; Asari et al., 2018; Williams, 2018). Concerning mental health stigmas, Kaplan (2019) noted that stigmas regarding seeking mental health treatment are often rooted in the military culture, with service members anticipating harm to their careers due to seeking mental health care.

Complaints

According to a 2009 United States Equal Opportunity Commission report, Armed Forces members who identified as Black/African American filed 1,207 discrimination complaints, even though they only made up 17.5% of the total workforce in the Army (EEOC, 2009). In the same report, members who identified as White (69.3%) filed 90 racial discrimination complaints, and members who identified as Asian (3.81%) filed 18 discrimination complaints (EEOC, 2009). In the Navy, 643 discrimination complaints were filed, with 146 by Black/African American, 27 by White, and 35 by Asian members (EEOC, 2009). For the 2020 fiscal year, the Department of Defense No FEAR Act

reported a total of 2,864 complaints lodged based on race and/or color, which was higher than complaints filed based on sex, disability, and age (DoD, 2020).

Literature Review

Race Origination

According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), before the 1500s, the term “race” was used to identify groups of people who had a kinship or group connection; however, the modern-day usage of the term “race” distinguishes people by their appearance, physical traits, or characteristics (NMAAHC, 2021). The term “white” was also not widely used and was used to describe only the English elite women who were of high social status as their skin was pale due to not going outside, yet males were not given this term as it signaled that they were unproductive, sick, or lazy (NMAAHC, 2021.). During the 1600s, European Colonists commonly used the term “white” to refer to people who looked like them, and by the mid-1660s, they had created race distinctions with “races” of ‘savage’ Indians, ‘subhuman’ Africans, and ‘white men” (NMAAHC, 2021). The term “slavery” changed from indentured servitude to chattel slavery, with strict laws enacted to prohibit or restrict interaction between “white servants and black slaves” (NMAAHC, 2021). These divisions, along with Thomas Jefferson and John Locke making arguments that there were inferior races, helped propel the concept that Blacks were inferior to whites and that “freedom” and “liberty for all” did not extend to Black Americans (NMAAHC, 2021).

Race as a Social Construct

Social research often treats race as a social construct and a continuous byproduct of historical racialization (Mueller, 2018). Many articles refer to race as a social construct because race is a “human-invented classification” (Center for Health Progress, 2017, p. 2). Hodson (2016) points out that ideas of race vary among different populations and even within the same population. Hodson (2016) further elaborated that if race can be classified into different subsections or designations that can change over time or change depending on the culture or within a culture, with differing opinions, then it is a social construct. Hodson (2016) used the example of President Barack Obama’s run for President of the United States and the differing opinions about his race from opposing candidates and their supporters. Many members of the White community felt that he was “too Black,” while members of the Black community felt that he was “not Black enough,” as he did not descend from American slaves (Hodson, 2016).

Colonial Militias (1528-1774)

Before the American Revolution, race had no bearing on militia membership, and colonies required that every able-bodied man fit to carry and use a weapon be a local militia member (Webb & Herrmann, 2002). As slavery became more popular, the fear of blacks became prominent as reports of Black slave uprisings spread around Virginia and the other colonies, resulting in laws that prevented Blacks from having ammunition and arms (Webb & Herrmann, 2002). White colonists were fearful that slave revolts would up-end their economic security and their way of life, reverse the roles of whites and Blacks, and the slave would become the master (Webb & Herrmann, 2002). The financial

security of Black slavery was a driving force behind changes to colonial militia memberships. Laws were rewritten where those who refused to serve had to pay a fine, and when more men were needed, recruiters turned to the undesirable Mulattos, who were of mixed race, Native Americans, and those of African descent (Webb & Herrmann, 2002).

The United States military has had a long-standing relationship with racism, yet Black Americans have routinely voluntarily and involuntarily fought for America's freedom honorably in various wars and military conflicts without gaining acceptance in the military ranks (Nalty, 1989, p. 10). According to Nalty (1989), the military accomplishments of blacks diminished or disappeared when viewed through the distorted lens of white supremacy (p. 10). Paul Laurence Dunbar, a Black Poet, wrote that the fight against racism was a pivotal battle where medals, parades, and accolades would not be the prize; it would be full citizenship (Nalty, 1989, p. 10). Racism, according to Nalty (1989), has deprived generations of Blacks while imposing superficial limitations for opportunities within the military (p. 11). The reality of war is that manpower is needed, and with the length of wars increasing and changing scope, the military could not afford to continually "indulge in the wastefulness of racism" (Nalty, 1989, p. 11).

American Revolution

Black Americans played many vital roles during the American Revolution. Quarles (1961, 1986) explained that the Black American's role in the American Revolution is best understood by "realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place or a people, but to a principle" (p.33). Quarles (1961, 1986) detailed that the resistance to

enlisting Blacks in the military arose from the “reluctance to deprive” the master of his chattel slave, coupled with the fear of arming a man who was not free (p.33). Nash (2013) wrote that an estimated 5000 to 9000 Black soldiers and sailors fought for the Continental Army, Navy, and state militias. The rates of desertion were far lower for Black soldiers than their white counterparts, as free Blacks did not have anything to desert to (Nash, 2013). As far back as colonial times to the twentieth century, Blacks were overlooked at the start of a conflict. As manpower dwindled and the conflict became harder, military commanders and civilian leaders sought Blacks who would rise from rejected inferiority to comrades in arms (Quarles, 1961, 1986, p.33).

Black Soldiers in the Continental Army

General George Washington took command of the Continental Army in July of 1775, and his adjunct General, Horacio Gates, made it known that “negroes” were not welcome in the Continental Army (Webb & Herrmann, 2002). The authors noted that the Revolutionary War was not widely supported, so recruiting fighting men was difficult, and with the issues of personnel shortages, General Washington had to reverse the Continental Army’s ban on Black soldiers. While Black soldiers were not allowed into the Continental Army, they were typically Private who did not bear a name or official identity or were identified by the names of “A Negro man, Negro by name, a Negro name not Known, or classic Negro surnames of the times like Cuffe, Jack, Jupiter, or Cato” (Webb & Herrmann, 2002, p. 6).

All-Black Units

Due to fears from slave owners, both enslaved and free blacks were forbidden to enlist in the Continental Army in October of 1775; however, that fear created an opportunity for the British to recruit slaves in November of 1775 as the Virginia British Royal Governor decreed that any enslaved Black man who fought for the British would be freed, which helped to increase the Black presence in the Armed Forces (Boyd, 2021; Altman, 1997, p. 33). Bowing to pressure from white southern leaders, General George Washington drafted general orders in October and November 1775 that purged the army of all African Americans (Nash, 2013). However, in late December, Washington partially reversed his decision and allowed only free Black men to serve in the Continental Army (Nash, 2013). Nash (2013) pointed out that by 1777, white recruitment was so low that all states except for Georgia and South Carolina allowed both free Black men and slaves in their state militias, but slaves gained their freedom to fight only after the Continental Congress compensated their masters. The first all-Black military unit in America, known as the First Rhode Island Regiment, assembled in July 1778, with many of the freed slaves taking on the name of “Freeman,” “America,” “Liberty,” and “Freedom” (Nash, 2013, p. 256). Altman (1997) noted that by 1779, the Continental Army had reversed its decision to allow Black troops to fight and actively recommended recruiting slaves because thousands of slaves were fighting for the British with the promise of freedom. In 1779, the Continental Congress urged Georgia and South Carolina to enlist three thousand slaves to help fight off the British forces plundering through the South. While these slaves would not receive compensation, if they survived the war, they would earn

their freedom and fifty dollars each, while their masters would be compensated for “loss of property” (Nash, 2013).

James Armistead

Even with all the resistance to having Blacks in the army, they proved themselves to be highly valuable assets to the army. One of the many notable slaves in the American Revolution was James Armistead, who was assigned to be a spy to infiltrate the British under the pretense of a runaway slave (Nash, 2013). The intelligence reports from Armistead proved highly valuable as they ensured the blockade's effectiveness, which led to the British surrender in Yorktown on October 19, 1781 (Nash, 2013). Nash (2013) pointed out that Armistead finally earned his freedom due to the testimony of a French Nobleman in 1786. While there are historical accounts of Black slaves fighting for America's freedom, the irony is that the freedom was not extended to all. Nagl and Allen (2023) pointed out that Black Americans made up around 5000 of the 230,000 soldiers who fought in the American Revolution for America's independence, yet that independence did not extend to them.

Emancipation and the Military

On September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln drafted a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. He issued it on January 1, 1863, with an added clause declaring that “suitable emancipated slaves will be received into the Armed Service of the United States” (Smith, 2002, p. 1). This proclamation showed a significant reversal in the status quo as issues of emancipation and military service were interwoven since the United States Army had turned away free Blacks since the start of the Civil War (Smith,

2002). Smith (2002) pointed out that there were strong feelings and harsh words of criticism regarding President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the idea of having to fight alongside a slave. Many white soldiers doubted the Black soldier's ability to fight, protested arming them, and argued that while they had no issue sacrificing their life for the rebellion, they did not join the army to "liberate Blacks or fight alongside them" (Smith, 2002, p. 5). One Corporal from the 74th New York Volunteers wrote, "We don't want to fight side and side with the [negro]; we are too superior a race for that" (Smith, 2002, p. 6). By the end of the Civil War, 178,975 Black American soldiers had gone through the army in 133 infantry regiments (Smith, 2002).

Blacks in World War I

As evidenced in prior sections, the recurring theme with Black Americans serving in the military is that whites were reluctant to arm Blacks. Yet, Black soldiers have been serving faithfully since the French and Indian Wars as early as 1689 (Altman, 1997, p. 32). Black Americans have stood up to collectively fight for a nation that has not done the same for them. Bryan (2021) pointed out that when World War I ignited across Europe, African Americans felt this was an opportunity to earn respect from their white neighbors. At this time, American society was segregated, and African Americans were viewed as second-class citizens (Bryan, 2021). Despite this, African Americans were once again clamoring to join the fight for America. Yet, even with the war looming over America's head, Blacks were still being turned away from serving in the military (Bryan, 2021). Bryan (2021) noted that the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 with a standing army of 126,000 men, and the War Department knew it would be

impossible to ensure a victory overseas with so few men. Because of this, in May 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act that required all men between the ages of 21 and 31 to register to be drafted (Bryan, 2021). Even before this Act, African American males eagerly joined the war effort to prove themselves loyal, patriotic, and worthy of equal treatment in America (Bryan, 2021).

When World War I began, four all-black units, considered the heroes of their communities, were still functioning: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry (Bryan, 2021). Within one week of the declaration of war, so many Blacks had scrambled to join that the War Department could no longer accept any more African Americans due to having met the quota (Bryan, 2021).

Bryan (2021) noted that when it came to the draft boards, Blacks had to tear off a corner of their registration card to be easily identified and separately inducted. According to Bryan (2021), it was common practice for mail carriers to purposely withhold draft registrations of Black men and then have them arrested for being draft dodgers. Even though Black men comprised just 10 percent of the United States population, they were 13 percent of the draft inductees, and those with small farms and families were drafted before “single white employees of larger planters” (Bryan, 2021, p. 2).

Discrimination Within Branches

Bryan (2021) explained that despite the history of discriminatory practices, the Army was the most progressive in race relations compared to the other branches. Blacks were not allowed to serve in the Marines and could only have menial and limited

positions within the Navy and Coast Guard (Bryan, 2021). While Blacks were more than qualified, they were not allowed to serve in combat units as they were completely segregated, and the four established all-Black units were not allowed in overseas combat roles (Bryan, 2021). However, according to Bryan (2021), the backlash from the African American community was so great that the War Department created the 92nd and 93rd Divisions made up of Black combat soldiers in 1917.

Early Black Combat Units and Officers

The establishment of African American units created the need for African American officers as the War Department believed that the Black soldiers would be more likely to follow a leader who looked like them and would help prevent potential uprisings (Bryan, 2021). In May of 1917, the first all-Black officer training camp in Des Moines, Iowa, opened its doors to 1,250 Black men (Bryan, 2021) and was the first and only program held at that location due to poor training. Those who graduated from officer camp were given the ranks of Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, or Captain and assigned to Infantry, Artillery, or Engineering in the 92nd Division (Bryan, 2021). Parker (2009) noted that the Army's senior commanders did not view Black officers as having leadership qualities and were fearful of the social implications of a Black officer commanding white troops (p. 35). As such, even though Blacks were earning higher ranks in the Army, they were still treated with hostility and discriminated against. Bryan (2021) noted that white soldiers refused to salute Black officers and barred them from officer clubs. Yet, the War Department rarely intervened, and discrimination was often condoned and overlooked. Overt racism prevailed from the top ranks down, and high-

ranking white officers would spread lies and misinformation in an attempt to sabotage mission outcomes of the 92nd Division, so no matter how well the mission went, the unit could not overcome the prejudice slander from the officers (Bryan, 2021). Parker (2009) pointed out that in France, Black soldiers were often undermined by American commanders because the French were less “race-conscious” and afforded Black soldiers a “measure of dignity and respect” (p. 34). The Army distributed a document to French officers and civilians titled “Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops” in hopes of preventing race mixing between Black soldiers and white women (Parker, 2009, p. 34). Despite the many obstacles Black soldiers faced, they still managed to persevere. The 369th Infantry Regiment became known as the “Men of Bronze” by the French because they did not yield an “inch of ground for over six months and never had a soldier taken as a prisoner” (Parker, 2009, p. 37). Parker (2009) noted that the French awarded the “Croix de Guerre,” which is a medal given for bravery, to three of the four all-Black regiments from the 93rd Division who fought under the French command (p.37).

Discrimination in Promotions

The military took drastic steps to prevent segregation customs from being violated when a Black officer was promoted (Parker, 2009, p.35). Colonel Charles Young was the only Black field grade officer at the time and also a West Point graduate who was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General but medically retired a day before he was to be promoted because the new rank would place him at a high-level command where he would be the senior ranking officer commanding at least 24 white officers (Parker, 2009, p. 35). Parker (2009) also notes that Black officers were only .7 percent of the officers in

the Army, even though 13 percent of the enlistments were black. The Army ensured that the small percentage of Black officers decreased, with many of these officers facing “charges of incompetence,” and those remaining were denied promotions higher than the rank of Captain (Parker, 2009, p. 35). In instances where Black officers were nearing promotions that would put them as the ranking officer, the white commanding officer would transfer the Black officer and promote a white officer in their place (Parker, 2009, p. 36). On the off chance that a Black officer was promoted above a white officer, the Black officer was instructed that white subordinates were not required to salute them (Parker, 2009, p. 36).

Coming Home After World War I

On November 11, 1918, the armistice, or truce, went into effect at 1100 (Bryan, 2021). With that, the American troops- Black and white- revealed in celebrating the victory. Black Americans helped secure this victory for the Nation, yet they were entering a different war on the home front. In 1918 and 1919, race riots were rampant across America, where over 135 African Americans were lynched and killed by white mobs (Parker, 2009, p. 38) and Bryan (2021) pointed out that as the Black troops were returning home, the lynchings even included veterans in uniform. Black veterans had gained valuable skills while serving in the war and brought these skills home to fight the war on the home front. The Tulsa Race Riot, one of the most violent race riots at the time, saw a lynch mob of over 2000 white men standing ready to lynch a 19-year-old boy for allegedly assaulting a white woman when he accidentally tripped while entering an elevator (Parker, 2009, p. 39). Once news spread of the lynch mob, Black veterans

donned their military uniforms, armed themselves, and gathered at the jail where the boy was being held and relied on their military training to defend the town of Greenwood (Parker, 2009, p.39). By the end of the riot, it is estimated that at least 26 Blacks were killed along with 10 whites, and the city was destroyed by fire, with at least 40 city blocks burned down (Parker, 2009, p. 39).

Despite all the barriers, discrimination, and hatred aimed at them, Black Americans continued to sign up to fight for a country that saw fit to lynch Black veterans. Yet, when World War II began, Black Americans and Black veterans from World War I once again answered the Nation's call (Bryan, 2021).

Pearl Harbor

Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, a young Black man, James Thompson, posed the question regarding the imminent war America was about to enter: "Should I sacrifice my life to live half American" (Delmont, 2022, p.25). This question bears significant weight regarding the plight of Black Americans in America. History has proven that while Black Americans have always jumped at the opportunity to serve America, the freedom and liberties many sacrificed their lives for have historically not been extended to the Black populace (Parker, 2009; Bryan, 2021).

World War II is rarely presented through the African American lens. Delmont (2022) noted that vital military roles, conflict beginning and ending dates, geographical locations, and international and home front implications take a different perspective when viewed through the African American eye. Delmont (2022) posits that World War II began years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, as many Black Americans saw

the connection between the Third Reich and America's racial policies. The Nazi racial ideology, according to many Blacks, was adapted from America's Jim Crow laws, and the Nazis had adopted these practices to apply them to the Jews (Delmont, 2022).

Delmont (2022) noted that even though the nation was preparing for a war in the days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, once again, Black Americans had to fight for the right to serve in the military, with hundreds being turned away by military recruiters.

World War II and the Tuskegee Airmen

In 1939, President Roosevelt signed the Civilian Pilot Training Act, which authorized civilian aviation programs to expand their training programs (Delmont, 2022, p. 30). Black Colleges and training facilities such as Howard University, Illinois's School of Aeronautics, and the Tuskegee Institute were training civilian Black pilots by the hundreds (Delmont, 2022). According to Delmont (2022), 100 percent of the Black aviation civilian students in the Tuskegee program passed the first year. Charles Hamilton Houston, a World War I veteran, was an outspoken critic of the government barring Black troops and wrote that the "Army has consistently discriminated" (Delmont, 2022, p. 31) and discriminated against Black troops and officers as the War Department continued to exclude Black Americans from entering the newly established Air Corps. Mr. Houston wrote a letter to the White House warning that if the United States went to war, "Black Americans would not silently endure the insults imposed on its soldiers and sailors during the course of the last war" (Delmont, 2022, p. 31). Delmont (2022) noted that within the first six months of Black veterans returning from World War I, twenty-eight public lynchings with at least seven army veterans murdered while in uniform.

Branch Quotas

Each branch had a quota for Black troops, but the Navy and Marines refused to follow the War Department's Black troop quota, so the Army and the Air Corps enlisted the qualified Black troops (Scott & Womack, 1998).

Tuskegee Institute

On March 19, 1941, the 99th Pursuit Squadron was activated, and on March 22, 1941, the all-Black fighter squadron was activated by President Roosevelt, who initiated the Tuskegee Institute experiment (Haynes, 2022). The Tuskegee Institute was established to determine if Black Americans could be trained as support personnel and combat pilots (Haynes, 2022). With the perception that Blacks were incapable of combat duties, the U.S. government, based on a heavily biased report published by the Army War College in 1925, expected the Tuskegee experiment to fail (Hayne, 2022). Four months later, on July 19, 1941, the inaugural class of the Tuskegee Institute consisted of thirteen flying cadets who had to complete four stages to complete the course: ground school/ preflight, primary flight training, and basic and advanced military flight training (Scott & Womack, 1998, p. 119). During that year, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Tuskegee Institute. She arranged for her Secret Service men to get her a ride on one of the instructor planes as she had "always heard that African Americans could not fly airplanes" (Scott & Womack, 1998, p. 120). After her flight with Chief Alfred Anderson, First Lady Roosevelt posed for a picture in the plane, and it was this photo, printed in both white and Black newspapers, that helped eliminate the American perception that Blacks did not possess the skills to fly a plane (Scott & Womack, 1998, p. 120).

99th Fighter Squadron

The Black aviators of the 99th Fighter Squadron understood that not only were they fighting for themselves but also fighting for the positive representation of every Black American because Jim Crow jurors were ready and eager to convict Black Americans as incompetent and cowardly (Nalty, 1989, p. 150). The Black 332nd Fighter Group, consisting of the 99th, 100th, 301st, and 302nd squadrons, proved their worth by successfully escorting bomber planes deep into Germany without losing a single bomber (Nalty, 1989, p. 153). The Distinguished Unit Citation was awarded to the 99th, 100th, and the 301st due to the Tuskegee Airmen's aggressiveness and discipline in escorting the bombers in Germany, along with shooting down 108 enemy planes (Nalty, 1989, p. 153). Yet, with all their accomplishments during World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen had to endure racial segregation and isolation continually. In contrast, their achievements were often overshadowed by racism and the desire to perpetuate negative stereotypes of Black troops (Nalty, 1989, p. 154).

Racism and PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the many mental health illnesses that plague service members, which can range from combat trauma to military sexual trauma. Mustillo and Kayser-Moon (2017) highlighted that researchers have not fully explored the potential influence of race on PTSD among minority Armed Forces service members. According to Carter et al. (2013), minority service members may suffer from PTSD that stems from instances of racial discrimination they encountered in the military combined with other traumatic experiences. The possible relationship between

racial discrimination and PTSD led Carter et al. (2013) to develop the Race-Based Traumatic Stress Symptom Scale (RBTSSS) for use in a clinical setting.

PTSD and Racial Discrimination

Carlson et al. (2018) suggested that Armed Forces Veterans of Color were at a higher risk of developing adverse psychological health problems and that minority Veterans have a higher prevalence of diagnosed mental health disorders. The authors attribute this to experiencing traditional combat zones along with instances of racial discrimination (Carlson et al., 2018). Carlson et al. (2018) divulged that a participant reported an instance of racism where white service members were actively planning and threatened to toss him overboard to intimidate him. Another participant reported that his white shipmates purposely exposed him to white phosphorous, which is a deadly chemical weapon that left burns all over his body, incapacitated him for six days, and resulted in a medical discharge due to the injuries he sustained (Carlson et al., 2018, p. 749). Carlson et al. (2018) reported that another service member reported witnessing the “deliberate killing of a Black service member (p. 749).

Group Cohesion

Carlson et al. (2018) noted that instances of racial discrimination may be more detrimental in the military due to an environment where individuals work together closely, and interdependence is required for well-being and safety. In an environment where group cohesion is strongly emphasized, experiencing racially motivated discrimination may lead to a breach of trust and safety concerns that can have long-term adverse effects on minority service members (Carlson et al., 2018). Furthermore, Carlson

et al. (2018) pointed out that group cohesion may also be a barrier to disclosing or reporting racial discrimination instances. Along with trying to maintain group cohesion, another barrier to reporting racial discrimination is the potential for the complaint to be ignored; the victim may encounter adverse outcomes, including demotions, ostracizing, or potential discharge (Carlson et al., 2018).

Colorblind Racial Ideology

Evidence suggests that the military may participate in or even promote “color evasion” (Carlson et al., 2018, p. 749), which is one of the domains of colorblind racial ideology. According to Carlson et al. (2018), this ideology “denies racial differences by emphasizing sameness to its service members through slogans such as “we are all green” (p. 749). While slogans in the military are beneficial to uniting service members, they may also promote the idea that racial differences are not important, thus creating barriers to reporting instances of racial discrimination, along with chronic exposure to racial discrimination and feelings of hopelessness to escape the situation as a contract binds the service member (Carlson et al., 2018).

Racial Apathy, Racial Disparities, and White Supremacy Roots

According to a Protect Our Defenders (2020) report, for years, the Pentagon withheld crucial information regarding “widespread racial discrimination and harassment,” and “39% of those who experienced discrimination or harassment did not report because “they thought nothing would be done” (Protect Our Defenders, 2020, p. 8).

Ralston et al. (2020) noted that while most Americans believe there is some presence of white nationalism in the Armed Forces, they do not view it as a serious problem. According to Brown et al. (2019), the disinterest in addressing white nationalism in the Armed Forces could be attributed to racial apathy, which allows those responsible for committing acts of racism to be absolved and to cover their eyes to their privilege. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the Military Times found that at least 36% of respondents witnessed white supremacy and racist ideology while in the Armed Forces (Shane, 2020). Gilbred (2021) noted that neo-fascist and white supremacist activity within the military has been a known long-standing problem, at least since the 1970s when an active chapter of the Ku Klux Klan was exposed at a Marine base. The investigation at the Marine base revealed Ku Klux Klan and other extremist organizing efforts at other bases around the United States (Gilbred, 2021).

President Ronald Reagan's defense secretary vowed in 1986 to "combat extremists in the Armed Forces" after receiving numerous reports from active service members who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups (Lichtblau, 2021). After the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, it was found that at least 27 of those arrested had ties to the Armed Forces, with both veterans and active-duty members participating. These findings have drawn attention to the crossover between the Armed Forces Service, violent extremism, and white supremacy (Lichtblau, 2021). As recently as fiscal year 2020, an Armed Forces report noted that it had processed over 750 discrimination complaints lodged by ethnic minorities (Stafford et al., 2021).

Combating Racism

One of the issues that Stafford et al. (2021) mentioned is that the Uniform Code of Military Justice does not sufficiently address instances of racial discrimination. Often, when a minority service member faces a court-martial, the jury comprises non-minorities, which some feel may lead to harsher punishments for the defendant (Stafford et al., 2021). Key findings from a Protect Our Defenders (2017) report suggest that, from 2006 to 2015, 71% of Black Air Force Airmen were likelier to face non-judicial punishment or court-martial in an average year than their White Air Force Airmen counterparts. Black Marines were found guilty 32% more than White Marines in the Marine Corps in an average year (Protect Our Defenders, 2017). The Navy only provided complete data for 2014 to 2015, which showed that Black Sailors were 40% more likely to have a referral for general or special court-martials than White sailors. Protect Our Defenders (2017) noted that the Army provided data from 2006 to 2015, which showed that, in an average year, at least 61% of Black soldiers were likely to face general court-martial or special court-martials in comparison to White soldiers. Boyd (2021) pointed out that Black Cadets at West Point Academy make up only 4.4% of the students there and are often subjected to racial oppression, both directly and indirectly.

Discriminatory Practices in Military Grooming Standards

Historically, racial discrimination has permeated the military ranks and continues to be in more covert ways, such as grooming standards. Myers (2020) noted that the Department of Defense seeks to expose racial injustice in the military, and one area that came to the forefront was the potential discrimination in grooming standards. Franklin et

al. (2021) pointed out that female service members in the Air Force have been allowed to wear micro braids and cornrows since the 1990s; however, “locs” or “dreadlocs” were unauthorized due to their “unkempt and matted nature” (p. 32). In 2014, the Air Force revised its policy to remove the words “matted” and “unkempt” regarding hairstyles (Franklin et al., 2021). According to Franklin et al. (2021), in 2015, the Marines were the first branch to authorize wearing locs and twists in uniform, followed by the Army in 2017, and lastly, the Air Force and Navy allowing locs in 2018.

Diversity and Inclusion

In response to the highly publicized shooting deaths of unarmed Black men, notably George Floyd, the Department of Defense (DoD) took a stance to denounce racism and the rampant killing of unarmed Black men (Myers, 2020). Along with this stance, military leaders started to assess other areas where racism is clearly displayed, such as Confederate memorials and a portrait of Robert E. Lee at West Point Academy and Army bases named after Confederate generals (Myers, 2020).

White Nationalism

With the push for diversity and inclusion, the question of white supremacy and white nationalism in the military arose. Ralston et al. (2020) surveyed how the public views white nationalism in the military. The survey results showed that while most Americans had suspicions that there may be some presence of white nationalism in the military, many did not view it as a significant problem (Ralston et al., 2020). Ralston et al. (2020) noted that those who identify as conservatives and hold the military in high esteem were “less likely to view white nationalism in the military as a serious problem”

(p. 229). Ralston et al. (2020) found that respondents were “significantly more likely” to view white nationalism in the military as a serious problem if service members provided evidence of its prevalence. Ralston et al. (2020) noted that far-right groups and White Nationalists view military service as the ideal recruiting ground. Polls conducted in 2017 and 2019 found that a fifth of the total 1,960 active-duty respondents had observed signs of racist ideology or white nationalism (Ralston et al., 2020). In a 2020 poll, the numbers significantly increased, with 36% of active-duty respondents reporting seeing evidence of racist ideologies and white supremacy in the military (Ralston et al., (2020).

January 6 Insurrection

The extent to which military members have perpetuated acts of domestic terrorism is concerning. Jones et al. (2021) noted that the Department of Defense submitted a report in March 2021 to the House and Senate Armed Services Committee stating that the Department of Defense is “facing a threat from Domestic Extremists” who embrace ideologies of white supremacists or white nationalist groups as they attempt to recruit military personnel, join the military to gain tactical and combat experience and encourage their members to join the military (Ralston et al., 2020, p. 1). In 2020, the DoD was alerted by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) that there were 143 open criminal cases involving veterans and current service members. Drieisbach and Anderson (2021) noted that of the 140 individuals charged in connection to the January 6, 2021 Insurrection, almost 20% currently or previously served in the military with at least one Reservist, one National Guard member, and 31 veterans were charged with conspiracy and other crimes (Jones et al., 2021).

Summary

Examining the effects of racism while serving in the military offers an opportunity to understand further potential lifelong health implications and possible influence on Black service members' military careers. In this chapter, I reviewed literature regarding racism, white supremacy, PTSD, and other health implications as they relate to military service members experiencing racism. I outlined the conceptual framework of the study, sources and keywords, and research that was conducted within the last 5 years. I reviewed the history of African Americans serving in the military in various roles and capacities and incentives to potentially sacrifice their lives. While reviewing the literature, I found research regarding PTSD in the military community; however, what seemed to be lacking was research that directly related experiencing racism while serving in the military to PTSD. This study may help substantiate a standard for acknowledging and addressing racism within military ranks, how it may directly impact Black or African American service members' career, and how to treat those experiencing PTSD-like symptoms. This idea will be further discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the chosen research method.

Chapter 3: Research Method

I used a qualitative phenomenological method to examine experiences of racism and their impacts on Black or African American Armed Forces service members. I aimed to explore and illustrate participants' experiences with racism related to their career decisions and overall wellbeing. The phenomenological approach was used to source elements of the phenomenon by conducting semi-structured interviews with the target population that will ultimately contribute to the field of forensic psychology. These phenomena include individual, psychological, and social facets of African American service members and how they have been affected by their knowledge of and experience with racism while serving in the Armed Forces. Results of the study include how service members' experiences impacted their careers, ability to cope, perceptions, and lasting effects on their psychological wellbeing. This chapter includes descriptions of the proposed methodology and research design, my role as the researcher, the target population, participant selection criteria, procedures for collecting data, and ethical concerns related to the study.

Research Question

The central research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of Black and African American service members with racism while serving in the Armed Forces?

Qualitative Research Design and Rationale

An experience is an event that is actually lived through in the conscious state and results in learned stimuli (APA, 2020). This phenomenological study was focused on

conscious experiences involving a phenomenon and the perceptions, emotions, and judgments of those experiencing it.

The Giorgi method was used to expose the meaning of a phenomenon in terms of themes, as individuals experience them. This method was used for participants to detail and validate their lived experiences from their perspectives.

Research Tradition

Busetto et al. (2020) noted that qualitative research involves studying the nature of a phenomenon to answer why something is or is not from experiences, perspectives, and meanings from the participant's point of view. Phenomenology involves capturing a phenomenon at the most basic level that manifests itself within the consciousness (APA, n.d.).

Qualitative Approaches

After considering other qualitative approaches, such as biography, grounded theory, and case studies, the existential-phenomenological design emerged as the optimal approach to examine the lived experience of racism and the toll it takes on service members' psychological wellbeing. The biographical qualitative approach involves focusing on a particular individual to create a reproduction of the subject's life (Thorpe & Holt, 2011). This particular approach did not suffice for this study, as the way individuals process their experiences with racism may differ. The ability to gather and analyze the perspectives of multiple individuals created a broader demonstration of the phenomenon, which is why the existential-phenomenological design was optimal. This design is used to describe people's values, emotions, and purposes, with participants as creative and

active subjects with human experiences (Thorpe & Holt, 2008). There is a gap in literature that explicitly addresses African Americans' experiences with racism in the Armed Forces and how it has shaped their careers, outlook on the Armed Forces, desire to continue or separate from the Armed Forces, and psychological toll on their overall wellbeing. The phenomenological approach was used to understand lived experiences via structured and semi-structured interviews.

Role of the Researcher

In this phenomenological study, I explored the impact of racial discrimination experienced by Black and African American Armed Forces service members from their perspectives. As a service member myself, to maintain objectivity, I used bracketing to refrain from, separate, and set aside my beliefs and biases from those being studied. Bracketing is used to fully invest in researching and understanding participants' viewpoints without tainting the study with their experiences or biases (Weatherford & Maitra, 2019). Researchers must be aware of their biases and be able to set them aside to ensure the study is objective.

As a member of the military, I was able to remain unbiased while collecting data. I also acknowledged my biases, maintained awareness of them, and set them aside to ensure validity of this study. Journaling my thoughts and feelings with openness and honesty about information I received during the interview process helped me separate my biases and experiences from co- participants' experiences.

Participants were recruited from the U.S., and I did not interview anyone with whom I had a personal or direct professional relationship. I expected participants had

some experience with racism during their military time. I understood there was potential that I may interview a participant who did not believe racism existed in the military, but that did not happen.

Methodology

Understanding how humans perceive and process a phenomenon is the catalyst of phenomenological research (Neubauer, 2019). The philosophy of phenomenology involves human experience as it relates to experiencing a specific phenomenon (Neubauer, 2019). Exploring the phenomenon through the perspectives of those who have experienced it is necessary for researchers to offer descriptions, themes, patterns, and potential meanings involving experiences.

Participant Selection Reasoning

The population for this study were those who identified as African American and served in the U.S. Armed Forces in both enlisted and officer ranks in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or Coast Guard.

Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research to identify and select participants with information-rich data related to the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The target number of participants was between eight and 10; however, the exact number was unknown until I reached data saturation. Data saturation in qualitative studies can be hard to pinpoint but is often recognized as the point where no new themes emerge from data (Guest et al., 2020). Typically, the first five to six interviews produce the richest data, with 80% to 92% of all identified concepts found within the first 10 interviews of a study (Guest et al., 2020). Based on this information, 10 to 12 participants

should produce the dataset that is necessary to analyze themes from properly gathered data.

Recruitment of Participants

Pending approval by Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruitment was conducted through social media by distributing electronic flyers to digital communities via Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Prospective participants received welcome emails and were invited to participate in brief interviews via Zoom, telephone, or email to ensure they met inclusion criteria and were eligible to participate. Once eligibility was determined and prospects indicated positive interest, follow-up communications were sent, including a welcome letter detailing expectations for participants, rules of engagement, and the consent form.

Participants who agreed to participate responded by typing "I consent" in their e-mail. The purpose of using e-mail for communication was to allow for electronic tracking, consistency, and ease of communication. The snowball sampling method was used to find hidden populations. This sampling style relies heavily on referrals from the initial participants who may meet the participant requirements and is cost-effective (Johnson, 2014). While the snowball sampling method allows access to unknown populations, there are some downfalls, such as issues with confidentiality and heavy reliance upon respondent judgment (Johnson, 2014).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The proposed inclusion criteria for participation inclusion were as follows: being and identifying as Black or African American, at least 18 years of age, currently serving

or previously served in the Armed Forces of any rank and career field for at least one year. Participants who met the criteria were determined based on responses from the demographic screening questionnaire sent out via social media and to prospective participants' email addresses.

Participants were excluded if they did not identify as Black or African American, never served in the military, served for less than one year, or worked in a highly sensitive career field or a career field that would readily identify the respondent.

Data Saturation and Sample Size

Non-probability sampling allowed me to take a small portion of the population, collect and analyze the data, and then use that data to interpret a population (Wolf et al., 2016). The minimum number of participants required for this study to reach data saturation was at least five. Electronic invitations were sent to the target communities outlined above to identify a prospective participant pool using non-probability sampling. Interviews were conducted until I reached data saturation, which occurred when no new themes emerged. While it is ideal to have equal gender representation, it was not a requirement.

Procedures for Pilot Study

The interview guide was piloted to verify accuracy and allowed the pilot participant to alter or suggest changes to the interview questions. The interview questions were open-ended to understand the lived experiences of Black servicemembers who encountered racism in the military. Once the pilot study was completed, it was transcribed and sent to my chair for feedback.

Procedures

I planned to create a welcome packet with an online form using Google Forms or another form generator to create a questionnaire using the criterion questions. The packet included the recruitment flyer and an informed consent form that described the purpose and intent of the study, confidentiality of participant responses, rights as a participant, the ability to stop the interview at any time, and my contact information. I explained the purpose of the Institutional Review Board at Walden University and the essential guidelines in place to ensure anonymity.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This study aimed to gather data about the lived experiences of the phenomenon of racism. In semi-structured interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions that allowed them to freely provide their opinions without bias or interference in their responses. At the start of each interview, I asked each participant basic demographic questions followed by open-ended questions to establish rapport and confirm that they met the eligibility criteria. I reiterated that their participation was voluntary, confidentiality would be maintained, and requested that they verbally acknowledge and agree to be recorded. Once the interviews were completed, I used Otter (<https://otter.ai/>) software to transcribe the interviews for analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Once the data was collected, I coded and analyzed the content to find patterns and themes that emerged from the research question posed. Katz-Buonincontro (2022) noted that reduction in phenomenological data analysis focuses on developing and clustering

themes discovered during coding passages. Another way that I can analyze the data gathered is to use horizontalization, which attempts to view the participant's experience from multiple roles or viewpoints (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). An emerging method for analyzing qualitative data is using "word clouds," which summarize and analyze data within the text to provide quick, easy, and meaningful analysis using colors and text size (Sellers et al., 2018). I used lists to help categorize themes I found through the collected data. I looked for specific categories emerging from both my primary and secondary interview questions.

Issues of Trustworthiness

This section is organized into the following components: trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability, and member checking.

Trustworthiness

Building trust, credibility, and dependability is crucial in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is a "shared reality" in which both readers and researchers may find commonality (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility shows confidence in the "truth" of the research findings (Amankwaa, 2016), and dependability refers to the ability for the findings to be repeated that are consistent with the phenomenon.

Transferability

This study addressed transferability through a comprehensive sample of participants and an exhaustive analysis of their responses. Transferability refers to the ability for the results of a qualitative study to be transferred or applied to other settings or contexts with different participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Rodan and Sesa (2008)

pointed out that the setting in which the phenomenon occurs may have common features in other settings, and the transferability is dependent upon the fit between the common features of the phenomena and the variable settings.

Confirmability

Cutcliffe and McKenna (2004) noted that audit trails are the principle techniques of qualitative research to establish confirmability. The audit trail consists of an additional party reviewing the primary researcher's research decisions, analytical processes, and methodological decisions (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004). Confirmability ensures that the results are shaped by the participant and not biased by the researcher's motivation or interest (Amankwaa, 2016).

Credibility

Wood et al. (2020) described credibility as the "truth value" used to demonstrate trustworthiness in a qualitative study. To prove trustworthiness in a study, the researcher must be transparent about the process used to interpret the data, along with the rationale for the process, and be open with the data to allow verification of the findings (Wood et al., 2020). Gagani (2019) noted that credibility in qualitative research necessitates that the data be based on a natural world environment and is vital to identify the phenomenon in the natural setting.

Dependability

In qualitative research, reliability and dependability are synonymous, according to Chowdhury (2015), and are the hardest to measure. Shanton (2004) determined that if the research is repeated using the same method in the same context, with the same

participants, similar results would be obtained. In short, the study should be able to be replicated with similar results.

Member Checking

Member-checking is a way for researchers to ensure the information is accurately being transferred from participant to researcher and is used in qualitative research to portray the participants' experience with the phenomenon accurately (Candela, 2019). Candela (2019) further explained that member-checking allows the participant to confirm or deny the researcher's interpretation and accuracy of the given data, which further adds to the credibility of the qualitative study.

Ethical Procedures

Treatment of Human Participants

In accordance with IRB guidelines, each participant received an introductory packet that included study details, an informed consent agreement, information regarding confidentiality, procedures, benefits, potential risks, and recording practices. Xu et al. (2020) noted that more robust relationships with participants allow them to make better and more informed decisions regarding their participation in the study.

To maintain anonymity, participants will be assigned a numerical code corresponding to their interviews and informed of their right to withdraw consent and leave the study at any point, with or without reason. Additionally, the interview transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet for at least five years and then destroyed by shredding.

Treatment of Validity

Hayashi et al. (2019) noted five different types of validity: descriptive, interpretive, evaluative, generalization, and theoretical. Descriptive validity ensures that the researcher does not “embellish or distort the information (Hayashi et al., 2019, p. 100). Interpretive validity encompasses the processes, participant values, and hidden concepts, beliefs, or intentions of the participant (Hayashi et al., 2019). Hayashi et al. (2019) described theoretical validity as “how much a theoretical explanation is developed through research analysis” (p. 100) and the consistency of the data. Generalization validity is the ability to extend the study results to other populations or specific situations (Hayashi et al., 2019). Hayashi et al. (2019) stated that valuation validity is the ability to critically examine one’s research results as a way of learning and expanding their understanding.

Threats to Validity

When it comes to human-based research, threats to validity are inherent, as biases are an innate structure that shapes our understanding of what we encounter daily (Palmer et al., 2021). Palmer et al. (2021) elaborated that these innate biases taint how we interpret a phenomenon as we often relate it to what we already know or believe we already know. The knowledge gained from a person’s experience with a phenomenon creates a baseline of understanding that develops parameters in the ways we interact; however, researchers must be able to acknowledge this and set it aside for the validity of a study (Palmer et al., 2021).

Treatment of Data

To maintain confidentiality for this study, participants were kept anonymous by assigning numerical identifiers to hide their identities. Participant names, bases, base city, and other demographic identifiers were not used during the interview for added confidentiality. Participant information was only kept for myself, the dissertation chair, and the committee member. Since interviews were done virtually, only the audio was recorded to avoid unintentionally exposing the participant's identity. During the researcher's graduation week at Walden University, all audio recordings will be deleted and destroyed immediately after the audio recordings have been transcribed. The transcribed data was password protected with two-step authentications on all devices used to obtain and store the data to ensure security and maintain for seven years per the 2007 American Psychological Association guidelines.

Summary

This chapter included an outline of the study plan for recruiting participants, data collection, and data analysis, as well as the trustworthiness of the research. I also addressed ethical procedures for participating in and conducting this phenomenological study, which included informed consent, confidentiality procedures, disposal of interviews, and numerical coding to preserve anonymity. Further procedures were discussed, including interview recording transcription, coding, and data analysis to answer the research question. Chapter 4 includes discussions of study results, participant demographics, data collection and analysis, and emerging themes and subthemes. Chapter 5 includes suggestions for future research and implications.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine racism in the military and Black service members' lived experiences by exploring how those experiences impacted their mental health and overall wellbeing. Racism has detrimental effects on the mental wellbeing of those who experience it. Trauma from experiencing racism could begin with subtle microaggressive behaviors, such as being the target of or hearing racial jokes and comments (Williams, 2015). I sought to understand, from Black service members' perspectives, how experiencing racism in the military impacted their perceptions of the military, views on the culture of racism in the military, and overall experiences in the military.

Chapter 1 includes a discussion of the value of this study to the field of psychology-by outlining racism in the military. I sought to identify if racism was still an issue in the military and how experiencing it impacted the psychological well-being of Black service members. An extensive examination of literature in Chapter 2 provided the foundational focus to understand the historical roots of racism in the military as well as present-day racism. Racism played a role in shaping the military, and that continues to be a persistent problem.

I used the phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of Black and African American service members. Giorgi's phenomenological method was used to conduct this qualitative study by collecting data using semi-structured interviews to garner rich, comprehensive, and complete descriptions from participant narratives. I

conducted 16 semi-structured video interviews to develop four emergent themes with two subthemes.

The central research question in this study was:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of Black and African American service members with racism while serving in the Armed Forces?

Participants' shared experiences were identified by probing and reflecting on in-depth interviews with follow-up questions to explore further connections between participant narratives.

This chapter includes a description of findings. The purpose of follow-up questions was to allow participants to further expound on their experiences with racism, which enabled me to understand them further. I discuss demographics, the research setting, data collection, evidence of trustworthiness, and data analysis process. A comprehensive analysis of themes is provided, followed by a description of research results.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was only conducted after receiving endorsement from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) with approval #09-01-23-0608968. The pilot study involved testing interview questions for proper flow and appropriate interviewing techniques. The pilot study participant was facilitated with a former colleague who met participant criteria and is retired from the military. The setting for the pilot study was quiet, confidential, and conducted via telephone. An interview guide was used to conduct the interviews with 10 questions and 10 follow-up questions. I used an

audio recorder to capture responses and handwritten notes accurately. I then transcribed interviews immediately after completing them to ensure accurate representation of the narrative. The pilot study participant reported he had a great career and could not remember any experiences with racism and attributed it to possibly the career field he was in. While he had been told he was aggressive, he took it as constructive feedback and used it when he became a squadron commander.

Setting

Each prospective participant received an email suggesting that they choose a confidential and quiet location that would safeguard their integrity and privacy. Participants could participate in the study via email, phone call, or videoconferencing. All 16 participants responded and agreed via email to scheduled interview dates and times. No special stipulations or situations influenced participants or their responses.

Demographics

Lived experiences allow for an in-depth examination of the nature of the phenomenon through participants' perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). The participant pool was generated using specific criteria to determine suitability to participate in the study. Participants who were at least 18, identified as Black or African American, and had completed basic training and technical school in any military branch were chosen.

Initial contact was facilitated by distributing electronic recruitment flyers via social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn with over 100 potential participants responding. The selection process entailed randomly selecting individuals who had emailed about their interest in participating. A total of 20 potential participants responded

with their consent to participate after receiving Walden University's IRB-approved consent form; however, due to scheduling conflicts, I used 16 total participants who met eligibility criteria.

I reached data saturation after 16 participants. All participants provided written acknowledgment of meeting inclusion criteria, and all 16 were assigned alphanumeric codes for confidentiality purposes, which were used in all electronic and handwritten notes.

Table 1

Alphanumeric Identifiers

| Participant Alphanumeric Code | Branch | Years of Service | Gender |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------------------|--------|
| P1 | Army | 5 | M |
| P2 | Army | 4 | M |
| P3 | Army | 4 | M |
| P4 | Air Force | 15 | M |
| P5 | Navy | 10 | M |
| P6 | Army | 8 | M |
| P7 | Army | 4 | F |
| P8 | Army | 8 | F |
| P9 | Army | 5 | M |
| P10) | Air Force | 10 | M |
| P11 | Army | 3 (separated) | F |
| P12 | Army | 6 | M |
| P13 | Army | 17 | F |
| P14 | Army | 2 (separated) | F |
| P15 | Marines | 5 | M |
| P16 | Army | 11 (retired) | F |

Data Collection

Initial contact with participants was done through email after potential respondents expressed their interest in participating. I included the consent form,

confidentiality procedures, time commitment, and data collection procedures in emails. Once participants responded to emails with the words “I consent,” dates, times, and interviews were scheduled. The data collection process began on September 9, 2023, after receiving Walden’s IRB endorsement # 09-01-23-0608968. I posted flyers on approved social media platforms and emailed contacts who knew of potential participants who met inclusion criteria.

Semi-structured interviews provided the primary data collection method for this study. The 45- to 60-minute interview protocol was followed to obtain participant narratives of their lived experience of racism in the military. At the start of each interview, I informed participants that I would be audio recording the interview. I reiterated that the interview was confidential and that they would be assigned alphanumerical identifiers to protect their identity.

A digital audio recorder was used to capture participant responses during the interview. Each participant was allotted 45-60 minutes for their interview, and all participants stayed within the allotted timeframe. I used Otter AI (<https://otter.ai/>) to transcribe the interviews. Once each interview was transcribed, I reviewed it for accuracy and used member checking to finalize it by having each participant review it within 48 hours after the interview concluded. While conducting the interviews, there were no anomalies in the data collection process.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected, I used Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of Black service members experiencing racism

while serving in the military. Giorgi's method uses meaning units and categories to describe participants' responses to open-ended questions from the interview guide (see Appendix A). Due to the nature of the study relying on individual perceptions of the phenomenon, there can be varied narratives that may appear to be contradictory, such as reporting acts of discrimination while discriminating against others, which would present a contradicting occurrence.

The descriptive phenomenological by Giorgi (2012) facilitates data analysis using a step-by-step method that formulates meaning units and themes. The first step is to use reduction and bracketing, completed by participants articulating their experiences with the phenomenon.

The second step involves reading each transcript, reviewing journal notes, listening to the audio recording of the interviews, and then reviewing the transcription again (Giorgi, 2012). While various coding software is available, I hand-coded the data to develop a system of color-coding used to identify meaning units. During this process, I was able to remain aligned with the phenomenological approach.

To achieve the third step, the analyzing process shifts to viewing and maintaining the data as a whole with intertwined meaning units. Hand-coding the data involved reading and re-reading participant narratives as meaning units emerged (Giorgi, 2012). I ensured the journal notes and highlights were significant to the research question.

The fourth step is to transfer the meaning units into psychological statements, with the first three steps repeated for each participant's response to each interview question (Giorgi, 2012).

The fifth step involves formulating categories of expressions into inclusive themes that collectively describe participants' experiences with the phenomenon. This step takes the meaning units and clusters them into identifiable themes. This process engages the imaginative variation, which is the essence of psychological expressions (Giorgi, 2009).

The sixth and last step transfers the meaning units, categories, and themes to develop an all-inclusive narrative of the rich data garnered through exploring the lived experiences of Black service members experiencing racism in the military. Scharp (2021) explained that researchers need to determine the quality and relationship between the themes to decide if they are complementary or contradictory, which was done during data analysis. The author noted that the researcher should consider accounts that may challenge or contradict the dominant themes to avoid bias and overgeneralization. While analyzing the data, I did not find evidence of contradictory occurrences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Transferability

Trustworthiness was established by presenting the raw data, and all bias was subjected to the guiding research principles with details of the participant's experience as the participant stated. Direct quotes from participants' accounts provide transferability. I offered a detailed portrayal of the overall group by accurately preserving the privacy of participants' lived experiences while acknowledging that future researchers can replicate the phenomenon in future studies. Phenomenology is defined by Giorgi (2012) as the participant's conscientiousness of the account of their lived experience.

Credibility

Edward and Holland (2020) noted that credibility is the ability to articulate patterns of experiences that are not easily or immediately simplified. According to Giorgi (2012), a phenomenon is comprehended via qualitative research through the eyes of the participants as they lived and perceived the phenomenon while removing personal experiences. Gagani (2019) noted that the credibility of a qualitative study requires a “natural world setting” that allows for theoretical testing of the phenomenon in the real world. As the researcher, participants were encouraged to clarify their responses to ensure transcription accuracy throughout the bracketing process.

Dependability

To ensure the transcription accounts were aligned with the stated purpose, the researcher utilized appropriate cross-checking methods with the collected data. I did this by thoroughly checking and rechecking interviews against the audio recording and handwritten notes to verify there was evidence of the phenomenological interest.

Conformability

Throughout the process, the researcher remained objective by keeping a journal and continually confirming the findings. Conformability is the objectivity of research during data collection and analysis (Mandal, 2018). During the conformability process, procedures were detailed by providing ample time for participants to illustrate their lived experiences with racism in the military. The researcher maintained confidentiality, which allowed the participants to openly share their exclusive narratives without fear. I was able to set aside biases by keeping a journal to let the process be organic and without opinion.

Findings

The study results were organized using transcriptions, handwritten notes, and journal notes with observations of participant demeanor, speech pattern, and perceived emotional response. Once data analysis began, the researcher transitioned into a thematic analysis to show descriptive phenomenology, critical race theory, and theory of race-based traumatic stress.

The 16 participants were asked ten interview questions and ten follow-up questions, which produced over 300 meaning units from which four themes emerged with five subthemes. The interview and follow-up questions probed the participants to describe their lived experience with racism in the military. The interview questions initially focused on the desire to join the military, how they felt when they first put on the uniform, how long they served, which branch, and whether they felt a strong sense of devotion to their country. The interview questions then shifted to hone in on the participant's experience as a Black service member and descriptions detailing their lived experience with racism while serving in the military. Lastly, the interview questions captured how the participants' experience with racism impacted their mental health and how they cope. Giorgi (2009) posited that participant's experiences are individually diverse, and the themes that emerge uncover the essence of the phenomenon.

Emergent Theme 1

The research question correlates with the meaning units and Emergent Theme 1, which is that the majority of participants have served in the military for five or more years. (see Table 2) The average length of service was five years or more, with outliers at

two years and 17 years. The characteristics of the participants reflected a majority in the Army and varied between officer and enlisted.

Table 2

Meaning Units, Emergent Theme 1, and Subthemes

| Meaning Units | Theme 1/Subthemes |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 5 years of service | At least 5 years of service |
| Love and passion for the country | Love and passion for the country |
| Pride in the uniform | Sense of accomplishment |

Subtheme 1

Each participant had their reason for joining the military. Some joined due to financial and life-changing opportunities or familial influences, while most reported joining because of their love and passion for the country. When asked what influenced her decision to join the military, P1 stated:

I love my country, and I am passionate about defending the lives of the citizens.

P2 mentioned a similar reason:

My decision to join the military was based on my passion to save the country. I have passion of serving your country, irrespective of some discriminatory historic racism issues that I've had so far. So, I just believe that I need to be patriotic and also ensure that there are so many things that I need to follow to make sure that everything is working very well.

P7 responded:

Okay, I had the zeal to serve my country; that's always been something that I was wanting to do to serve my country. So that's what really motivated me to join the military.

Subtheme 2

Each participant reported feeling excited, happy, and accomplished when they first put their uniform on. I could hear the joy in their voice as they recounted the feeling they felt at that moment. P2 reminisced:

I was happy because I undergo some training, which I passed. But with the army, when we're in the uniform, there was this kind of, I feel a little bit power, there was a kind of some was emotional there about. So, is this how I will be operating? Or is this how my job will be for the rest of my life? So many decisions that I took this? How are we handling things irrespective of different race?

P8 reported:

Okay, felt proud to be putting on my uniform for the first time. And I felt a sense of responsibility to serve my country and protect its people. I felt a great sense of pride in my accomplishment and irresponsibility to continue serving my country to the best of my ability. So, I felt a strong connection to the other service members and serve them as my brothers and sisters.

P16 had a similar response:

I was proud of my uniform when I was a, when I first put it on as a butter bar. Because I felt like I finally made it, I did something that I always talked about doing. But that was the first time that I actually completed a task that I set my

mind to and was actually going to influence or make me a better person. So, I was, I was extremely excited for that.

Theme 1 is essential as it shows that servicemembers were willing to stick with the military for at least one enlistment period and some, for many years. Out of the 16 participants, only three had left the military after serving in the Army. Participants represented each Military Branch except for the Coast Guard. One participant served for only two years before separating, another for three years, and one retired after 11 years of service.

The subthemes that emerged showed that participants felt a strong sense of duty to the country and were fiercely passionate about serving. When discussing putting their military uniform on for the first time, each participant reported feeling happy, excited, and accomplished. The uniform gave them a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

Emergent Theme 2

Theme 2 aligns with the research question and describes participants' reports of experiencing racism in the form of racial comments, slurs, and discriminatory jokes. Theme 2 focuses on the Black servicemember's lived experience with racism. Every participant reported that they had experienced some form of racism during their time in the military (see Table 3).

Table 3*Meaning Units and Emergent Theme 2*

| Meaning Units | Theme 2 |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Reporting the experience was not helpful | Discrimination in jobs, treatment |
| Being told they have an aggressive or scary nature | Racial comments/Jokes in training |
| Officer side is very political and extremely racist | Fear of retaliation |

Many participants reported that they had been told they came off as scary or aggressive.

P2 stated:

So, so I've been told, always been aggressive in trying to respond to issues, any issue that any issue that has to do with a white and a black, I need to come up with so many things, because I see discrimination to be part of the military, it is historic in nature.

P7 stated that she was told she was aggressive by a superior:

One officer told me I was aggressive. Well, I think I think she did that because I was black. Because I know I'm very nice person. I don't. I don't. I'm not aggressive at all. But I think she actually said that because I'm black. But that wasn't a challenge for me. I still had to carry on.

P8 reported:

Okay, my experience as a black service member has been challenging. Despite my hard-working dedication to my military service, externally experience racism from my peers and superiors. So, this has been a difficult thing to face. But it has also made me strong and has taught how to confront racism in constructive ways.

Participants were asked if they had ever questioned if their comrades would risk their lives for them; some participants stated that they had questioned their comrade's intentions, while others were adamant that their comrades would save them because it was part of being in the military. P15 stated:

During the training period, how should they put it, use me as an example for people to struggle because I'm black? I think when it comes to that, yeah, they won't; they will not risk their lives for me or anything because it's like everyone for themselves.

P16 recalled a time she was deployed and feared she would not make it home and alluded to a possible sexual assault as well:

Yes. So actually, on my first deployment, I had an incident with my senior officer, where eventually he got kicked out for what he did. But I didn't think I was gonna come home after that, after my first deployment because of that. And I didn't say anything because I didn't want to not come home. And he did the same thing to another young lady out there. She was one who came forward, also a black female, and they dragged her through the mud. So, I knew that the only reason my situation came up was because she said something. And then I got pushed forward to another location out in Afghanistan after it. And I know it was just because they didn't want our presence there.

Other participants felt that sacrificing one's life for their comrade was a part of being in the military. P2 professed:

We believe that risk of life is also, we've signed an agreement, and we know what we are going into. So, it's part of us. So, we are not, we are not surprised. And of all those other stuff. I can risk my life to someone, someone can risk their live to me. Yeah, we are in the military.

P3 reported:

Um, no, yeah, totally, absolutely know that. Being in a military theater, we played a role. We always watching each other backs, always been there, because of during of our trainings. We have been given proper orientation, you know, though, you know, in the military, you're signed up for everything, you know, you know, that you sign up for that, to serve the military until maybe your retirement, you know, okay. So after, you know, we watch each other back, especially maybe when a guy in the warfront or anytime.

Some participants responded that they had never questioned their comrades while deployed and were adamant that their comrades would save them.

Each of the 16 participants responded that they had experienced racism while serving. P1 disclosed:

White folks say, made some racist statements stating that these guys are angry black fellows, always endorse us angry. White colleagues would just see us as trash, believe we, we, we, not equal, don't respect us, they don't respect our boundaries. Make us feel like we are less of people. We are less of our military officers; every little thing they try to see it as an infraction.

P2, who had a strong accent and sounded defeated, reported experiencing it with educational opportunities, unequal treatment compared to whites, and being sent to the front lines in combat. He stated:

I feel the racism. There is some is on the educational resource aspects; some we will likely be sidelined. And also, some, some kind of assignment that really needs to involve us so that we can learn a lot of things you have been sidelined. And that has really been a very big problem. So, majority of the black people are the ones that I really, I've been in, the one they always push forward, you know, when we are having a kind of combat issue there, they're just pushing us for us to just get the bullets like that. Without any kind of normal formalities of normal percentage of people that should be moving equal whites, and blacks should be equal in that. So, the stuff I always see is that, that, the black always like attaching to black when trying to do works. They don't always like attaching to whites because there is always a lot of issue. So, one may not die in a battleground, and you see a white person carrying the black; it's something that's rarely happened, but their black may always, be the always, may always, give you a shoulder for you to lean on. And also, you do early work together and connect together. Yeah. So that to you may likely be set up by whites over some combat issue. Yeah. But you can trust a black person, but to trust a white person because of historical racism that already occurred. It's, it's not really possible like that.

P2 disclosed:

So, there was one guy that used to bully me back then. He throw my things outside and tell me that I don't belong to be there, so room to go out and stay with all my colleagues, or I need to sleep outside.

P14 reported that the Code of Conduct kept him from losing control and stated: Everyone is a brother, and I quickly put myself into control. It was hard to let go. Someone made an aggressive or wrong statement towards me, and I could not fathom why he would have made such a statement; he, it was more like an abusive word. And that day, I really had it to my, to my neck. And I really wanted to, to do something crazy to him, but I cannot do that with my military uniform. I will put my code of conduct, so I had to let it go. It was a racist word that was said.

Subtheme 1

Participants reported they had some expectations of the military. P12 stated: Before I went to the military, I personally felt it was gonna be a fun feel, you know? You get to just live some kind of way. Maybe some lifestyle, you know, when I got there, it was quite different, to lay down certain things, and to meet and apply to discipline. That really swept me off. And not just that, to cope with my expectations, were really caught off.

P16 had other expectations:

I was expecting to travel, I was expecting to have a career where I could stay in shape, one that would allow me to be with my family. Something that will give me financially a better hold on life. So that's what I was expecting.

Emergent Theme 3

Black and African American service members experience discrimination with promotions (see Table 4).

Table 4

Meaning Units and Emergent Theme 3

| Meaning Units | Theme 2 |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Discrimination in both officer and enlisted promotions | Discriminations in promotions |
| Discrimination mainly in enlisted promotions | |

Most participants reported having witnessed or experienced discrimination with promotions, although P1, P2, P6, and P15 denied witnessing or experiencing discrimination in promotions. P2 stated:

I haven't witnessed that. Because I was promoted. After proper training and promotion to a corporal, Yeah. Of course, there are stages that discrimination is to come in. That's when you are trying to be from Lieutenant they're about. Yeah, discrimination do comes in here.

On the other hand, most participants reported they had been passed over for promotion or know of friends and colleagues. P16 reported seeing it mainly on the enlisted side:

Oh, yeah. Especially on the enlisted side. When I was a commander, if you weren't qualified on paper, I don't care what you look like, if you weren't qualified on paper, I was not going to sign your promotions. But for him, he wanted a certain look in his battalion. So, it just so happened that majority of our instructors are. So it wasn't that I was being racist. It was the fact that they were qualified.

And those that were not, were not right. So, he didn't appreciate the fact that I was giving these kudos to the black men instead of the typical white guy that he wanted to be the face of the battalion.

Emergent Theme 4

The research question identifies with emergent theme 4: Black and African American Service members reported that experiencing racism in the military has impacted their mental health (see Table 5).

Table 5

Meaning Units and Emergent Theme 4

| Meaning Units | Theme 2 |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Sought out counseling or attending counseling | Poor mental health due to racism |
| Anxiety is sky high | |
| Too much to handle | |

Each participant reported that racism had impacted their mental health in some way and impacted their perception of the military. P1 detailed his experience:

My perception of this military, it has made me feel like, um, this is not my place. I'm not supposed to be here. It has made me feel, um, bad. So sometimes we have to we have to go through a lot of pain, a lot of emotional or psychological pain as military officers.

P3 noted:

Yeah, you know, I would say that my mental health day, you know, regardless to racism, you know, has been something that has been disturbing me, a lot, because I still wondering why things like this do happen, and how it started, what really

make this happen? Like, so it's something that most of the times, you know, at my spare time, you know, I do try to see how I could just go for some counseling, you know, understand the reason for this.

P5 noted:

Well, sometimes I lost my self-esteem. Because sometimes I just do feel that I'm a weirdo. I'm good to be given a promotion in a position. But because of one of the things to do with racism, I'm not being given the opportunity to do it. Yeah.

Subtheme

P11 reported:

I actually separated and started my own business. I actually am having peace of mind in my business. So, I'm not experiencing any visual discrimination. So, I'm happy and relaxed. Thinking straight, my mental heads held stable. And I just hope that those who are there, do not experience what I experienced. thankful to you for actually doing this survey now. The survey for people with this kind of issues with racial discrimination and all I'm so happy whenever I see things about racial discriminations is actually makes me happy because we actually go through a lot as luck. Isn't it's not fair? Actually, I don't know if you've gone through it, or it's actually mentally draining. So, I'm very happy, So that's all.

P12 detailed her account of seeking therapy:

Back then, I was like, really heavy (sad). I don't think anybody would have gone far. I tried to, first it was really hectic. Yeah, I was, I was a little depressed. I had to visit, I had to visit a therapist twice or thrice a week, every different

appointment. I always had like, this motivation, motivational, motivational talks, playing for my phone every morning, because I was getting tired mentally. I just need something to keep me going. I also give myself mental and personal assurance, looking to myself and myself, do this, this is all we've always wanted. Then, one day, I sat down, and I'm like, this is what I wanted. But I wasn't planning on coming here to so far, have been hit to come over here to use my senses, or my mental health also pushed me out of the military. I was like, what else? Do you know, like this, try to invest in something else you like. That was when I decided to, like, look beyond military look beyond what I saw in the military aspect. And I went a lot of other things ventured into other things, and I really loved it. So, it was just how it was for me.

P16 noted about her mental health:

Um, it's terrible. I, my anxiety is through the roof. Like if it's a number I don't know, if it's a certain look from a certain individual, if it's a certain person that looks a certain way, I'm just, my anxiety is through the roof now because of the military.

Many participants reported that despite their experience, they set it aside to continue serving their country. Other participants noted that their experience made them more resilient, such as P2, who stated:

I would just say it contributes to my career positively because it helps me, for me to, to be steadfast. And all also for me to be on guard. Yes, does number one to

protect myself, but negatively, it's really affects me in a way that I see that there is no unity among us. And, and this has really been a very big issue.

P3 pointed out:

Um, you know, I don't really think it has change, though, you know, when it comes to this aspect of discrimination in, I feel, you know, I just see it as normal ways, you know, our normal ways of life of things that come into your life, we shouldn't need to, like amend the way you live, you know, and also try to strategize on how to cope with people. Because, you know, most of the issues that we have in our reserves are trustworthy within the people, and we don't really have to trust people a lot because of most times we don't really know what their mindset. How what the thing about if they think evil, all you need to do is just to be a sovereign for cause and what you know that you want to do and whatsoever why you think in order to help you achieve a certain goal alive.

P7 reported:

Okay. I could say my mental health here, It's, it's normal. I don't let those things get some pay. So, I just, just kick it off, even when it comes. I always try my best to be better talk to someone to make sure I'm alright. At the moment. Yeah, I will. I will just forget about it. Okay, so I can come on my job, right? Initially, I wasn't expecting racism. How it affects me because I am a very social person, and I like talking to everybody. But because of the, because of discrimination, I couldn't talk to people even if I want to talk to them, because they wouldn't want to really talk to me.

P8 responded similarly:

Experience of racism has influenced my career because I to say, I think that maybe I'm not supposed to be here. Still, I'm, still optimistic, but maybe someday these people go to choosing everything, black, berry, orange, so you can see that it almost impacted me negatively at the start. But as of right now, I'm used to it, everything was okay with me now.

Summary

This study centered on the research question: What are the lived experiences of Black and African American service members with racism while serving in the Armed Forces? This research question was answered through collecting data from semi-structured interviews, resulting in meaning units and overall themes that captured the essence of lived experiences from participants' perspectives. Themes showed that participants had served in the military for an average of 5 years, were subjected to racial slurs, jokes, and comments, experienced or witnessed discrimination with promotions, and had mental health due to racism, resulting in seeking counseling.

Throughout interviews, many participants described their experience with racism in the military as unfavorable; however, others reported these experiences made them more resilient. Most participants noted lack of change if they reported racial discrimination. They reported they did not or would not report their experiences due to fear of retaliation. They disclosed they would often talk to close superiors or each other about their experiences, and some participants said they were able to be promoted due to having a superior who was Black to speak up for them.

Not all participants perceived the phenomenon in the same way; however, there were enough similarities to determine connections between participants.

The process of breaking down participant narratives into meaning units to produce themes is used to capture generalized lived experiences involving the phenomenon in a succinct manner. Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017) noted thematic analysis is a reflective and continuous process to address the phenomenon.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of interpretations of findings and study limitations, along with an explanation of the theoretical foundation and a conclusion. I also describe implications for future research and social change recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore lived experiences of Black and African American service members with racism while serving in the military. This chapter includes interpretations of findings, implications, recommendations, and how this study can lead to positive social change.

Researching previous studies on racism in the military allowed for identifying the gap in literature at the start of this study. The descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design was best suited for addressing the research question. This chapter expounds on and the study's contributions to the field.

Interpretation of Findings

My findings revealed Black and African American service members still encounter racism in the military. Due to the nature of the military, occupational stressors include deployments, strenuous training, and combat demands (Flood & Keegan, 2022). This study acknowledges those inherent stressors but differentiates between demands of the military profession and racial stress that Black and African American service members may experience. Information from this phenomenological research study afforded a clear perspective of what Black and African American service members have experienced in the military. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 16 participants. Participants had served in the military for an average of 5 years, experienced some form of racism, including racial slurs, comments, and other aggressive actions, witnessed or experienced discrimination involving promotions, and faced mental health struggles as a result of perceived racial discrimination. Data saturation was reached with

these participants. Findings resulted in four emergent themes that stemmed from semi-structured interviews.

Participants reported excitement and joy when wearing the uniform; however, instances of discriminatory jokes and racial comments and slurs overshadowed their excitement. Participants reported witnessing or experiencing discrimination with promotions. Results also showed racism had negative impacts on participants' mental health, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety that led many to seek counseling or leave the military. Participants' recollections of their experience with racism exposed issues involving promotions, racial slurs and comments, and negative impacts on their psychological wellbeing. Results revealed that racial stress included being subjected to microaggressive comments, racial slurs, and biased treatment. Participants noted they were subjected to racist statements and slurs from non-Black colleagues. P1 stated, "White colleagues would just see us as trash, believe we are we not equal, don't respect us, they don't respect our boundaries, make us feel like we are less of people." P13 reported that during training, a White colleague threw his bed and belongings outside and told him that he did not belong there, and he should sleep outside. P5 believed he and other Black colleagues were discriminated against due to the color of their skin when it came to promotions. P11 stated, "I've experienced racism because it's only the Whites that was probably, are being given the promotion, but not the Blacks. The Blacks are not being given."

Participants reported their experiences of racism negatively impacted their mental health, with many reporting they sought mental health counseling or left the military. P13

served for 2 years before getting out and reported that her mental health was negative as a result of racial stress stemming from her experiences with racism while serving. P17 noted her anxiety is “through the roof,” while P8 reported she had “made peace with the fact that these people love making racist jokes.”

While this study is not inclusive of all Black and African American service members’ experiences in the military, these participants’ narratives provide information regarding experiences that may cause racial stress in addition to typical military stressors.

All participants were military service members who offered narratives of their experiences with racism while serving in the military. All participants had completed basic training and technical school and were actively working in their respective career fields. Participants had served in various military branches for at least 2 years, and the longest-serving participant had served for 17 years. All but three participants were actively serving in the military and planned to continue serving.

The first subtheme was that participants reported joining the military because they had a strong love and passion for their country, which gave them pride in serving. Other participants reported joining the military for better opportunities and to improve their financial standing. Some participants reported that they joined for educational opportunities.

The second subtheme was that participants reported feeling happy, excited, and a strong sense of accomplishment when wearing their uniforms.

Each participant reported feeling happy and excited when they first wore their uniform. Some participants reported feeling a sense of confidence and power and the

uniform gave them a feeling of belonging. Participants reported the uniform gave them distinction and they were proud of themselves for accomplishing their goals.

Participants reported they experienced some form of racism while serving in the military that included discriminatory jokes and racial comments as well as slurs.

All participants except P4, P5, P10, P12, and P15 explicitly mentioned experiencing discrimination in some form during their experiences as Black service members. Some participants noted they experienced discrimination during their training period, and others alluded to discrimination with promotions. Most participants said they could be themselves in the workplace and voice their opinions or concerns. Most participants reported they were told they were aggressive in some situations. P2 noted he was told he was too aggressive in response to racial discrimination. P10 reported he had not been told he was aggressive due to his conscious effort to be “very soft towards the Whites.” P13 stated he was told he was aggressive in response to being called a racial slur.

The subtheme for theme 2 was that the majority of the participants reported that they expected to receive fair and equal treatment along with an inclusive and fair working environment with positive interactions with co-workers. When asked what their expectation of the military was before joining, most participants reported that they expected to be treated fairly, work in an inclusive environment, and have positive interactions with their co-workers. Some participants expected to improve their living standards by joining the military and having educational opportunities.

The findings that aligned with the research question theme 3 yielded the third theme. All participants except P1, P2, P6, P14, and P15 reported that they had either experienced discrimination in promotions themselves, had witnessed, or were aware of a colleague who felt they were passed over a promotion due to their skin color. The results showed that perceived discrimination in promotions can be associated with racism as the participant felt they were mistreated based on their ethnic or racial background. The results further highlighted the perception of systemic racism against Black and African American service members that has historically existed within the military structure, with some participants feeling that promotional decisions were made or influenced by biased evaluations of them or their work ethic.

In a report on Army promotions, Lytell et al. (2023) reported that some interviewees suggested that direct superiors and commanders' decisions may be affected by unconscious or implicit bias of ethnic minority soldiers' competence and characteristics that affected rates of promotion and career progression compared to non-ethnic minorities. Lytell et al. (2023) noted that in August 2020, the Army suspended the requirement of submitting official photos and demographic identifiers, such as race, gender, or ethnicity, for promotion boards, which seems to show improved promotion outcomes for Army officers. P16 stated that she often saw promotion discrimination happen on the Enlisted side and noted that when she was a Commander, she took the opportunity to promote those who deserved it and met the requirements regardless of their skin color. P12 reported that she was due for promotion, met all the requirements, and was fairly senior to the other girl, who had recently arrived at the unit and was

promoted instead of her. P12 perceived the missed promotion as discriminatory because she felt there was no logical explanation for her not being promoted. While many participants reported experiencing or witnessing promotion discrimination, they did not report their concerns as they felt nothing would be done. An Air Force Independent Racial Disparity Report (2020) showed that 40% of respondents did not trust that their chain of command would address incidents of racism or unequal opportunities.

Depression is the most commonly reported impact of racism, according to Schouler-Ocak et al. (2021), and was most often mentioned by the participants as something they suffered from after their encounters with racism and racial discrimination. Only two participants, P4 and P11, stated that they would consider their mental health good. Some participants reported that their mental health has improved after seeking counseling for some time. P14 reported that her mental health significantly improved once she separated from the military after having served for two years. P16 is retired from the military after serving for 11 years but reports that her anxiety levels are “through the roof” because of her experience in the military. She also reports being concerned about raising her bi-racial child in a military environment and not wanting him to experience what she experienced.

The subtheme showed that despite negative experiences with racism, many participants are resilient and hold onto the belief that continuing to serve is the right thing to do. Although their experience with racism in the military has negatively impacted their psychological well-being, most participants reported that their experience has made them stronger. Participants noted that being in the military was their goal. P2 reported that they

adapt to the situation they are in, try to have a superior or someone they can talk to, and allow their experience to help them remain steadfast in their goals. P7 noted that even when racial discrimination bothers her, she “pushes it aside” to keep moving forward because she sets a goal for herself. P8 reported that his experience with racism in the military made him feel like he was not supposed to be there, but he remains optimistic that things will change.

The results showed that Black and African American service members continue to experience racism in the military, regardless of their rank, years of service, or branch of the military.

Theoretical Foundation

CRT

The foundation of this study was based on the critical race theory and the theory of Race-Based Traumatic Stress, which effectively addressed the research question. Delgado and Stefancic (2023) noted that due to “ordinariness,” racism is challenging to cure or address because it is not acknowledged. Interest convergence is the second tenet of CRT. It is based on the concept that because racism is beneficial for the advancement of both white elites and working-class whites, there is no real drive or incentive to eradicate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

The third tenet of CRT is that race is socially constructed and is not objective, fixed, biological, or genetically inherent (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Delgado and Stefancic (2023) posited that while people with common geographical origins often share similar physical traits, such as hair texture, skin color, or physique, this does not

constitute increased intelligence, morals, or status above or beneath another “race.” It is further noted that society uses “race” to manipulate, invent, or retire when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

The military is one of many institutions that racism has permeated, and Schouler-Ocak et al. (2021) suggested that institutional racism can be seen in overt and covert policies and practices designed to reinforce racial disparity. Some of these policies were outlined in Chapter 2 regarding the recruitment and treatment of African Americans in the military, and Chapter 3 discussed modern policies regarding dress and appearance standards that specifically addressed African American hairstyles, along with Confederate statues at prominent bases and bases named after Confederate generals.

The last element of CRT is the notion that African Americans and other minorities have a unique relationship with oppression that their white counterparts might know or comprehend, thus giving a voice of competence that presumably allows minorities to speak on racism and race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

This study’s participants’ narratives supported using CRT as a theoretical foundation.

RBTS

According to Polanco-Roman et al. (2016), race-based traumatic stress theory or RBTS, developed by Carter (2007), posited that racial and ethnic minorities may suffer psychological trauma as a result of experiencing a racially traumatic event with responses similar to PTSD. The more occurrences of racial discrimination incidents that an individual experiences, the greater the impact is on their mental health (Polanco-Roman

et al., 2016). Carter (2007) suggested that racially discriminatory events could be perceived as a threat to the individual's safety, thus causing harm to one's physical and psychological well-being.

According to RBTS theory, increased instances of racial and ethnic discrimination within institutional settings are linked to amplified stress sensitivity (Polanco-Roman et al., 2019). Each of the 16 participants responded that they had experienced some form of racism while serving in the military, and that experience impacted them in some way. Some participants reported seeking counseling to help them cope with their experiences. In contrast, others reported that their experience with racism motivated them to keep fighting to reach their goals and not let it get them down.

This study's participants' narratives were supported using RBTS as an additional theoretical foundation.

Limitations of the Study

This study offered a comprehensive description of the lived experiences of Black and African American service members experiencing racism while serving in the military. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to validate their experience with racism through their lens.

This study focused solely on the lived experience of Black and African American service members, therefore limiting the ability to generalize the findings and apply them to other races or those not serving in the military. These limitations may present some concerns regarding the sample size and target population; however, the goal of the

sample size is governed by the richness of the data, examination complexity, time constraints, and data delivery (Creswell, 2014).

Participant's narratives were taken at face-value and there is no way to verify the truthfulness of their statements. An additional limitation is that based on their perspective of the phenomenon and what they consider a racial encounter, participant experiences differ, which may impact future research endeavors as these factors can affect the individual experience.

Due to the nature of this study, there is the potential for social desirability bias, which happens when a participant adjusts or presents their reality in a manner which they perceive to be more socially acceptable than their true reality (Bergen & Labonte, 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

Qualitative research invokes perceived paradigms based on the phenomenon and the resulting identifiable themes. The final sample size was determined by the fulfillment of reaching data saturation, which resulted in 16 participants. As the data was analyzed, meaning units emerged that were used to identify the emergent themes based on participants' narratives.

This research fills a gap in research on the lived experience of Black and African American service members experience with racism while serving in the military. While the target population for this study was restricted to Black and African American service members, another enlightening study could view this phenomenon from the perspective of other minorities in the military, minorities in a single branch, minority women,

minority men, officers, enlisted, law enforcement agencies, and institutions of higher learning.

Veterans Affairs offers compensation for disability ratings to Veterans who were injured or got sick while serving in the military, who developed or exacerbated physical conditions, and those suffering from mental health conditions (Veterans Affairs, n.d.). Due to the psychological impact of experiencing racism in the military, a recommendation is for Veterans Affairs to establish a disability rating for minorities experiencing racism while serving in the military. Research has shown and continues to show that racism negatively impacts the psychological well-being of those who experience it, whether directly or indirectly. A Veteran Affairs disability rating for racism would offer validation of the service member's experience while acknowledging that racism continues to be a persistent problem in the military.

A final recommendation is to develop targeted mental health programs and treatments for qualified mental health professionals to use with Black and African American service members. With proper training, mental health professionals, military organizations, law enforcement agencies, and other institutions would be able to effectively address the psychological impact of experiencing racism.

These research findings are recommended as a foundation and instrument to drive social change within the military and mental health arenas. Additional research could clarify the variables and considerations that drive participants' perceptions of a specific phenomenon that may provide a holistic understanding of the influences on organizational effectiveness in the military. Future research can examine the

psychological impact of experiencing racism in the military on female service members, male service members, and other ethnic minorities. Additionally, future research can investigate racial discrimination in specific military career fields, such as military police, intelligence, special forces, pilots, and medical career fields.

Implications for Social Change

This study substantiated the assumption that racism continued to be a persistent problem in modern-day military organizations and was revealed by the lived experiences of Black and African American service members. Exploring the psychological effects of racism on Black and African American service members afforded insight into the complexities of navigating the military culture, discrimination within that culture, and personal identity as a minority. This study on racism in the military was crucial to understanding the pervasive impact that racism has on Black and African American service members' psychological well-being and mission readiness. The findings showed that to foster an environment free from racism and discrimination; there is a considerable amount of work to be done. The results identified that it is imperative for the military to embody a culture of respect and dignity that supports minority personnel experiencing racism, as the lack of support negatively impacts operational effectiveness.

The findings also indicated that Black and African American service members remain marginalized in many aspects of military service regardless of the branch they serve in. Recognizing, acknowledging, and effectively addressing racism in the military and its psychological impact is the path toward positive social change. The insights gained from this study can be a roadmap for developing mental health programs that

effectively address the psychological trauma of racial discrimination. The results revealed that there is a need for the development and implementation of targeted policies aimed at addressing systemic racism that focus on inclusiveness, revising promotion practices, and enforcing effective disciplinary actions.

The participants' and others' experiences of racism and discrimination within the military may be due to a lack of knowledge; therefore, education is imperative. The historical timeline of African Americans' struggles with racism in the military and the arduous task of overcoming opposition discussed in Chapter 2 should be taught as a mandatory requirement for all service members, from the top leadership to the newest trainee in all levels of Professional Military Education (PME), Basic Military Training (BMT), and technical school training.

Lastly, a plan should be implemented, at least annually, to identify service members who have affiliations with extremist, white supremacist, and other terroristic organizations. Once identified, these members should be provided with education and training on why their affiliations are misaligned with the goals and objectives of the military. Based on the findings, it appears that racism undermines unit cohesion, morale, and mission effectiveness; therefore, addressing systemic racism within the military is essential for operational effectiveness.

Future research can expound on this study by exploring the psychological impact of racism and sexism among minority female service members in government or law enforcement agencies. Additional research can determine if there is a relationship between ethnic minority status and court-martial outcomes and if they vary between the

military branches. Conducting a longitudinal study on service members throughout their military career can offer insights into the long-term effects of experiencing racism on their career, mental health, and overall well-being. Furthermore, research can explore the interconnectedness of racism and other forms of discrimination for servicemembers, government employees, and law enforcement officials who additionally experience sexism or homophobia to understand better how individuals in multi-marginalized identities navigate and cope with these challenges.

Investigating the organizational factors that either mitigate or perpetuate racism within the military, Department of Defense, and law enforcement agencies can provide insights into how leadership practices, organizational policies, practices, and culture either perpetuate or diminish racism in these institutions. Lastly, further research could examine the effectiveness of implemented Diversity and Inclusion initiatives on the behaviors, attitudes, and organizational culture within military, law enforcement, and government institutions.

Based on this research, some policy changes for legislators to consider include developing or readdressing zero-tolerance policies for discrimination, which include clear, concise, and strict consequences for offenders ranging from disciplinary actions up to dismissal from the service. Implementing and mandating annual training on racial discrimination, racism, implicit bias, subconscious biases, and prejudices should be required for all military personnel to complete.

Additionally, many participants disclosed that they did not report their experiences due to the belief that nothing would be done. Therefore, it is necessary to

revamp or develop supportive reporting procedures that ensure the confidentiality of the reporter, with parameters in place to protect them from retaliation and effectively address the complaint with tangible outcomes for both the offender and the complainant.

Participants discussed the lack of diverse representation in leadership, which they felt impacted promotions for them, with some participants stating that even when there was diverse representation, the leader was often undermined. To address this problem and enhance operational effectiveness, implementing initiatives that promote recruiting and retaining diverse leaders is important, as different perspectives and experiences offer innovative problem-solving strategies that can address complex military operations. The findings also showed that when service members had leaders who looked like them and shared similar experiences, they felt valued and validated and were more motivated to continue their military career because they had a role model and mentor who helped cultivate them as future leaders.

Conclusion

As a positive social change scholar, it was necessary to highlight the prevalence of discrimination and racism in the present-day military and the impact it has on Black and African American service members. This research was conducted with 16 participants using semi-structured interviews that allowed them to offer a first-hand account of their lived experience with racism while serving in the military. Participants shared their encounters with discriminatory practices in promotions, racial comments and slurs, and mental health struggles because of their experience.

The narratives from each participant resulted in four emergent themes to generalize the participants' experiences. These themes were: a) The majority of participants have served in the military for five or more years (b) Participants reported that they experienced some form of racism while serving in the military that included discriminatory jokes and racial comments/slurs (c) Many participants reported witnessing or experiencing discrimination with promotions (d) Participants reported experiencing racism in the military has negatively impacted their mental health. The findings of this phenomenological study helped fill the research gap in previous studies on racism and discrimination in the military. They can contribute to enhancing and implementing strategies that promote positive social change for Black and African American service members along with other minorities in the military. Additionally, the findings and implications from this study can extend beyond the military to be used for broader societal efforts in combatting racism.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you very much for participating in this interview. As a service member, sharing your experiences with racism in the military may be a sensitive topic to discuss. Please note that all of your information will remain confidential, and the researcher will only use the answers for research purposes. For your participation in this research, you will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.

1. What influenced your decision to join the military?
2. What were your expectations of the military when you joined?
3. How long have you served?
 - a. What Branch do you serve in?
4. When you put on your uniform for the first time, what did you feel?
 - a. Do you feel a strong sense of devotion to your country?
5. What has been your experience as a Black service member?
 - a. Do you feel that you can be yourself and express your feelings or voice your concerns in the workplace?
 - b. Have you ever been told you were “too aggressive” or came off as “scary”?
 - c. If you were deployed, have you ever questioned if your comrades would risk their lives for you?
6. Have you experienced racism while serving?
 - a. Can you elaborate on that experience?

- b. Did you report your experience, and what was the outcome?
 - c. Has your perception of the military changed because of your experience?
7. Have you witnessed or experienced discrimination with promotions?
 8. How have experiences of racism influenced your career?
 9. How would you describe your mental health today?
 - a. Do you feel that you have had an opportunity to move past the racial trauma sustained?
 10. In what ways has racism affected your mental health?
 - a. What are your thoughts on Veteran Affairs establishing a disability rating specific to race-based traumatic stress?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Interview study seeks Black or African American service members

There is a new study about the experiences of Black and African American service members who experienced racism while serving in the military that could help military leaders and counselors better understand and help Black and African American military members. For this study, you are invited to describe your experience with racism in the military.

About the study:

- One 45–60-minute phone interview that will be audio recorded (no videorecording)
- You would receive a \$10 Amazon gift card as a thank-you
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Identify as Black or African American
- Currently serving or previously served in any Branch of the military
- Be of any rank and served at least one year in the military