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Army Medics With College Degrees Who Transitioned to Civilian Life

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2015

Abstract

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MPA, Kaplan University, 2012

BS, Kaplan University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Few colleges and universities have adopted the practice to provide credits for the majority of undergraduate coursework for military career training. Easing the transition from military to civilian life has become a priority for the Department of Defense, yet there is a significant gap in empirical knowledge regarding the potential benefits of a college degree on soldiers exiting the military. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Army Medics who have transitioned back into civilian life after graduating from a college degree program that grants significant credit for military training. This phenomenological study used a conceptual framework derived from Schlossberg's adult transition theory. Data were collected from a focus group, semi-structured interviews, and interviewer notes. Seven participants were identified through purposive sampling. Interview transcripts and interviewer notes were analyzed using the Van Kaam method and yielded 4 pre-transition and 6 transitional themes. Findings indicated that the participants' initial fears of the transition were replaced with higher perceptions of self-worth and confidence, which benefitted them as they assimilated back into civilian society. The implications for positive social change include informing the Department of Defense and policymakers who are supporting soldiers transitioning to civilian life about study participants' increased feelings of self-worth and confidence upon degree completion.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my wife Pia and my daughter Sidney, whose support over the last three years has been unwavering. While the journey seemed long, their efforts to see me through to the end are the reason I've arrived at this point.

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While there are many instrumental people who influenced my journey, I would like to recognize those who challenged me the most; the educators. They did so by challenging my thoughts and beliefs, and by making me look for answers even though I believed I knew them already. You will forever be remembered by your students as teaching the *hard* classes, but your impact lasts a lifetime. Your rewards are few, but know that your efforts resonate in the scholar-practitioners that your students become.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The number of U.S. military members transitioning back into civilian society between 2010 and 2020 is estimated to total nearly two million (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Helmer, 2011). The difficulty of this transition has been compounded by unsettling economic conditions in the United States. Employment concerns make up the most common theme identified by soldiers as their greatest hindrance to an easy transition back into civilian society (Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). In the increasingly competitive U.S. job market, having a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation among civilian employers (Caumont, 2014; Michigan State University, 2014).

A handful of colleges and universities have adopted a paradigm shift on curriculum design that provides credits to active duty and veterans for the bulk of undergraduate coursework based on military career training. A significant gap in empirical understanding surrounds the feelings and perceptions that having a college degree has on soldiers making the transition from active duty to civilian life. This study promotes positive social change by creating a greater understanding of these new programs that have a strong potential to be used to ease the transition for those in the future.

In Chapter 1, I outlined the background of the study, delivering a brief summation of pertinent literature, before moving to the problem and purpose statements. I then identified the research questions, theoretical background of the study, the nature of the

study and opportunity to effect positive social change. I concluded Chapter 1 with a summary and transition to Chapter 2.

Background of the Study

As the number of U.S. military members making the transition from active duty military service to civilian life soars, both the economic and social perspective of the transition have become a great concern (Helmer, 2011). The current political climate in the U.S. has the Global War on Terror (GWOT) winding down in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The result of the shift in policy from *boots-on-the-ground* to one engaging in dedicated, long distance airstrikes to maintain control, means that the military – all branches – must reduce the level of forces currently maintained. The number of soldiers that will make the transition from military service to civilian life is estimated at over two million between 2010 and 2020, and will primarily be drawn from the enlisted ranks (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Helmer, 2011). The men and women who serve in the military represent a figure that is less than 1% of the total population of the United States (Plach, 2009). As such, lived experiences of the population of individuals who serve on active duty differ dramatically from those of the civilian population ("Common Challenges," n.d.). Rubin et al. (2013) maintained that, within civilian society, the *individual* is the central point of focus. Personal effort and accomplishments, according to Rubin et al. (2013), are rewarded within family, scholastic, social, and work environments. These concepts contrast sharply with the typical belief structures of a soldier. Regardless of branch of service, military members generally share commonality in central beliefs that include "honor, courage, loyalty, and commitment" that transcends

the era in which the individual served (Rubin et al., 2013, p. 23). U.S. military members do not live in isolation, however, and those who join the military, regardless of age, bring with them the value-sets developed within the civilian society from which they came. These values quickly morph into those associated with the military and the branch of service from which the individual enters (Paniagua & Yamada, 2013). Core beliefs serve as the foundation for military emphasis which focuses on the *group*, rather than the individual. Unlike civilian society where people strive for individual success and accolades in almost all aspects of life, soldiers strongly value *duty* and *mission*. Individual achievements are highly regarded by the military, but these regards center on the contribution that the actions have on the unit as a whole (Paniagua & Yamada, 2013).

Attempts to increase knowledge of the transition from military to civilian life has become a point of focus for the Department of Defense (DOD). The Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011, also referred to as the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, made it mandatory for all transitioning service members to participate in Department of Labor, VA, and preseparation counseling, regardless of branch of service ("VA TAP," 2011). This act created a more structured, mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP) than previously existed, with all soldiers being required to complete the program before leaving the service. TAP standardized the curriculum being delivered by each branch of the military and brought order to existing programs. Each branch of the military now delivers specific information designed to make the transition back into civilian life easier for the soldier. The Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard each delivers the TAP program under branch-specific name:

- the Army Career and Alumni Program,
- the Air force Transition Assistance Program,
- the Fleet and Family Support Center (Navy),
- the Career Resource Management Center/Transition and Employment Assistance Center (Marines), and the
- Worklife Division Transition Assistance (Coast Guard).

Each of these programs conforms to the auspices of the TAP program curriculum outlined in Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011.

Prior to the roll-out of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, MacLean and Elder (2007) examined TAP's delivery of information surrounding transition services available to departing service-members. This pre-regulation evaluation concluded that increasing the soldier's knowledge of assistance programs available to them had a positive impact on the transition, but noted a disconnect in the delivery of information that caused many transitioning soldiers to fail to receive or comprehend the data (MacLean & Elder, 2007).

Prudential (2012) conducted a post VOW Act study that examined how understanding that increased information made the transition easier for military members. This study used three Veteran's Employment Challenges Survey to access 2,453 veterans and was designed to identify the single most important challenge to making the transition as seamless as could be (Prudential, 2012). The ultimate conclusion of the study was that difficulty finding a job, overall unemployment, a poor delivery of resources designed to help transitioning veterans, and the significantly different lived experiences that separate military from civilian culture were the most significant barriers to the transitioning

soldier (Prudential, 2012). As a result, the study concluded that the newly designed TAP program was not effectively delivering transition resource guidance to soldiers.

Employment concerns are the theme most identified by soldiers as being the greatest hindrance to an easy transition to civilian life (Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). The economic climate has shifted radically since the beginning of the Global War on Terror began in 2001. The US economy moved from one of prosperity at the beginning of this conflict, to one in recession, forcing more competition for civilian jobs that now typically pay less than prior to the economic downturn (Phillips, Braud, Andrews, & Bullock, 2007). This competitive civilian environment exists in sharp contrast to the collaborative military environment that soldiers are accustomed to ("Common Challenges," n.d.). However, Morin (2011) and Taylor et al. (2011) separately determined that the possession of a college degree reduced the fears associated with employment and eased the overall transition for the soldier. Findings revealed that commissioned officers and those who had graduated from college faced an easier period of readjustment than those in possession of a high school diploma (Morin, 2011). In an increasingly competitive U.S. job market, having a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation of civilian employers (Caumont, 2014; Michigan State University, 2014).

Education, in one form or another, has been repeatedly identified as a positive factor in easing the transition from the military to civilian life. This benefit is stated in the current VA Mental Health Pamphlet (n.d.), the Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011, MacLean and Elder (2007), Veterans Employment Challenges ("Veteran's Employment Challenges," 2013), and Morin (2011). The correlation between education

and employment is especially significant because employment has also been identified as the dominant pain point in the transition of the military member back into civilian society (MacLean & Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; "Veteran's Employment Challenges," 2013). One of the most significant factors in the overall success of each returning veteran is gaining meaningful employment, because it affects not only the income generated within the household, but also positively impacts the "physical and psychological health of these veterans and their families" (Wishnie, Cuthbert, Eimers, Lim, & Nadler, 2013, p. 1). The failure of federal, state, and local authorities to recognize and credit military training and experience has forced many veterans to engage in months or years of repetitive training in order to acquire needed licensing or accepted credentials like college degrees (Wishnie et al., 2013).

The importance that education plays in an individual's life and employment opportunity has been recognized by the Department of Defense. Each military branch of service has a Tuition Assistance (TA) Program in place which, for active duty military members, pays 100% of "voluntary higher education courses taken during off-duty hours in support of professional and personal self-development goals" ("Armed Forces Tuition Assistance," 2014). Active duty personnel and veterans may also qualify for either the Montgomery GI Bill, the post 9/11 GI Bill, or a combination of both, which are designed to pay for technical training, postsecondary education and additional expenses associated with them ("Student Financial Aid Services," 2014). These programs and legislation are designed to provide veterans with opportunities to gain knowledge and increase their quality of life as a result.

The DOD is currently the largest provider of adult education in the United States (Persyn & Paulson, 2012). Current military training embodies all aspects of modern learning techniques currently being utilized at civilian based postsecondary institutions Persyn & Paulson, 2012). No correlation has been made between the actual training delivered and that delivered in postsecondary institutions, but the use of the same teaching methodologies offers a learning environment that is consistent between the two entities. As a veteran, I learned that training within the military is initially focused on teaching the new soldier a specific skill and is segmented into different career fields within each service. The Army refers to career training as Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). Each MOS is assigned to designate a specific job being performed (i.e. MOS 68W = combat medic, 31B = military police, 11B = combat arms).

Many postsecondary institutions, both for-profit and nonprofit, offer military students the opportunity to have their military transcripts reviewed for potential credit towards a degree. This credit, however, is typically applied to the elective requirements instead of being used for major coursework, leaving the bulk of a military student's major requirements unfulfilled ("ACE," 2014). This practice began shortly after the conclusion of WWII with the inception of the American Council on Education (ACE: Tyler, 1944). While recognizing the potential for military education to transition to postsecondary credit, there was no initial determination on a best means of accomplishing this. From the inception of these credit programs, however, no identification of career field training (e.g. medical training, mechanical training) was designed or implemented. This has historically meant that any credit awarded would need to be included as an elective

credit. A veteran completing 3 months of military training as a plumber, for example, can effectively be awarded the same minimal amount of credits as an individual who trained for over a year to be a as a surgical technician.

The U.S. military has significantly advanced its instructional delivery and methodology to align them with their civilian counterparts (Persyn & Poulson, 2012). However, civilian colleges and universities have failed to recognize and validate learning that occurs outside of their collegiate walls and maintained transfer policies that limit or reduce earned credit from qualified sources (Smith, 2010). This study examines a program at a for-profit university that created a specialized degree for Army medics that mapped course requirements to match the 68W MOS.

This curriculum of this degree represents a significant paradigm shift because it incorporates military training not just for elective credit, but also as the bulk of major coursework. As a result of this granting of credit, as few as five general education classes are needed to complete the undergraduate degree. This radical change in curriculum design allows military members to complete coursework entirely online and earn the degree at an accelerated pace. The model has proven to be effective and the paradigm shift is now making the way into state sponsored nonprofit community colleges ("College Credit," 2014). At the time of this study, almost five hundred students have graduated from the program originally introduced by the for profit university and some have made the transition back to civilian life. Because this customized degree designed specifically for army medics was initially offered in late 2012, no empirical study has been completed to detail changes in these veteran’s perceptions of the impact that graduation had on their

transition back into civilian life. As a result, a significant gap in understanding currently exists.

Problem Statement

The transition from military service to civilian life has proven to be difficult for many making the journey. While the Global War on Terror continues, the United States is currently drawing down actions in Iraq and Afghanistan and as a result, the U.S. military has been tasked with reducing the overall amount of personnel contained within each branch of service (Helmer, 2011). Over two million American military members, consisting mainly of enlisted soldiers, comprised the forces used in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, in 2003 (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Helmer, 2011). The men and women who served in the military have been exposed to, and part of, a distinctly unique culture which less than 1% of the American population has participated in (Plach, 2009). As a result, the lived experiences that they have been exposed to differ radically from the general population.

The Department of Defense (DOD) spends a significant amount of time and money training soldiers for war, but little of these efforts or funding are geared to prepare these individuals for the eventual reintegration back into civilian life ("James Madison University," 2014). Many military members encounter great difficulty with the transition back into civilian life. While the negative effects of this transition have been studied from the perspective impact of the economy, which shifted from active and flourishing to a time of decline (Phillips, Braud, Andrews, & Bullock, 2007), posttraumatic stress disorder, mild traumatic brain injury and depression (Eisen, Schultz, Vogt, Glickman,

Elwy, Drainoni, Isei-Bonsu, & Martin, 2012), and alcohol abuse (Bohnert, Bossarte, Britton, Chermack, & Blow, 2012), little is known of the effect that being a college graduate has on this reentry into civilian life. Morin (2011) identified that veterans who had earned a college degree had an easier time transitioning back into civilian society. One for-profit university has significantly reduced the time and expense needed for some specific Army Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) to earn a degree while serving on active duty. Focusing on the specialized training received by Army Medics as the major coursework, the university constructed an associate level degree that typically requires the completion of only five general education classes to earn. Because using (MOS) training as the major coursework for a degree has not been done prior, little is known of its impact on active duty graduate's feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts. This study represents an exploration of these feelings and perceptions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army medics who have graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training prior to leaving active duty. Interviews via phone and video conference were conducted on seven participants who graduated from a specialized program and then transitioned out of military service and back into civilian life. Participants were of varying rank,

demographic backgrounds, and geographic locations with the purpose of gathering data relevant to this study.

Research Questions

This qualitative study incorporated the phenomenological method to seek answers to the following questions:

Primary Research Question

- Q1. What changes occurred in the medic's feelings and perceptions after graduating from the specialized degree program and transitioning back to civilian life?

Secondary Research Questions

- Q2. How did the veteran perceive the level of impact that possession of a college degree had on their transition to civilian life?
- Q3. How did the veteran's feelings of self-worth and equality among civilian peers evolve after graduating from the specialized degree program?
- Q4. How were perceptions of the importance education in one's life altered as a result of the experience?

The primary research question and secondary research questions listed above relate to the single phenomenon and demonstrate a clear-cut relationship to the problem statement and the methodology of the study (Maxwell, 2013). The flow from the problem statement to the research questions remains consistent with the qualitative problem and the methodology that was used within the study.

Theoretical Framework and the Use of Theory

In qualitative research, a theoretical framework provides a means of adding additional structure needed to the research being conducted (Maxwell, 2013). During this study I incorporated constructivism as the worldview to engage the issue and accompanying the phenomenological method. Social constructivists maintain that learning is the product of life experience and previous learning (Crotty, 1998). Moustakas (1994) viewed the use of social constructivism as an integral platform for attaining a greater understanding of experiences described by individuals. As such, used a constructivist worldview or paradigm along with the phenomenological method in order to accurately describe the lived experience (Mirriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994) of Army Medics that have graduated from a specialized postsecondary degree and transitioned from military service to the civilian world.

The use of additional existing theories further adds to the structure, and facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. One of the earliest definitions of a theory was provided by Hempel (1952) who maintained that theory is a network in which "system" and "observation," governed by the "rules of interpretation," provide an apparatus for understanding (p. 36). Simply put, theory is best represented as an explanation. This is further substantiated by Leedy and Ormond (2005) who add that "a theory is an organized body of concepts and principles intended to explain a particular phenomenon" (p. 4).

Schlossberg's (1984) adult transition theory was used to ultimately arrive at the essence of feelings and perceptions associated with transition from active duty to civilian

life (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Transitions, for the purposes of this study, are centered on the journey made by the Army Medic to shift from military service to civilian society. This theory provided a structured means of discovery in three key areas of the transition; *moving-in, moving-through,* and *moving-out*, and most importantly, provides a platform for understanding individual feelings and perceptions associated with each phase (Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989). Of critical importance is that knowledge that change does not define transition, but amounts to the constructs of a person as they move through the event (Goldman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 33). Data was collected and analyzed under the auspices outlined within this theory.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative Phenomenological Research

Because the study centers on gaining a better understanding of feelings and perceptions rather than more tangible or measurable items, a qualitative approach that employs the phenomenological method will be employed. A philosophical perspective or worldview orients the work and provides an additional layer of needed structure to the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The social constructivist worldview provides additional structure to phenomenological methodology, and properly aligns with the "conception or model" referred to by Maxwell as the conceptual framework of the study, which is discussed later in detail (2013, p. 39). Social constructivists maintain that learning is the product of life experience and previous learning (Crotty, 1998). Social constructivism brings with it three central assumptions; meanings are formulated by people as then encounter aspects of the world in which they exist, social and historical perspectives

allow human beings to assign meaning to specific items or events, and any meaning assigned is always social, or originating from interaction with others (Crotty, 1998). As such, I intend to engage a constructivist worldview or paradigm along with the phenomenological method in order to describe the lived experience of Army Medics that have graduated from a specialized postsecondary degree and transitioned from military service to the civilian world (Mirriam, 1998).

The phenomenological method is designed to allow the researcher to better understand the "essence" of the shared experience of those that encounter a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 60). The assumptions of social constructivism coupled with the philosophical orientation associated with interpretivism provide the structure that is incorporated into the phenomenological method. For example, open-ended questions allow the researcher to probe the lived experience (Crotty, 1998, p. 53). Interpretations are derived by the qualitative researcher that has immersed themselves within the issue. These interpretations identify the meanings that individuals have assigned as a result of interacting with others. This perspective aligns the research to the underlying phenomenon.

Definition of Terms

Active Duty: Soldiers on active duty are serving full time and are comprised of two groups – enlisted and officer personnel. Serving full time refers to the fact that this is the primary job of the individual. Active duty terms are renewable between two and six years.

Army Medic: The official job title of the Army Medic is Health care Specialist and each maintains the military occupational specialty (MOS) of 68W. Health Care Specialists are often referred to as medics or combat medics if the individual has served in a combat arena.

Enlisted Personnel: Enlisted soldiers make up the bulk of those serving in the military and are typically not in possession of a college degree at the time of enlistment. As such they are noncommissioned personnel. Each individual receives military training and has his or her own job specialization which is identified by their military occupational specialty (MOS). Enlisted members sign enlistment service contracts that include durations lasting between two and six years.

Military: For the purposes of this dissertation, a term referring to the Armed Forces of the United States of America. Comprised of five branches including the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and Coast Guard.

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS): A series of numeric and letter designators used by the United States Army to identify a specific job held by a soldier. The first two digits are numeric and identify the career management field (CMF) that the soldier is associated with. The third digit is usually a letter used to depict the specific occupation of the soldier. For example, an Army Health Care Specialist would maintain the 68W MOS. (i.e., CMF 68 denotes medical and the W is used to identify the job of Health Care Specialist).

National Guard and Reserves: National Guard and Reserves is comprised of soldiers serving on a part-time basis. The military is not the primary job held by these

individuals who typically serve a period of two weeks on Title 10 Orders, once a year, and every other weekend throughout the year. National Guard and reserve troops are subject to activation to active duty status to support specific threats and deployments.

Officer: These individuals are the leaders charged with guiding enlisted personnel through peacetime and combat operations. These are the managers and problem solvers of the military.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): This term is used to identify the military operations in Afghanistan that began in late 2001.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): A term denoting military operation that occurred in Iraq beginning in 2003, almost two years after the terrorist actions perpetrated on September 11, 2001.

Operation Noble Eagle (ONE): Represents the name given to military operations centering on "homeland security and support to federal, state, and local agencies in the wake of September 11, 2001" (Kapp, 2005, p. 1). This term encompasses both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Transition: This dissertation engages the definition of transition outlined by Goldman et al. (2006) which asserted that a transition "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumption and roles" (p. 33) that are either anticipated or unanticipated. These transitions can have both a positive or negative affect on the life of the affected individual (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989).

Title 10 Orders: Title 10 refers to an individual serving on active duty military status. Reserve and National Guard units serve under what is known as Title 32, except

for the two week period of annual service which falls under Title 10. When a National Guard or Reserve unit is called to active duty service for deployment, their status is changed from serving under Title 32 to that if serving under Title 10. The result of this change affects the level of military benefits that a soldier is entitled to.

Veteran: For the purposes of this dissertation the term refers to an individual that served on active duty for a specified period of time and then transitioned out of military service and back into civilian society. The individual has separated from service and is not serving in the Reserves or National Guard.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An initial assumption centered on the participants and held that, Army medics that graduated from a specialized degree and then transitioned back into civilian life, represented an accurate portrayal of the overall population. It was further assumed that the responses provided by participants were an open and honest exchange of information. A prerequisite of participation was that each would provide accurate and honest reflections of changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts. The final assumption was grounded in the fact that the researcher concentrated all efforts to arrive at the essence of this issue.

Limitations

While validity and reliability are crucial elements, expanding the study to include all job titles and all branches of the military was impractical from an economic

standpoint, and far to labor intensive to be accomplished in a timely manner. As a result, research concentration on only one job, (medics) and one branch of service (Army) delineates that the study is not exhaustive of all military members that have transitioned back to civilian life. The number of medics that have graduated from the newly introduced program and transitioned back to civilian life is small. While smaller sample sizes are commonly used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), the overall transferability of findings is therefore be limited.

Another limitation comes in the form of participant bias that is not identified throughout the research process. As such, it must me noted that interpreting out all potential participant biases is a virtual impossibility.

Delimitations

Rudestam and Newton (2007) defined delimitations as "limitations on the research design" that are "imposed deliberately" by the researcher (p. 105). Delimitations are often used to restrict the population of a study to a point where transferability can be attained (Rudestam and Newton, 2007). For example, a study may focus only on males because of a readily accessible population or because a theory guiding it has not been applied to females.

In an effort to narrow the focus of the study, research was centered on one segment of military members, specifically Army 68W Health Care Specialists, that have made the transition from active duty to civilian status after graduating from a specialized degree built from their military training. Focusing on all military personnel, from all branches of service, that have earned a college degree while on active duty and then

transitioned to civilian life is not feasible and would contradict the ability to answer the research questions outlined in this study. Ultimately this focus was designed to allow a deeper understanding of changes in feeling and perceptions occurring during the transition and an arrival at the *essence* of the phenomenon.

While generally requiring only the completion of five classes to complete, the Associate of Science in Health Science degree offering for Army medics is new, thus the number of graduates is significantly low. The number of graduates that have transitioned out of military service and assimilated back into civilian society is representative of an even smaller subset of the population. Those graduates who have not moved from military to civilian life have not experienced the transition, which is the focal point of the study. For this reason those that have graduated from the program, but remain on active duty, did not take part in the study. In addition, those serving on Reserve or National Guard units were also not be asked to participate in the study because they are essentially civilians that engage in military service on a part-time basis. As such, the cultural impact associated with full-time service in the military is negated and there is no viable transition because Reservists and National Guard members live and work dominantly within civilian society. For the reasons previously listed, literature which concentrates on Reservists and National Guard members was not reviewed.

Finally, in-person interviews and field observations, which are commonly used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013), were not utilized within this study. As the population of Army Health Care Specialists (68W) who have earned the specialized college degree and transitioned out of the military and back into civilian life

is extremely limited, participants could potentially be located all over the United States. In-person interviews and field observation was simply impractical and unattainable within the financial confines of the study.

Significance of the Study

Reduction of Gaps

There is currently a significant gap in understanding of the role that having a college degree plays in the overall transition process that a soldier goes through when moving from active duty to civilian. Only the study conducted by Morin (2011) touched upon the relationship between having a degree and easing the transition. Conversely, no empirical study has looked at the issue from the perspective of the soldier. Army Medics that have earned a specialized associate degree built from their military training are provided with a credential recognized by employers in civilian society. Looking at the issue from a generalized perspective, one that involves all branches of service, is impractical and cost ineffective. Concentrating the study on the changes in feelings and perceptions of Army medics allowed for a more pointed look at the issue. This concentration on medics that have earned a degree allowed for a reduction of the gap in understanding by uncovering changes in feelings and perceptions surrounding the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts.

Implications for Social Change

The significance of the study centered on better understanding feelings associated Army Medics that have earned a specialized college degree and have assimilated back

into civilian life. Increasing the knowledge of changes in feelings associated with this transition, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts who possess similar credentials has the potential to facilitate a better understanding of the transition overall, and ease the stress points associated with it. Addressing the changes in feelings and perceptions by exploring their source – the veteran soldier – helped identify the attitude that they carried with them into civilian life. Positive social change will be exacted through increased knowledge that translates to a more seamless reintegration from military service to a civilian society. Future research will move to a quantitative focus on topics that include reintegration ease of soldiers with college degrees, the economic impact of utilizing military training as the major component of degree coursework, and the potential for state universities to map similar degree offerings for military students.

Summary and Transition

This study was designed to explore the depth of feelings associated Army medics who possess a college degree attained prior to their transition back into civilian society. Understanding any change in feelings or perceptions associated with self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, which occurred after the successful completion of a specialized degree program, began the process of filling in specific gaps in knowledge associated with the military transition process. The findings derived from this study may be utilized by military members and commands, legislators that dictate ongoing military educational benefits and entitlements, and educators in general.

In Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature and will begin with understanding constructionist worldview and a justification for the use of the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition before moving to better understand the reasons for joining the military and the cultural differences that separate it from civilian society. A demonstration of the level of importance that the DOD places on soldier postsecondary education, educational barriers faced by active duty service members, and the studies which identified a correlation between an easier transition and possession of a college degree will be discussed in conjunction with the development and implementation of a specialized degree designed to incorporate military training as the bulk of coursework. The lack of empirical study on the relationship that possession of a college degree has on easing the transition process will also be reviewed. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the Army 68W, a historical review of the military transition process, current difficulties experienced during this transition, and reasons for these difficulties.

In Chapter 3, I present the study methodology and theoretical frameworks which was utilized as a lens for viewing the phenomenon. The method of the study, will also be described in detail along with ethical considerations and the role of the researcher.

In Chapter 4, I depict the participant profiles and the emergent themes derived from data analysis.

In Chapter 5, I discusses conclusions, ethical considerations associated with the study, and limitations of transferability. The chapter concludes with the delivery of implications and recommendations for future research on the phenomenon.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The U.S. government has made the transition from military service to civilian life a great concern from both a social and economic perspective. The conclusion of formal United States operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has created a strong need to facilitate an easy transition for servicepeople from military to civilian life (Helmer, 2011). Because former servicepeople make up less than 1% of the total population of the United States, there is a distinct cultural difference between their lived experiences and those of the population that have not served in the military ("Common Challenges, n.d.; Plach, 2009). These cultural differences have contributed to difficulties in assimilating back into civilian society. This study was specifically designed to investigate the lived experiences of Army medics that graduated from a college degree program that grants credit for military career training and have transitioned back into civilian life.

This chapter presents, the major findings associated with the study's literature review. A direct connection of the problem statement to the theoretical framework will also be presented. The literature review contains applicable information on the following major topic areas; historical review of the military transition process, current transition difficulties, DOD emphasis on education while on active duty, educational barriers experienced by active duty soldiers, having a college degree prior to making the transition, and the theoretical foundation of the study which includes social constructivism and Schlossberg's Adult Transition Theory.

Literature Search Strategy

The search strategy I employed to identify and review pertinent literature included word searches through relevant databases. I primarily used Google Scholar to identify relevant work that I then retrieved via the Walden University Library. I also used scholarly databases to search journals, Congressional, DOD, and other federal, state and local reports, and other research designed to uncover relevant scholarly literature. The databases I searched included the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Education, ProQuest, EBSCO Host, SAGE political science and business databases, along with Military and Government Collection. The following primary keyword strings used in the search were; military, military education, military transition, military transition problem, military college degree, military education, military transition services, military employment, military benefits, military educational barriers, military education issue, military education assistance, military education support, active duty education, active duty education benefit, tuition assistance, social constructivism, military social constructivism, military educational phenomenon , transition theory, Schlossberg transition theory, transition theory military, and Schlossberg transition theory military.

Theoretical Framework and Use of Theory

Social Constructivism

This study used social constructivism as the worldview from which to engage the issue. Social constructivists maintain that learning is the product of information being constructed into reasoning based upon life experience and social contexts (Crotty, 1998; Mayo, 2010). At its core, constructivism utilizes Socratic questioning and the critical

thinking skills that accompany it, to construct knowledge, which is then tested with the future experiences of an individual (Mayo, 2010). The construction of knowledge is therefore as unique as an individual, but dependent on life experience and societal acceptance. Vygotsky (1978) held that education was grounded in all aspects of the culture of and the individual, describing the sum of an individual's life experiences as assimilating into the understandings the individual generated.

Culture also provided a key element of Vygotsky's basis for understanding how one learns. Culture provides learned teachers and mentors who then facilitate understanding and knowledge in the people they assisted (Mayo, 2010; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivists view teachers and mentors as playing a pivotal role in the construction of knowledge within an individual. Modern constructivists maintain that a person's understanding of concepts and knowledge is inevitably of that person's own construction and not a "purely objective perception of reality" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43). According to this viewpoint, there is no singular construction that can claim definitive "truth" over another which means that the development of theories and models amounts to a desire to understand something about a reality far greater in scope (Maxwell, 2013, p. 43).

Transition Theory

Human beings experience a multitude of transitions throughout their lives. As people mature from childhood, individual's transition through age, education, economic status, and relationships. Each of these transitional periods are representative of common transitions which the individual prepares for through the guidance of parents, mentors,

teachers, friends, supervisors, and any number of additional people met along the journey of life. These transitions are expected and prepared for, in one way or another, by members of society. Unlike a civilian who moves from one job or career to another, the active duty soldier making a transition back into civilian life makes career based changes that directly affect all other aspects of his or her life, and bring with them a period of uncertainty. There are three models most often utilized to gain a better understanding of transition and individual responses to it (Bridges, 2004; 2009; Sugarman, 1986; Schlossberg, 1984).

Sugarman's (1996) seven-step transition model divides transition into immobilization, reaction, minimization, letting go, testing for alternatives, searching for meaning, and integration. Immobilization consists of the initial confusion and overpowering effect that an impending change can have on an individual (Sugarman, 1996). Individual *reaction* to the change event is quickly followed by a *minimization* process whereby anticipation intensifies the potential for stress. Before moving forward an individual must come to terms with *letting go* of the previous situation and move to a period of *testing for alternatives* (Sugarman, 1996). At this point in the model, Sugarman (1996) identified that the individual rationalizes the change, or *searches for meaning*, while working to positively gain from the experience before shifting to the well-being offered in the final stage, *integration*. Here, *integration* represents the point of total acceptance, the beginning of new period in the life of the individual, and the end of the transition process.

Bridges (2009) delivered a less complex three-step transition model, and the needed clarification of two key terms associated with the process – *change* and *transition*. *Change* is often misinterpreted as *transition*. *Change,* as maintained by Bridges (2004, 2009) is a more short-lived and more concentrated activity (i.e., a child moving from 6th grade into 7th grade or an adult moving from one employment position to another), but *transition* is represented in the mental or psychological processes associated with acceptance of the *change*.

Bridges' (2004, 2009) three-step transition model identified the points that an individual must successfully navigate through in order for a change to be psychologically accepted. The three stages begin with the *ending*, whereby an individual relinquishes the previous situation (i.e., the child leaving the familiarity of a previous grade and moving to another or an individual taking a promotion and leaving the old position behind). In order to successfully pass through this stage, the person must psychologically accept that the previous norm no longer exists. This acceptance focuses the individual on moving forward to the second stage of the transition process; the *neutral zone*.

According to Bridges (2004, 2009) the *neutral zone* is the time period that exists between the departures from the prior situation to the psychological acceptance of the new one. Within the neutral zone the greatest amount of tension, stress points, and disorientation associated with the change exist. It is in this time period that Bridges (2004, 2009) suggested that individual acceptance of the change takes root and the transformation can then progress to the final stage referred to as the *new beginning*. The new beginning is as the name suggests, a period of complete acceptance the new

situation. Here the person has committed to the new situation which becomes a new norm to the individual.

The transition models offered by Sugarman (1996) and Bridges (2004, 2009) each depict a clear-cut starting point where a change is initiated, a period of stress and confusion where the individual comes to the realization that the change is inevitable, and then a period of ultimate acceptance, where the change becomes the individual's new norm.

The active duty soldier serving in the armed forces represents less than 1% of the American population (Plach, 2009). The lived experiences that these men and women encounter differ greatly from those experienced by the remaining 99% of the American people. In making the transition from active duty to civilian, the military member goes through a multitude of changes all within a concentrated period of time. In essence, almost all aspects of life experience a degree of change that the individual must transition through and accept each. For example, military life is extremely structured; food and lodging are often provided for and duties, responsibilities, and expectations are clearly defined ("Common Challenges," n.d.; Exum et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2013). When re-entering civilian society, the military member engages in changes that center on leaving structured existence of the military. The resulting changes affect more than a simple exchange of a uniform for civilian attire; no element of the individual's life is left unchanged. Relationships with family and friends are often strained, social interactions must be redefined, some friendships may be redefined while others are newly formed, a steady paycheck becomes uncertain, a new career path must be identified, and because

the military member can be stationed globally, changes in geographic location may also need to be planned and executed. Of key understanding is the fact that each of the change events associated with each of these aspects occurs almost simultaneously and affect all of the societal norms that the soldier has come to know. The depth of feeling associated with one aspect of the transition may also impact the individual's reaction to another.

The transition models of Sugarman (1996) and (Bridges (2004, 2009) do not provide the platform best suited to be the theoretical framework of this study because each fails to address the depth of feelings and perceptions associated with the transition from active duty military service to civilian life. Schlossberg (1984) introduced the theory of adult transition which, unlike the models of Sugarman (1996) and (Bridges (2004; 2009), concentrated on the both the individual's movement through a change event and feelings and perceptions derived as a result of the movement. The critical differentiation and alignment of focus offered by Schlossberg's (1984) theory of adult transition makes it best suited as the theoretical foundation for this study.

Schlossberg's Theory of Adult Transition

The theory of adult transition provided by Schlossberg (1984) initially identified the fact that behaviors surrounding the individual in transition were dependent upon three critical circumstances – the type of event, situation in which it materializes, and the overall affect the change has on the individual. This approach was advanced and refined by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) into a model which encompassed three distinct pillars – moving-in, moving through, and moving-out.

The moving-in period amounts to the onset of a transition, and is representative of a point at which a person becomes acquainted with a situation that breaks from an established norm (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). For the active duty military member moving-in begins at the point that the decision to assimilate back into civilian society becomes a reality; a considerable time period may elapse before they enter into Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) associated with the branch of service they serve in. Stresses associated with uncertainty begin at this genesis point in the decision to transition from military to civilian life (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). The realization of the scope and magnitude of the impending change occurs as the individual moves-in to transition.

The second pillar associated with the adult transition theory is the move-through period whereby an individual adjusts to the change being implemented (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). For the military member in transition, this is the period where they will gain understanding of the adjustments and adaptations that will be needed to complete the process. A critical balance shifts to the positive as knowledge replaces stresses related to uncertainties surrounding the change (Anderson et al., 2012; Schlossberg et al., 1989). In the third pillar and final stage, *moving-out*, represents the completion of the transition and the acceptance of the new situation as a norm. For the active duty member it marks the period when they have accepted the newly established roles associated with civilian life.

Using this three-pronged approach devised by Schlossberg et al. (1989) eliminates the complexity of the transition model offered by Sugarman (1996) and the

alleviates the constraints of the model provided by Bridges (2004, 2009) by allowing for the emergence of the depth of feelings throughout the three stages. Applying this model to the active duty service member transitioning back into civilian society allows for a greater depth of understanding because feelings and perceptions associated with the transition are included in the process. Where Sugarman (1996) and Bridges (2004, 2009) approached transition from a change over a life-span perspective, Schlossberg (1984) and later Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989) developed the model with the intent of providing a means of counseling individuals through transition. The differentiation is critical in putting the researcher using the Schlossberg et al. (1989) model at the *essence* of the feelings and perceptions associated with the transition.

To facilitate the ability to assist individuals in coping with the transition from a counseling perspective, Schlossberg et al. (1989) developed a system based on four key elements – situation, self, supports, and strategies for adapting to and managing transition. Known as the 4S System, its use is essential to allowing researchers to arrive at the essence of how an individual copes with transition as a person. As asserted by Anderson et al. (2012) this transition model is useful in understanding transitions because it "incorporates the notion of variability while at the same time presents a structural approach so that counselors and helpers do not have to approach each situation anew" (p. 31).

While no empirical study has previously focused on the changes in feelings and perceptions fostered by those that have attained a specialized college degree prior to making the transition from military to civilian life have been completed, Schlossberg's

(1984) theory of adult transition has been applied to a multitude of studies concentrating on the transition from military service to college student (DiRameo, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Green & Hayden, 2013; Robertson & Brott, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) engaged the theory of adult transition and the 4-S System to develop a means allowing colleges and universities to better provide for veteran students. Of importance in this study was the wide scope from which it was used to research the issue. The move-through phase of this study dealt directly with the individual's life experiences while serving on active duty and the move-out phase targeted the transition from military to civilian life (DiRamio et al., 2008). Information gathered in both of these phases has a direct relevance to the current undertaking.

Additional researchers have embraced the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition and the 4-S system produced by Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering (1989). Rumann and Hamrick (2010), focused on military members who had completed the transition to civilian and enrolled in a four year institution while and Zinger and Cohen (2010) concentrated similar efforts toward veterans that made the transition and enrolled in community college. In a study revolving around veterans who transitioned into college DeRamio and Jarvis (2011) identified the changing role of the individual, levels of control, and coexisting stress as critical elements in the moving in, moving through, and moving out phases. The soldier moves-in as the transition from active duty service to student begins. A critical point in the process exists in the next phase – moving through. In this phase DeRamio and Jarvis (2011) noted that the soldier faced increased stress levels associated with the changing role associated with soldier to student. When the

student was able to accept their new role – move-through - the stress and confusion associated with the transition was mitigated (DeRamio & Jarvis, 2011).

Green and Hayden (2014) used the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition to better explain the difficulties that veterans experienced as they moved from soldier to student. Introverted personalities, the wounded veteran experience, and the perspective that female veterans must transition through in order to become effective students were viewed through the lens of the adult transition theory.

The volume of academic use and acceptance of the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition in studies involving military members validates the appropriateness of its use in this study which concentrates on arriving at the essence of a shared phenomenon soldiers who have earned a college degree and made the transition from military to civilian life.

Reason for Joining Military

When an individual turns eighteen he or she is faced with several options – enter a trade school, enroll at a college or university, enter the workforce, join the military, or do something else entirely. Enlisting in the military is representative of the oldest and perhaps most hazardous means of public service. From a historic perspective, serving in the military was once considered a compulsory provision of citizenship, but in 1973, as America wound down combat operations in Vietnam, the United States opted to move to an all-volunteer system to fill the rank and files. Understanding the motivations behind an individual's reasons for joining the military ultimately assisted in understanding the difficulties associated with the transition back into civilian life. The American public

often places a great value on the fact that an individual served in the military. Of the forty-four Presidents of the United States, thirty-one have served in military uniform in one way or another (Kingsbury, 2010). Griffith (2008) maintained that motivations for enlisting in the Army could be categorized under two specific rationales – occupational or institutional. From the occupational perspective, enlistment is viewed as a job, or a means of providing a primary or secondary income. Entering the service under the auspices of gaining employment are often associate with individuals who are not interested in making the military a career (Griffith, 2008). Instead they are often motivated by the job training provided by the military, enlistment bonuses, cash awards for entering specific career fields for a given enlistment period, or educational benefits that occur both during and after service has concluded (Horton, 2011). Education plays a significant role in the decision to join the military. For this reason educational benefit and focus of the military will be discussed in detail under its own heading.

The recent economic downturn is also cited as a contributing factor in driving up military enlistment. Dr. Curtis Gilroy (2009), then director of accession policy for the department of defense maintained that "when the economy slackens and unemployment rises and jobs become more scarce in civilian society, recruiting is less challenging" (as cited in Alvarez, 2009, para 5). Enlistment bonuses effectively attract individuals to specific military jobs and incentivize enlistment by providing a cash award for joining (Asch et al., 2010). In a period of economic decline and higher unemployment, these added bonuses often work to increase enlistment (Asch et al., 2010). An individual's economic situation can often correlate to the desire to trade military service for job

training and/or educational benefits. This quid pro quo tradeoff defines the occupational rationale for obligating one's self to military service for a specific amount of time.

Conversely, the institutional rationale behind enlistment is fostered by deep-rooted beliefs in patriotism, honor, and an obligation to serve (Griffith, 2008). Patriotism, according to national recruiting statistics, has consistently been names within the top three reasons for joining the military (cited by Kingsbury, 2010). Lt. Noel Carroll (2011), an emergency room nurse serving in the serving with the United States Air Force, joined after her brother, an Air Force Pararescueman, was killed in combat operations in Afghanistan (Chappelle, 2011). In the performance of her duties as an aeromedical flight nurse she maintained that, "When I see these soldiers, I see my brother" (Carroll, 2011 as cited in Chappelle, 2011, p. 16). Patriotism, and the deep-rooted desire to serve one's country represent the dominant reasons for enlistment. These individuals simply view military service as their duty as an American citizen.

Whether an individual joins the military for occupational or institutional reasons, they are indoctrinated into a culture that differs exponentially from that of a civilian.

Military Culture

Rubin, Weiss, and Coll (2013) define military culture as being "comprised of values, beliefs, traditions, norms, perceptions, and behaviors that govern how members of the armed forces think communicate and act" (p. 23). Men and women who serve in the United States military comprise of less than 1% of the total population and have distinctly different life experiences that their civilian counterparts (Plach, 2009). Military enlistees encompass the vast diversity of the modern American society (Paniagua & Yamada,

2013). Embracing diversity, whereby all races, creeds, and individuals from all economic and social backgrounds are valued as equals, is an active part of military culture (Kuhner, 2013) and the abandonment of the *Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell* policy has brought recent inclusion to gay and lesbian soldiers (Hajjar, 2013).

Military training is delivered in a multitude of ways. Initially, the potential enlistee meets with a recruited who discusses options and lays out the positive aspects associated with military service. Once the decision has been made, the new recruit enters a period of intense training known in the Army as Boot Camp ("Training Overview," 2014). Following Boot Camp, the new soldier is sent for job-specific training that occurs at an Advanced Individual Training (AIT) which delivers the skills needed to perform in the chosen career ("Training Overview," 2014). Upon completion of AIT, the soldier undergoes a Permanent change of Station (PCS) their first permanent duty station or is deployed overseas. In either scenario, learning is continual as the new soldier continues to adapt to and assimilate into their new environment. From the perspective of constructivism, each point along the transition from civilian to soldier, the new military member has teachers (drill instructors at Boot Camp and instructor soldiers in AIT) and mentors (soldiers at his or her first duty station or deployment location) who play a pivotal role in helping the individual construct new understanding (Mayo, 2010; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Understanding the culture that exists within the military begins with identifying specific attributes and beliefs associated with civilian culture within the United States today. Rubin et al. (2013) maintained that within civilian society, the *individual* is the

central point of focus. Personal effort and accomplishments are rewarded within the family, scholastic, social, and work environments. These concepts represent a sharp contradiction to the belief structures of the soldier. Regardless of branch of service, military members share a commonality in central beliefs that include “honor, courage, loyalty, and commitment” that transcends the era in which the individual served (Rubin et al., 2013, p. 23). Since they do not live in isolation, those who join the military, regardless of age, bring with them the value-sets developed within civilian society. These values quickly morph into those associated with the military and the branch of service from which the individual enters (Paniagua & Yamada, 2013). Core beliefs serve as the foundation for military emphasis which focuses on the *group*, rather than the individual. Unlike civilian society where people strive for individual success and accolades in almost all aspects of life, soldiers value *duty* and *mission*. Individual achievements are highly regarded by the military, but these regards center on the contribution that the actions have on the unit.

Core values are indicative of military service, but each branch of service adopts an individualistic ethos, or personality, that is a derived from defining a dedicated set of service oriented core values. The Army lists seven specific core values as its foundation – loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and selfless courage ("Warrior Ethos," n.d.). Navy core values are honor, courage, and commitment ("US Navy," n.d.). The Marines, who fall under the Department of the Navy, add *semper fidelis,* Latin for always faithful, to the core values of the Navy ("Principles and Values," n.d.). Semper fidelis adds distinctly to the value of association that marines place on their service.

Finally, the Air Force has adopted integrity, service before self, and excellence in all that is done ("Our Values," n.d.). Each of the identified service values become a part of the individual soldier that resonates throughout the service branch. *Duty* becomes the central point of emphasis. *Duty* in the mind of the soldier encompasses behavior, work responsibilities and commitment to the mission, unit, service branch, and country (Rubin et al., 2013).

Exum, Coll, and Weiss (2011) maintained that the rigid hierarchal system within the military facilitates obedience and stresses mission importance. There are three essential components of the hierarchal system – enlisted and noncommissioned officers, warrant officers, and commissioned officers. Individual soldiers understand that their social status is dependent on rank which depicts income, work responsibilities, living accommodations, and who the person will interact with (Exum et al., 2011). There is no ambiguity as to what the individual expectations are for any given soldier. Unlike their civilian counterparts, military members can be called to duty at any time and are expected to stay until mission requirements determine that the individual's presence is no longer needed. As such, each of the core values resonates through all levels of military engagement. The explicit "devotion to duty" displayed by military members as a result of the complete acceptance of and adherence to the core values is also markedly different from civilian society where workers often anticipate leaving work, regardless of whether a task has been completed or not, at the end of the day (Rubin et al., 2013, p. 24).

Devotion to duty is emphasized in all aspects of military life. Like their civilian counterparts, military members must abide by the laws of the United States, but in

addition to these laws, service-members must also comply with a set of laws and doctrines that are unique to the military. These laws are directed at specific actions that military members, and not civilians, are exposed to. For example, disobeying a direct order is a punishable offence under Article 92 doing what one is told while at work in civilian society can include disciplinary action or termination. Failing to follow the order of a superior noncommissioned or commissioned officer are substantial and can include a permanent or temporary reduction in rank and imprisonment ("UCMJ," 2014). Unlike a civilian who disregards the orders of a manager at work, the soldier who disobeys an order can cause the destruction of property or even death.

When a soldier is deployed in support of combat operations, their family is left behind. The stress of war is compounded by the stress associated with separation (Fischer, 2014; Kaplow, Layne, Saltzman, Cozza, & Pynoos, 2013). The concept of death is a critical aspect life that soldiers must accept and become accustomed to. During actions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom 4,410 US soldiers were killed in action, 13 DOD civilian employees also lost their lives, and 31,942 American soldiers were wounded in action (Fischer, 2014, p. 1). Casualties from Operation Enduring Freedom included 2,299 soldiers killed in action, 3 DOD civilians killed in action, and 19,572 soldiers wounded in action (Fischer, 2014, p. 1). Amputation often accompanies being wounded. The casualties of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom have collectively suffered 1,558 major limb amputations (Fischer, 2014, p. 6).

Combat engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan often began with the detonation of an enemy-made Improvised Explosive Device (IED). Anti-US combatants used

improvised materials to detonate homemade bombs along roadsides for the purpose of killing and wounding American soldiers. Through 2007, IED's were attributed with 60% of American deaths in Iraq and 25% in Afghanistan (Gill, Horgan, & Lovelace, 2011). Two years later IED's would attribute to 75% of American casualties in Afghanistan (Gill et al., 2011). Soldiers had no way of knowing where or when these bombs targeting convoys of soldiers would occur. Serving as a soldier is one of the few careers where one may be killed or wounded on the job at any given time. The stresses associated with family separation and combat operations work to solidify the emphasis on group success (Exum et al., 2011). The individual embracement of the service core values compound to make this bond emotionally tighter and facilitate strength in unity. These concepts are best articulated in the frustrations of Gulf War combat veteran, Second-Lieutenant Robert Mabry (n.d.) who explained;

> I want you to be able to close your eyes and smell the aviation fuel mixed with the third-world stench of human waste, charcoal, and rotten fruit. I want you to smell the stink of sweat and blood mixed with gunpowder and burning tires. I want you to be able to hear the roar of helicopters overhead, mixed with the distinctive sound of AK-47 rounds and the whoosh of rocket-propelled grenades as they go past. I want you to hear the deafening echo of continuous gunfire along narrow, confined streets mixed with the screams of "Medic" and "I'm hit" from the dying and wounded. I want you to see

> bodies to your left and right being hit and to feel the bullets passing by, sometimes through your clothing and equipment, and I want you to understand the effect that has on your concentration and psyche (as cited in Chapman et al., 2012, p. 270).

Second-Lieutenant Mabry's (n.d.) statement demonstrates the frustration often accompanying a service-member's explanation of the military mission to a civilian who has no common point of reference from which to draw an understanding. The statement also brings to light the differentiations between the lived experiences of the military member and those of a civilian. Intensity, loyalty, passion, fear, and anger are each identifiable within the statement, but so is acceptance of the core values that bind each soldier together.

The men and women who enter the military enter a service where diversity is embraced and fostered because each individual is potentially dependent upon the actions of another (Hajjar, 2013; Kuhner, 2013; Paniagua & Yamada, 2013). Soldiers learn from the various demographic differentiations of the men and women that fill the ranks. The soldier's lived experiences differ radically from their civilian counterparts. The active duty soldier can be sent anywhere in the world at any given time in support of the missions of the United States government. Institutional reasons for joining the military – patriotism, honor and obligation to serve (Griffith, 2008) – coupled with comprehensive training and the acceptance of service oriented core values, a rigid hierarchy, and devotion to duty, produce individuals who embrace unit or group success over individual

achievement (Exum et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2013). In combat situations, a soldier's life often depends on the actions of the man or woman next to him. This is demonstrative of the differentiation between civilian and military culture in that it transfers emphasis from the *individual* to the *group*.

Military Emphasis on College Education

Brief History of the GI Bill

Fueled by fear of the economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, many economists believed that when the soldiers returned form fighting WWII, the job market, perceived as already being taxed, would be oversaturated; throwing the country back into a state of economic chaos (Cunningham, 2012). Providing educational benefits provided the means of getting veterans into positions that were higher than those associated with the entry level. In addition, providing education was believed to provide a significant delay in the influx of workers onto the American job market (Altschuler & Blumin, 2009 as cited in Cunningham, 2012). The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 was signed into effect by Franklin D. Roosevelt on June 22, 1944 and would quickly become known as the GI Bill of Rights ("History and Timeline," 2013). The legislation provided a means of educating servicemen and came with a controversial $20.00 per month living stipend ("History and Timeline," 2013). Other significant provisions included the ability for servicemen to receive guaranteed, low-cost home loans, insurance, and health care.

Soldiers returning from war took advantage of the benefit and enrolled in colleges and universities in numbers previously unrecorded. Prior to the GI Bill, postsecondary

enrollment numbers saw the 1.6 million students enrolled in colleges and universities (88,000 of which were reported as veterans), to 2.3 million students (of which 1.15 million were veterans) following the conclusion of hostilities in 1945 (Mettler, 1973 as cited in Cunningham, 2012). Military veterans were graduating from college and this success was directly attributable to the opportunities provided by the GI Bill.

Benefits were soon offered to returning Veterans of the Korean Conflict of the early 1950s. These veterans also took advantage of the opportunity to receive a college education and enrolled in colleges and universities across the country. In the 1980s, the GI Bill once again evolved; becoming the Montgomery GI Bill ("MGIB," 2013). This new variant required active duty military members to pay $100.00 per month for the first 12 months of their service and came with a minimum service period in order to be utilized. The government matched this contribution. Educational expenses have risen dramatically since the inception of the Montgomery GI Bill and this, coupled with the need to provide for returning veterans of war, led to the development and implementation of the Post 9/11 Veteran's Assistance act of 2008.

The Post 9/11 Veteran's Assistance act of 2008, known as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, centers singularly on education and incorporates several provisions from the past, along with significant changes designed around the technology and norms of current society. Students now receive the highest in-state tuition rates for public universities. Private universities are limited to standardized payment criteria, but may any absorb any excess costs by participating in the Yellow-Ribbon Program whereby no additional cost is

passed to the student-veteran ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014). A book stipend, consisting of up to $1,000 was also added to the 2008 version of the GI Bill.

Where the Montgomery GI Bill failed to address living expenses encountered by full-time students ("MGIB," 2014), the Post 9/11 GI Bill provides a Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) for students that attend classes physically (at an institution) or virtually (in an online format) ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014). The BAH is reduced for students taking classes in the online format to 50% of an E-5 pay grade with dependents.

The most significant upgrade accompanying the Post 9/11GI Bill is the transferability of educational benefits to a spouse or child. Military members who have ten years of service, or served six years and reenlisted for an additional four years, may transfer all, or some, of their Post 9/11 educational benefits to their spouse or children ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014). This provision allows the serviceman or woman who takes advantage of other educational benefits provided to active duty soldiers to provide an education for other family members, while still achieving their own educational goals.

Active Duty

All branches of the United States military offer soldiers serving on Active Duty or in Reserve or National-Guard components the opportunity to attend classes in their off-duty time. Each branch has a set amount of money earmarked for the soldier to use to enroll and take these college classes. Military Tuition Assistance (MTA) covers 100% of the cost of tuition up to the individual amount set by the branch of service ("MTA," 2014). In the Army, the set amount of tuition assistance paid for soldiers annually was recently reduced from $4,500 to $4,000 annually ("Army TA Policies," 2014). Tuition

assistance does not cover the cost of books, study materials, or other fees associated with the coursework. Associate, bachelor, and master level degrees are all attainable under the TA program which is offered to both enlisted soldiers and officers alike. Enlisted Army men and women may apply to use TA one year after completing Advanced Individual Training (AIT) which qualifies them in a specific military occupational specialty ("Army TA Policies," 2014). Current TA limits the number of undergraduate and graduate credits that can be funded at 130 credit hours and 39 respectively. Enlisted soldiers must maintain a grade of 2.0 or they are financially liable to reimburse the Army for the tuition payment ("Army TA Policies," 2014). Soldiers may attend a physical campus on base at the local Army education center, off base, or online anywhere in the world (Flair, 2013).

In 2013 the Army employed 571 educational advisors, located at education offices at bases in the US and abroad that provided information and guidance to over 280,000 soldiers who enrolled and took classes using tuition assistance (Emery-Arras, Doughty, Baxter, Burgeson, & Siegel, 2014). As of 2013, there were 528,070 active duty soldiers serving in the Army and 106,635 of these individuals attended college courses funded by the tuition assistance program (Emery-Arras et al., 2014, p. 19). Base education offices provide the bulk of information to soldiers wanting to better understand what funds are available to them and how to use the program to their advantage. College counselors and the internet provide an additional source of information. Tuition assistance is designed solely for those serving on active duty or within Reserve or National-Guard components.

Veterans

VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program Chapter 31)

The Veteran's Administration Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, referred to commonly as Chapter 31, is a program established for returning veterans that have suffered a service-related disability of 10% or greater ("Vocational Rehabilitation," 2014). This program offers greater benefit than offered by the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Where the Post 9/11 GI Bill has limitations on covering the cost of books, fees, and living expenses ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014), Chapter 31 covers the total cost additional fees and increases amounts for living expenses and books ("Vocational Rehabilitation," 2014). Soldiers are not guaranteed entry into this program and apply through the Veteran's Administration (VA) who assign a counselor to evaluate the veteran's qualification for entry into the program. The academic intentions of the service-member must be demonstrative of the pursuits identified through an academic plan based on the disability rating of the veteran that is constructed by the VA counselor ("Vocational Rehabilitation," 2014). Approvals are granted when the VA counselor concludes that the academic pursuits fall within the abilities of the veteran and completion of the program increases his or her opportunity for employment. Chapter 31 is available only after discharge and only if the veteran is deemed to meet the qualifications of the program by his or her educational counselor.

Montgomery GI Bill (Chapter 30)

The Montgomery GI Bill, also known as Chapter 30, is sectioned into two distinctive parts – Active Duty and Reserve components. The level of benefit for active duty service-members is considerably greater for active duty soldiers than for those in the Reserves ("MGIB," 2014). Funding is designed to pay for educational services derived through postsecondary institutions, for either a degree or certificate program, technical or vocational training, apprenticeships, or licensing or certification tests ("MGIB," 2014). These benefits remain eligible for use for a period of ten years after the discharge date of the veteran. After this period the benefit is no longer usable. In addition to the $100.00 contributed by the active duty service-member each month during the first year of service, an additional $600.00 may be added. If the service-member opts to add this amount they will receive an additional $5,400.00 in additional benefits ("MGIB," 2014). This additional contribution must be made while the soldier is serving on active duty. The Montgomery GI Bill was designed for use after the soldier has made the transition back to civilian life.

Post 9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33)

The Post 9/11 GI Bill, commonly referred to as Chapter 33, represents the most comprehensive educational benefit package in the history of the United States (Cunningham, 2012) and is far more to administer because the benefit amount to the soldier or veteran is dependent upon length of service and where the individual attends school ("RAND Post 9/11," 2010). Those that qualify to use the benefits associated with the Post 9/11 GI Bill include “veterans and service-members of the Army, Navy, Marine

Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard including the reserve components" who have served "an aggregate minimum of 90 days on active duty after September 11, 2001" or been discharged with a service-related injury after serving 30 continuous days on active duty after September 11, 2001 ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014). A graduated scale is used to determine the percentage of coverage the soldier is entitled to. Under this scale, a soldier that completed 90 days, but less than six months of active duty service would be entitled to 40% of the total benefit amount, while a soldier completing over 36 months of active duty service would receive 100% of the allotted benefit amount (Dortch, 2014). The book stipend of up to $1,000 and Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) benefits are allotted in accordance with the percentage of entitlement the service-member attains through his or her duration of service. Use of this benefit is time sensitive as one initiated, the service-member has 36 months, or the equivalent in part-time educational assistance ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014). While some aspects of the Post 9/aa GI Bill benefits can be used while the soldier is serving on active duty ("Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014), the benefits were designed for use postservice (Cunningham, 2012). Only through use postservice is the veteran able to exact the book stipend and BAH used for living expenses.

Educational Barriers Experienced by Active Duty Soldiers

Active Duty Students

According to DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) the failure of the military to adequately prepare soldiers for future academic endeavors after service presents the soldier with significant obstacles. Where civilian counterparts often transition from high school directly to college, the student soldier takes a far different path. Military members

may not return to school for several years as training, duty and on-call mission requirements may not allow adequate time to attend either physical or online classes. When duty allows for the return to the classroom however, DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell (2008) identified that many soldiers believe their scholastic skillsets have diminished as a result of not being in school. According to the study, students engaged in substandard study habits coupled with a lack of concentration.

For the soldier, the chain of command represents authority, order and structure; violating this structure is a violation of military law (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). This rigid hierarchy, coupled with other aspects of military culture can produce feelings of isolation among peers (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). It also can translate to self-doubt from military members not understanding the actions of their civilian counterparts. Civilian students can display disruptive classroom behavior that is foreign to the military student. This cultural differentiation shuts down the desire for some military students to associate with others and socialize; an essential aspect of reintegration into society (Rumann and Hamrick, 2010).

Hindering the active duty student further is the constant looming threat of deployment (Cunningham, 2012). Being deployed while taking college courses all but eliminates the student's ability to participate in classes or complete assignments. Current postsecondary institutions are not able to adequately work through attendance and scholastic requirements that are not possible when student is deployed (Smith, 2010) and these students often return to find that they were dropped from a class. If the active duty student is using Tuition Assistance and was withdrawn or given a grade below a 2.0 (or

C), are required to reimburse the Army for the cost of the class ("Army TA," 2014). This can place an undue financial burden on the soldier and dissuade him or her from attending college.

While earning a college degree while on active duty has been identified as facilitating an easier transition from military to civilian life (Morin, 2011), the emphasis of current educational benefits is work in contradiction. Of the educational benefits offered to military personnel, only tuition assistance is designed for use by the Active Duty soldier ("TA," 2014). Chapter 31 is used exclusively for soldiers that have suffered a service-related injury which has been deemed to be at least 10% debilitating to the individual by Veteran's Administration doctors ("Vocational Rehabilitation," 2014). Therefore it can only be utilized after discharge from military service and only after an assigned counselor approves the training for the individual.

Both the Montgomery and Post 9/11 GI Bills were both designed and implemented for use postmilitary service (Cunningham, 2012; "MGIB," 2014; "Post 9/11 GI Bill," 2014; "RAND Post 9/11," 2010). This places the emphasis on educating soldiers after they have made the transition back into civilian society rather than beforehand. The importance of this postservice emphasis means that the veteran must transition to civilian life and academic enhancement simultaneously if he or she is going to be competitive in the job market (Caumont, 2014). Researchers at Michigan State University's College Research Institute (2014) identified that current competition within the job market has escalated to its highest point in a decade. As a result, employers are placing greater emphasis on hiring individuals with postsecondary degrees. The contained information

supporting the fact that “all graduates will find more opportunities this year” (Michigan State University, 2014).

The Transfer Credit Dilemma

The Department of Defense (DOD) has an established system in place which is designed to annotate military training over the life of a soldier. Each military branch produces their own individual transcript that is designed much like a civilian based college transcript. A significant differentiation exists in the addition of the American Council on Education (ACE) recommendation for college credit which accompanies each military training class ("Military Guide," 2014). ACE recommendations are designed to identify the number of college credits that could be awarded by a postsecondary institution for any given class taken by a military soldier.

The awarding of college credit can traced as far back as WWII (Tyler, 1944). During the WWII, colleges saw the value placed in awarding credit for military training and many were awarded a “blanket credit” that awarded students “as much as a year of advanced standing without evidence of competence” (Tyler, 1944, p. 58). A large percentage of these students failed to adapt to the rigors of college because they were not adequately prepared. Problems stemmed from the manner in which the blanket credit was designed. Under the blanket credit system, a military member who received three months generalized training as a plumber received the same amount of college credit as a soldier given specialized medical training for over ten months. A committee assembled by the American Council on Education (ACE) was assembled to develop a cohesive awarding system that worked to provide a realistic awarding of college credit for training received

while in the military. ACE recommendations, as they have come to be referred to, are the number of college credits that any given training can be awarded by a military institution. The credit recommendation is commensurate with the type of training ("Military Guide," 2014). Currently, over 2,000 colleges and schools accept military training as potential college credit.

When a military member enrolls in a college, military transcripts are ordered and sent to the university much in the same way that civilian transcripts are sent from one institution to the next. The institution can then award specific college credit to the student which reduce the total number of classes needed to graduate. These credits are typically relegated to electives, leaving the bulk of major coursework left to be completed (Boerner, 2013).

Smith (2010) called to attention the fact that institutions of higher learning often discount potential earned credit from the military by failing to adequately award credit for specific training. Limiting credits earned to curriculum electives adds time, cost, and an increase in the frustration levels of military students (Smith, 2010). The problem is then perpetuated in postservice enrollment in college by veterans. While referring to veterans (not active duty military members) Wishnie et al. (2013) called attention to the failure of federal, state, and local authorities to recognize and credit military training and experience forcing many veterans to endure months or years of repetitive training in order to acquire licensing or accepted credentials like college degrees. A study completed by Persky and Oliver (2011) noted the frustration experienced by one military student who identified that three of the classes he was being required to complete as a part of the

degree curriculum amounted to a retaking of training the individual had received while serving on active duty. Additional attention to improve the credit earned for military training and experiential learning would ease the frustration associated with military members having to repeat training that they have already completed (Persky & Oliver, 2011). Soldiers currently have little clarity on which credits are applicable to any curriculum in a given college as this decision is left completely up to the institution of higher learning.

68W Health Care Specialist

The Army designates the MOS 68Was a health care specialist, but these soldiers are often referred to as medics ("Careers and Jobs," 2014). Medics represent a combination of care giver and soldier; able to perform under extreme combat conditions (Chapman et al., 2012). Primary responsibilities of the health care specialist begin with "emergency medical treatment, limited primary care, and health protection and evacuation from a point of injury or illness" ("Careers and Jobs," 2014, para. 1). This translates to these individuals working in base hospitals and designated areas or in front line combat action or facilities engaging in triage and initial care of the injured. Entering the career field in the Army is dependent upon the individual meeting the scoring requirements of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude (ASVAB) test which is taken prior to entering military service ("Careers and Jobs," 2014).

After completion of basic military training, the soldier transfers to the Medical Education and Training Campus (METC) at Fort Sam Houston, located in San Antonio, Texas.). While some combat oriented career fields do not allow women, both male and

females are accepted into the career field. The METC facility represents a massive medical training facility that offers all branches of service training in over 64 areas of study ("METC," n.d.). At this location, comprehensive training is provided in providing care at US medical facilities, hospitals and while operating under extreme, combat oriented, conditions while deployed overseas ("METC," n.d.). Additional training is provided to the individual to enable face to victims of weapons of mass destruction (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) ("METC," n.d.).

Soldiers completing the program are certified nationally as Emergency Medical Technician Basic (EMT-B). METC training conforms to medical training standards prescribed for by the federal government. Civilian students can receive similar training through associate level degree pursuit through state and community colleges. METC training contracted on delivering only the essential medical aspects associated with working in the field as a health care specialist or medic. Civilian students pursuing an associate level degree are required to complete general education coursework (composition, math, etc.) as part of their requirements for degree completion ("Anoka-Ramsey Community College," 2014; "Greenfield Community College," 2014; "South University," 2014). Completion of 68W training is noted on the Joint Service Transcript (JST) of the military member. Conversely, the civilian student is awarded the associate level degree upon completion of their program.

When training is completed the medic is then transferred to a first permanent duty station or deployed to an overseas location. Permanent duty stations are military bases located within or outside of the United States and while soldiers are allowed to offer a

base of preference, assignments are based on mission requirements. Deployment involves overseas assignment to a combat arena or attachment to a unit conducting a specialized mission. Combat medics (68W deployed into theaters where combat is prevalent) are the military version of first responders. The primary difference being that there soldiers are imbedded within a unit comprised of people with varying roles. When a combat incident begins, whether through gunfire, rocket-propelled grenade, or IED detonation, the role of the medic is to make their way to wounded soldiers and begin triaging the wound (Chapman et al., 2012). The standardized training curriculum and combat triage training delivered at METC have delivered the lowest "killed in action" rate in the history of the United States (Chapman et al., 2012, p. 271).

The high level of medical training also makes the 68W Health Care Specialist in the category of training that has the highest degree of applicability to the civilian employment (Morin, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). These skills are taught through the use of standardized curriculums that closely follow those used by civilian postsecondary institutions however, students completing the required military training to hold the 68W MOS have this completion documented in their Joint Military Transcript (JST).

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Based Degree Curriculum

Having a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation among civilian employers (Caumont, 2014; "Rapid Growth MSU," 2014). Education, in one form or another, has been identified as a positive factor in easing the transition from the military to civilian life ("Common Challenges," n.d.; MacLean and Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2013; Veterans Opportunity to Work Act, 2011). The military has advanced

its instructional delivery and methodology, aligning them with their civilian counterparts (Persyn & Poulson, 2012) but civilian colleges and universities have failed to recognize and validate learning that occurs outside of their collegiate walls and maintained transfer policies that limit or reduce earned credit from qualified sources (Smith, 2010). One for-profit university mapped a curriculum for a specialized degree based on the comprehensive training associated with the 68W healthcare specialist.

The curriculum of this degree represents a paradigm shift in the way in which curriculum mappings are traditionally delivered and the means in which college credit is awarded because it incorporates military training not only as electives, but as the bulk of major coursework; leaving as few as five general education classes needed to complete the degree ("Military Guide,"2014; Smith, 2010). Because of the radical change in curriculum design, military members are able to complete coursework entirely online and earn the degree at an accelerated pace ("Military Medical," 2014). The college degree is an accepted, albeit standardized, validation of training used in the civilian world.

This paradigm shift in curriculum design was recently adopted by a state sponsored nonprofit community college through the development of a similarly based program of study ("College Credit," 2014). Graduates of the initial for-profit university's program are limited but increasing, and some have made the transition back to civilian life. Because this customized degree designed specifically for army medics was initially offered in late 2012, no empirical study has been completed to detail changes in these veteran's perceptions of the changes in feelings and perceptions that graduation had on

their transition back into civilian life. As a result, a significant gap in understanding currently exists.

Military Transition Assistance Program

When a soldier makes the decision to leave military service when their enlistment period has concluded they will eventually be entered into a series of mandatory briefings designed to educate them on all aspects of the transition they are about to embarking upon. The Veterans Opportunity to Work Act of 2011, referred to as VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011, made it mandatory for all transitioning service members, regardless of branch of service, to participate in Department of Labor, VA, and preseparation counseling ("Military TAP," 2011). As a result, the Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was created to bring a standardized curriculum to the previously existing programs being used within each branch of service. While each service operates the program under the banner of their own creation – Army Career and Alumni Program, Air force Transition Assistance Program, Fleet and Family Support Center (Navy), Career Resource Management Center/Transition and Employment Assistance Center (Marines), and Worklife Division Transition Assistance (Coast Guard) – each conforms to the auspices of the TAP program curriculum outlined in Veterans opportunity to Work Act of 2011. TAP workshops are normally 3 days in length and soldiers are briefed on effective means of job hunting, resume building skills, and refining interview competencies (Congressional Digest, 2012). Coupled with the TAP seminars, transitioning soldiers are also instructed on benefits afforded to then as a result of their service. These benefits include preferential hiring for federal jobs (Congressional Digest, 2012). The TAP

instructors, coupled with other trusted soldiers and friends, move into the constructivist role of teacher and mentor; assisting in the construction of understanding the transition about to be undertaken (Mayo, 2010; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Two significant studies, one prior to the implementation of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (MacLean & Elder, 2007), and one during the initial rollout, (Prudential, 2012), identified problematic issues among transitioning service members. MacLean and Elder (2007) sought to bring to light the level of knowledge that transitioning military members had regarding resources and services available to them. A notable statistical difference was identified and MacLean and Elder (2007) concluded that gaining knowledge surrounding the transition to civilian life while still in the military positively impacted event. Expanding on the importance that knowledge plays to the transitioning veteran outlined by MacLean and Elder (2007), the Veteran's Employment Challenges survey engaged 2,453 veterans with intent of determining what factors posed the greatest challenge to transitioning veterans (Prudential, 2012). The study concluded that ineffective TAP transition guidance was a significant factor that was directly attributed to difficulty during the transition. While close to two thirds of these veterans experienced substantial difficulty, nearly half did not feel that they were ready for the transition (Prudential, 2012). Education in the form of access and delivery of information through the use of the military TAP program was identified as a concern (Prudential, 2012). The readiness of an individual to adapt to the transition was deemed to increase with the level of education provided prior to separation.

Current Transition Difficulties

A current Veterans Administration (VA) mental health pamphlet, identified that the lived experiences of military members are radically different than those of their civilian counterparts. Service breeds conformity; as such, the culture of the military becomes a norm. While serving on active duty the military member receives regular compensation, housing and medical needs are provided for, social status is established, and even the cloths that will be warn (and how they will be worn) are accounted for (Bertoni et al., 2014'; "Common Challenges," n.d.). As the soldier progresses these actions become established norms that will be radically altered as the soldier move in, moves through, and moves out of transition (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering, 1989).

Putting one's own needs first, as opposed to the needs of fellow veterans, is also a conceptually difficult adjustment to make, yet most employment opportunities today reward the individual and not the collective unit; a concept often found to be foreign to veterans ("Common Challenges," n.d.). The economy of the United States immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 was strong and expanding, yet over the course of the GWOT, the economy plunged into recession (Phillips, Braud, Andrews, & Bullock, 2007). The result, as documented by Phillips et al. (2007), was greater competition for fewer employment opportunities that were often lower paying than prior to the economic downturn. This is compounded when the culture associated with civilian employment - a competitive, rather than the collaborative environment the veteran is accustomed to – is taken into consideration ("Common Challenges," n.d.).

The PEW Research Center conducted a study with the goal of identifying factors that contribute independently to an easier or more difficult transition from military to civilian life (Morin, 2011). In the study, 1,853 individuals that had served in the military and then assimilated back into civilian society were surveyed between July 28, 2011 and September 4, 2011 (Morin, 2011). Through the engagement of a "statistical technique known as logic regression," information from the PEW Study facilitated researchers to view the impact of "18 demographic and additional values" (Morin, 2011, p. 1). Logical regression allows analysis to estimate the effect that of each variable has on the other variables in the model. Findings revealed that commissioned officers and those who had graduated from college faced an easier period of readjustment than those in possession of a high school diploma (Morin, 2011). "Being a college graduate increases the predicted chances of an easy reentry—over and above the impact of rank, religiosity and other variables tested" (Morin, 2011, p. 2). The significance of the study comes in the correlation between college education and the ease of the military transition back into civilian life. While this study represents the first, and only correlation of its kind, the correlation to education in general is longstanding.

Veteran's Employment Challenges, a study commissioned and executed by Prudential (2012), polled 2,453 veterans or those that would be veterans in an online survey between December 12, 2011 and January 12, 2013. The study included veterans of all eras who met two main criteria; veterans or reservists who had completed their service and returned to civilian life and active duty personnel who would be off of active duty status within one year (Prudential, 2012). The margin of error reported was +/- 1.98% at a

95% confidence level, and two sample sources – 1,018 from e-rewards and 1,435 from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) – facilitated the gathering of a random sample (Prudential, 2012). Researchers identified that while generations of veterans have experienced difficulty in making the transition from military to civilian status, veterans that had served in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) had significantly more concerns and faced more hardships during the transition than soldiers from WWII, Korea, and even the Vietnam era (Prudential, 2012). *Finding a job* was noted as the area of most concern among veterans in participating in the study (Prudential, 2012). Nearly 86% of unemployed veterans claimed to have experienced great difficulty during the transition back into civilian life (Prudential, 2012). Military members engaged in career fields including "electronics, engineering, and administrative backgrounds," career fields that are provided with a greater amount of education and training in order to accomplish, had an easier time making the transition back into civilian life (Prudential, 2012, p. 5). These jobs had a direct correlation to civilian based jobs which translated to an easier understanding of the training and skill sets by civilian employers. Conversely, military career fields such as "combat arms, protective services, and transportation," career fields that offer little correlation to civilian jobs and require only limited training to perform, were found to be the least ready to make the transition (Prudential, 2012).

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2014) identified that veterans are currently experiencing a variety of challenges while transitioning back into civilian society. Employment and financial concerns were central to struggles during transition, but there were mounting concerns over "relationships, legal difficulties,

homelessness, and substance abuse" (Bertoni et al., 2014, p. 6). Education, centered both on transitional requirements and those associated with academic or technical training, have been consistently identified as making the transition from military to civilian life easier ("Common Challenges," n.d.; MacLean and Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012). Having a college degree is rapidly becoming an expectation among civilian employers (Caumont, 2014; Michigan State University, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). Understanding the correlation between education and employment is essential because it ties directly to the employability of the individual in transition. Employment has been consistently identified consistently as the most significant pain point in the transition of the military member back into civilian society (MacLean & Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). One of the most significant factors in easing the transition of military members back into civilian society is the ability to gain meaningful employment because it touched not only the income generated within the household, but positively impacts the "physical and psychological health of these veterans and their families" (Wishnie, Cuthbert, Eimers, Lim, & Nadler, 2013, p. 1).

Summary and Transition

Constructivism, initially built upon my early philosophers, holds pivotal role in the foundation of this study. Constructivism engages Socratic questioning and critical thinking to understand that learning is the product of information being constructed into reasoning based upon life experience and social contexts (Crotty, 1998; Mayo, 2010). A key aspect presents itself in the form of teachers and mentors (Mayo, 2010). Teachers and

mentors play important roles in the transition first from civilian to military, and then in the transition back from military to civilian.

Transitioning from active duty military service is a complex undertaking that involves all aspects of one's life. Schlossberg's (1984) theory of adult transition provided the most appropriate lens for ultimately arriving at the essence of the phenomenon. Using the three-pronged approach devised by Schlossberg et al. (1989) allowed for the emergence of the depth of feelings throughout the three stages – *moving-in, moving-through, and moving-out*. The allowance of the emergence of feelings and perceptions, and the role each has in the transition, is a critical aspect associated with the use of the theory because these components allowed the researcher to arrive at the essence of the lived experience.

Understanding the complexities that will be ultimately associated with the transition from military begins with the fundamental knowledge of the motivations for joining the service. Whether joining for occupational (the *quid pro quo* trade of service for skills, education, or compensation) or institutional (a more patriotic, duty-bound emphasis), military members adopt a culture which is radically different than that experienced in civilian life (Plach, 2009). The civilian emphasis of the *individual* is quickly replaced with emphasis focused on the *group* and *mission* (Exum et al., 2011; Paniagua & Yamada, 2013; Rubin et al., 2013).

The ability to further one's education has become a significant part of the military experience. Each branch of service offers soldiers a set amount of money that can be used to attend classes while off-duty ("TA," 2014). Additional funding while on active duty

can also come from use of the Montgomery or Post 9/11 GI Bills. Several severely limit the active duty soldier's ability to attend classes, even in off duty hours. Not being prepared to enter college (DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell, 2008) and the constant threat of deployment (Cunningham, 2012) are representative of the two most devastating to the soldier.

DOD emphasis on education is focused on being delivered postservice, but a college degree has become central to gaining meaningful employment (Caumont, 2014; Michigan State University, 2014). The postservice emphasis on education places may add to the difficulty of the transition by limiting the number of soldiers that are able to earn a college degree while on active duty. Employment and financial concerns derived from it have been cited as the main stress point in the transition process (Bertoni et al., 2014; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). In addition, current TAP initiatives fail to properly deliver the information needed to ease the transition process (Prudential, 2012).

The transfer credit dilemma, whereby college credit is awarded for military training, but relegated to elective courses within degree plans ("Military Guide," 2014; Smith, 2010). Failing to a lot credit outside of the elective pool often forces military students to retake classes that deliver information they revived while serving in the limitary. The result is an increase in frustration (Persky and Oliver, 2011).

Skills taught to the Army Health Care Specialist are more transferable to civilian based competencies than those of many Army MOS (Morin, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). These skills are taught through the use of standardized curriculums that closely follow

those used by civilian postsecondary institutions however, students completing the required military training to hold the 68W MOS have this completion documented in their Joint Military Transcript (JST). In a paradigm shift, one for-profit university recently mapped the curriculum for an associate's degree using the comprehensive training associated with the 68W Health Care Specialist. Students may complete the associate level degree program with the completion of only five general education classes. Because of the radical change in curriculum design, military members are able to complete coursework entirely online, from anywhere in the world, and earn the degree at an accelerated pace ("Military Medical," 2014). There is greater opportunity for the 68W to complete the program because the effects of deployment are mitigated by the portability of the online format used to deliver coursework.

Graduates of the initial for-profit university's program are limited but increasing, and some have made the transition back to civilian life. Because this customized degree designed specifically for army medics was initially offered in late 2012, no empirical study has been completed. The intent of this study is to gain a better understanding of changes in 68W graduate's feelings and perceptions encompassing the importance of education and the role these feelings played during the transition back into civilian life.

In Chapter 3, I provide the research methodology used in the study. Research design and rationale will be discussed in detail, along with the role of the researcher. Also detailed will be the population, sample and participant selection logic. The data collection and analysis methods are also presented with a discussion of ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with descriptions of internal and external validity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army medics who have graduated from a specialized postsecondary degree program built from their military training. Identifying common themes encountered by military members may yield an interpretive recourse for easing the process for the influx of soldiers that will ultimately make this transition as combat operations diminish globally.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology and the phenomenological method used in the study. The chapter begins with a review of the appropriateness of the research design, as well as, a justification for the use of the phenomenological method. Research questions that provide the focus of the study are identified, along with the role of the researcher, before moving to the population, sample type, and study participants. Procedures covering interview protocol, informed consent, confidentiality, geographic location, data collection are also detailed. Chapter 3 provides information concerning validity, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with a summary of content.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative Inquiry

The research design selected for this study was a qualitative inquiry, using the phenomenological method. Qualitative inquiry represents a means of researching what is often intangible (individual feelings and perceptions) and the relevance they hold to a person. These intangibles were the central point of focus in the transitioning 68W Health Care Specialist. The study was loosely controlled by me as the researcher to facilitate greater learning, as suggested by Creswell (2013). Moustakas (1994) detailed that qualitative research is devoid of the numeric or statistical quantification and used in social and behavioral sciences to focus on the entirety of a particular issue. Where quantitative research is representative of a concentration on "variance theory," qualitative research gravitates to "process theory" (Mohr, 1982 as cited by Maxwell, 2013, p. 29). Qualitative inquiry provides a means of concentration on the processes involved to ultimately attain a greater understanding of a particular issue (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Through the study of the processes, researchers derive answers centering on the *how* or *what* of a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Processes involved with the transition, and how they are perceived by the soldier as he or she *moves-in*, *moves-through*, and *moves-out*, play a key role in the study.

I used semistructured interviews conducted with the use of open-ended questions, which allow a researcher to uncover and identify the feelings and perceptions associated with a life event (Hennik, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). During the course of a qualitative study, these feelings and perceptions are analyzed and categorized into descriptive

themes (Creswell, 2013; Martin, 1986; Maxwell, 2013). This study concentrated on understanding the feelings and perceptions of the transitioning 68W Health Care Socialist who has graduate from a specialized degree program built from military training associated with the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). An interpretive approach represents the most appropriate means of adequately arriving at a greater understanding these feelings and perceptions. Qualitative inquiry, an interpretive approach, allows the researcher to attach meaning to particular lived experiences (Hennik et al., 2011) with the understanding that one's interpretation of the event is constructed from a historical and personal context (Crotty, 1998; Mayo, 2010).

Qualitative processes allow for the answers provided by participants during semistructured interviews to be utilized by researchers who arrive at the essence of a lived experience through the terminology provided directly from participants (Creswell, 2013; Hennik et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013). The specific words and context provided by participants was essential to the study because it provided a means for me as the researcher to gain a level of increased understanding of the lived experience of the 68W who had transitioned back into civilian society.

Phenomenological Method

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) first delivered the phenomenological method as a method of inquiry centered on a lived experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Within the phenomenological method, Husserl (1859-1938) introduced the concept of *lifeworld,* which represents the experiences of the *actual* life of the individual, as opposed to the *everyday* experiences encountered by an

individual (as cited in Moustakas, 1994). This method provides needed structure and procedure to qualitative inquiry. Moustakas (1994) maintained that the phenomenological method "provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of an experience" (p. 47). There are six fundamental steps engaged by researchers employing the phenomenological method; identifying the particular phenomenon or lived experience to increase knowledge on, remove researcher bias, collect a detailed description of the phenomenon from participants, identify essential elements through the use of bracketing, separate meaningful quotes from participants, and repeat until a situation point is attained (Creswell, 2013).

Researchers employing the phenomenological method must open themselves to the processes and information delivered through participant interaction while avoiding rigid structures that could prohibit an increased understanding of a life experience. Semistructured interviews provide the platform for the transfer of information between researcher and participant (Maxwell, 2013). In order to effectively employ the phenomenological method, the researcher must effectively bracket out personal biases and constructed knowledge and perceptions associated with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the identification and elimination of researcher opinion leads the researcher to the essence of the experience under study. Effective bracketing of personal opinions, constructs, and biases allowed me to approach the issue in a naïve, yet open-minded perspective needed to achieve a greater understanding.

Qualitative inquiry using the phenomenological method focuses on the shared life experiences participants in the real world (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012; Martin, 1986; Moustakas, 1994). Other methods engaged in qualitative inquiry – narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic and case studies - do not provide the ability to arrive at the *essence* of the shared life experiences as effectively as phenomenology. Narrative research concentrated on delivering a better understanding of "lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). Emphasis is placed on one or two participants to ultimately collect data through stories and then ordering them as they occurred chronologically. As this study placed emphasis equally on the lived experiences of several participants rather than simply one or two, the narrative approach was rejected. Grounded theory research is best suited for the discovery or development of a new theory which is "grounded" in the information provided by participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). The development of a theory in this type of research would hold the purpose of explaining the experience, which was not a desired outcome.

I rejected using the ethnographic approach for other reasons. Ethnographic research involves the identification of specific "patterns" in larger groups that engaged by those in phenomenology or narrative and grounded theory research (Creswell, 2013, p. 90). Ethnography has its roots in social structures and therefore concentrates on behaviors, beliefs, language, and shared values. Case studies take the researcher's focus in an entirely different direction. Unlike ethnography, the case study researcher places emphasis on gaining as better understanding of a case or cases within real life, rather than the social or cultural aspects (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology in turn focuses poignantly

on the identification of common meanings or the *essence* of a lived experience of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Because no empirical study has been conducted to facilitate a better understanding of the lived experience of Army 68W Health Care Specialists who earned a college degree and transitioned back into civilian society, the phenomenological method presented the most effective means of allowing the participants own words to provide a greater base of knowledge.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

- Q1. What changes occurred in the medic's feelings and perceptions after graduating from the specialized degree program and transitioning back to civilian life?

Secondary Research Questions

- Q2. How did the veteran perceive the level of impact that possession of a college degree had on their transition to civilian life?
- Q3. How did the veteran's feelings of self-worth and equality among civilian peers evolve after graduating from the specialized degree program?
- Q4. How were perceptions of the importance education in one's life altered as a result of the experience?

The primary research question and secondary research questions maintain a direct correlation to the phenomenon and are demonstrative of a clear-cut relationship to the problem statement and the described methodology of the study (Maxwell, 2013). The

progression from the problem statement to the research questions remains consistent with qualitative inquiry using the phenomenological method to arrive at the *essence* of a shared lived experience.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher assumes the role of instrument within qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). While my veteran status allows for a greater depth of understanding encompassing military life and culture, as well as the transition process, great care was taken to ensure that emphasis was maintained on the lived experience of participants. Individual preconceptions or researcher bias were effectively bracketed to allow for an enhancement of knowledge surrounding the *essence* of the lived experienced of participants. Miles, Huberman, and Salgado (2014) identified researcher bias in four well-defined categories; *holistic fallacy*, *elite bias*, *personal bias*, and *going negative*. Holistic fallacy is demonstrated when a researcher "interprets events as more patterned and congruent than they really are" (Miles, Huberman, & Salgado, 2014, p. 294). To this end, as the researcher I concentrated on the whole of the conversation, and themes or patterns that emerged through hand coding were triangulated through the use of the Van Kamm method of analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994).

Elite bias, as defined by Miles, Huberman, and Salgado (2014), is "overweighting data from articulate, well-informed, usually high-status participants and underrepresenting data from less articulate, lower status ones" (Miles, Huberman, & Salgado, 2014, p. 294). As such, the potential for a variance in transition experience did exist between lower and higher ranking individuals. To this end, discrepant cases derived

from the interviews of participants with varying rank is discussed in detail to avoid bias associated with military rank at separation.

Personal bias emerging in the researcher's personal agenda and can "skew the ability to represent and present fieldwork and data analysis in a trustworthy manor" (Miles, Huberman, & Salgado, 2014, p. 294).

Being employed at the university that facilitated the paradigm shift in curriculum development surrounding the 68W training based degree, I disclosed that I had no predisposed agenda and any potential contact with study participants would, if existing, be cursory at best. No interaction with study participants postgraduation from the program had occurred with any participant. Maxwell (2013) maintained that negotiating the relationship between researcher and participant is a critical element of the method; how one initiates and navigates through these relationships is representative of a "key *design* decision" (p. 90). As such, I acted as an active observer-researcher. Disclosure of my military service was used to provide a common level of cultural understanding that exists only between those that have served in the military.

Finally, avoiding *going negative*, or losing one's ability to effectively "bracketing ability" by "being co-opted into the perceptions and explanations of local participants" (Miles, Huberman, & Salgado, 2014, p. 294) was negated by the fact that interviews were conducted wherever the student is located via telephone or Skype video conference conversation.

As the researcher acting as the instrument in a qualitative study, I understood that each interview had to stand equally on its own. Participants, regardless of rank, location, or demographic, contributed to a greater understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study are Army 68W Health Care Specialists who graduated from a specialized degree program and made the transition from military service to civilian life. A judgment, or purpose sample, was used in this study. Purposive sampling allowed for the identification of the number of participants needed to appropriately answer the research questions within the framework of the study, and avoid the acquisition of a redundancy of information affiliates with a saturation point (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Because the degree offering began in 2012 there are an extremely limited number of 68W Health Care Specialists graduates that have made the transition to civilian life. For this project, the sample size was seven participants. The achieved mix of the sample participants for the study included variances in age, gender, race, rank at separation, and geographic location.

Instrumentation

To act as both tool and guide, I used an interview protocol throughout the semistructured interview process. Previous studies using the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition to increase the understanding of the transition a military member undertakes when leaving the service and entering college (DiRameo et al., 2008; Green &

Hayden, 2013; Robertson & Brott, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) served as the foundation for the development of the protocol.

Since "there is no mechanical way of converting research questions into methods" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 100), validity was enhanced through the triangulation of the protocol substance and questions through a focus group (Janesick, 2011) comprised of veterans that both had and did not have college degrees prior to their transition from active duty to civilian life. The questions listed on the interview protocol provided the semistructure needed for the interview. Follow-up questions were driven by participant responses and were intended to elicit additional, more comprehensive detail.

Population

A population is representative of a group of individuals that maintain specific common characteristics which set them apart from other groups (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The population for this study was U.S. Army 68W Health Care Specialists who graduated from a specialized degree program and then made the transition from military service to civilian life. The existing population is extremely limited since the degree offering was made available in 2012.

Sampling

A judgment, or purpose sample, was used in this study. Purposive sampling allowed for the identification of the number of participants needed to appropriately answer the research questions within the framework of the study, and avoid the acquisition of a redundancy of information affiliated with a saturation point (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Commensurate with purposive sampling, homogenous sampling

also guided sampling. Homogenous sampling involves the selection of individuals which have specific characteristics or traits (Creswell, 2013). As previously stated, participants were Army 68W Health Care Specialists that served on active duty, graduated from a specific college program with a curriculum built from military training, and made the transition from military service to civilian society. Because the degree offering began in 2012 there are an extremely limited number of 68W Health Care Specialists graduates that have made the transition to civilian life. For this project, the sample size was seven participants. The mix of the sample participants included variances in age, gender, race, rank at separation, and geographic location.

Study Participants

The culture adopted by military members fosters membership in, or relationships to, social media groups highlighting military service and MOS. An invitation to participate was posted on social media sites designed for the 68W Health Care Specialist for the purpose of recruitment. Individual who met the criteria (68W graduate of customized degree program that transitioned from active duty to civilian society) were asked to email their intent to a dedicated study email address (ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com). For this project, the sample size was determined through interview process to be 7 participants.

According to Creswell (2013) participants were advised of the potential for risk (stress, frustration) that accompanies inclusion, as well as the benefits of the study (Creswell, 2013). All participants were also advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time without notice.

The research posed minimal risk to participants; no child was included in any part of the study. Participants were emailed a brief questionnaire after emailing their interest in being a part of the study (Appendix F). All study participants submitted an informed consent form. The unlikely event that an interviewee felt increased stress as a result of the interview did not occur. As such, there was no need to stop the interview to provide the interviewee with contact information of Military One Source who would then direct the individual to available no cost counseling provided by the Department of Veteran's Affairs.

Procedures

Focus Group for Interview Protocol

A focus group was convened to hone the interview protocol and questions asked during the interview. The focus group also represented an element of triangulation for the study. The benefits of triangulation in qualitative inquiry center on "increasing confidence in research data, creating innovative ways of understanding a phenomenon, revealing unique findings, challenging or interrogating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem" (Thurmond, 2001, p. 254). A time limit of 30 minutes was adhered to for all participants. The focus group consisted of veterans from all branches of service who both had and did not have a college degree prior to separating from the military and returning to civilian life. Participants were emailed a participation invitation (Appendix E) and a Focus Group Consent Form (Appendix A). Participation in the focus group was confidential.

Interview protocol

Interviews were conducted by phone and on Skype (audio/video conference). The telephone provided a means of communication for those unable or not wanting to use Skype. One thirty-minute interview was conducted per participant using a dedicated interview protocol (Appendix C). Connectivity was not lost or interrupted during any of the interviews. To ensure the greatest connectivity, the researcher did not be use a cell phone, but rather a LAN line while conducting telephone interviews. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Participants were also be provided information on the dissemination of final study results.

Video Conference Interviews

The preferred method of conducting the semistructured interview was to take place via video conference over Skype. For the majority of participants, this was not a viable option. A secondary means of conducting an interview was the telephone, without video. Limiting factors that determine which method were used centered the willingness of the participant to create a Skype account and the availability of Wi-Fi services. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. I also took notes throughout the interview process.

The use of Skype or other audio/video services is an accepted method of data collection within social sciences (Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). Skype provided the researcher and participant a means of communicating that surpassed the voice-only technology associated with telephone conversation because on-screen video was added. As a result, the researcher was afforded

an added dimension that can only accompany visual communication. Certain limitations associated with this technology included participants having access to both a computer with visual and audio capabilities, and availability of Wi-Fi services needed to maintain connection.

Most participants did not feel comfortable in creating a new Skype account and expressed the desire to do the interview over the phone. Holt (2010) maintained that the telephone interview provided a greater depth of information because the lack of face-to-face interaction forces constant engagement by both researcher and participant. In this case, the telephone also offered more flexibility to an already limited population from which to draw participants from.

Informed Consent

All participants, both focus group and those interviewed for the study, received consent forms (Appendixes A and B respectively). These documents explained the purpose of the study, the ability for withdrawal at any time, and required either a participant signature or confirmation email sent to a dedicated study email address (ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com) (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Participation in the focus group and study was also completely voluntary. Gaining informed consent constituted a means of identifying and maintaining ethical behaviors throughout the study (Miles et al., 2014).

Confidentiality

Maintaining focus group and study participant confidentiality was an important aspect of this study involving voluntary participation (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman,

& Saldana, 2014). All participants were identified by numeric assignment and all records are maintained in a single computer file (NVIVO) dedicated solely to the study. In addition, as identified by Miles et al. (2014) coding during the analysis process also aided in maintaining confidentiality. During this study, each participant's initial email was responded to with a request for basic data to verify that the individual met the criteria used for participation. This data was immediately transferred into a Word document and stored in the dedicated study file (NVIVO) within my computer. All original emails were destroyed after saving as Word documents in an effort to alleviate the potential for theft of the information via internet hacker.

Geographic Location

Participant interviews were conducted via computer (Skype) or telephone from wherever the individual was located. I am located in Orlando, Florida and this served as my location during all interviews.

The focus group was held at a conference center at Kaplan University (16250 Ingenuity Drive, Orlando, FL., 32826). Permission for the use of the conference center was attained prior to use and included as an appendix on the dissertation. The focus group met only once.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred during the interview process and encompassed ethical research principles. As such data collection is tied to the ability of participants to assume a role of self-governing individual with the right to opt-out at any time, appropriate research conduct, minimizing potential harm to participants, and fair treatment

throughout the participant selection and all aspects of the study was adhered to (Punch, 2014). Interviews took place via video conference over Skype or by telephone, without video. Limiting factors that determined which method was used included the availability of Wi-Fi services to study participants. Interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. I also took notes throughout the interview process.

While Skype or video conferencing was the preferred method, only one participant opted to use it. For this reason, the telephone provided the primary means of allowing ne to conduct the semistructured interviews. Holt (2010) maintained that the telephone interview provided a greater depth of information because the lack of face-to-face interaction forces constant engagement by both researcher and participant. The telephone also offered more flexibility to an already limited population from which to draw participants from.

All data collected was kept confidential. Only the researcher, dissertation chair, and committee member have access to data collected. This access is designed to facilitate the increase of knowledge and social change associated with the study. Notes, consent forms, emails, and interview recordings will be maintained securely for five years before being properly destroyed. All data is being stored on my personal computer in an NVIVO file dedicated to this dissertation only. Data stored on my personal computer is password protected and segregated from other information stored on the device. Written documentation in any form was scanned for electronic storage and the original document shredded.

Ethical Considerations

Agreements

The researcher produced an invitation to participate in both the focus group (AppendixD) and study (Appendix E). All focus group participants were then sent a consent form (Appendix A) and study participants were also sent a dedicated consent form (Appendix B). Both focus group and study participants were required to email a dedicated email address (ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com) the following statement; "I consent" in order to participate. Participants in the focus group or interviews will be provided a summary of the results of the study.

Participants

The study hinged participants who assumed a role as a self-governing individual with the right to opt-out at any time (Punch, 2014). Appropriate research conduct, minimizing potential harm to participants, and fair treatment throughout participant selection and all aspects of the study was strictly adhered to (Punch, 2014).

Data

In order to main confidentiality, all data collected is kept securely. Only the researcher, dissertation chair, and committee member have access to data collected. This access is designed to facilitate the increase of knowledge and social change associated with the study. Notes, consent forms, emails, and interview recordings are being maintained electronically and securely for five years before they will be properly destroyed. All data is stored in an NVIVO file on my personal computer. Data stored on my personal computer is password protected and segregated from other information

stored on the device in a singular NVIVO file. Written documentation in any form was scanned for electronic storage and the original document shredded.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research using the phenomenological method strives to arrive at the *essence* of the lived experience of participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The end result of the study is a description of the lived experience as depicted from the first-hand information of participants. A form of data analysis occurred during the interview process where the researcher took detailed notes and asked relevant follow-up questions (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Janesick, 2011; Miles et al., 2014). Interview notes were written into more cohesive detail and transcription of interviews will occurred prior to the start of the formal data analysis plan.

Initially codes, "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" were used in a two-cycle process (Miles et al., 2014, p. 71). First cycle coding allowed for the development of larger segments of information to be ordered. During this first cycle, I incorporated descriptive coding, whereby a word or phrase was used to categorize the content descriptively (Miles et al., 2014). Value coding served an important role in first cycle coding. Attaching this measure to individual values, attitudes, and beliefs allows the identification and isolation of thoughts surrounding individual perceptions, thoughts about others, and opinions and prejudices (Miles et al., 2014). The incorporation of more than one coding method worked to triangulate data analysis. Data analysis followed the Van Kaam method as

outlined by Moustakas (1994). Specific stages were utilized in the coding of data which ultimately led to the identification of themes.

When moving to second level coding, data was grouped into more finite categories or themes. The computer was an essential tool that was used to store all data; handwritten notes, transcribed interviews, and audio recordings. NVIVO software was used to store data related to the study because it offers a single-point storage and reference point (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). As maintained by Moustakas (1994) the experience or perspective of the researcher was not used to detail the lived experiences of participants.

Following the Van Kamm method of data analysis, once emergent patterns were correlated into specific themes, I produced a narrative description of the themes which culminated at the essence of the phenomenon being studied.

Internal and External Validity

Internal validity peaks when the study design is devoid of error, while external validity hinges on transferability to differing populations (Creswell, 2013). The use of a focus group in the development of the interview protocol, the semistructured interview process, and first-hand data derived directly from the lived experiences of participants added to the level of internal validity (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). External validity of this study is extremely limited because of the finite, but expanding population from which the sample was drawn. Participants were limited to Army 68W Health Care Specialists who completed a specialized degree while serving on active duty, and then transitioned back into civilian society.

Credibility

Credibility was achieved through interview saturation and triangulation. Triangulation in this study was achieved through the focus group, and the transcription of its content, audio recordings, and transcriptions of participant interviews, researcher notes, and employment and detailed documentation of the Van Kamm method of phenomenological data analysis. While the sample size was limited by the small number of Army 68W Health Care Specialist graduates from an identified program and also transitioned back into civilian society, the similarity of military culture and training accurately represented the larger population.

Transferability

Research for this study centered on Army 68W Health Care Specialists who graduated from an identified program and transitioned back into civilian society. Participants were acquired using a purposive sampling process. As such, results transferrable only to similarly trained 68W Health Care Specialists who graduated from this specialized degree and assimilated back into civilian society. Results are not transferable to Army Health Care Specialists who served in Reserve or National Guard units as these are considered part-time or a secondary means of employment. Reserve and National Guard soldiers are considered a part of civilian society because they are not tied to military service at all times.

Dependability

Participants were recruited using social media and each served on active duty in the Army as a 68W Health Care Specialist. As such, the training for each individual was

standardized at both basic military training (Boot Camp) and AIT through a curriculum delivered at METC. While extremely limited in population size, rank at separation was an important factor in arriving at the essence of the lived phenomenon. Data collection included a first-hand accounting of the lived experience of participants.

Confirmability

As the researcher, I worked to identify and eliminate researcher bias, predispositions, and other beliefs to approach the subject as naively as attainable. Semistructured interviews were used to allow participants to have some control over the direction of follow-up questioning.

Summary and Transition

In Chapter 3, I detailed the research methodology of the study in its entirety. The study employed qualitative inquiry and the phenomenological method to ultimately arrive at results that withstand the rigors of validity (internal and external), credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The use of qualitative inquiry allowed the first-hand data collected directly from study participants to deliver the essence of the shared experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994); in this case feelings and perceptions of army medics that served on active duty, graduated from a specialized degree program, and transitioned back into civilian society.

Researchers employing the phenomenological method must open themselves to the processes and information delivered through participant interaction while avoiding rigid structures that could prohibit an increased understanding of a life experience. In order to effectively employ the phenomenological method, I effectively bracketed out

personal biases and constructed knowledge and perceptions associated with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), the identification and elimination of researcher opinion ultimately leads the researcher to the *essence* of the lived experience under study. Effective bracketing of personal opinions, constructs, and biases allowed me to approach the issue in a naïve, yet open-minded perspective needed to achieve a greater understanding.

Research questions guided the qualitative, phenomenological study. The primary research question and secondary research questions maintained a direct correlation to the phenomenon and are demonstrative of the clear-cut relationship to the problem statement and the described methodology of the study (Maxwell, 2013). The progression from the problem statement to the research questions remained consistent with qualitative inquiry using the phenomenological method to arrive at the *essence* of a shared lived experience.

The role of the researcher was clearly defined as the instrument in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). As such, I was an active observer-researcher. Disclosure of my military service was used to provide a common level of cultural understanding that exists only between those that have served in the military. While my veteran status allows for a greater depth of understanding encompassing military life, culture, and transition process, great care was taken to ensure that emphasis was maintained on the lived experience of participants. To act as both tool and guide, I used an interview protocol throughout the semistructured interview process. Previous studies using the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition to increase the understanding of the transition a military member undertakes when leaving the service and entering college

(DiRameo et al., 2008; Green & Hayden, 2013; Robertson & Brott, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) served as the foundation for the development of the protocol.

The population is representative of Army 68W Health Care Specialists that have served on active duty, graduated from a specialized college degree program, and transitioned back into civilian society. Social media was used to foster participation and a purposive sampling method was employed.

Great care was extended to ensure that all ethical considerations were adequately accounted for. Agreements ensured that study participants understood what the study was trying to accomplish, how it will accomplish the task, and detailed that their participation could be terminated at any time.

Data analysis was clearly mapped and consisted of organizing notes into narratives and compiling interview transcriptions. Coding was accomplished in a two-cycle process and then triangulated using the Van Kaam method of data analysis. First-cycle coding allowed for the development of larger segments of information to be ordered. During this first cycle, this study incorporated descriptive coding and values coding methods (Miles et al., 2014).

When moving to second level coding, data was grouped into more finite categories or themes. Emerging from these more finite codes were patterns, usually consisting of four interconnected descriptive segments; categories or themes, causes/explanations, relationships, or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). Once emergent patterns were correlated into specific themes, I produced a narrative description of the themes which will culminated at the essence of the phenomenon being

studied. Data was then reexamined through the use of the Van Kaam method described by Moustakas (1994). The incorporation of more than one coding method worked to triangulate data analysis. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The transition from military service to civilian life has been difficult for many Americans who served in the U.S. armed services during the Global War on Terror. Many military members encounter great difficulty with the transition back into civilian life due to combination of poor economic conditions (Phillips, Braud, Andrews, & Bullock, 2007), posttraumatic stress disorder, mild traumatic brain injury and depression (Eisen, Schultz, Vogt, Glickman, Elwy, Drainoni, Isei-Bonsu, and Martin, 2012), and alcohol abuse (Bohnert, Bossarte, Britton, Chermack, & Blow, 2012). Prior to this study, little was known little is known of the effect that being a college graduate has on servicepeople's reentry into civilian life.

This study represented the first steps toward eliminating the knowledge gap surrounding graduate experiences in thought prior to, during and after they made the transition back into civilian society. As a result, the primary research question, and the secondary research questions, concentrated on uncovering the lived experiences of study participants to ultimately provide a better understanding of feelings associated with the transition. The findings outlined in this study indicated that initial fears were replaced with higher perceptions of self-worth, and confidence, which saw each participant through the transition process.

This chapter delivers the means in which participants were obtained and a portrait of their demographic makeup before outlining data acquisition, storage, and the method of analysis. I will also outlay the steps that were taken to provide for accuracy and

quality of the data collected and analyzed. Ultimately, I will detail the specific themes that emerged from the journey to arrive the essence of the phenomenon.

Focus Group

Recruitment

Focus group sample recruitment was accomplished as detailed in the study design. Participants were recruited by placing an invitation (see Appendix E) on social media sites catering to veterans in the local (Orlando, Florida) area. The purpose of the focus group was to triangulate the interview protocol questions that would be used during semistructured study interviews. The focus group population was far larger in this area than would be available for the follow-up study. Nine potential candidates emailed their willingness to participate and were then invited to my office conference center, located at 12650 Ingenuity Drive, Orlando, Florida at 8:30AM EST on March 18, 2015. Six candidates were selected from the overall nine that volunteered. The three candidates that were excluded volunteered after the deadline for participation had passed.

Demographics

The desired demographic makeup for the focus group was a group of military veterans that had separated from service and made the transition back into civilian society. I was specifically interested in having a balance of focus group participants who had college degrees prior to separating from the military and participants who did not have a degree prior to separating, as this would allow for input from both perspectives.

Study

Recruitment

The study sample recruitment was accomplished as detailed in the study design. While the overall population of Army medics that had graduated from the specialized degree being examined was minimal, I was able to reach out to sufficient potential participants via social media. The invitation to participate (see Appendix D) was posted on two dedicated 68W sites on six occasions, so as to cover morning, afternoon, and evening time periods. The posting of the invitation to participate was limited to six only postings so as to avoid generating potential ill feelings that often result from constant bombardment of unwanted advertising.

The responses were sporadic, but eventually totaled eight volunteers. Each of the eight potential participants were then sent an email containing six preparticipation questions (see Appendix F) designed to validate that the individuals met the criteria needed to validate that these individuals had participated in the shared lived experience. Participation decisions were made on the following criteria: participants must have held Army MOS 68W before separating from active duty military service and must have graduated from a customized degree built only for the 68W MOS. In addition, to avoid any effects from stress associated with participation, female volunteers were not allowed to take part if they disclosed that they were pregnant. No participant was screened out for pregnancy. Arriving at a diverse, geographically separated population that contained a range of differing rank at discharge was most desired. Of the eight, only one volunteer did not meet the requirements for study participation.

The seven postscreening participants selected to participate were eager, but also displayed a level of skepticism. All of the participants preferred to be interviewed via the telephone; times were always arrived at through working around the schedule of the participant. All skepticism disappeared during the interview as each participant came to the understanding that the study was real and not a mask for selling them something.

Telephonic interviews were conducted over a two-week period in April, 2015. The research tools used in the study were semistructured interviews and researcher notes. Data collection practices employed during the study were accomplished in accordance with the standardized procedures and ethical guidelines detailed in Chapter 3, so as to ensure confidentiality and validity.

Demographics

Army 68W medics who had transitioned back into civilian life after active duty service after graduating from a specialized degree program represented the overall population from which I drew my sample. While the existing population was extremely small at the time of the study, growth will occur over time as more colleges and universities move towards this paradigm shift in curriculum.

The sample of the population used in the study was acquired as planned and consisted of participants ranging between 25 and 48 years of age. Ethnicity and gender were also mixed and rank at discharge ranged between E-3, Private First Class, and E-9, Sergeant Major. Four of the participants resided in eastern states (Florida, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Maryland), two from the Mid-west (Iowa and Michigan) and the remaining individual lived in the geographic west (Wyoming).

Data Collection

Focus Group Participant

Focus group participant were used to triangulate the questions used in the semistructured interviews conducted with study participants that had held the Army MOS 68W, Medic, who shared the lived experience of graduating from a specialized college degree program and then transitioned back into civilian life. The perspective of military veterans who had all made the transition from active duty to civilian was essential to comprehending the scope of questioned to be asked to study participants. Including focus group participants that both had and did not have college degrees prior to their transition allowed for comprehensive triangulation by including both perspectives.

Focus Group Participant Overview

Table 1.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Age	Gender	Branch of Service	Time in Service	Rank at Separation	Degree Prior to Separation
P1	White	48	Male	Army	8 Years	E-6	Yes
P2	African-American	39	Male	Navy	3 Years	E-3	No
P3	White	51	Male	Navy	26 Years	E-8	No
P4	Hispanic	37	Female	Army	10 Years	E-6	Yes
P5	African-American	28	Female	Army	4 Years	E-4	No
P6	African-American	40	Male	Navy	4 Years	E-4	Yes

Data collection from the focus group participants occurred as outlined in Chapter 3. Participants arrived at the conference center, located at my office at 12650 Ingenuity Drive, Orlando, Florida at 8:30AM EST on March 18, 2015. In adherence to confidentiality protocols participants used only first names during the meeting, but no participant name was included in the study. Instead, unique identifies replaced participant names. While all in attendance agreed that the interview protocol would ultimately allow for the arrival at the essence of the shared phenomenon, one addition was unanimously called for. This addition centered on asking participants to detail thoughts centering on if study participants would or would not make any changes in the educational decisions they made. This question would then be added as a conclusion that allowed for participant reflection. The length of the focus group meeting was held to 30 minutes in order to pose the least amount of inconvenience to participants.

Study Participant

As the purpose of the study was to gain insight on the lived experiences of Army 68W Medics that had graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training and then transitioned back into civilian life, it was necessary to allow those who lived the experience to accurately detail it through an interview process. The phenomenological method allows for the arrival at the core or essence of the lived experience through immersion in it. Semistructured interviews provided the platform for researcher immersion.

Participant Overview

Table 2.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Years on Active Duty	Rank at Separation	State of Residence
P1	29	Male	White	6	E-5	IA
P2	31	Female	African-American	8	E-5	MI
P3	28	Male	White	4	E-4	FL
P4	25	Female	Hispanic/White	4	E-4	KY
P5	35	Male	African-American	8	E-5	WV
P6	48	Male	White	21	E-8	WY
P7	47	Male	African-American	23	E-9	MD

Data collection was accomplished as detailed in Chapter 3. All data for the study was derived from semistructured interviews with seven study participants. Each participant was interviewed live, in person via telephone. Participants were in their respective homes while I was in my Florida home-office. In adherence to confidentiality and ethical protocols, no participant name was utilized within the study. Instead, unique identifies replaced participant names. The length of all interviews was held to 30 minutes in order to pose the least amount of inconvenience to participants. Consent forms were acquired via email prior to the initiation of all interviews.

Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured participant interviews were guided by the interview protocol (see Appendix C) which had been triangulated through the focus group. Follow-up questioning was derived from participant answers to the initial questions. Relevant follow-up questioning allowed for a more comprehensive, relevant conversation that ultimately yielded specific themes.

Interview Notes

The use of interview notes allowed participant depictions to take on a rich detail. During the flow of the interview details such as voice inflections and detailed comments were documented for use. These notes then helped me to be able to move seamlessly into needed areas.

Data Maintenance and Security

All data associated with the study, including both focus group and study participants information, researcher notes, audio files, transcriptions, and coding data were stored in a NVIVO file on my personal computer and secured as outlined in Chapter 3. A password protected external hard drive was used as a back-up, and changes to the back-up were made after each change in or addition to any relevant data. All identifying information was removed prior storage.

Data Analysis

The key to the analysis of data collected during this qualitative phenomenological study comes with the understanding that the lived experiences of participants must detail the essence of the shared phenomenon; not the interpretation of others which includes the

researcher. As maintained by Moustakas (1994) the experience or perspective of the researcher cannot be used to detail the lived experiences of participants.

Data analysis initially consisted of organizing notes into narratives and compiling interview transcriptions. Coding was accomplished in a two cycle process and then triangulated using the Van Kaam method of data analysis. First cycle coding allowed for the development of larger segments of information to be ordered. During this first cycle, this study incorporated descriptive coding and values coding methods (Miles et al., 2014).

When moving to second level coding, data was grouped into more finite categories or themes. Emerging from these more finite codes were patterns, usually consisting of four interconnected descriptive segments; categories or themes, causes/explanations, relationships, or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). Once emergent patterns were correlated into specific themes, I produced a narrative description of the themes which will culminated at the essence of the phenomenon being studied. Data was then reexamined through the use of the Van Kaam method described by Moustakas (1994).

In accordance with the Van Kaam method, all transcripts were read to allow the researcher to comprehend what was said. Horizontalization, a method of assigning equal value to a participant statement which represents a segment of meaning (Moustakas, 1994) was completed by reviewing each transcript and identifying significant statements that detailed the participant's experience, and then listing these preliminary groupings.

These quotes were then transposed onto a separate Word document with two distinct columns; one in which the quote was placed and the other to assign an identifying code.

Next, I used the guidelines outlined by Moustakas (1994) to eliminate invariant constituents. There are two key factors in identifying and eliminating invariant constituents. A statement or quote must be analyzed to determine whether it contained "a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it" and second, whether it was "possible to abstract and label it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

Producing clusters of meaning was next step in the evolution of data analysis for this study. I reviewed each horizantalization, the groupings of participant statements which I had assigned meaning, to identify emergent themes. Labeled constituents represented the emergence of relevant clusters of meaning associated with the Army medics that had completed a specialized college degree before transitioning back into civilian society (Moustakas, 1994). These clusters were ordered chronologically into the following categories; pretransition and transition. Those occurring in transition were then overlaid with the tenants of the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition; *moving-in*, moving-through, and moving-out.

Adhering to the Van Kaam method of analysis, I then moved to produce an individual textural description of the feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, experienced by singular participants. Four participants were selected for their variance in rank and time of service. Each individual textural description was derived from the labeled constituents initially identified during the horizantalization process, and then

grouped into clusters of meaning. These clusters of meaning provided the heart or essence of the textural descriptions I created for four of the participants in the study. I have provided an example of one such textural description as Appendix G. I then turned to producing a composite description encompassing all study participants. The composite demonstrated the essence of the participant's experience associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts.

It is important to understand that no two interviews are exactly alike. However, each displayed maintained a commonality with the other. These commonalities are represented in specific themes that resonate the essence of the lived experience. The relevance of these themes was demonstrated in the number of interviews it appeared in. The themes that were ultimately identified were included as an outcome when at least five of the seven interviewees identified it as part of their descriptions of the experience.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Evidence of trustworthiness is essential to any qualitative, phenomenological study. Trustworthiness amounts to the overall viability of information contained within it and typically includes four key aspects that combine to facilitate it; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Prior to conducting the semistructured interviews, the convening of a focus group took place in order to add validity through the triangulation of questions being proposed to be asked to study participants. This resulted in the modification of the interview protocol and the addition of a reflective question as a conclusion to the interview. The

focus group was recorded and then transcribed. All subsequent interviews were also recorded and then transcribed. One interview is included (Appendix H) for review. All identifying personal information has been removed to adhere to confidentiality and ethical protocols. From the transcriptions of the interviews, a detailed, rich, inclusive description was utilized to deliver the essence of the lived experiences of participants. Evidence of this rich description comes in the form of allowing participants to *speak* in the form of quotes from their transcribed interviews.

In order to identify and clarify potential researcher bias it is understood that I am an employee of a university that offers a variant of specialized degrees offered to military members possessing specific Army Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), Navy Rates, and Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC). To facilitate proper bracketing, I produced a list of preconceived notions prior to beginning the data collection process. These preconceived notions included thoughts that I perceived soldiers maintaining as they transitioned back into civilian society with a college degree. As a researcher employed by a university I have also identified that I have had no prior contact or interaction with study participants.

In addition, as a researcher employing the phenomenological method I have engaged a technique described as bracketing (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell 2013; and Moustakas, 1994). In an effort to properly bracket personal researcher bias and effectively set it aside. To facilitate bracketing I worked diligently to forgo any predisposed or bias thought and concentrate only on the words and thoughts conveyed by participants. It is, as described by Moustakas (1994), the job of the researcher to ensure

that the lived experiences of participants must detail the essence of the shared phenomenon; not the interpretation of the researcher.

Credibility

No singular item, event, or procedure alone can ensure the overall credibility of a given study. Therefore, triangulation, a process involving the use of multiple data sources to produce understanding (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) is often used in qualitative research. Using multiple methods is therefore designed to provide deeper meaning within qualitative research. Triangulation in this study was achieved through the focus group, and the transcription of its content, audio recordings, and transcriptions of participant interviews, researcher notes, and employment and detailed documentation of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis.

In addition to triangulation, the self-identification of personal researcher preconceived notions served as a means of properly bracketing bias. This bracketing dramatically lessons the opportunity for the emergence of bias by bringing it to the forefront of thought. Only through constant efforts like those employed through bracketing, can bias be effectively reduced.

Transferability

Transferability of qualitative phenomenological studies is typically limited to those participating in the study. The findings associated with this study reduced the knowledge gap currently in existence and pave the way for future studies to expand upon. The similarities in the answers provided by all of the study participants does however hint

at the potential expansion of transferability, but this could only be validated through additional future studies.

Dependability

Dependability of the study is facilitated by the use of documented techniques in study design and method. Use of the phenomenological method within qualitative inquiry adds a level of structure (Creswell, 2013). This structure is further compounded through the use of a theoretical perspective or lens and comprehensive documentation throughout all aspects of the study. All aspects of the study design, data collection, storage, and analysis were reported in explicit detail to allow potential replication by future researchers.

Confirmability

As the researcher, the primary research tool in qualitative studies, I framed the study on practices and principles that correlate to this type of research. Each segment was designed and implemented using established methods and practices that included the use of phenomenology as a method and the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition as a theoretical perspective to provide an established means of structure which adds to the overall confirmability of the work. In addition, thorough documentation of procedures and consistent rechecking of data was employed throughout the course of the study.

Results: Themes in Correlation to Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army Medics who have

graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training. The findings presented below are directly correlated to the research questions and designed to bring the essence of the shared experience to light. The listing of each theme will also include some participant statements that were used in the data analysis to label it. This was followed by analysis of the relationship between the themes and the research questions. Discrepant cases will then be examined.

In order to better arrive at the essence of the phenomenon, themes are separated into two distinct time periods; those that are pretransition and those that are not. Those themes deemed transitional are positioned in accordance with the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition as *moving-in*, *moving-through*, and *moving-out*. Themes were identified if five of the seven participants describe the same experience. Participant statements are taken directly from the labeled constituents in horizontalization and subsequent clusters of meaning identified through the use of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis. The use of direct quotes allows the themes to be explained in the participant's own words and best depicts the essence of the shared phenomenon.

Pretransition Theme 1

Predegree perceptions of self-worth were lower than perceptions of civilian peers that had earned a degree. This theme emerged asking participants; prior to enrolling in the specialized degree program, from an educational or career oriented perspective, how did you view yourself compared to civilian your counterparts that had earned a college degree? All study participants maintained unanimously that a civilian in possession a degree held a distinct advantage over them. It is important to note that answers to this

question included both preenlistment and post enlistment perceptions. However, in either case, the participants saw themselves as negatively unequal to their civilian counterparts. This distinct feeling is best delivered in the words of the study participants. Here are some examples;

> P2: Oh I was at a disadvantage for sure. I was really upset initially that I could not go to college. It really bothered me.
>
> P3: Because they had the degree you realize, you know, that they have the heads up. And it's one of the reasons I decided to go ahead and get my degree.
>
> P4: I had great experience and great training, but before I had that piece of paper that said I graduated from college I don't think I was, I could compete with someone who did.
>
> P4: Oh I was at a disadvantage. I mean there was no way I could get a job like I have now. I have four years of real experience that that started at METC and then put into practice in Bethesda. But I didn't have a degree so I couldn't get the job if I got out. The right job I mean.
>
> P7: Well I saw them as having a distinct advantage on me. That being said, this is a retrospective look because at the time I never gave any thought. In other words, I went my way and they went their way. That was it. If I was to have gotten out of the military and had to face one of them in an interview there's no doubt in my mind that they would have gotten any job over me because of their degree.

Summary of Pretransition Theme 1

Each participant felt that they were negatively impacted by not continuing onto get their degree in comparison to peers that had done so. For this reason, a distinct lack of confidence in employability was evident. Each saw a distinct advantage possessed by their civilian peers.

Pretransition Theme 2

Participants believed that the military and peers positively influenced their decision to pursue education. This theme emerged from responses to questions involving reasons for enrolling in the 68W based degree program while on active duty. Military commanders and noncommissioned officers at duty stations held briefings to encourage and explain the importance of education. Participant examples include;

> P1: You go through basic and AIT and then you're sent to your first duty station. And then you see some guys they say they're going to class and you start asking them questions.
>
> P2: Well the command had a briefing. They told us all about this new program that was made for those that were in the 68 MOS from, from, this college. It was supposed to be a faster way for us to get a degree; it was an Associates.
>
> P2: A friend of mine and I left a briefing and we got on the speakerphone we call the school.
>
> P4: Our commanders briefed all of us on the importance of education. They said we should take advantage of all the programs offered by the Army. Or senior NCOs, these were the people I really worked hand-in-hand with, they also kept

talking about it. One day I was near the base education office and just stopped in. I started talking with the counselor and they told me about the program that was made from my training.

P6: I was about halfway through my career when I started seeing, I mean when, when, the Army started placing importance on it. They started emphasizing it more and more and definitely put a higher emphasis on it. Yeah that's one of the things that made me start to think about it. Because if I wanted to advance in my career I really needed to get some, some, type of education.

P6: First it was points for college credits and then it became an Associate's degree. Once it became required for promotion boards with your peers, education became important as far as getting promoted.

P7: It was actually quite far in. I was in before education became a priority in the military. In other words I saw it go from something that some guys did, to something that was advocated for by commanders. Promotion points were offered for college credits obtained, and this made it important for those seeking to get a higher rank. I had already achieved or surpassed the ranks that were affected by educational promotion points. But at some point you realize that you're not going to be in the military forever. It was when I really started thinking about getting out that I began looking at colleges.

Summary of Pretransition Theme 2

The Army gave promotion points to enlisted soldiers for college education. When younger soldiers arrived at their first permanent duty station they were briefed by

commanders as to the benefit education brought for career advancement. Senior soldiers saw the educational policy enacted long after their enlistment, and were then briefed as to the importance of education when the policies were enacted. All Army 68W soldiers wanting advancement could then get promotion points in return for passing grades in college classes. Soldiers were further influenced to begin or continue their education by peers wanting to do the same.

Pretransition Theme 3

Convenience and transferability of military training into college credit was an important factor in enrolling in the selected degree program. This theme emerged in response to gaining a better understanding of the reasons behind enrolling in the 68W based degree program. It emerged as a byproduct of each participant's response to moving forward with their education. In the words of participants;

> P1: I talked to a guy my unit that had graduated from it. He said it was easy. He even did classes while we were in Afghanistan. They do it all online. I actually saw a couple of classes he was taken as they happened. You know when you're off in Afghanistan there is not a lot to do, so I checked it out. For some reason I just knew that this was something I can do.
>
> P3: Well I heard about it from one of my buddies; he was doing it and it's a pretty amazing program. He did a little research about it, but it was only five classes that I needed. This was pretty cool, they took all the training that I did and it left, like math and English. So I decided to knock it out.

P4: My first class was an English class. It was really good and everything was online. That made it easy for me because I never really knew where I would be.

P5: With what my experience will stand for and only having five or six classes it was perfect. It helped me get my degree really fast and that was the one thing I really wanted.

P7: Another Command Sergeant Major mentioned it in passing. I walked back down the hall after thinking about what he said to make sure that I heard him correctly. He said I would take around five classes and be done with the associates degree. I asked him about it and then called the school to hear more. They confirmed it, so I transferred in the credits that I had already taken plus my military credits.

P7: I got credit for just about everything in the degree. My military training really counted heavily. They told me that they actually built the degree from the transcripts of the 68 whiskey. It made me feel great to know that my military training was on par with others; I mean other colleges.

Summary of Pretransition Theme 3

Being online, the classroom essentially traveled with the student. This translated to the belief this would be easier than having to physically attend classes. In addition, all of the participants placed importance on the fact that the degree curriculum offered significant college credit for their military training. In the mind of the interviewees this meant that they received a large number of promotion points when an audit if their military training record, the Joint Service Transcript (JST) was completed. This coupled

with the fact that there were four or five classes that needed to be completed, and they were available in an online format, clearly impacted the decision to move forward.

Pretransition Theme 4

Each participant experienced increased self-pride upon graduation. While clearly part of one's self-worth perception, pride was a dominant word used in all interviews when describing feelings associated with graduation. Pride was also expressed by the family members of the participants. This answer was typically provided when directly asked how graduation made the participant feel. In the words of participants:

> P2: Like I said; having the degree was a big deal, but I felt like, I know this may sound silly, but I felt like a winner when I graduated. I felt like I had really accomplished something. And that was just with my associates. I was on top of the world with my bachelor's degree. It was an amazing joyous feeling.
>
> P3: They were proud. Even though education wasn't a big thing in their life I think they understand how important it is now days - more than when they were growing up. So it definitely made them proud. It makes you feel pretty good when your parents are proud of you.
>
> P4: Oh like million bucks. I was on top of the world; I called my parents. They were so proud. It was a great moment. We still talk about it when I see them. It went so fast that it was done. I was really happy in a still am.
>
> P6: Well I was extremely proud. I mean it was a milestone in my life. You know, first person in my family to graduate, I know it didn't come lightly. And it was a major accomplishment. Because it's, you know, a college education; I know what

it means to be a college graduate as far as the way it's viewed in our country, as well as, you know, it's it was an accomplishment. As far as me personally, there was a lot of sacrifices made to get that.

P7: I was excited as hell! That's putting it mildly. I was the old dog learned a new trick and it made me feel damn good. Well mom had passed and that was sad in a way because she would've been really proud. Dad was proud, but that was always proud of me no matter what. He's a great dad and just wanted the best for me. He was certainly happy though. My wife was excited. I could see it on her just as much as she told me. Even the kids. The oldest really understood that it was a big deal. Frankly that made me feel pretty doggone good to.

Summary of Pretransition Theme 4

Feelings of pride in having completed the specialized degree plan were expressed by all participants. These expressions were made with changes in voice inflection which left me feeling that there was no hesitancy in the interviewee. When speaking of pride several participants referenced family members expressing pride in their accomplishment.

Transitional Themes: Moving-In, Moving-Through, Moving-Out

Moving-In: Transitional Theme 1

Employment concerns dominated fears when entering the transition. This theme emerged from follow-up questions typically involving statements that included; was getting a job important to you? Was it something you thought about prior to getting into the transition? Again, each participant, regardless of rank, identified employment as the most prevalent fear. In the words of participants;

P1: And let me be clear that's the biggest fear you, you, will have. You know when you get out of the military the paychecks stop. I got a little bit for my medical every month. It's not enough to live on. Especially with the family. No matter what, I knew I had to get a job. Having that degree, I felt like I could do it. I was not going back to the kind of work I had before.

P2: Yes this was the biggest fear I think anyone has. Getting a job, I mean you have to be able to support yourself when you get out. There's nothing there, you just you have to have a job that's it; it's the great fear I would say.

P3: You know, you have the military background, but not knowing for sure about getting a job or how that's going to work. It's just such a huge change. There's a lot of fear the unknown outside of work. Can I get a job in my field? How quick will it be? There's a lot of thoughts going through your head. A little scared; change is always a little scary. My livelihood was on the line.

P5: There's a lot of fears. Switching back. I think one of the fears was getting that job.

P6: The biggest thing is employment: I mean, where am I going to get a paycheck? You know things like that.

P7: Well that was it, getting a job. I knew that I would always have my retirement money, but let's face it that's just not a substantial amount and I'm still relatively young. At least I think so. Getting a job, no, getting a good job, was my greatest fear without a doubt. It would mean that our life, our quality of life, would be improved. Now I'm not saying we didn't have great quality of life in the military,

what I mean by that is that I would essentially have two incomes. First the income from my military retirement and then the income from the new job. When those two are combined I would be making quite a bit more than what I was just in the military. But I still had to get that job.

Summary of Transitional Theme 1

In line with the findings of Morin (2011) and Taylor et al. (2011), employment fears were consistently mentioned in each interview as the dominant fear when entering the transition back to civilian life. It is also important to note that two participants (P6 and P7) had retired after careers eclipsing 21 years; which meant that each would be receiving a monthly paycheck. Despite the fact that each had a steady income after they retired, both detailed the fear of employment as substantial.

Moving-In: Transitional Theme 2

Each believed that the Army on-the-job experience they had was superior to the experiences of civilian counterparts. All participants mentioned, often in great detail, that the experience that they had as an Army Medic was far superior to the experiences of a civilian peers. In most instances this arose prior to or during conversation stemming from employment fears. In the words of the participants;

P1: [Referencing attachment to a combat unit in Afghanistan]: It certainly had its moments. But the experience was unbelievable. I mean if you're a medic you see it all. The stuff they teach you at METC is amazing. I didn't know how good it was until I got in the field. Once I started working with a combat unit everything just kind of clicked. I really enjoyed it; I know that sounds odd. But I enjoy

helping them, you know, wounded guys, and even taking care of sprains and regular things like that.

P4: I knew I could get the job. My experience was because it was in the military, was better than anyone who is not been in the military. My real competition was between other military people that also had a degree. I found out after I was hired that some of the other candidates were military and didn't have a degree. They never made it past HR. I was hired on the spot after I interviewed in person. I even started the next day.

P5: You know with the experience that I have I think that there's a lot more knowledge. Now some of those people went to school and college. All of the different experiences I overseas and see and been a part of, that is something that they can't say. That is something; I felt I can handle more stress on the job. I consider myself more qualified maybe because of all of that.

P6: Oh yeah I, there was nothing on the civilian side that could replace the experience and training that I had in the military. I've done more things and see more things than your typical civilian with similar experience; that's for sure.

P7: P7: I led men and women and I managed a major department containing almost 150 medical soldiers under my charge. I couldn't imagine starting over. I knew that having that degree would at least open me up to being able to apply for jobs that would be commensurate with my experience and abilities.

Summary of Transitional Theme 2

Each participant maintained that the level of training and the subsequent hands-on experience derived from applying the training was far superior to that experience by civilian counterparts. It is important to note that when referring to *experience*, each participant included military training synonymously. In other words, military training and experience, normally have two separate meanings, but the participants often spoke of them as being the same thing.

Moving-Through: Transitional Theme 3

Having a degree and military and experience elevated self-worth when compared to civilian counterparts. Participants were unanimously more passionate when talking about their military experience than at other times during the interview. Each maintained that this experience was far more encompassing than a civilian peer would receive. When each made the connection between the experience and the degree, voice inflection changed, and each spoke with a great deal of pride.

> P1: Oh it was a huge deal that I had to get a job. I mean my leg is not incapacitating. It just put me out of the Army. So I still had to go and get a job a good job. Having a college degree meant that I can apply for jobs that I normally couldn't, and when you combine that with the experiences I have dealing with real-world experiences in treating and triaging extreme damage, I thought it made me very employable.
>
> P2: I felt like if I was going up against a job, my military experience would be far better than anyone who didn't have any military experience and that I have

educational credentials to open the door for me; to get my foot in the door. I'm an outgoing person; you probably figured that out. But I knew I could get the job if I just could get an interview. Having my degree really made a big difference for me because without it I could only have interviewed for, you know, an entry-level type of job. And after being in the military and working with patients and as an administrator back in the states after my deployment, I felt like I had what it took to get the job I wanted.

P5: I don't think it's even in the same ballpark. What I experienced and my degree, I'm trying not to be big on myself, but I think I have a lot more going for me.

P6: I had a real benefit with my experience. That's one of the things I'm glad about that I did take the time and make the sacrifice and getting my education while on active duty. I'm glad that I did that.

P7: I knew that because I had my degree I would have the doors open that I needed to get into. And that's really what it's all about. Getting those doors opened and getting the opportunity is what the degree does. I knew that if I could interview I would be able to get a job. I have experience that no civilian, or at least very few, would ever have. I've done everything from being a medic in combat situations to running departments and hospital sections that treat wounded soldiers. It's like, well imagine an emergency room on steroids. Whatever level you're at in the hierarchy you can't make mistakes. So whether you're the combat medic triaging a wound on the battlefield or in a hospital, in leadership deciding

> who gets sent where to help who, or an administrator making sure that the operation runs smoothly, everything has to be perfect. That's what the military teaches you; how to react under extreme conditions and make correct decisions. I knew that my military experience prepared me far better than most civilians I would be competing with for a job. The degree just opened the door. It gave me the opportunity to talk to the right people.

Summary of Transitional Theme 3

Participants placed great value on the training that they received while on active duty. The belief that the training was superior resonated through both those Medics that worked in a hospital environment stateside and those that were deployed with combat units and sent overseas. Making the connection between the experience (including training) and the degree was an important part of each conversation. Participants emphasized unanimously that this combination not just level the playing field between them their civilian peers. Each saw this combination as elevating them to a superior position over civilian peers.

Moving-Through: Transitional Theme 4

Participants experienced increased feelings of confidence in gaining employment after military separation. When speaking of employment, each participant had separated and gained employment in a position that they desired. Some participants had continued their educational pursuit and moved into or completed the next level of degree; a bachelor's degree. However, each participant valued their associate level achievement as essential in their ability to gain employment. In the words of the participants;

P3: It builds their confidence. You feel like you're prepared. It's like if you're going into to take a test and you're totally prepared. I felt like because I have a degree I can knock this out. So it definitely built a lot of confidence in me to get to a whole new level.

P4: Well I knew I could get a job. I had great experience and great training, but before I had that piece of paper that said I graduated from college I don't think I was, I could compete with someone who did. My military training was really important. I know that but having that degree was so much of getting my job. They don't hire people without college degrees at the hospital I work for. You have to at least have an Associate's degree. I'm not talking about janitors and things, you know what I mean.

P6: Well, you know, I thought I had the whole package. Leadership, experience, and education. I took leadership courses available in the Army and applied them back in the civilian side. I have an education, so I felt I had the complete package. I thought I was a very attractive candidate.

P7: I think it went relatively quickly, but I have nothing to compare that to. I interviewed at three hospitals after sending out three resumes. Of those three, I received two job offers. That made it awfully nice. I was able to select the job that made the most sense to me. It turned out it was a great decision. I enjoy the position, the leadership, and the people I work with. Being a part of the civilian leadership team is different, but I always draw upon my military experience.

Summary of Transitional Theme 4

Employment had been listed as the major concern of each participant but, as conversations turned back to employment after degree attainment, there was noticeable level on confidence injected in the voice of the participant. This level of self-confidence resonated as each participant moved through their description of the transition process.

Moving-Out: Transitional Theme 5

Participants demonstrated feelings of satisfaction with the employment position gained postservice. Without exception, each participant identified that they had not only gotten a position that they desired, but were also had a high degree of job satisfaction also. In the words of participants;

> P1: Operations Manager for an emergency services company. I oversee and train our teams of EMT personnel that operate our ambulance services. It's a great job and somewhat ironically, I actually enjoy the numbers side of the job as well. I do the department's budget and present it annually, and then we do quarterly meetings designed to discuss where we are in the budget. It's been a great experience. People at my company don't quit so it may be a while before I can move up. But the money is good, people are good, and I enjoy what I'm doing.
>
> P2: Having my degree was what opened the door for me to get my job. I work on a hospital staff and love it. It's everything I ever wanted. The job that I applied for was not an entry-level position and, and, when interviewing, I knew that my military experience was instrumental. They asked me a lot of questions about

military training that I took and my real world experience. But I would not have gotten the interview if I did not have a bachelor's degree. It was that important.

P5: So I was able to do that and get my foot in the door. With the degree it was pretty easy. I got a job pretty quick. Without a degree online washing dishes or something that I feel was beneath me but that degree made a huge difference in my life.

Summary of Transitional Theme 5

Each participant projected joy and pride as they spoke of getting employment after separating. It is important to note that all participants claimed not only to be employed, but also doing the job that they wanted to be doing. This is significant because of the differences in rank, training, and experience level. Each level of position earned appeared commensurate with the employment expectations maintained by the individual.

Moving-Out: Transitional Theme 6

Participant's perception of the importance of education increased after graduating from the specialized program. Each participant placed great value on continuing education. Participants had either continued their educational pursuits or claimed to be beginning to move towards additional degree levels. In the words of participants;

P1: Well it's super important. I've come a long way. When I look back I mean. I'm so happy that I enrolled in the program. Right after I graduated I started the on a bachelors program at the same school. It was like three months later.

P2: I'm so glad that I did everything before I got out. I was able to finish my bachelor's degree literally the month before discharge.

P4: Oh it's huge. I'm in nursing school now working towards my RN degree. It just seemed like a natural progression. One of the classes I took in my degree actually qualifies me to sit for the EKG test. I took that in passed it after I got out. It was a really good move. Because that being in the degree help me get my job. And I've been promoted twice at the hospital. They're even paying for part of my college.

P5: there's a larger importance now. I think on education, that I've been through everything. It's very important nowadays to get any kind of job. Getting my associates degree really help me out. It's competitive out there; you have to have a degree.

P6: The two things I've done in my life that I'm most proud of are my military career and my education. No matter what happens no one can take those away from me.

P7: Well I'm really happy that I got that degree. But I should tell you that I was able to complete my bachelor's degree prior to getting out of the military. I just kept going. I finished the bachelor's degree because again, a great deal of my military training took up the bulk of coursework.

P7: My oldest kids were doing homework alongside of me. And it was a funny thing because, you know, if dad has homework and he's doing it they felt like they better also be getting it done. I liked the fact that because I value it, my

education, they started seeing the importance to. This was a big thing for me and I actually remember consciously thinking to myself that the kids are really getting it.

Summary of Transitional Theme 6

The expressions of participants in this area represented a dramatic change from initial questions about the importance of education in their lives. Answers to the initial question at the onset of the interview garnered mixed results, while at the end of the interview, the importance dominated statements of additional educational accomplishments or ambitions of returning to school.

Discrepant Cases

It should be noted that P6 and P7 were the highest ranking of the participants. As such, they demonstrated a knowledge of the transition process that far exceeded all other participants. As a result, while the answers they provided on gaining employment after separation were similar to the depictions provided by the other participants, one significant differentiation was made; each took over 30 days of terminal leave prior to separation. Under the military terminal leave program, soldiers can take unused vacation time as the last days of their enlistment. Soldiers are exited from service, but their date of separation does not conclude until after the leave or vacation time has expired (in this case 30-45 days later). P6 and P7 used between 30-45 days of paid terminal leave to move their families to the desired location, settle in, and apply for employment. Other participants took terminal leave, but this amounted to only a few days. Rank played a role

of imparting the importance of exit planning that was not shared by the other five participants.

Composite Depiction

The composite depiction is intended to demonstrate the essence of the participant's experience associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts.

The Army Medics interviewed covered a concentrated, often similar spectrum of feelings, believes, and perceptions surrounding their own self-worth and equality when compared to civilian counterparts as each made the transition from active duty soldier to civilian. Initially, each viewed themselves as inferior to the civilian that had gone to college. Each understood that education would play a role in their lives, but that role was yet to be clearly defined.

Upon entering the military, education moved to the forefront as a result of either the importance placed upon it by the Army, peer endorsements, or a combination of both. The fact that the specialized program was completed online and placed great emphasis on the value of military training (leaving as few as 5 classes left to complete) was a deciding factor in enrolling.

After graduating, a great sense of pride was experienced. Now the combination of military training and experience coupled with the associate's degree that had been earned, paved the way for a change in belief's centering on self-worth. Military training and experience had been previously viewed as being far superior to the training and experience of civilian peers, but possession of the degree gave way to the greater self-

confidence and belief that these individuals were now far more qualified than their civilian peers.

Moving into the transition, employment fears resonated within. The confidence attained through the earning of the degree proved beneficial as each moved-in, moved-through, and moved-out of the transition a level of fear surrounding employment. Each was able to gain not just employment, but employment at the position and level desired.

Moving forward, education had come full circle; holding a role of importance and prominence in the current and future experiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided information covering the means of participant recruitment utilized in the study. Each participant was an Army veteran that had served on active duty as an MOS 68W, Health Care Specialist (medic), and then transitioned back into civilian society. The results of the study indicate that having earned a specialized associate level degree built from the training of the MOS prior to making the transition increased participant perceptions centering on self-worth, and raised feelings of equality when compared to civilian counterparts. Feelings of confidence acted as a support mechanism as each participant moved-in, moved-through, and moved-out of the transition. In addition, education took on a more prevalent role in the lives of all participants.

In Chapter 5, I provide an interpretation of the findings, discuss implications for positive social change, make recommendations, and deliver conclusions.

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Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Findings

Introduction

In Chapter 5 I provide a review of the purpose for the study, the research questions which guided the inquiry, and the methodology facilitating discovery. In addition, the findings will be interpreted and I discuss the theoretical framework from a post-study point of reference. Important implications for positive social change will then precede recommendations for further study and researcher reflections.

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life occur in Army medics who have graduated from a specialized college degree program that incorporates their military training. It specifically examined these former medic's sense of self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts. This study represents the first steps in eliminating the knowledge gap surrounding graduate experiences in thought prior to, during and after they made the transition back into civilian society.

The research design selected for this study was qualitative inquiry, using the phenomenological method. Qualitative inquiry represented a means of researching what is often intangible (individual feelings and perceptions) and the relevance they hold to a person. These intangibles were the central point of focus in transitioning 68W Health Care Specialist. Where quantitative research is representative of a concentration on "variance theory," qualitative research gravitates to "process theory" (Mohr, 1982 as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p. 29). Through the study of the processes, researchers derive

answers centering on the *how* or *what* of a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). For the purpose of this study, *processes* involved with the transition, and other key feelings and perceptions experienced by soldiers as they *moved-in*, *moved-through*, and *moved-out*, of active duty military service and back into civilian society.

The phenomenological method was used to provide needed structure to the study. Moustakas (1994) maintained that the phenomenological method "provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of an experience" (p. 47). By employing the phenomenological method, I opened myself to the processes and information delivered through participant interaction while avoiding rigid structures that could prohibit increasing the overall understanding of the life experience. Semistructured interviews provided the platform for the transfer of information between researcher and participant, as suggested by Maxwell (2013). In order to effectively employ the phenomenological method, I bracketed out my personal biases and constructed knowledge and perceptions associated with the phenomenon being studied.

The population for this study consisted of Army 68W Health Care Specialists who graduated from a specialized degree program, and completed the transition from military service to civilian life. A judgment, or purpose sample, was used in this study. Purposive sampling allowed for the identification of the number of participants needed to appropriately answer the research questions within the framework of the study, and avoid the acquisition of a redundancy of information affiliated with a saturation point (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Because this specific degree program was first offered

in 2012, there was an extremely limited number of 68W Health Care Specialists graduates that have made the transition to civilian life. For this project, the realized sample size was seven participants. The desired mix of the sample participants was attained and included variances in age, rank at discharge, gender, race, and geographic location.

Interpretations of Findings

The intent of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army Medics who have graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training. Prior to engaging participants, I convened a focus group of veterans to hone and validate the interview protocol questions. All of the results of the study occurred as a direct result of information gathered during semistructured interviews with seven study participants, dissemination of notes compiled during the interviews, literature review, and use of the theoretical framework. Four pretransition themes and six transitional themes allowed the essence of the shared experience to be richly described.

Pretransition Theme 1

Predegree perceptions of self-worth were lower than perceptions pf civilian peers that had earned a degree. The first theme indicated that all of the participants viewed peers that had gone on to college and earned a degree as being held in higher regard than themselves before the participants completed their degrees. These feelings and were indicative of beliefs stemming from perceptions of self-worth. The fundamental belief

that peers having a college degree hold greater value than those without may stems from perceptions of employability. This belief is also consistent with study results derived from Caumont (2014) who identified that college graduates were more satisfied with their jobs. Ultimately each participant made the decision to enter military service. Each participant detailed the fact that prior to earning a degree, they viewed peers with degrees as superior to themselves, and each set themselves on a path that would lead to many changes in belief and perception.

Pretransition Theme 2

Participants believed that the military and peers positively influenced the decision to pursue education. Each participant gave specific references to commanders who held briefings to discuss the importance of education and reacquaint soldiers with basic procedures for using Army educational benefits while on duty to fund educational efforts. In addition, the participants cited peers as having positively impacted their decisions to initially move forward with postsecondary educational pursuits. While specific reasons for joining the military were not part of the study, Griffith (2008) maintained that motivations for enlisting in the Army could be categorized under two specific rationales – occupational or institutional. While aspects of each rationale were touched upon by participants during the semistructured interviews, movement toward advancing education had sustained the stagnation that began after graduating from high school. Exum, Coll, and Weiss (2011) maintained that the rigid hierarchal system within the military facilitates obedience and stresses mission importance. Within the culture of the military, commanders represent authority figures within the military hierarchal. Action based on

advice from commanders can be directly attributed to the core values instilled within military culture.

Within military culture emphasis shifts from the *individual* to the *group*; from this perspective the importance of peer interaction comes into view. Peer interaction is synonymous with self-identity of the soldier, as such when one engages in an activity it not far-fetched to see others also engage in it as well. To the participants, command encouragement and peer support influenced the decision to move forward with college enrollment. This action is reflective of an embracement of military core values and culture.

Pretransition Theme 3

Convenience and transferability of military training into college credit was an important factor in enrolling in the selected degree program. Colleges and Universities often discount potential earned credit of military career training by failing to adequately award credit for it. Limiting credits earned to curriculum electives, as maintained by Smith (2010), adds time, cost, and an increase in frustration levels of military students which results from being required to repeat previously completed training provided by the military in civilian institutions. Each of the participants noted the amount of credit awarded for military training as a significant factor in their decision to enroll in the program. The majority of participants voluntarily named the few classes that were left to complete; further emphasizing the importance of the credit for military training.

Participants also placed great emphasis on the ease of attending classes. As active duty medics are subject to being called to duty at all hours and can be deployed globally,

without notice. Therefore, attending classes can typically represent a daunting challenge. In addition, the cultural differences between military members and civilians often results in feelings of isolation among military students physically attending civilian colleges and universities (Zinger & Cohen, 2010). The fact that the classes needed were offered in an online format was identified as significant because this effectively removed barriers preventing class completion.

Pretransition Theme 4

Participants experienced increased self-pride upon graduation. Participants unanimously mentioned an increase in self-pride which they attributed to college graduation. This pride resonated with voice inflections as it was described and was expounded upon by all to include the family-member pride in their accomplishment. While participants delivered mixed results to questions centering on the importance that education would play over the course of their life prior to their college enrollment and graduation, postgraduation feelings were dramatically different.

The increase in pride translates directly to an increase in self-worth. The increase in self-worth is correlated to eliminating concerns of eventual civilian employability. These feelings are also in line with Caumont (2014) who determined that "about nine-in-ten college grads in every generation say college has been, or will be, worth the investment" (para. 6). Graduation for the Army medic was the result of overcoming duty related obstacles and overseas deployments, often to combat zones.

Moving-In: Transitional Theme 1

Employment concerns dominated fears of the transition. Each participant unanimously conveyed employment fears as the most significant aspect of the transition out of military service and into civilian society. As identified by Morin (2011) servicepeople who earned college graduates experienced easier transitions than nongraduates. The fear of civilian employment resonated heavily on the minds of participants as they moved into the transition.

Employment has been consistently identified as the most significant pain point in the transition of the military member back into civilian society (MacLean & Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). One of the most significant factors in easing the transition of military members back into civilian society is the ability to gain meaningful employment because it touches not only the income generated within the household, but positively impacts the "physical and psychological health of these veterans and their families" (Wishnie, Cuthbert, Eimers, Lim, & Nadler, 2013, p. 1).

Moving-In: Transitional Theme 2

Participants believed that the Army on-the-job experience they had was superior to the experience of civilian counterparts. Participants expressed the belief that the experience that they were afforded as a result of their military service eclipsed the experiences of civilian peers as they moved into the transition from military service to civilian life. This feeling resonated throughput each of the semistructured interviews and centered on the belief that very few civilians would have the ability to put similar training to practical use at the level in which the military allows. In the mind of participants, this

belief moves the cultural differentiations of military service and experience into positive attributes which are valued by civilian employers. As less than 1% of the American population serves in the military (Plach, 2009), the participants viewed their experiences as superior to those that had not served.

Moving-Through: Transitional Theme 3

Having a degree and military experience elevated self-worth when compared to civilian counterparts. As participants moved through the transition they maintained the distinction that their military experience had great value. This perception enhanced feelings associated with personal worth. In essence, participants believed that their experience elevated them above peers that had not served. Again, all participants expressed the perception that they had been bettered as a result of their military experience. This can be attributed to a combination of aspects associated with military core values (i.e., pride in accomplishment, honor, duty, respect) and self-confidence gained through the perception that an individual's educational improvement also benefits the Army; a point delivered through commanders and NCOs who advocated educational advancement.

Core beliefs serve as the foundation for military emphasis, which focuses on the *group*, rather than the individual. Unlike civilian society where people strive for individual success and accolades in almost all aspects of life, soldiers value *duty* and *mission*. Individual achievements are highly regarded by the military, but these regards center on the contribution that the actions have on the unit. As the participants moved-

through the transition, self-worth appeared to be a derivative of military service and degree attainment.

Moving-Through: Transitional Theme 4

Participants experienced increased feelings of confidence in gaining employment after military separation. Increases in feelings of self-worth also saw participants speaking in great detail about having greater confidence in their employability in the civilian world. Skills taught to the Army Health Care Specialist are more transferable to civilian based competencies than those of many Army MOS (Morin, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). However, having a college degree combined with the training and experience gained while on active duty was perceived by participants as a major bolster to confidence. It is important to note that gaining civilian employment was the concern that resonated as the most fearful aspect of moving into the transition.

Again, employment has been consistently identified as the most significant pain point in the transition of the military member back into civilian society (MacLean & Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). One of the most significant factors in easing the transition of military members back into civilian society is the ability to gain meaningful employment because it touches not only the income generated within the household, but positively impacts the "physical and psychological health of these veterans and their families" (Wishnie, Cuthbert, Eimers, Lim, & Nadler, 2013, p. 1).

Moving-Out: Transitional Theme 5

Participants demonstrated feelings of satisfaction with the employment position gained postservice. Gaining employment represents a critical step in the transition from soldier to civilian. Each participant expressed satisfaction with the job position; which they had secured. Again unanimously, the participants each maintained that they had applied for and gotten positions both in their desired field and at the level believed themselves qualified to hold. There was a direct correlation between the level of position and the rank and experience of the individual at the time of separation from active duty. P6 and P7 held advanced rank and had experience commensurate with senior leadership. Both reported gaining employment in more advanced levels. In addition to satisfaction with the position held, each participant maintained that their degree and military training and experience were identified as being instrumental in helping all participants gain the employment they sought.

Understanding the correlation between education and employment is essential because it also touched the perceived confidence levels of the soldier seeking employment while transitioning. As employment has been consistently identified consistently as the most significant pain point in the transition of the military member back into civilian society (MacLean & Elder, 2007; Morin, 2011; Prudential, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). Gaining employment allowed the participants to establish new norms; completing the process *of moving-out* of the transition process.

Moving-Out: Transitional Theme 6

Participant's perception of the importance of education increased after graduating from the specialized degree program. Having a college degree has increasingly become an expectation by civilian employers (Caumont, 2014; Michigan State University, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011). Each of the seven participants credited the initial completion of the specialized associate level degree as a pivotal point in their perception of the importance of education throughout one's life. Six of the seven participants had gone on to earn bachelor level degrees as a result of their personal increase in the value of education. The single participant that had not earned a bachelor's degree did however state that he intended to move forward in getting it.

While participants initially varied greatly on their perception of the importance that education would play over the course of their lifetime, it is significant to arriving at the essence of the shared experience to understand the higher degree of importance education assumed in the minds of participants as they *moved-out* of the transition process.

Conceptual Framework as a Lens

This study was explored through the theoretical framework of the Schlossberg (1984) Theory of Adult Transition. The theory of adult transition allowed for the identification that behaviors surrounding an individual in transition were dependent upon three critical circumstances – the type of event, situation in which it materializes, and the overall affect the change has on the individual. This approach was advanced and refined

by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) into a model which encompassed three distinct pillars – moving-in, moving through, and moving-out.

For the soldier moving from active duty to civilian live, the type of event is life changing. All aspects of their life are affected. Everything from geographic location to employment, social interaction, and daily routines undergo complete change in structure. For soldiers, the situation in which the transition arises is often dictated by themselves. They have opted to end their service after a committed time or are retiring.

The use of the Schlossberg (1984) theory of adult transition as a conceptual framework facilitated a distinct separation of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs expressed by Army medics who had graduated from a specialized college degree program before transitioning back to civilian life. Pre-transition thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs were separated from those correlating directly to the three phases of adult transition; moving-in, moving through, and moving-out. The result is a more comprehensive dissemination of the representations of the participants which facilitates a richer contextual understanding of their lived experience.

Pretransition

In the pretransition phase, which included time both before and after enlistment, as well as time prior to and after graduation from the specialized college degree program, participants initially expressed mixed feelings associated with their perception of the value of education over the course of their lives. Prior to enlistment and graduation from the degree program each detailed a lower self-worth when compared to civilians. However, after enlisting, commanders and peers encouraged the medics to pursue their

education while on duty. From a cultural perspective, the rigid hierarchal structure of the military meant that when commanders advocated education to participants, they listened intently. Later they spoke with peers and researched specific programs of interest. The amount of college transfer credits was important to the decision to move forward; as was the convenience of being able to forgo worries of shift changes, duty requirements, and or global deployment.

The convenience of classroom delivery method afforded participants the ability to stay the course and ultimately graduate. Upon graduation, these medics related an increase in self-pride associated with their accomplishment. Feelings of pride resonated both individually and as directed from family members. The importance of education was also increased as six of the seven participants enrolled in bachelor level degree programs after completing the specialized associate's degree. The participant that did not enroll in a bachelor level program within six months of graduating from associate level degree also experienced an increase in the perception of the importance that education would hold over the course of a lifetime and intends to complete a bachelor's degree.

Moving-In

Each participant made the personal decision to separate from military service; two retired after serving on active duty for over twenty years. Regardless of rank or time in service, the greatest fear was finding employment. Employment meant that financial aspects of the transition would potentially be relieved; allowing participants to concentrate on settling in and establishing new norms.

To this end participants believe emphatically that the experience they had while serving on active duty far outweighed those experiences of their civilian counterparts. It is important to note that this belief was expressed by participants who worked in stateside hospitals, attached to combat units overseas, or a combination of both. As participants moved into the transition, the belief in their experience would carry them into the next phase.

Moving-Through

Initial perceptions centering on the importance of the level of experience achieved while on duty soon combined with the understanding that each participant had earned a college degree. In the mind of participants, the degree represented a credential that legitimized their military training in the civilian world. Participants now viewed themselves as superior job candidates to civilian peers that held similar degrees. Participants believed that their military experience, coupled with the degree, set them at a level far superior to their civilian peers.

Concern centering on employment turned to confidence in getting not only *a* job, but *the* job. Participants related feelings centering on confidence that they would be able to get the job they wanted at the level that they believed themselves qualified to do. This feeling of confidence was projected as the participants moved into the civilian job market.

Moving-Out

Participants used the confidence expressed in the previous phase in their ultimate gaining of employment. Each was able to get a job in the field and at the level they

believe they were qualified to work in. each participant also expressed a high level of job satisfaction. This provided a level of comfort that saw for the establishment of new norm centering on their reintegration into the civilian world. Each also both described and portrayed a distinct increase in perceptions surrounding the level of importance that education will play over their lifetime.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitation associated with this study that have been identified. The population from which to draw a sample is extremely small. As a result, the small sample size used in the study is transferable only to the participants within it. As time increases and more graduates transition from active duty to civilian status, larger sample sizes may yield a more finite look at the essence of the shares phenomenon.

In addition, this study called for a hindsight look at some events that included perceptions and feelings being recalled after several years. In the case of the two senior NCO participants, some aspects of the study this required recollection of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that had occurred several decades earlier.

Recommendations

Further research is recommended as the population of Army medics that have graduated from the specialized degree program and reintegrated back into civilian life continues to grow. Future research should:

1. Encompass a larger sample size as the population increases.

2. Look closer at the effectiveness of the current emphasis on providing the bulk of education benefits after the transition from military to civilian has been completed (GI Bill).
3. Focus on quantitative aspects associated with soldiers having a college degree and the effect is has n the transition from military to civilian life.

The focus of future research into the areas mentioned above would allow for a greater picture understanding of how the transition from military to civilian is best accomplished. Ultimately, this may provide for the easing of the stress points currently affecting the many soldiers recently discharged from military service.

Implications

Social Change

As the number of military members making the transition from active duty military service to civilian life soars, both the economic and social perspective of the transition have become a great concern (Helmer, 2011). Estimates put the number of soldiers – primarily from the enlisted ranks - that will make the transition from military service to civilian life will top two million between 2010 and 2020 (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; Helmer, 2011).

This study concentrated on determining what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army Medics who have graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training. Addressing the changes in feelings and perceptions by exploring their source – the veteran soldier – helped to

identify the attitudes that they carry with them into civilian life. While locally transferable, the results open the door to gaining a better understanding of the fears associated with the transition from those sharing the lived experience. This knowledge can then be utilized to create positive social change that is designed to facilitate a more seamless reintegration into civilian society.

Shift From Emphasis on Postservice Education to Education While on Active Duty

The research leads one to ultimately question the current emphasis that the DOD places on assisting soldiers to gain an education after their service has been concluded. The implementation and evolution of the GI Bill represents the primary benefit used after one's service has concluded. However, as the results of this study indicate for the sample studied, placing the emphasis on education after service concludes perpetuates the greatest fear of soldiers making the transition military to civilian society; finding civilian employment.

Prudential (2012) allowed *finding a job* to be noted as the area of most concern among veterans in participating in the study. The fact that nearly 86% of unemployed veterans claimed to have experienced great difficulty during the transition back into civilian life (Prudential, 2012) raises concerns that the current educational emphasis of concentrating the bulk of financial resources on postservice college education is misaligned with the needs of the service member. The findings of this study, while transferable only to a small sample, may point to a needed paradigm shift in the positioning of college education benefits to future soldiers.

Dissemination of Findings

The results of this study would benefit a wide variety of groups and organizations. I intend to distribute it to the Department of Defense and attempt to publish an article in peer related postsecondary educational journals. Speaking engagements will also be sought at local veteran's organizations, community colleges, and universities.

Researcher's Critical Reflection

Army Medics, MOS 68W, are a tight-knit group, both on active duty and as veterans. I greatly enjoyed speaking with the seven participants and traveling in the direction that their responses led me. Being a veteran, I understood the language that they spoke, and in the course of bracketing out my own experiences, could easily see the difficulty that someone who has not served would have in arriving at the real essence of the life experience highlighted in my study. As I concluded the data analysis it became apparent that this study represents only the tip of the proverbial iceberg of work that needs to be done.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts, occurs in Army Medics who have graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training. This study represents the first steps in eliminating the knowledge gap surrounding graduate experiences in thought prior to, during and after they made the transition back into civilian society. Qualitative inquiry, coupled with the phenomenological method,

provided the means of arriving at the shared experience of the Army Medics who volunteered as participants.

The information uncovered over the course of the study added a body of knowledge that did not previously exist. It is hoped that this research effort will ultimately lead to a more seamless, stress-free transition from active duty to civilian society. In addition, the information derived from this content of this study may lead to a paradigm shift in the positioning of resources designed to educate soldiers while they are still on active duty, rather than waiting until they have made the transition back to civilian society.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Focus Group

You are invited to take part in a focus group for a study on Army medics that graduated from a specialized degree before transitioning out of the military and into civilian society. The researcher is inviting military veterans of all branches of the military who separated from service with and without a college degree to assist in a focus group designed to hone interview questions for study participants. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This focus group and study is being conducted by a researcher named Alex Giberson, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to better understand changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life of Army Medics who graduated from a specialized postsecondary degree program built from their military training.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time focus group designed to provide feedback and suggestions centering on the researcher's interview questions for participants
- Focus group participation will require a meeting of no longer than 30 minutes in duration
- The meeting will be recorded and a copy of the transcription will be provided to all participants

Here are some sample questions we will discuss:

- What is your academic background prior to enrolling in the associate program?
- What benefits did you perceive education would play in your life at this time?
- Did you notice a change in how you perceived yourself after graduation?
- What did you think about the importance of having a degree before making the transition back into civilian life?
- How do you view the importance of education now?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress or fatigue. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing

The potential benefit of the study is to increase the knowledge surrounding the transition from active duty military service to civilian; ultimately contributing to an easing this process for military men and women.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure in one computer file dedicated to this study. The file has two layers of password protection and is only accessible to the researcher and dissertation chair. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Compensation:
No compensation of any kind will be provided. Participation is entirely voluntary.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via 407-739-3001 or at ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-13-15-0399081 and it expires on March 12, 2016.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying "I consent" to this email, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Participant

You are invited to take part in a study on Army medics that graduated from a specialized degree before transitioning out of the military and into civilian society. The researcher is inviting Army Medics (68W) who enrolled in and graduated from a specialized degree built from their military training and then transitioned out of the military. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Alex Giberson, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to better understand changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life of Army Medics who graduated from a specialized postsecondary degree program built from their military training.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a one-time interview designed to provide feedback on graduating and the transition process
- Participation will require a meeting via Skype or telephone of no longer than 30 minutes in duration
- The meeting will be recorded and a copy of the transcription will be provided

Here are some sample questions we will discuss:

- What is your academic background prior to enrolling in the associate program?
- What benefits did you perceive education would play in your life at this time?
- Did you notice a change in how you perceived yourself after graduation?
- What did you think about the importance of having a degree before making the transition back into civilian life?
- How do you view the importance of education now?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress or fatigue. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing
The potential benefit of the study is to increase the knowledge surrounding the transition from active duty military service to civilian; ultimately contributing to an easing this process for military men and women.

Privacy:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure in one computer file dedicated to this study. The file has two layers of password protection and is only accessible to the researcher and dissertation chair. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Compensation:
No compensation of any kind will be provided. Participation is entirely voluntary.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via 407-739-3001 or at ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-13-15-0399081 and it expires on March 12, 2016.

<u>Please print or save this consent form for your records.</u>

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below or replying "I consent" to this email, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project: Doctoral Dissertation

Date _____

Time _____Location_____

Interviewer: Alex Giberson

Interviewee: _____

Release form signed/received? ____

Notes to Interviewee:

Thank you for your participation. I believe your input will be valuable to this research and in helping to grow the understanding associated with feelings and perceptions surrounding graduating from a postsecondary degree program mapped from the training received as an Army 68W; Army Medic.

Anonymity of responses is guaranteed

Approximate length of interview:

Less than 30 minutes with four major questions and follow-up based on answers you provide.

Purpose of Research:

The purpose of this study is to is to determine what changes in feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life occurred in Army Medics who graduated from a specialized college degree program built from their military training.

Before Beginning:

I want to take a moment and reiterate that this study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Should you feel discomfort at any time I will stop the interview immediately. If you feel that you need assistance in dealing with any feelings I am providing the phone number to Military One Source who can refer you to an appropriate counselor through the Veteran's Administration. Their number is 800-342-9647.

This interview will be recorded and then transcribed. In addition, I'll be taking notes as we proceed through.

Do you have any questions or concerns that I can address before we begin?

Participant Questions:

Basin Military/Demographics Info

Age_____ Length of Service _____ Rank at Discharge _____ Residence ST _____

Q1. Let's start by looking at the importance you place on education.

a. Looking back, prior to joining the military, what importance did you believe education would play over the course of your life? Explain

b. What prompted you to ultimately enroll in the 68W based degree program?

c. Having graduated and completed the transition to civilian life, how do you see the role of education in your life now; and moving forward?

Q2. Let's turn now to feelings you have about yourself compared to civilians with similar training.

a. Prior to enrolling in the specialized degree program, from an educational or career oriented perspective, how did you view yourself compared to civilian your counterparts that had earned a college degree?

b. Follow-up guided by response.

Q3. Now we'll move to feelings that center on your degree and the transition back to civilian life.

a. Take me through how you felt having earned a college degree make you feel.

b. After making the transition, did those feelings remain the same? If not, what changed and why?

Q4. Let's wrap-up by talking about final thoughts;

a. Is there anything you would change if you had it all to do over again? Explain

I want to again thank you for participating in this study. Once the study is completed, I'll email you a summary copy of all findings and recommendations within 30 days. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix D: Participant Invitation to Participate

68W Invitation to Participate in Research Study

My name is Alex Giberson and I am a PHD student at Walden University.

This is an invitation to take part in my study looking at Army 68W Health Care Specialists who served on active duty, earned a specialized college degree built from their military training, and then transitioned back into civilian life.

The goal of the study is to learn more about how having a college degree prior to separating from the military helped to shape changes in feelings and perceptions associated with the transition out of military service and back into civilian life.

- Participants will be interviewed via Skype or telephone at your convenience
- It will be audio-recorded but all responses are anonymous, and no one will be identified
- Interviews will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete
- The interview will be based around some questions but you will have the opportunity to add your own observations

If you are willing to participate or would like more information, please email me on ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com.

Thank you for reading this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Alex Giberson
Doctoral Student

Appendix E: Invitation to Participate in Focus Group

Invitation to Participate in Focus Group

My name is Alex Giberson and I am a PHD student at Walden University.

This is invitation is for military veterans of all branches of service living in Orlando, Florida to take part in a focus group designed to validate a series of questions to be asked to study participants during an interview.

The goal of the study is to learn more about how having a college degree prior to separating from the military helped to shape changes in feelings and perceptions associated with the transition out of military service and back into civilian life.

- The focus group will be presented the proposed questions to be asked to study participants, and you will have the opportunity to add your own observations

- Focus group participation will take no longer than 30 minutes and will convene in North Orlando

- It will be audio-recorded but all responses are anonymous, and no one will be identified

- The first 6 to respond to this request (3 who had degree prior to separation and 2 who did not have a degree prior to separation) will be selected with one additional person from each group selected in reserve

If you are willing to participate or would like more information, please email me on ArmyMedicStudy@gmail.com.

Thank you for reading this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Alex Giberson
Doctoral Student

Appendix F: Pre-Participation Questions Email to Prospective Participant

Hello [name],

Thank you for your email offering to participate in my study. The following questions are designed to determine eligibility. Please reply to this email and respond either “yes” or “no” to the following questions;

1. Are you an Army Veteran (discharged, not currently serving in the military)?
2. Did you graduate from a customized degree built only for your MOS after 2012?
3. Are you male or female?
4. If female, are you pregnant?
5. What was your rank at discharge?

Once again, thank you for volunteering to participate. I look forward to receiving your response to this email.

All the Best,

Alex Giberson

Appendix G: P1Textural Description

The textural depiction is intended to demonstrate the essence of the participant's experience associated with the transition from military to civilian life, self-worth, and equality when compared to civilian counterparts.

The Army Medic was direct and never indecisive on relating feelings and perceptions covering his own self-worth and equality when compared to civilian counterparts as he recalled making the transition from active duty soldier to civilian. At the onset he perceived himself as inferior to the civilian that had gone to college. He believed that education was important, but the value had not been imparted upon him by parents that had not graduated from a high school. Upon entering the military, slowly moved education moved to the forefront as a result of either the importance placed upon peers. This gave way to curiosity and then positive action. The fact that the specialized program was completed online and placed great emphasis on the value of military training (leaving as few as 5 classes left to complete) was a deciding factor in enrolling.

After graduating, a great sense of pride was experienced. He was proud of the accomplishment and equally proud of the positive reactions from his family.

The combination of military training and experience coupled with the associate's degree that had been earned, paved the way for a change in belief's centering on self-worth. Prior to graduation, military training and experience had been previously viewed as being far superior to the training and experience of civilian peers, but possession of

the degree gave way to the greater self-confidence and belief that these individuals were now far more qualified than their civilian peers.

Moving into the transition, employment fears dominated the list of fears. However, perceived confidence attained through the earning of the degree proved beneficial as he moved-in, moved-through, and moved-out of the transition. As such, he was able to gain not just employment, but employment at the position and level desired. While he has not currently enrolled in a bachelor's degree program, he intends to do so within six months.

Moving forward, education had come full circle; holding a role of importance and prominence in the current and future experiences.

Appendix H: P5 Interview Transcription

Researcher: Hey [name omitted], I just want to thank you so much for uh, for taking the time for doing this. I know it's an inconvenience, and believe me it's greatly appreciated.

P5: Yes sir, no problem.

Researcher: well first thing I really believe your input will be valuable to this research in helping to grow the understanding associated with feelings and perceptions surrounding one who has graduated from a college degree program mapped from the training you got as a 68 whiskey. And uh, remember that anonymity of your responses is guaranteed. Your name will not be used in this at all; period. I'm gonna maximize this and hold it, hold our conversation to less than 30 minutes. With four specific major questions and then I'll ask you to follow up based on those, on the answers that you provide. This purpose of this study is to determine what changes feelings associated with the transition from military to civilian life occur in Army medics who graduated from a specialized college degree program built for their military training. So, exactly what my request for volunteers said in the Facebook listing. So, before we begin though, I want to take a moment to reiterate that this study completely voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to stay in the study. No one will treat you differently if you do, if you do decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. Should you feel discomfort at any time I'll stop the interview immediately. If you feel that you need assistance in dealing with feelings I'm providing a phone number to you for Military One Source who can refer you to an appropriate counselor. I have their number so should that come up I'll provide it. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. In addition I'll be taking notes as we go through. Do you have any questions or concerns that I can before we begin?

P5: No sir, I think, I think I'll be good

Researcher: All right…

P5: I'll help you out here.

Researcher: Alright, well again it's greatly appreciated. Question; how old are you?

P5: I'm 35 sir.

Researcher: 35. Length of service. How long were you in?

P5: I was in 8 years. I served a tour in Iraq and served one in Afghanistan.

Researcher: I want to thank you for your service. I know those are, those are some tough, potentially tough tours of duty. I'm a veteran myself. I'm an Air Force guy and I did all of my six years were served overseas so I, I know what it is to be out there, downrange, so your service is greatly appreciated.

P5: Oh no problem, thank you sir, thank you for your service too.

Researcher: You bet. Well and last but not least, where are you from? What state are you in?

P5: I'm from Huntington, West Virginia.

Researcher: Huntington West Virginia, how's the weather in Huntington today?

P5: It's a little chilly but it's all right. We do all right up here in the hills. I love it up here.

Researcher: Good deal. Well, all right, if you're ready to get started. First is, I'm going to start by looking at the importance you place on education. And I'm going to do this at different, different times in your life. So looking back, before you joined the military, what importance did you believe education would play over the course of your life?

P5: I felt it was pretty important. Growing up in Huntington there is a Marshall and a few other big universities. So it was pretty dominant. Lot of my friends went, they went to school there. But uh, it's just one of those things, sometimes it's hard to get done. Hard to find the money, hard to get started. That's one of the reasons I joined, joined the Army.

Researcher: Is that right? Did you join the Army to…Was getting an education part of the rationale behind joining the Army?

P5: It, it was for me, yes sir.

Researcher: Okay, okay, great, well tell me about that. What, what value did you in that? How did see The Army playing out to help your education?

P5: Well, you know, talking to a lot of my friends and family, … and being…and talking to recruiters. You know, I know that they got the G.I. Bill and they got these other helps that helps pay for school. So, that's kind of one of the things that helped me make my mind up.

Researcher: That's a good thing. What prompted you to, to ultimately enroll in the 68 whiskey based college degree program you did?

P5: Well with what my experience was with the uh, with only having to take those five or six classes, it was perfect. It really helped me get that degree really fast and that, you know, it's one thing I really wanted was that associates degree; to knock it off and you know, go for that bachelors afterwards. But that was, that was a good experience.

Researcher: Um hm

P5: So it was much easier for me, with everything going on, especially with being overseas some, it made it convenient.

Researcher: Did the fact that it was online sway your decision to, to, become or take part in that, that program?

P5: Yes sir.

Researcher: Okay.

P5: Yes sir it did. That was a positive thing that I really needed. I had to have something online there was not a way I could have went to a campus. So that, that was heavily on my mind.

Researcher: Okay did you go back and get your bachelor's or are you in school now to get your bachelor's?

P5: I got my associates degree. And then I'm, I'm on my way, yes sir, to finishing up that bachelor's degree; finishing pretty soon.

Researcher: Nice okay, okay. So you did take it to, to heart; the role of education. That's a really positive thing. having graduating now, with that associate's degree, and completing, and having completed the transition, in other words from military back into civilian life, how do you now see the role of education in your life and was there a change in, in , how you see it now and what you saw it as before?

P5: There's, there's a larger importance now. I think on education, that I've seen through everything. It's very important nowadays to get any kind of job. It's competitive out there so. Getting my associates degree really help me out.

Researcher: Did it help you get a job after you got out?

P5: It did. It did, it helped me get into ah, pretty quickly. I was able to get a full time job. Once I, once I got out of the military.

Researcher: Was it, um, did it help you get the job you wanted?

P5: It helped me get a good job. But I need to go further to get the job I need.

Researcher: Okay, okay.

P5: One of the reasons I want to get that bachelor's degree.

Researcher: Okay; and …do you mind if I ask what you are working in?

P5: Yeah I work at a, as an emergency responder.

Researcher: Okay..

P5: So…

Researcher: So it's closely tied to what you did in the military. That's great.

P5: Yes sir, with that experience and degree it really made it, you know, a lot easier for me.

Researcher: Okay, so what I want to do now, I want to take a minute here and turn towards feelings you have about yourself compared to civilians. In other words, people that didn't go in the military but got similar training. They went to a college or a community college and they went and got the same type of associate's degree, even though they didn't have the specialized training that you had that was counted as credit. So prior to enrolling in your degree program, from an educational or career oriented perspective, how did you view yourself compared to your civilian counterparts that did have a degree, now this before you earned your degree, how you view those that had a degree, compared to you?

P5: That's a good question. You know with the experiences I had, I think that, that there's a lot more knowledge; I feel. Even though some of those people went to school, learned, at a community college or something like that. All of the different experiences I had overseas; things that I was able to see and be a part of, I think that, that is something that they experienced. I think that's, you know, something that I felt was a little more. I can handle the stress of the job and I can handle all of the, the fast pace I consider myself more qualified maybe because of all of that.

Researcher: Okay. So I just want to clarify something, so that I am absolutely understand you. You are saying that even though they had the associates and you didn't, the military training that you went through, and the experience the practical application or experience in the field, was more beneficial than the degree itself.

P5: That's the way I feel sir. You know taking those classes for my associate's degree. I just needed English and math so, all the actual working with military people, that I had experience and so on already. Hands on. .

Researcher: Right, right; if you don't mind me asking, were you as a combat medic? Did you see combat when you're overseas?

P5: Yes sir I did. There's lot of different things I'll never forget. There's a lot of different situations.

Researcher: I'm sure and again, I'm telling you one veteran to another, I really appreciate what you did.

P5: Thank you sir.

Researcher: The um, now let me take it one step further okay. Now let's, let's look at these same feelings but after you graduate. So now you have your experience and you have your degree and the other civilian has the experience that they have encountered and a degree. Now their experience will be, at this point, limited to school, not a practical application. So how would you feel, how would you rate your, your training, after you now have a degree, compared to your training and they're having a degree?

P5: I don't think it's even in the same ballpark. What I experienced and my degree, I'm trying not to be a little big on myself, but I think I have a lot more going for me.

Researcher: that's okay. Remember there are absolutely no wrong answers in this. Good, bad or indifferent; there are no wrong answers. So that is 100% acceptable don't you worry. The next thing I want to talk about was moving to feelings that center on your degree and then the transition you had to make back into civilian life. What was your biggest concern prior to exiting the military? Single biggest concern you had.

P5: I might have to think about that for a second. That's a pretty good one there. There's a lot of fears. Switching back; I think one of the fears was, was, you know, getting that job.

Researcher: Okay.

P5: Because of the experience or maybe people being afraid of posttraumatic stress syndrome or something like that. So it was a fear in being kind of competitive. And um, being overseas for a while.

Researcher: Okay, that makes total sense. So, let me kind of expand on that. Did, when… So prior to making the transition your fear was your job, or getting the job is that right?

P5: Yes sir.

Researcher: Okay. So now take me through how you felt having earned the degree knowing that you were going to make a transition.

P5: That made me feel so much better; knowing that I have the degree. Because I know the importance to many people. That they look at that. So to have that degree made me look at myself in a whole different way.

Researcher: Well why do you think that is? Why is having a degree so important?

P5: for some people?

Researcher: Uh huh.

P5: For me, it, it just made me feel like now I have the paper to prove it. Here we go. I got the experience, I've done the work, I felt like I had what I needed. It made me feel good having that degree

Researcher: Do you feel that it leveled the playing field or do your, your experience toppled the playing field? In other words, you were far superior to it?

P5: I think the experience was superior. But now that I have the degree I think that gives me a heads up on just about anyone has that type of degree.

Researcher: okay. So I'm going to ask you a question now that is a bit sensitive. I want to tell you upfront, if you don't feel like answering it you don't have to. Okay?

P5: Yes sir.

Researcher: All right, on the…you mentioned the public's thought about PTSD and things like that about military soldiers. And my question then is; did having the degree quell some of these thoughts, or were they still prevalent as you made it out? And then I'm going to follow up with how did, once you got out did that change at all?

P5: I honestly believe having that degree makes people look at you and have a little more trust. Cause in a way it seems like you've overcome some of those issues. If that makes sense.

Researcher: Well you know what, my, I guess…let me ask you this; why do you think people looked at you differently because you had a degree?

P5: I think that it, you know, shows that you didn't give up on something, that you have the willpower and when put you mind to it you can do it, and that you weren't weak. You know you were able to see something through and get it done.

Researcher: Right, right. That's a great perspective. I really appreciate you saying that. That's really a great point. Okay, so after you made the transition and you became a civilian, how did your education play into the job that you got? Did it, did it…Was it a quick process, was a long process? Tell me about the things you encountered when you applied for jobs and that kind of thing?

P5: Well I know a lot of the jobs I applied for you had to have a degree. So that opened the door for me in the first place. If I didn't have the degree, I wouldn't be able to apply for it. So that, that was a big one. So I was able to do that and get my foot in the door. With the degree it was pretty easy. I got a job pretty quick. I think, without a degree I might still be, you know, I might be still washing dishes somewhere or doing something, you know, that I feel, I fee would be beneath me but I would work, take any job I can take. But that degree made a huge difference in my life.

Researcher: Okay. Again I cannot thank you enough you've given me so far. You really have provided me some really solid feedback. Now I'm going to ask you, just a couple more things. What was your academic background prior to enrolling in the associate program?

P5: I got, I had my high school diploma.

Researcher: Okay, okay, and after you got the job, when you came back in and you got the position, and again, there is no right or wrong on this, and there may be no reaction, but my question would be did you, how did you feel? How did you feel, from coming out of the military, getting a job, it sounds like you got it quickly. What did you think about it?

P5: I felt, I felt amazing. I felt like $1 million. It brought up so much, even thinking about now it made me bring up a bunch of feelings…I just...making my parents proud; showing people what I could do. That really meant a lot to me.

Researcher: I'm really glad to hear that. Tell me about your, those feelings of pride. You mentioned your parents, do you feel like they were, they were happy that you completed this?

P5: Yes sir, they, they were thrilled.

Researcher: And why do you think that?

P5: Well I'm not…they told me they were so proud of me not too many people in my family have a college degree. So it was, it was, it was something not many people do, you know, so that was something else. Even though I was in a in a town where a lot of people are going to school, in my family, direct family, there was not a lot.

Researcher: gotcha. I gotcha. Well let me ask you this then, in a ..Looking back, if you had it all over again, from an educational perspective, is there anything that you would change during the process of getting your education?

P5: I, you know I think I would have started a little earlier. Made things a little easier. Maybe I would have my bachelor's degree by then. By the time I got out.

Researcher: Do you still believe that going in the military was the right decision for you?

P5: Yes sir, it was, it change my life and it was defiantly in the right direction.

Researcher: Do you feel like you changed your life for the better?

P5: Yes sir.

Researcher: And would you say it change your life educationally for the better?

P5: Yes sir, without a doubt.

Researcher: Why do you say that?

P5: The opportunity. Opportunity I never would've had for school.

Researcher: Is that from a financial standpoint, I just want to make sure that I understand?

P5: Yes sir,

Researcher: Okay…

P5: Financial.

Researcher: That makes total sense. Again I want to reiterate that there is never a wrong answer here. My goal is to try and really get a better feeling for just that, feelings and thoughts and perceptions that were going on as you moved in, to the decision, and moved through the decision and, and, the process, and then the transition and moved out of it. It sounds like you've got a job and you're doing well everything is on the up and looking good.

P5: Yes sir.

Researcher: Okay, is there anything you'd like to add to anything that I've asked you?

P5: No sir, that's pretty much it. I hope I was able to help you out with your study.

Researcher: Well I want to thank you. You've been very frank and I hope that I didn't bring up any feelings that caused you any discomfort.

P5: No sir, it was good.

Researcher: Well again I appreciate it and I want to congratulate you, number one on your degree and success and I want to wish you absolutely the best. Again, everything I'm doing here, what I'm going to do, just so you know; in the, *I consent* form you consented to, it says I outlined that in the end, when I'm all done, I'll send you a two page summary of all the findings. So you'll get the actual results of this study and you'll know exactly what happened in the, in the end.

P5: That sounds good sir. Thank you sir, I just want to wish you the best of your studies and thank you so much for letting me participate.

Researcher: Listen I want to thank you again for participating. Do you have any additional questions for me?

P5: No sir not at all.

Researcher: Well thank you so much again. Especially doing this late at night, I just can't thank you enough wish you the best. Feel free to shout any time. Okay?

P5: Sounds good sir. Thank you sir.

Researcher: Thank you [name omitted] and good night. Bye-bye.

P5: Goodnight sir and thank you bye-bye.