

ABSTRACT

Military to Civilian Transition Experiences of Women Veterans: A Phenomenological Study

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Since its inception, women have served in the United States Military but were not given formal military status until 1901. Throughout the 1900s, women slowly integrated into the military but remained in support roles (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Upon completion of their service, women often returned to their homes to assume more traditional gender roles. As a result, women veterans have been termed “invisible” (Thomas & Hunter, 2019) and often receive little recognition for their military service. The United States finally removed all gender-based restrictions from military occupations in December 2015, creating an increase in service opportunities for women, leading to more women veterans than ever before (Pellerin, 2015).

As of 2017, there were nine million women veterans, and estimates show a growth rate of 18,000 women veterans per year over the next decade (Department of Veteran’s Affairs, 2019; National Center for Veteran Analysis and Statistics, 2017). Women veterans differ from their male counterparts in various ways, yet research into women veterans' lived experiences is limited. As the women veteran population grows, a

greater understanding of their transition experiences is required to provide the necessary services and programs. To understand and describe women veterans' lived experiences as they transition to civilian life, the researcher conducted a descriptive phenomenological study using a conceptual framework based on feminist theory and further grounded in military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Descriptive phenomenological research provides meaningful insights and understanding of the phenomenon of interest through the participant's viewpoint (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with a small group of women veterans recently separated from the military, focusing on their military to civilian transition stages. As a result, eight key themes were identified and include the following: reasons for separating, command response, transition programs and services, emotional nature of transition, the effort required during transition, career outcomes, health outcomes, and change in identity. Each of these identified themes provided opportunities to improve support programs and expose further research opportunities.

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Military to Civilian Transition Experiences of Women Veterans:
A Phenomenological Study

by

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DEDICATION

To the research participants, I dedicate this to you for your openness and willingness to share your experiences.

To all women veterans, your challenges, barriers, victories, and achievements are not invisible.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Problem of Practice

Introduction

In December 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter made history by removing all gender-based restrictions from military occupations. Provided they could meet the requirements, women could serve in any job or role within the military (Pellerin, 2015). This announcement opened many military career opportunities and created more potential for increased gender equality in the military. Today, the number of women in service is at a record high. As of the last report in 2017, women made up 16% of the enlisted ranks and 18% of the commissioned officer ranks (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, 2017). With this increase in female representation comes an increasing number of women veterans. As of 2017, women veterans constitute over nine percent of the veteran population, one point nine million in total (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2019). These women are more ethnically diverse, younger, more educated, and more likely to have children than their male counterparts. They are also more likely to have faced sexual violence during their time in service. After separating, they are more likely to have a service-connected disability, have no personal income, and to live in poverty as compared to male veterans (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). Despite these differences, transition assistance programs fail to address topics specific to the needs of women veterans (Government Accountability Office, 2014). Society largely views veterans as male, and despite the evidence to the contrary, support programs and services take a primarily male viewpoint (Eichler, 2016; Kamarck, 2018).

This study described the perspective of women veterans as they experience the military to civilian transition. By seeking to understand how these women make meaning of their lived experiences, both during and after their military service, this study provided insight into activities and programs that better support women veterans during the transition process.

Statement of the Problem

The military to civilian transition experience is a challenging and confusing process for the majority of servicemembers. The United States government created the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1991 to assist servicemembers separated due to reductions in force in the latter part of the 1980s. Since that time, the program was updated multiple times, with the most significant redesign in 2011. This redesigned program called Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success) included preparation throughout the military career and an increased number of required TAP curriculum (Kamarck, 2018). Despite these various updates and changes, no differentiation within Transition GPS addresses specific challenges faced by women veterans leaving the service (Kamarck, 2018).

Research into women veterans has increased over the last few years, with a primary focus on health-related benefits and the needs of women veterans. Overwhelmingly, research views gender differences amongst veterans from a quantitative perspective with gender functioning as a variable (Eichler, 2016). The body of literature fails to differentiate between veteran groups with a bias towards seeing veterans as male (Eichler, 2016). Women who leave the service are more likely to have mental and physical health problems. They do not experience as much social support, have lower

socioeconomic status, and have lower employment rates despite a higher education level. The ability to transition to civilian life for women carries additional family burdens in childcare and spousal expectations (Demers, 2013; Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, 2017; Eichler, 2016; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). Although women veterans face a variety of problems physically, mentally, socially, and economically, there is a need to examine the lived experiences of women veterans both during and after their transition out of the military.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of women veterans as they go through the military to civilian transition. This study was grounded in feminist theory and focused on a small group of women veterans' unique experiences during their transition out of military service. Thematic analysis of this study aligned within the stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Findings from this study can help improve government transition support programs and provide valuable insights for organizations and veterans themselves. Women veterans are a growing population that could help overcome the gender gap in leadership prevalent across society. Private and public organizations seeking to support transitioning veterans must understand the unique challenges different veteran groups face. The identification of themes validated these women's experiences and ultimately promoted increased gender equality.

The central research question was, what are the lived experiences of women veterans during their military to civilian transition? Secondary research questions provided further structure for this study and included how do women veterans describe

their experiences as they approached their transition out of the military, how do women veterans experience transition trajectories, and how do women veterans describe the outcomes of their overall transition experience?

Conceptual Framework

This phenomenological study utilized an interpretive framework bounded by feminist theory. Feminist research approaches focus on the diverse experiences of women and the institutions that frame those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This phenomenological study focused on the lived experience of a specific group of women, women veterans, and their development within the broader military organization's confines. Much of the current research on women veterans defines gender as a variable (Eichler, 2016). Research treats gender as a simple variable for categorization purposes and fails to consider the feminist viewpoint (Eichler, 2016). Feminist theory seeks to make women and their lives visible, seeing women as relevant subjects worth studying (Ackerly & True, 2010a). This theory has its roots in the historical feminist movement and came about because women were often unseen in scientific research (Scott, 1986). Women, their experiences, and their interpretations of those experiences did not have value until the women's movement raised awareness of the issue (Ackerly & True 2010b). Personal topics such as women's health, sexual harassment, and marital rape became politically valid. Feminist theory resulted from recognizing the vital role of research to challenge gender-biased knowledge that would only serve to uphold the power men have over women (Ackerly & True, 2010b). Focusing this research specifically on women veterans will challenge the inherent gender bias within veteran scholarship and ideally fill a knowledge gap (Demers, 2013; Eichler, 2016).

Within feminist theory, this study focused on gender as an explanatory category to help describe the role of gender norms or gender bias in the veteran experience. This approach recognizes that gender is a social construct. This study explored what it means to be a woman within this current social and historical context and how gender norms affect veterans' reintegration into society. It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, women are defined within the military system that only allows for binary classification. This study does not include other gender constructs precisely due to the nature of the military institution. Women veterans face specific tension between their gender role within the military and their gender role in civilian contexts, both personal and professional. Demers (2013) found that women veterans strive to be accepted in the hyper-masculine military environment throughout their time in service, often donning different or gender-nonconforming roles to survive. This struggle becomes more pronounced when veterans try to live up to the ideals of femininity within society, especially when there is no support or recognition of their unique experiences. This study utilized gender as an explanatory versus quantifiable variable to describe how gender norms impacted veteran transitions. This study helps identify the characteristics of programs designed specifically for women veterans to provide the necessary support needed to transition successfully.

Analysis of themes captured during this study occurred through the lens of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). This theory has three overlapping stages: moving from approaching the transition, managing the transition, and finally assessing the transition. Each stage has specific factors and components that provided a helpful

method of bounding phases of the transition. Chapter three covers this theory in greater detail.

Research Design and Methods

This descriptive phenomenological study described women veterans' lived experiences through the military to civilian transition. This type of study focuses on derived meaning from the experiences shared by participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology does not seek to identify a theory but rather to "gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world" (van Manen, 2015, p. 9). Each of the participants shared their personal experiences and viewpoints when leaving military service. This study captured that viewpoint to uncover hidden meanings to understand the phenomenon of women veteran's transition out of the military, with the potential to use that information to improve policies or practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study used criterion-based purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows for the selection of participants who have experienced the specific phenomenon of interest. For this study, that phenomenon is the military to civilian transition. This sampling type intentionally focuses on a small group of people who have a shared lived experience to allow for a greater depth of understanding (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants were women veterans who have transitioned from the service in the last two years or less and served a minimum of four years. Eight women veterans participated in the study to preserve time and allow for rich, in-depth data collection.

For data collection purposes, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to capture participant demographic information. A semi-structured

interview protocol allowed the participants to guide the discussion (for a complete list of interview questions, see Appendix A).

Definition of Key Terms

Feminism: “the search to render visible and to explain patterns of injustice in organizations, behavior and normative values that systematically manifest themselves in gender differentiated ways” (Eichler, 2017, p. 464).

Gender norms: “individual and collective expectations about masculine and feminine behavior” (Eichler, 2017, p. 682).

Identity: a multidimensional concept that is “socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed within community” (Eichler, 2017, pp. 493–494).

Military Sexual Trauma: “psychological trauma from a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment which occurred while the veteran was serving on active duty or active duty for training” (US Government, 2014, p. 285).

Reintegration: “a complex process of adjustment across both life and career, as veterans move through a transition that involves changing structures, culture, and life roles” (Anderson & Goodman, 2014, p. 40).

Transition: “any event, or nonevent, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 39).

Veteran: “a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable” (Pensions, Bonuses, and Veteran’s Relief, 2008, p. 138).

Conclusion

Women currently make up one of the largest growing populations of veterans, with 1.9 million women veterans (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017). The expected growth is 18,000 women veterans a year through 2025 (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). However, the Veteran's Administration has refused to change the language of its mission beyond its male-focused goal "to care for *him* [emphasis added] who shall have borne the battle and for *his* widow and orphan" (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2015). This emphasis on men's military service reaches far into society (Di Leone et al., 2016; Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019). Women veterans represent a significant population worthy of study, but scholarly research is slow to catch up.

When examined through the lens of feminist theory, research can seek to understand and make women veterans' experiences known. Feminist theory aims to disrupt the cycle of oppression and privilege granted to men. Gender is a social construct used to oppress women and other groups to maintain the "normal" male stereotype (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). This gender expression is especially true in the hypermasculine military environment, where the masculine qualities correlate to effectiveness. Within the veteran community, oppression in the form of a failure to highlight women veterans' experiences, though often unintentional, is preserved. By viewing women veterans' experiences through this lens of feminism, the hope is to challenge gender norms and improve access across all domains.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The experiences of women veterans as they transition out of the military are very different from those of male veterans. These women are younger, more educated, more likely to be single parents, and face many service-related health issues (Demers, 2013; Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, 2017; Eichler, 2017; Mankowski & Everett, 2015; Kamarck, 2016). However, the research into veterans has been slow to recognize these differences amongst veterans. Failure to differentiate between gender when conducting veteran scholarship leaves a significant demographic of the veteran population out of the light and results in women becoming “invisible veterans” (Thomas & Hunter, 2019).

Women leaving the service have a strong desire to lead, bringing a wide variety of technical skills and leadership abilities gained during their time in service (Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019). With the recent focus on the gender gap in leadership across society, women veterans have excellent potential to help close that gap and reach greater gender equality (Warner et al., 2018). Feminist theory recognizes that women have a place in our society and need more support to overcome institutional oppression. An in-depth review of relevant literature uncovered the existing research body around women veterans and their transition experiences. Key themes that emerged through the analysis of women veteran literature included gender and identity, health challenges, and reintegration experiences. In addition, the research included a review of Women’s workplace barriers, as these are genuine challenges women veterans must overcome as they transition into

the civilian labor market. This review helped define the current state of women veteran scholarship to identify gaps and the need for further research.

Gender and Identity

The first topic to consider when reviewing the experiences of women veterans is that of gender and identity. Eichler (2017) conducted a literature scoping review to identify research on gender and veteran transitions to civilian life between 1990 and 2015. She examined the change in veteran research with the inclusion of gender as a relevant category. Eichler found that veteran research had increased in the previous 15 years and covered various topics and disciplines. However, this research was consistently genderblind. The author noted that more current veteran research was changing with the concept of gender appearing more frequently. This upturn reflected the increased attention to gender in general within academics and policymaking.

Eichler noted that the bulk of research on women veterans was quantitative and focused on the health sciences. Gender scholarship during that period typically presented itself in one of two ways, first, by merely focusing on women veterans as a concept, thereby challenging the assumed norm of male veterans. Second, this research sought to make women veterans visible as a population. The body of literature utilized gender differently by examining differences in veterans' experiences or outcomes based on gender. The author drew on feminist theory as a way of providing a critical review of this growing body of research to identify both trends as well as gaps (Eichler, 2017).

Eichler (2017) utilized the feminist understanding of how to approach gender based upon the work of historian Joan Scott who developed three definitions of gender (1986). The first was a descriptive category, which focused on women as subjects of

study but failed to consider the history and the power imbalance between men and women. The second category, causal, seeks to identify how the stories of inequality relate to women's subordination. This category looks at gender as a critical component of social relationships based on the differences between them. The analytical approach views gender in a myriad of ways. These include symbolical, normative, political, and relating to individual identity (Scott, 1986). Eichler's findings highlighted the importance of considering gender when studying veterans. Women are increasing their participation level in the military, with the military representing our society. The experiences of women veterans are essential to the understanding of all women's experiences. Overall, Eichler identified the research gaps and the need for further research into gender and veteran transition experiences (2017).

Crowley and Sandhoff (2017) provided further insights into the concept of gender and identity for women veterans. These authors conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry focused on the lived experiences of female United States combat veterans, specifically regarding the ability to make sense of their femininity in the military's hyper-masculine culture. The authors noted that the opening of all combat roles to women in the military in 2016 dramatically changed the military landscape and highlighted prevalent issues around gender. Women veterans had to learn how to survive as women in the military while also facing the very significant barrier of hyper-masculinity. The authors found that participants attempted to adapt to the military's masculine norms by suppressing their femininity. Participants in this study also showed explicit anti-feminine attitudes, seeing feminine behavior as inferior to the male soldier's ideal. The veterans described efforts to disassociate themselves from other female soldiers, especially those not acting in ways

that held up the military's masculine norms. Success in the military, according to the participants, required masculine characteristics. Crowley and Sandhoff (2017) found that women in the military faced exclusion and reinforcement of gender norms through sexual harassment. Male service members alienated women by treating them as sexual objects rather than peers. The study's women noted they rarely challenged this treatment, feeling powerless to create change, even accepting it as normal behavior. Many women veterans experienced sexual harassment and saw institutional standards that upheld or encouraged it, including leaders at the highest levels.

Gender and identity shaped and constrained experiences of women veterans during and after leaving military service. The women veterans reported feeling like they would never really belong, and despite their essential roles in combat, they never felt truly accepted. These struggles highlight the challenge that women veterans have in understanding and adhering to gender norms. Their identity continued to be challenged throughout their time of service and into their civilian lives (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017; Demers, 2010).

Demers (2010) also researched gender and identity in terms of veterans. The author noted a lack of literature about women veterans and found most research on women veterans related to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the Veteran's Health Administration, or sexual victimization in the form of Military Sexual Trauma. Demers found very little qualitative research on reintegration into civilian life. Demers found that society creates the culture and learning of social norms, values, and place within that construct (2010). All military members go through indoctrination to integrate members into the military culture while also removing civilian identities. A vital component of any

organization is socializing ideals and goals to members of the organization. The military takes this to the next level, creating members capable of following orders that could take human life. The military culture characteristics make a cohesive group identity based on self-sacrifice, emphasizing the group over the individual (Demers, 2010).

Di Leone et al. (2016) sought to understand the extent of women veterans' identity based on their service experiences and the level of positive regard they felt about that identity. The authors wanted to understand women veterans' identity based on demographic differences such as age and combat exposure. The authors utilized a quantitative survey analysis to capture data for their study. They then studied the women's veteran identity centrality and positive regard for veteran identity using revised scales. They measured the frequency of adherence to these scales and compared them to demographics. The researchers also looked at the women's usage of Veteran's Administration services to identify any correlations to veteran identity. The authors found no correlation between veteran identity centrality and specific demographic characteristics. Participants overall showed a highly positive connection to their veteran status. The level at which they internalized this identity positively correlated to their choice to use Veteran's Administration services. Overall, the authors found that individual experiences while in the service can significantly affect veteran identity and level of positive regard after separating (Di Leone et al., 2016).

Gender and identity are essential topics to consider within veteran research, including the effect of organizational ties on identity formation. Women veterans face conflicting gender identities when separating from military service and must learn to acclimate to new expected standards and norms. Women leave the hyper-masculine

military environment after having known to suppress certain parts of their identity. When they return to civilian life, expectations for behavior change dramatically. The ability to navigate this changed identity can cause confusion and disparity for women veterans (Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019; Demers, 2013; Goldstein, 2019). The lack of qualitative research into this topic provides clear guidance on the need for further studies.

Health Challenges

Another topic that is highly prevalent within women veterans' scholarship is health challenges. Health-related issues have implications for many veterans, from stigmas around mental health to strains in relationships due to deployment experiences. For example, women in the military face very high military sexual trauma rates, and experts believe the actual number remains underreported (Weitz, 2015). In addition, women in the military experience different mental and physical health issues than their male counterparts and are also less likely to seek services from the Veteran's Health Administration (Mattocks et al., 2017; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017; Weitz, 2015; Zalaquett & Chatter, 2016). Highlighting this critical topic helps create a better understanding of some of the transition challenges women veterans face.

In 2016 the Veteran's Administration Health Services Research and Development division published a report that provided an overview of the literature on women veterans (Danan et al., 2016). The study gathered 437 articles written between 2008 and 2015, identifying the changing face of research and the prevalent topics of interest. Over half of the research articles covered issues relating to mental health. The authors noted a definite upswing on topics such as rural access to care and reproductive health. Danan et al.

(2016) identified a few critical gaps and potential areas for future research. They found that most research failed to differentiate women as a subpopulation instead of including them in the overall results. The authors also noted the military's changing nature between removing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the inclusion of women in combat. These ongoing changes would require a different response to serve the needs of women veterans. Finally, while research was improving, the authors noted that veterans themselves needed to be engaged at a higher rate to validate and improve research outcomes.

Brownstone et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study to understand better the phenomenology of Military Sexual Trauma amongst women veterans. Thirty-two women participated in the study, and several thematic patterns emerged. The first was that women veterans viewed sexual harassment as an ever-present behavioral norm during their service. They not only experienced it but expected it to happen regularly. The second theme noted that institutional pressure existed to hide or cover up incidences of sexually related trauma, especially if a woman wanted to have a military career. The third theme was the women veterans' changed attitudes about the military, in general, following their Military Sexual Trauma. Many of the participants felt that the reputable organization they had envisioned the military to be was inaccurate. The fourth theme was losing trust in all relationships after Military Sexual Trauma, even amongst friends and significant others. This theme occurred several times, with bystanders failing to support a victim's claims and participating in its perpetuation at times. A fifth theme that emerged was self-blame by victims due to their appearance or behavior. Many felt it was their bodies or femininity at fault for what happened to them. The sixth theme was avoidance as a coping mechanism. Many of the participants tried to forget or pretend their trauma

had never occurred to survive. A final issue that emerged amongst a small group of participants was the positive experience following trauma due to internal and external support and justice for their assailants. However, these women constituted a small percentage among the participants. Overall, the themes identified by Brownstone et al. (2018) provide powerful insight into both the experiences of Military Sexual Trauma survivors and ongoing barriers to recovery that may exist for women veterans.

Weitz (2015) conducted qualitative research into how fear of sexual violence could impact women servicemembers. According to the author, American culture has four primary messages that women receive around rape. These messages are that women are physically vulnerable, that women are incapable of protecting themselves (thereby reliant on men to protect them), that sexual predators are rampant throughout society, and that it is women's responsibility to prevent rape (Weitz, 2015). The author sought to understand how this presented itself for women in military service through interviews with women veterans around fear of sexual assault, specifically during military deployments. All the women reported sexual assault was a significant issue, with 44 percent saying that they lived in fear and took active steps to prevent sexual assault. Though 12 percent of the women in the study stated they were not concerned about sexual assault, this was only due to protective measures they took to prevent it. These conflicts show that while the military can help women overcome cultural messages, the military's masculine nature can, in other circumstances, reinforce those messages (Weitz, 2015).

Mental health was a consistent theme throughout the literature reviewed. Buttner et al. (2017) looked at the relationship between combat exposure, chronic pain, and

mental health amongst veterans who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The authors found that combat exposure had a significant association with higher levels of chronic, intense pain and mental health issues relating to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression. Women veterans exposed to combat in the study indicated a higher association between pain intensity and depression. Women can serve in all combat-related roles, increasing their likelihood of exposure. Overall, the authors found that veterans report higher rates of trauma, resulting in chronic pain, both in and out of the military. This finding could have significant impacts on their functionality (Buttner et al., 2017).

Curry et al. (2014) examined survey data collected from 1700 veterans to understand lifetime major depression, comorbid disorders, and gender differentiation. The authors' overall findings showed a higher incidence of major depressive disorder amongst veterans than nonveterans, with women veterans showing a higher rate of occurrence than male veterans. Women veterans had a higher incidence of comorbid major depressive disorder with anxiety or eating-related disorders. Male veterans showed a higher comorbid rate of major depressive disorder with substance use disorders. Incidence rates of comorbid Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and major depressive disorder were higher than usual for male and women veterans. The onset of primary depressive disorder sequence did not vary between male and women veterans, despite the likelihood of an earlier start of depression amongst women nonveterans. The study's implications included the need to recognize major depressive disorder earlier amongst women veterans and screen for potential comorbid issues.

Gutierrez et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative review of women veterans' exposure to deployment-related stressors. The focus was on identifying those gender differences apparent in mental and physical health outcomes, specifically around risk factors related to suicidal ideation. The authors identified several similar themes to those found in a study of primarily male veterans, with notable differences. Having navigated the masculine military culture, women veterans focused on mental and physical toughness experienced pride and frustration. These women reported working harder than the men to do their jobs yet still feeling like a burden. They thought that they did not belong since they could not live up to expected standards. Many women felt suicide was an extreme coping mechanism and recognized how someone could get to that point. The participants noted incidents of prior self-directed harm as a result of their lack of belongingness. Overall, the study helped to highlight the danger in generalizing veteran experiences without considering gender. Women veterans and associated health issues result from very different experiences while serving (Gutierrez et al., 2013).

Mattocks et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study using in-depth interviews to understand military-related stressors and coping strategies. Women veteran participants identified the following stressors: combat experiences, Military Sexual Trauma, Separation from family, post-deployment reintegration, difficulties with friend and family relationships, and attempting to leave the war behind. The participants also identified main coping strategies in response to these stressors, behavioral avoidance (binge eating, overspending, or substance abuse), cognitive avoidance (self-inflicted isolation), and positive behavioral coping strategies (connecting with other women vets or seeking therapy). The authors noted that many respondents felt that finding opportunities to

connect with other women veterans was limited. The women veterans in the study also felt a lack of appreciation or recognition of their war experiences. The participants indicated limited use of Veteran Health Administration services, not feeling that they deserved treatment as women (Mattocks et al., 2012).

Blais and Geiser (2019) conducted quantitative research on suicidal ideation amongst women veterans, specifically in response to Military Sexual Trauma and the inability to feel pleasure due to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The authors reviewed women veterans' surveys that measured the level of suicidal ideation, type of Military Sexual Trauma, the severity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms depression severity. Blaise and Geiser found that Military Sexual Trauma from assault correlates to suicidal ideation and high depression and anhedonia. This study highlighted the importance of considering the type of attack when studying the aftereffects. Understanding the factors contributing to suicidal ideation is essential as the risk amongst service members is high. Women veterans are two times more likely to be suicidal than women civilians (Blais & Geisler, 2019).

Zalaquett and Chatter (2016) reviewed the relationship between veterans' mental health issues and the potential impact on career opportunities. The authors cited the high incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depressive Disorder amongst veterans, correlating this to the high number of veterans entering the civilian labor market and existing stigmas around hiring veterans. Additionally, the authors noted a clear connection between mental health issues and the impact on finding employment and the lack of research differentiating between veterans' subgroups, such as based on gender (Zalaquett & Chatter, 2016).

Health-related issues can play a significant role in the effective transition to civilian life amongst women veterans. Identifying health issues and providing better support represents a critical element of ensuring women veterans' inclusivity. The Veteran's Health Administration has recognized the need for focused efforts on women veterans' health services, but more action is necessary (Danan et al., 2016). Health challenges can impact every aspect of their well-being, including relationships, employment, and even effective reintegration into society.

Reintegration

Reintegrating into a new way of life is difficult for anyone, but veterans face additional challenges beyond the norm. Veterans who leave the military must learn an entirely new way of interacting with others, from how they talk to how they dress. Women veterans must learn how to effectively engage with a society with different expectations for their gender-normative behavior (Demers, 2010; Goldstein, 2019). Despite the increased number of women serving in the military and transitioning to civilian life, very little is understood about what these experiences look like and how it affects women veterans.

Demers (2010) studied women veterans' lived experiences through the transition into and out of the military. The author conducted two focus groups with 17 women veterans who had experienced combat. Key themes identified by the author were becoming a soldier, being a woman in a man's world, fighting two wars, and not being treated as belonging. The women also faced different challenges upon returning from deployment, specifically renegotiating their identities and struggling to cope with changes. Participants noted problems due to repressed experiences such as prior sexual

harassment they had failed to acknowledge. Demers (2010) found that many women veterans expressed a loss of certainty, not knowing who they were as civilians compared to the military. They also faced barriers with civilian friends and family who struggled to understand what a women veteran is. Many expressed a need to undo the military indoctrination but did not know how. Ultimately, the women veterans struggled with reintegration into society, especially concerning their feminine identity. After years of isolating that side of themselves in the military, they had to relearn how to be a woman and feminine.

Burkhart and Hogan (2015) conducted a grounded theory study on women veterans' experiences transitioning into, though, and out of military service. The authors identified a fundamental concept of coping with transitions in their study. This coping was evident when joining the military and transitioning out of the military to live as a civilian. Joining the military creates stress for women, including learning new policies and procedures and dealing with gender stereotypes, degrading treatment, and high occurrence of Military Sexual Trauma. The military transition also resulted in stress due to culture shock and feeling unprepared for their lives as civilians, compounded by mental and physical health problems. When leaving the military, some of the participants' specific issues were lack of a support system, unfamiliarity with civilian operations, and difficulty learning social or cultural standards outside the military. Participants also noted a disconnect between military and civilian work ethic and a lack of a critical mission. Many struggled to find their identity as a woman once leaving military service.

Burkhart and Hogan's research provided a clear insight into some of the stressors that servicewomen experience throughout their military career as they move through points of transition (2015). Their study also identified that they exhibited limited coping methods when these women veterans encountered new stress sources. Many became hardened and ultimately experienced later issues due to the lack of coping, specifically PTSD. The authors found that many respondents entered the military in late adolescence, a period of significant identity development. By first creating their identity within the military, then changing again upon re-entering civilian life, women veterans face additional challenges with fully knowing themselves (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015)

Dichter and True (2015) conducted a qualitative study that examined women veterans' specific experiences related to their decision to transition out of the military. The first prominent theme that emerged in this study was premature separation from the military based on gender-specific experiences. Two categories identified these reasons for early departure. The first was external situations or circumstances that were not compatible with the demands of military service. Reasons included pregnancy, childcare expectations, and mental health problems unrelated to military service but precluded its continuance. The second category was negative or traumatic experiences during military service. Military Sexual Trauma was a highly prevalent traumatic experience for the second category, including the lack of support experienced after that trauma. Many women reported victim-blaming and PTSD as a result of their ordeal. In addition to sexually related injury, participants reported trauma based on combat-related experiences. All these factors contributed to the participants' decision to leave the military service. The authors recognized that while their sample was not indicative of the entire women

veteran population, the findings could identify critical considerations for military programs and initiatives (Dichter & True, 2015).

Maiocco and Smith (2016) conducted a qualitative study with eight women veterans to better understand their experiences upon returning from war. Six key themes emerged among the participants around their reintegration. The first theme was the internal conflict between feeling relieved to be home and feeling guilty about leaving. The second theme was the participants' change and their new perspective on their lives and experiences. The third theme identified was aggravation with family and friends, precisely their inability to identify with the veteran's experiences. The fourth theme centered around the impact of deployments on relationships and decide to stay in the military. The fifth theme was about remembering war experiences that never seemed to end. The final item was recognizing that the future held potential opportunities. The authors noted that issues with mental health and the family's role are significant concerns for women veterans (Maiocco & Smith, 2016).

In summary, reintegration into civilian life holds various challenges for women veterans, exemplified when other issues come into play, such as health or relationship stress. Women veterans transitioning to the civilian way of life redefine their identity and how they present themselves to the world (Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019; Demers, 2010; Goldstein, 2019). Support programs for veterans do not differentiate by gender and fail to consider these factors (GAO, 2014). Through examining available scholarship on the role of gender and identity, health challenges, and reintegration, gaps in scholarly research around women veterans present themselves. In addition to the challenges women veterans face in their personal lives, they also face challenges as women in the workplace. The

gender gap in leadership and other related phenomena places additional stressors on women veterans (Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019; Warner et al., 2018). These women have left military service with great experience and capability, not consistently recognized or appreciated by organizations. Additional research is needed to identify the primary challenges women face in the workplace and the different support programs that women veterans require.

Women in the Workplace

In addition to the challenges specific to women veterans, women can face many different phenomena than men within the civilian workplace. Therefore, this is a relevant category to review as these experiences are relevant for women veterans seeking post-service employment. Topics identified in this review include different performance standards, gender harassment, stereotype threat, and other barriers to success. Identifying these challenges and their influence provides clarity on the experiences women veterans may face when transitioning.

Ellemers (2014) conducted an in-depth literature review that examined the various organizational characteristics that could potentially affect women's career opportunities. Organizations reap many benefits from increased gender diversity, such as improved bottom lines and more creative, innovative problem-solving techniques. However, most women in the workforce still experience disparity in terms of pay and opportunity. The differences between men and women biologically are minor, but the social construct of gender emphasizes and reinforces gender distinctions. Ellemers reviewed four methods by which organizations and individuals are mutually influential in affecting women's career opportunities. The first is implicit bias, which applies specific characteristics to all

women, such as that women value time with family more. These biases can create unintentional discrimination that may negatively affect a woman's career opportunities. The second method is the concept of a glass cliff, which involves placing women in leadership positions that are precarious or have few resources at a much higher rate than men. The glass cliff can be very beneficial if the woman is successful but highly detrimental if not. Another well-known phenomenon is that of the Queen Bee or women who refuse to share the benefits of their success with other women. This concept is more likely to be present in organizations that exhibit higher incidents of gender bias. Women in these organizations feel a need to fight to maintain their position and take fewer risks. The fourth issue that affects women's career development is work-life issues.

Although men and women share more household and childcare responsibilities than ever before, a perception still exists that women cannot balance work and family obligations. In addition, women receive a negative correlation when they spend time on family obligations, while the opposite holds for men. The author notes the challenges these various phenomena present and the implications for organizational change (Ellemers, 2014).

Bobbitt-Zeher (2011) reviewed gender discrimination legal cases to identify how gender discrimination functions within the workplace, specifically related to work processes. The author reviewed narratives from sexual discrimination case reports to create connections between workplace policies and gender stereotyping. Two hundred nineteen sexual discrimination case narratives revealed themes and persistent patterns amongst the respondents. The author identified seven different types of harassment. She also identified gender stereotyping, descriptive (how gender is) or prescriptive (how

gender should be). Three stereotypes emerged: women employees are “women first,” their personal life is more important than their career, and they are sexual objects. A second theme that emerged was perceived gender inferiority, specifically around women being hormonal or emotional. The next item was that women were in jobs that were more appropriate for men. Finally, many women reported stereotyping in terms of gender bias. This bias manifested in the workplace as general aggression towards women or seeing women as a liability. The author also found clear links between gender stereotyping and the misapplication of workplace policy. An example is firing a woman for being in a relationship with a coworker but not penalizing the man. Overall patterns in the study point clearly to gender stereotyping in gender discrimination in the workplace (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011).

Brescoll (2016) reviewed existing research into gender stereotypes regarding emotion and how this affects women’s perceived leadership capability. The emotionality of women is a common gender stereotype throughout society, even amongst women themselves. This belief creates specific barriers for women to navigate to be successful, including determining the correct amount of emotion to display and what types to show. Women face very different experiences regarding their ability to assume leadership positions—society associates masculine traits with leadership characteristics. Women receive adverse effects when they stray from an expected stereotype, such as displaying the masculine emotion of anger. Evaluations of female leaders rate them equivalent to their male counterparts, except in terms of emotional control, with or without any factual evidence. Decisions made by female leaders appear emotionally driven to peers and subordinates, regardless of the accuracy of that assessment. Society views women’s

emotional response as a lack of control, even if the level or type of emotion is appropriate.

The assumed tradeoff between rational decision-making and emotional control means viewing women as emotional results in their inability to make effective decisions as leaders. The challenge of determining an appropriate level of emotional display occurs when penalizing women for both being emotional and lacking emotion. Others view women who chose not to display emotion as cold or distant. This fear of emotional display is a double-edged sword. Women are aware of the perception and often struggle to assert their workplace position even when they have the authority and right to do so. Overall, the author found that these stereotypes about female leaders are detrimental to women and organizations struggling for gender equality. True gender equality requires a complete change in the perception of female leaders' emotionality and effectiveness (Brescoll, 2016).

Carlin et al. (2018) researched low confidence in women and the impact on career development and opportunities. Their literature review and experiential learning design found that women have lower self-confidence related to work than their male counterparts. When self-evaluating, women generally rate themselves lower on self-esteem. This self-evaluation can directly correlate to lower workplace opportunities. Women are less likely to seek roles or promotions if they do not meet or exceed all the qualifications. Instead, women settle for low pay and low-status jobs, increasing the salary gap between men and women. Even women who do not suffer from a lack of confidence may downplay their abilities. Women face repercussions for self-promotion in the workplace, so they may feel that self-confidence does not reap any rewards. In the

workplace, people view women who interrupt as rude but reward men for identical behavior. Additional impacts of low self-esteem include a perception of lack of competence and failure to seek out mentors, which hinder career progression. The authors conclude by offering recommendations for how managers and organizations can improve women's opportunities through confidence-enhancing activities (Carlin et al., 2018).

Cundiff and Vescio (2016) reviewed the role gender stereotypes play in rationalizing gender inequality within the workplace. There has long been an interest in research on how stereotypes serve to uphold social orders. Underrepresentation of certain groups, such as women in leadership roles, results in biases that said group lacks the characteristics necessary to succeed within that context. These types of stereotypes explain or rationalize the disparity. The authors looked at how people explain gender disparities in the workplace regarding their validation of gender stereotypes. They studied undergraduates to understand their tendency to stereotype gender and how it related to their view of leadership capability and gender discrimination. A high propensity to endorse gender stereotypes resulted in a greater likelihood of defining leadership capability based on gender differences. A man is a leader due to having characteristics a woman does not have. They also found that individuals with high levels of gender stereotype adherence often failed to recognize gender discrimination. Their study confirmed that when people believe that gender stereotypes are valid and meaningful, they fail to notice bias and uphold gender disparity within the workplace (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016).

Glass and Cook (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study to help understand what factors may affect the experience and success of women who have risen above the

glass ceiling. Their study examined the career trajectory of all current female Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample. They sought to understand if female leaders did face the glass cliff phenomenon. They also looked at the level of support and challenges to authority experienced by female CEOs. Finally, they sought to understand the occurrence of performance scrutiny experienced by women in leadership positions. Their overall findings showed consistent promotion of female CEOs into “glass cliff” settings, although at times, this was due to self-selection to stand out amongst male peers. They also found that female CEOs reported a consistent lack of support and challenges to their authority at a much higher rate than male counterparts, regardless of competence or performance. Finally, they noted that female leaders faced a high level of scrutiny, both in work-related performance and appearance. This scrutiny contributed to a consistent theme of weariness and lack of job satisfaction amongst female CEOs. Ultimately, this research shows that even after achieving success, which often comes at a stiff cost, female leaders’ experiences remain fraught with challenges and clear gender bias (Glass & Cook, 2016).

Bear et al. (2017) reviewed the role of performance feedback and the likely link to power retention to reinforce the gender gap in leadership. Men and women have very different experiences when it comes to receiving feedback in the workplace. Women receive lower quality feedback, face performance backlash for violating gender norms, and have more negative experiences within the feedback process. When people in power view an effective leader’s characteristics as masculine traits, they often fail to provide meaningful feedback for developing a leadership identity (Bear et al., 2017). Thus, a vicious cycle exists where women receive feedback that is not conducive to creating a

leadership identity, reducing women leaders' numbers, resulting in more women self-selecting out of leadership opportunities. Women often cannot see that leadership opportunities are even a possibility, especially in male-dominated organizations. Women also lack the necessary access to social networks and mentors. The standards for performance between men and women are different and often scaled. Finally, women and men are different in how they receive or internalize feedback. These issues uphold and enforce the gender gap present in leadership (Bear et al., 2017).

There are many barriers and challenges women face in the workplace, especially those attempting to assume positions of authority. These include a gender gap in leadership, reduced access to mentors, differing standards for performance, gender stereotyping, and gender bias. All these are issues that many women veterans face entering the civilian workforce. Interactions within the workplace are an essential aspect of women veterans' experiences; thus, support services need to assist them in dealing with potential barriers to success (Brescoll, 2016; Ellemers, 2014; Glass & Cook, 2015).

Conclusion

Over the last several years, veteran scholarship has begun to recognize the various subpopulations of veterans that require different insights. One especially prominent group is women veterans. This population is proliferating, and the need for specialized services becomes more critical every day (Kamarck, 2018; Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, 2017). A review of the current research into women veterans identified vital themes as well as gaps. Women veterans have the potential to play a significant role in civilian society. This potential requires an in-depth review of the unique challenges women face when attempting to assume leadership positions. The key themes identified

within women veteran literature include gender and identity, health challenges, and reintegration. The experiences of women veterans do not mirror their male counterparts and should be studied separately in the future to ensure accurate insights. Women leaving the service are more educated, more likely to be raising children on their own, and more likely to have service-related health issues (Demers, 2013; Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, 2017; Eichler, 2016; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). These characteristics may impact their ability to find meaningful civilian employment. Ultimately, this literature review has highlighted how women veterans are not understood or even recognized across the board, essentially making them unseen or invisible veterans. Improving transition services and programs for women veterans requires more research into their lived experiences to identify better the critical barriers they face (Bruggeman & Rosen, 2019).

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction: Research Questions

The previous chapter demonstrated that women veterans are one of the fastest-growing veteran populations (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, 2017). They have different experiences from their male counterparts, both in the service and after separation from military service (Demers, 2013; Deputy Undersecretary of Defense, 2017; Eichler, 2016; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). While veterans are a well-studied demographic, there is little effort to differentiate experience based on gender. Women veterans have a more difficult time finding meaningful employment, have a higher prevalence of mental and physical health issues, and have more encounters with gender inequality in the workplace (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). Transition support programs meant to help veterans move into the civilian sector are limited in scope and make little effort to address gender-specific barriers (Whitworth et al., 2020). This problem of practice described what women veterans experience when transitioning out of military service, specifically relating to gender norms and gender bias. The following research questions guided the research design process to address these issues and develop a study that describes women veterans' experiences. The central research question was, what are the lived experiences of women veterans during their military to civilian transition? Secondary research questions provided further structure for this study and included how do women veterans describe their experiences as they approached their transition out of the military, how do women

veterans experience transition trajectories, and how do women veterans describe the outcomes of their overall transition experience?

Researcher Perspective and Positionality

This study gathered participants' insights on their own experiences and interpreted their understandings based on their unique perspectives. I am a woman veteran who served as an officer in the United States Navy for 10 years. I faced many personal and professional struggles during my time in service. Upon leaving the military, I did not anticipate the gender norms and biases I encountered. I struggled to find my identity as a women veteran and work under the challenges many women face in the workplace. Despite having ten years of advanced leadership experience and education, I did not receive the respect or acknowledgment often given to my male counterparts. It was not until seven years after leaving the military that I ultimately found meaningful employment. I have seen firsthand that women veterans face very different challenges and have very different civilian workplace experiences.

After seeing my women veteran peers' challenges transitioning from military to civilian life, I became interested in studying this topic. The study participants were other educated women veterans with a minimum of four years of military experience. Although our shared military experience established some common understanding, I recognized that my participants differ from me. They have experienced the transition from the service much more recently; they may not have the same challenges and interpret their experiences differently. The experiences of women are just as valid as the affairs of men. Women are essential research subjects in their own right, not only in contrast to their male counterparts (Lather, 1992).

Throughout this problem of practice, I have committed to a feminist research ethic by identifying and giving voice to the silenced within my research (Ackerly & True, 2010a). I remained committed to this ethic by “continually reviewing and challenging notions of what are appropriate and reliable ways of knowing and understanding the world” (Ackerly & True, 2010a, p. 25). I recognized that different individuals and social groups have different ways of interpreting the world. I committed to remaining aware of my positionality and how that may impact my interpretations of the information gathered.

Conceptual Framework

This study’s conceptual framework was an interpretive study bounded by feminist theory and grounded in military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Feminist theory recognizes that all issues are feminist issues and that women’s experiences and viewpoints are meaningful to study (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). Unlike other types of research, feminist research seeks to “put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry” (Lather, 1992, p. 91). Feminist research aims to understand and break down gender inequality in various aspects of society. For this study, feminist theory guided the overall intent of making women veterans’ stories known and understood. For this study, gender functioned as an explanatory category. This focus helped describe the role of gender norms or biases in women veterans’ experiences. Eichler (2017) defined gender norms as “individual and collective expectations about masculine and feminine behavior” (p. 682). Using gender as an explanatory versus quantifiable variable recognizes that gender is socially constructed. This study explored what it meant to be a woman veteran within this current social and historical context and the effect gender norms may have had on reintegration.

Feminist theory recognizes that reality results from power and inequality struggles, that discrimination due to gender influences how individuals see the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This reality becomes known by studying the social structures, power, oppression, and control that uphold this gender inequality. Feminist theory seeks to raise women's issues and starts from the assumption that oppression and control are real, that power is unequal based on gender, and that research is responsible for recognizing these experiences as vital for study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The base assumptions of feminist theory shaped the research questions of this study. Women's experiences are unique; women's voices need to exist within veteran scholarship; and the social construct of gender is at the heart of the inquiry (Lather, 1992).

When considering the feminist research ethic, the process of gathering information from participants is done through careful attention to the "power dynamics, boundaries, and the situatedness of the researcher" (Ackerly & True, 2010a, p. 163). Within feminist theory, this process is data production versus data collection. The researcher produces the information in conjunction with their participants; it is not merely information lying around waiting for collection (Ackerly & True, 2010a). Within this study, data production occurred through semi-structured interviews. This method is especially salient within feminist theory allowing for guided focus by the researcher while also allowing participants to give answers that may not align with the researcher's expectations. Creating the space for women to tell their own stories without researcher influence is an essential concept within feminist theory (Ackerly & True, 2010a). During the interview process, it is vital within feminist research not to attempt to code themes; this helps avoid premature analysis that may distract from the insights generated during

the interview. There may be a need for further clarification during data analysis, achieved through follow-up questions or even multiple interviews. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of participants' lived experiences within this study, it was important to consider timing during interviews and build rapport to ensure participants felt safe (Ackerly & True, 2010a).

Analysis of themes captured during this study occurred through the lens of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). This theory covers three overlapping components (Figure 3.1).

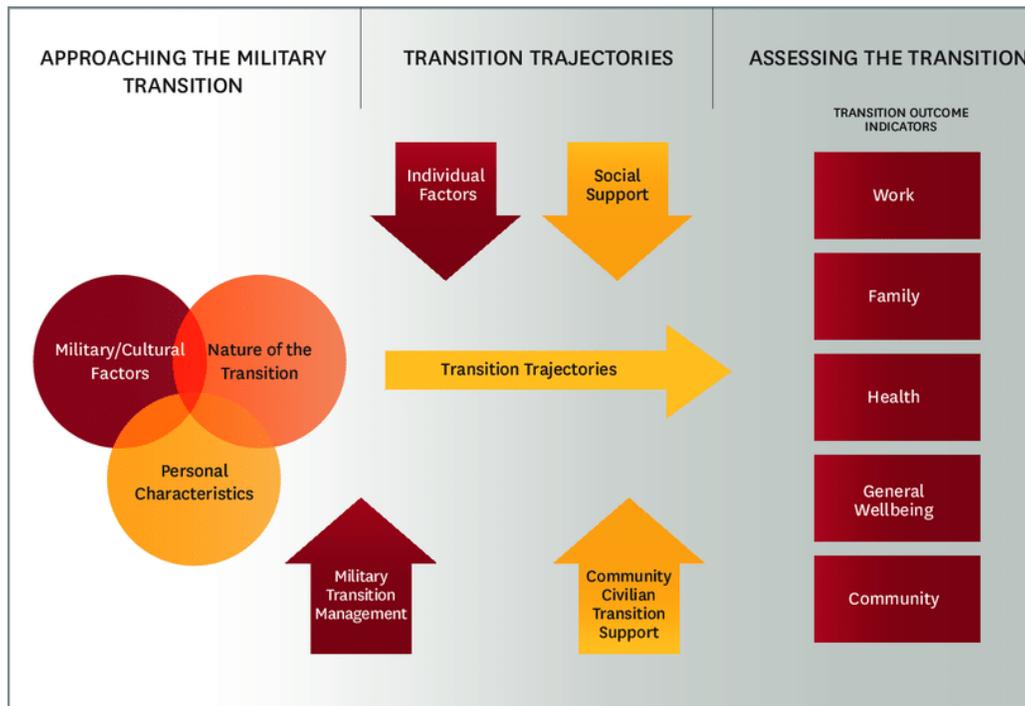


Figure 3.1. Military transition theory.

Note: Reprinted from “The State of the American Veteran: The Los Angeles County Veterans Study,” by C. Castro et al., 2014. Copyright 2014 by the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families. Reprinted with permission.

The first component in the theory is approaching the military transition. This stage considers personal and transitional factors influencing the transition path, such as discharge type, health issues, and transition nature. The second component is managing the transition. This stage considers factors that impact the individual's progression to civilian life, including social support and navigation of resources. The final stage, assessing the transition, looks at the outcomes resulting from transition, measured in various categories (Castro et al., 2014). This theory provided a helpful framework to understand better and conceptualize the categories of themes gathered from the participants.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design chosen for this study was a descriptive phenomenological study. Phenomenological research seeks to derive the meaning for a lived experience amongst a group of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Descriptive phenomenology views ontology, or the nature of reality, as subjective, constructed by each individual based on their own experiences (Abalos et al., 2016). Phenomenological research seeks to study lived experiences and then interpret the meanings individuals apply to their experiences to get a richness or depth of understanding. Ultimately phenomenological research is a “search for what it means to be human” (van Manen, p. 12). This study searched for what it meant to be a women veteran leaving military service and transitioning to civilian life. The phenomenon in this study was the experience of transitioning out of the military. This study aimed not to quantify measurable data, such as the number of women veterans going through particular challenges or experiences, but rather to describe a small group's specific experiences within the phenomenon of transitioning out of military service.

This study followed the specific and systematic inquiry method required within descriptive phenomenology (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Descriptive phenomenology explores a phenomenon via direct interaction between researcher and subjects (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This direct interaction occurred in this study through multiple, semi-structured interviews with all participants.

Another essential component of descriptive phenomenology is setting aside any preconceptions about the phenomenon via bracketing. Bracketing involves recognizing one's preconceived notions or feelings about the phenomenon and then setting them aside to see the phenomenon through participants' eyes (Abalos et al., 2016). Bracketing prevents biases from impacting the subjective review of the phenomenon. Throughout this study, the researcher journaled to capture any preconceived notions or attitudes that could potentially impact the study. This bracketing did not take the researcher out of the study but instead made them mindful of their perceptions and possible influence on their interpretations of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). As shared with the researcher, the participants' lived experiences provided a universal understanding of the phenomenon.

A final key aspect of this type of research is the alignment between the researcher and the subject on the description's accuracy. Good descriptive phenomenological research takes adequate time to ensure participants agree that the material presented accurately reflects their experiences and understanding of the phenomenon as a whole (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Participants in this study received ample opportunity to review and correct any information gathered from them during each interview session throughout the

study process. Table 3.1 provides details on the timeline of the research plan utilized for this study.

Table 3.1

Timeline of Research Plan

Timeframe	Activity	Purpose
Fall 2020	Submit study for Baylor I.R.B. Approval.	Ensure study meets Baylor I.R.B. expectations to proceed with data collection.
November to December 2020	Identify participants for the study.	Identify the appropriate amount of participants through purposeful sampling
January to May 2021	Conduct the first interview with participants one on one via video conference calls.	Share information about the study and obtain consent. Utilize the semi-structured interview protocol outlined in Appendix A.
June 2021	Transcribe and analyze interviews following each interview. Share transcripts of interviews with participants.	Capture interview data, begin the process of data analysis. Share transcripts of interviews to confirm study accuracy and validity. Ask follow on questions as needed to reflect experiences.
June to July 2021	Finalize coding and categorizing, identify meaning.	Final data analysis, organize themes through the lens of military transition theory.
July 2021	Interpret and write results Final follow-up with participants as needed.	
July to August 2021	Complete and refine chapters four and five	

The phenomenological research design was an appropriate methodology for this research study. This research study's overall purpose was to describe and understand the military to civilian transition through participant experiences (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In turn, study findings can help develop policies or practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018), specifically those aimed at transitioning women veterans. Descriptive phenomenology also aligns well with the tenets of feminist theory. The journaling process to provide for bracketing provides a necessary documentation step in the feminist research process to ensure that the researcher's thoughts and reflections do not impede the narrative owned by the subject (Ackerly & True, 2010a).

Participant Sampling

This study utilized purposive sampling. Purposive sampling focuses on selecting a relatively small and purposeful sample based on specific characteristics (Campbell et al., 2020), who have experienced the phenomenon allowed for a greater depth of understanding. Purposeful sampling selects participants based on their ability to provide valuable insights into the phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2020). The attributes defined for this study were United States female military veterans with a minimum of four years of military service who separated from the military in the last 24 to 36 months. These characteristics ensured that participants had enough time in service to assimilate to military culture and have transitioned out of the service recently enough for the phenomenon to remain in their memory.

The researcher selected eight women veterans who met the criteria and availability for participation. Recruitment of participants occurred via three strategies. First, the researcher posted a recruitment flier (Appendix C) to their LinkedIn and

Facebook pages soliciting participant recommendations from their social network of active duty and veteran military personnel. Second, the researcher posted the recruitment flier to four different Veteran networking groups on Facebook and LinkedIn. Finally, the researcher used purposeful snowball sampling to identify interest from individuals known by selected participants suitable for participation in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). All potential participants completed a short questionnaire to determine the suitability and based on required participant attributes. A summary of participants and relevant demographic data is below (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2

Participant Demographic Data

Participant (Pseudonym)	Time since Separation (months)	Branch of Service	Rank at Separation	Type of Discharge	Years of Service
Angela	26	Navy	O-4	Honorable	26
Betty	20	Navy	O-3	Honorable	6
Christine	19	Army	O-3	Honorable	10
Darcy	6	Marine Corps	O-4	Honorable	10
Eve	2	Navy	E-6	Honorable	22
Fiona	9	Navy	E-5	Honorable	6
Gretchen	12	Army	O-3	Honorable	10
Heidi	22	Army	O-3	Honorable	5

Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data from participants. Interviews are a good source of data collection for a descriptive phenomenological study. They allow participants to share their experiences in their own words while allowing the researcher to add clarifying questions to improve understanding

(Bevan, 2014). This study utilized Bevan’s (2014) approach as a framework for creating interview questions. Bevan lists a staged approach to interview questions that provides a clear, well-defined structure to follow, provided in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Structure of Phenomenological Interviewing

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method
Phenomenological Reduction (epoché)	Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative context questions
	Reflexive Critical Dialogue With Self	Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive and Structural Questions of Modes of Appearing
	Active Listening	Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)	Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure Questions

Note: The wording in this table is quoted from Bevan, 2014, p.139.

Any phenomenological research must first start with adopting the attitude of phenomenological reduction. This reduction occurs in two parts. The first is the epoché, which requires one to adopt an attitude of refusing to take anything for granted, openness to understanding the conscious experience through the beholder’s eyes. The second component requires the researcher to consciously reduce bias through bracketing (Bevan 2014; van Manen 2015). Within this conscious attitude, the researcher must approach the interview to accept participants’ attitudes or perspectives, remain self-critical regarding one’s perception, and engage in active listening that ensures clarity of understanding (Bevan 2014).

Within this framework are three interview question structures and methods. The first interview question structure is contextualization, asking the participant to provide context or insight into the overall experience. Contextualization is an opportunity to learn that person's biography surrounding the experience. For this purpose, the question method is descriptive or narrative questions that seek to provide contextual information (Bevan, 2014). The second structure is apprehending the phenomenon, which focuses on getting into greater detail to understand better the specific phenomenon of interest using descriptive and structural questions. Descriptive questions provide detail on the experience of the phenomenon. Structural questions apply individually to a participant to understand better how they approached the phenomenon. The two types of questions provide greater insight and clarity (Bevan, 2014). The final interview structure is clarifying the phenomenon. In this phase of an interview, the researcher guides the participant through imaginative variation with the goal or intent of understanding the phenomenon from different perspectives or experiences, such as how a phenomenon might change based on other circumstances (Bevan, 2014).

For this study, the researcher conducted a one-hour-long interview with eight study participants. Interview questions remain sorted by structure or goal within the framework of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). The first set of questions addressed how the participant approached their military transition. The focus was on preparation for transition, command support, reasons for leaving the military, and any other relevant data to understand participant experience during this stage. The second set of interview questions focused on the transition trajectory stage of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Questions addressed how the participant moved through the

actual transition process, including such factors as resources or services accessed and support systems in place. The final set of questions focused on how participants assessed their transition outcomes. These questions focused on areas such as well-being, family, and career outcomes.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed using scribe.com. The researcher reviewed transcripts while watching recordings to verify accuracy. Final transcripts went to each participant to allow for member checking (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). This process helps to ensure that participants feel captured themes accurately reflect their viewpoints. The interview questions were a starting guide point throughout the data collection process, with active listening used by the researcher to ask clarifying questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive phenomenology requires researchers to adhere to a well-defined methodology and practice when analyzing data. The first step of the data analysis process is bracketing, intentionally taking steps to note and define personal bias during the research process. This step aims to highlight preconceived notions to prevent their impacting the research analysis (Abalos et al., 2016; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In this study, a journal provided an ongoing method for the researcher to capture personal biases or impressions while interviewing participants. Highlighting preconceived notions occurred before beginning data collection and were “set aside” to allow for intentional neutrality when listening to participants describe their transition experiences in their own words. Data analysis for this study utilized Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method. This analysis method and pertinent description information based on Morrow et al. (2015) are in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method of Data Analysis

Step	Description
1. Familiarization	The researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading through all the participant accounts several times.
2. Identifying significant statements	The researcher identified all statements in the accounts that were directly relevant to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. Formulating meanings	The researcher identified meanings relevant to the phenomenon based upon careful consideration of the significant statements.
4. Clustering themes	The researcher clustered identified meanings into themes evident across all accounts.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	The researcher created a complete and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating themes produced in step four.
6. Producing the fundamental structure	The researcher condensed the detailed description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure	The researcher returned to participants to ask whether the fundamental structure captured their experience. The researcher modified earlier steps as needed based on this feedback.

Note: The wording in this table is derived from Morrow et al., 2015.

The first step in the data analysis cycle was familiarization. In this step, the researcher read transcripts and descriptions multiple times to get a better feeling for participant experience (Colaizzi, 1978). With each transcript document, the researcher immersed themselves in the stories related by each of the participants. Reading of each interview transcript occurred three or more times. Copious note-taking and descriptive commentary helped the researcher to understand better and further clarify participant experiences. This step's focus was describing the fullness or essence of each participant's experience (Colaizzi, 1978).

In the second step of data analysis, the researcher identified significant statements. The researcher carefully reread the transcripts to “extract from them phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). The researcher focused on specific statements relating to participants' military to civilian transition experiences, each loosely sorted by stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014).

In the third step of data analysis, formulation of meaning occurs for each of the significant statements. This step required the researcher to look at each significant statement and attempt to determine the participants’ meanings. This step involves creativity to take a “precarious leap” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59) from statements to underlying meaning. The researcher regularly referred to the original transcripts to ensure a clear connection. The researcher sought to discover and illuminate hidden meanings in this stage while not unintentionally formulating inaccurate meanings unconnected to the data. In this stage, the researcher utilized bracketing to identify and then set aside their understanding of meaning for statements.

The fourth step of data analysis grouped the significant statements (and associated meanings) into thematic clusters. The goal was to identify consistent themes present across all the participant accounts. These themes aligned with the stages and components of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014), which provided the study’s underlying thematic structure.

In the fifth step of data analysis, the researcher integrated all the data and findings, included coded segments, and identified themes, created an in-depth, descriptive

interpretation of the phenomenon. Again, the intent was to create an exhaustive, detailed description that accurately reflects the experience of the phenomenon.

In step six, the researcher used the detailed description statement from step five to create a condensed fundamental structure reflecting the phenomenon's essential nature. The statement focused on essential concepts central to understanding the phenomenon of the military to civilian transition.

The researcher then shared this fundamental structure with participants in step seven. This step allowed for data validation by engaging participants to ensure themes and meanings gathered from their interviews accurately reflected their perspectives. This validation process with participants and careful use of bracketing helped ensure that researcher bias did not impact results. A final step to ensure validity was to use in-depth, rich, and detailed descriptions. Descriptive information captured throughout the study added insight into raw data gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis using these seven steps was ongoing throughout the study. Following each interview session, the content was carefully transcribed, checked for accuracy, and analyzed for thematic elements using the ATLAS.ti software system. Analysis of thematic elements occurred through comparison to the stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014) to group common themes and determine hidden meanings.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting this study or commencing with any data collection, the researcher received Baylor's Institutional Review Board permission. Before conducting interviews, participants gave written consent to participate in the study (see Appendix B).

Each participant received an overview of the process, the purpose of the study, the use of information gathered, and methods for protecting sensitive data. The researcher assigned an alias to each participant, ensuring confidentiality of any personally identifiable information. Some data collected during the interviews was potentially sensitive. The researcher only included information of this type with approval from participants that would not bring them harm. Finally, a review of the transcript and interview data by the participants ensured that their experiences remained protected.

Limitations and Delimitations

The researcher could not control several variables due to time and availability constraints. The study required enough time to find willing participants and conduct multiple interviews, so the following limitations were in place. The first limitation was the location; participants were from all over the United States based on availability and willingness to participate. The second was socioeconomic status, which is an uncontrolled variable for two reasons. The first is that all participants needed access to a computer and the internet to participate in interviews. Second, highlighting socioeconomic status might have influenced or precluded participants from wanting to participate. A third limitation was participant race, as the research focused on all women veterans' experiences, not just one particular racial group. A final limitation was the branch of service; choosing only specific military service branches would limit available participants and potentially bias the results.

There were several delimitations put in place by the researcher. First, all participants were women. The study aims to understand women veterans' lived experiences, allowing gender to serve as an explanatory category. Second, the researcher

only interviewed women veterans with a minimum of four years of active duty military service. This service time allowed enough time to develop a military, cultural identity but precluded participation by certain groups. The final constraint was the time since separation. To ensure that participants could recall their transition experience, all participants separated from the military within 24 to 36 months.

Conclusion

This descriptive phenomenological study focused on understanding women veterans' lived experiences transitioning out of the military. The central and secondary research questions guided the methodology and research design. Throughout the study, the researcher engaged in phenomenological reduction to ensure an attitude of open wonder and willingness to bracket or set aside any preconceived notions about the phenomenon. The participants in this study were all women veterans who served in the military for a minimum of four years and separated from military service within the last 24 to 36 months. Although each of them had different experiences and viewpoints, the study was bounded in feminist theory, highlighting women's experiences, then organized into themes based on the stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). These two theories created a conceptual framework for a more meaningful understanding of the military to civilian transition phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews captured participant experience in their own words with analysis of interview data using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step approach to phenomenological data analysis. The themes identified by the researcher provided details that can potentially improve or build upon existing policies and practices aimed at women veterans.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results and Implications

Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, this study was a descriptive phenomenological research study seeking to describe the lived experiences of women veterans going through the military to civilian transition process. Eight women veterans participated in interviews sharing their experiences in their own words. Semi-structured interview protocols allowed the women to share openly through guided questions centered around military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). The data collected and analyzed from this study provided thematic elements that describe the perceived experiences of the military to civilian transition phenomena for women veterans. Although coming from varied backgrounds and experiences, the women in this study provided data indicating eight relevant themes, many with additional sub-themes. Feminist theory provided the construct for this study as the researcher sought to make women's voices heard. The researcher bracketed and participated in epoché to ensure participant's thoughts and feelings came across in their own words. The central research question was, what are the lived experiences of women veterans during their military to civilian transition? Secondary research questions provided further structure for this study and include how do women veterans describe their experiences as they approached their transition out of the military, how do women veterans experience transition trajectories, and how do women veterans describe the outcomes of their overall transition experience?

This study aimed to describe the lived experiences of women veterans as they go through the military to civilian transition process. The majority of literature and veteran scholarship fails to differentiate veterans by gender, meaning women are often left out of the discussion when considering the services veterans may need (Eichler, 2017; Kamarck, 2018). The military to civilian transition process is a confusing and challenging experience for the majority of veterans. Women often have even more challenges due to experienced trauma, family obligations, and increased ethnic diversity (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). By focusing on women veterans and giving voice to their experiences, this study provides valuable insight into supporting women veterans going through the transition phenomenon.

Participants of the Study

Eight recently separated women veterans participated in this study. Each of these women had different experiences, both personally and professionally, during their time in military service. Every participant served for a minimum of four years and had separated from military service within the last 26 months. The first participant was Angela (all names are pseudonyms), a retired Naval Officer. Angela was married with one child and served for a total of 26 years. Her rank upon separation was Lieutenant Commander. Angela came into the military as an enlisted sailor in the Navy who was later promoted to officer, giving her a unique perspective on the experiences of officer versus enlisted. Participant two was Betty, a Naval Officer who separated from military service after six years. Betty was married with one child, and her husband was also an active duty Naval Officer, giving her perspective into the experiences of dual-military couples. The third participant was Christine, an Army Officer who separated from military service after ten

years. Christine was married to another recently separated Army officer and had two children. Participant four was Darcy, a Marine Corps officer who served for ten years. Darcy was married to another Marine Corps Officer and had one child. Participant five was Eve, a retired First Class Petty Officer who served for 22 years. Eve was married with three children and chose not to pursue employment immediately following her separation from the military, but instead chose to stay home with her children. Participant six was Fiona, a recently separated Second Class Petty Officer who served for six years. Despite being enlisted in the Navy, Fiona entered military service already having a bachelor's degree. Fiona was unmarried with no children. The seventh participant was Gretchen, an Army Officer who served for 12 years. Gretchen was married with one child and described her transition as "ideal." Heidi was the final participant, an Army Officer who served for five years. Heidi was unmarried with no children. Each of these women participated in live recorded video interview sessions. The semi-structured interview and interview questions allowed the participants to share their experiences in their own words with minimal influence from the researcher.

Thematic Analysis

Each participant's interview was carefully transcribed, and description focused in Vivo coding allowed the participants' thoughts and feelings to speak for themselves. Description-focused coding allows a study to describe phenomena, experiences, or events (Adu, 2019). This type of coding does not interpret or make any presumptions about the data, ideal for a phenomenological study where one seeks to describe lived experiences in the words of the study participants. Codes were carefully documented and then grouped into categories and themes. Each transcript was read and reviewed multiple times to

ensure codes correctly described participant experiences. Grouping into clusters was conducted by assessing characteristics of each code, then reviewing for any commonalities before grouping them based on shared characteristics. These clusters of codes, known as categories, allowed for the natural emergence of themes compared between participants (Adu, 2019). Themes were compared and further grouped based on where they fell within the stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). This thematic analysis resulted in eight key themes that were then further broken down into various sub-themes. Comparing themes across participants allowed for greater insight into the military to civilian transition phenomena. The themes identified during this study were organized in the framework of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014) and provided in-depth descriptive answers to the research questions. Figure 4.1 provides a representation of identified themes in terms of conceptual and theoretical framework.

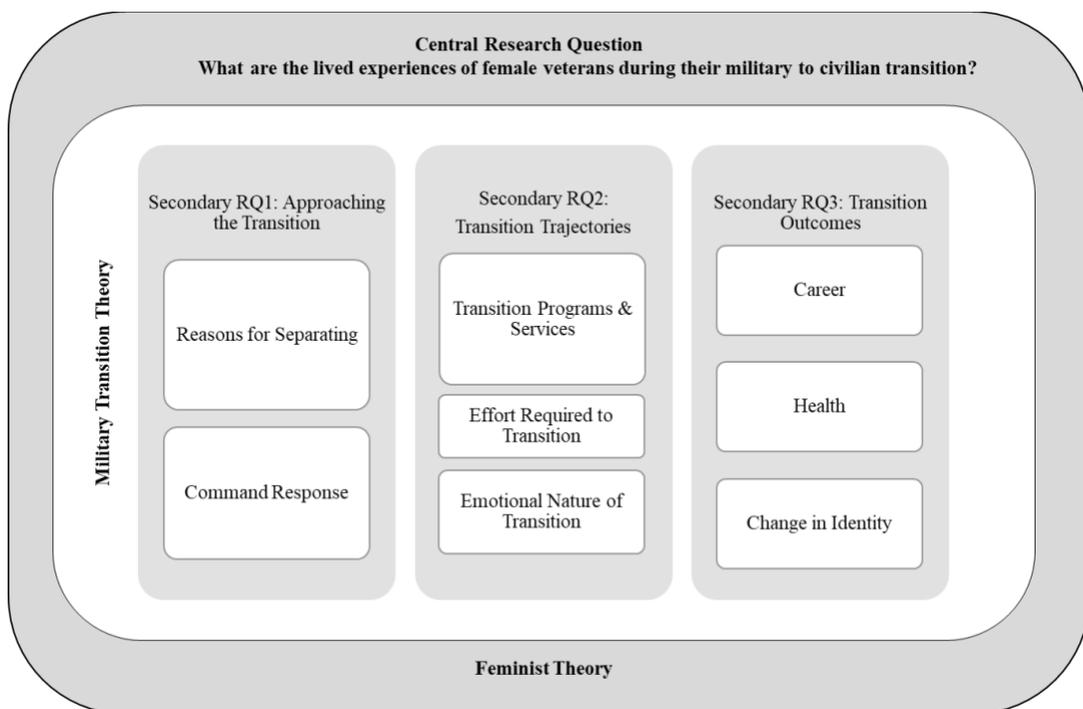


Figure 4.1. Identified themes within conceptual framework.

Within Figure 4.1, feminist theory provided the overarching frame of reference for the study. Feminist theory was the basis for the purpose and intent behind the study, seeking to find female voices and make them heard (Dichter & True, 2015). The central research question encompassed all the thematic elements identified, as each one contributed to how women veterans describe their lived experience during the military to civilian transition. Military transition theory provided the construct for organizing the secondary research questions and their correlating themes (Castro et al., 2014). The themes identified during the coding, categorizing, and grouping process include the following. In the first stage of military transition theory, the themes identified while approaching transition included reasons for separating and command response. Within the second stage, transition trajectories, themes identified include transition programs and services, emotional nature of transition, and the effort required during transition. Finally, in the last stage of military transition theory, transition outcomes were summarized by career, health, and change in identity (Castro et al., 2014).

Secondary Research Question One, Theme One: Reasons for Separating

The first secondary research question centered on how participants approached their transition. Within military transition theory, this component summarizes all the personal, professional, and other factors that create the base for the transition trajectories (Castro et al., 2014). The first theme identified within this stage was the reasons why participants wanted to separate from the military. Sub-themes identified within this theme included work-life balance, opportunity, family needs, trauma, and disillusionment with the military.

Work-life balance. The first sub-theme identified under Reasons for Separating was a desire for improved work-life balance. Five of the participants specifically mentioned the challenges of having a balanced life while serving in the military. Betty stated that “the work-life balance in the military is zero” and that to achieve that balance while in the military was not even an option. Heidi discussed how in her first civilian job, she felt like she was doing something wrong at first when she had extra time and that she had to learn “how to balance work and life, ‘cause I know I was prepared to work on the weekends ... People don't operate that way in the civilian world.” Other participants described in detail how the nature of the job-life structure provided by the military was not sustainable, especially in terms of balancing active duty and having a family. Angela described her decision not to take on a stressful job in the civilian sector after retiring, discussing how the long hours and working weekends were “gonna be worse than being in the military with a small kid.” Christine described how being able to work from home, get enough sleep and spend time with her kids was something she appreciated even more after separating, even stating that being a civilian was a “totally different life in terms of those, I don't know, creature comforts.” Darcy described all the different identities she had while on active duty and that she “needed a job-life structure that was more sustainable, and active duty, military, military spouse, mom life was just not.” These examples show that these participants felt that the lack of balance between work and home life was a large part of the decision to separate and achieve more stability in their home life.

Opportunity. The second sub-theme identified under reasons for separating was different or better opportunities outside of the military. Darcy described how she had

accomplished everything she had set out to do in her military service. There were no unique or engaging opportunities for her in future military service. Fiona described the opportunity in terms of the ability to put her graduate degree to use. She stated, “I got my grad degree while I was in, so I felt like there was a lot more opportunities for me to use that degree [outside of the military] and to make more income off that degree and experience.” These two descriptions showed that opportunities within the military were limited or exhausted, and participants found more significant opportunities to be available outside of military service.

Family needs. A third sub-theme that emerged under reasons for separation was family needs, especially in terms of children and dual military careers. Four of the participants specifically described the challenges associated with having children while on active duty, and others did not feel that being on active duty was conducive to having children. Some of the participants described making the decision far in advance to leave military service before having children. Betty even stated that “I knew I didn’t wanna be in the military when I started a family.”

Some of the participants faced additional family challenges due to being part of a dual military couple. They had spouses on active duty, which significantly impacted their ability to manage familial responsibilities. One participant, Darcy, discussed these challenges in depth. She and her active-duty husband had a child while both were serving. The experience she encountered of returning to active duty after only six weeks of maternity leave, while all family support was across the country, caused a great deal of stress and pressure. She stated that “being dual active duty is hard, which I think a lot of

women deal with.” Looking back, she recognized that all of this led them to decide not to have any more kids while both still served.

Christine had her son while on her last tour of duty. She was not traveling or leaving home most of that time, but when she did have to leave her son for the first time due to a training exercise, she realized that she did not want to experience that again. She talked about feeling anxious and sad, even crying regularly during the first few days of the exercise, “I was just very emotional, I didn’t wanna leave my son.” This experience of leaving her son helped her to make the final decision to leave the military.

Another participant, Angela, served for 26 years and never considered having kids during her more rigorous service years. She even noted that she could not understand how deployed service members could manage with children. In addition, when she was in a leadership position, she felt she was very unsympathetic to those who had family requirements that impacted their work. However, as she began to approach retirement and knew she had to decide whether to retire, the fact that she had a daughter made the decision easier for her, noting that she “didn’t wanna deploy with having a small child and everything.” Each of these examples shows that for participants, military life and raising children were often mutually exclusive. They did not feel that serving in the military allowed them the time and resources required to raise children.

Trauma. Another sub-theme that emerged when discussing the reasons for separating from the military was trauma. This trauma took many different forms but was impactful for many of the participants. For example, Heidi described candidly that she “had experienced sexual assault while I was in the service, and that was a big reason why I decided to leave” This military sexual trauma colored her perspective about service in

the military. She felt she was largely naïve and sheltered, too trusting of others, and that when joining the military, she did not prepare or take any precautions to protect herself. This sexual trauma negatively impacted her in many ways, mentally and emotionally. As a result, she struggled to trust others which ultimately led her to separate from the military.

Fiona described how she “endured a decent amount of workplace trauma, like actual discrimination against me in my last two years of the military.” This discrimination, even after separating from the military, continues to impact her interactions with civilian coworkers. Darcy and Gretchen described experiencing trauma due to toxic leadership. They had various interactions with commanders who lacked trust and treated their team members with contempt. This experience ultimately helped them both recognize that this was not an organization they wanted to be a part of any longer. Fiona noted that all service members were “trauma-adjacent,” even those who work in an office and never deploy, stating that,

You don’t have to go to combat, you don’t have to go to these other countries and be in these really super stressful situations that have to do with operations to still come out with some type of baggage that will affect how you operate in life afterwards.

These quotes show that participants experienced various traumatic experiences, from sexual trauma to discrimination, that influenced their decision to separate.

Disillusionment with the military. The final sub-theme that was prevalent was a general sense of disillusionment with the military. Participants described feeling like the military either was not what they expected or changed over time in a negative way, ultimately prompting their desire to separate from military service. Heidi described how

she felt like she did not get the experience expected in the military, that she was taken advantage of and that “the military was an organization that just didn't really foster freedom of thought.” She also felt that the military had begun to let people into service due to 9/11 without as much caution, which she believed meant “that a lot of bad apples got kind of roped into being in the military.” Gretchen made a similar statement when talking about the senior enlisted soldiers she worked with over her ten years of service, stating, “I can only think of one or two senior NCOs that I worked with that were commendable human beings.” Darcy described how her toxic leadership was a known issue, but nothing changed. She stated that “even with command climate surveys and request mast, nothing was done about it, and it was just one of those like, Well, if this is the institution that I am signing on to be a part of for the rest of my career, no thank you.” Eve described how her experience and viewpoint on the military changed over her two decades of service. She described feeling like these changes were negative and impacted her desire to service, stating,

I saw different changes in the military, and I just wasn't okay with some of the systems anymore. I just never really played the game, and I think by the time I learned what the game was, it was too late.

Although each of the participants had different reasons or insights into this disillusionment, the sentiment remained consistent. The military did not live up to their expectations, and they no longer felt it was an organization that reflected their values or desires.

Secondary Research Question One, Theme Two: Command Response

The second theme that emerged under approaching the transition was command response. This includes how supervisors, peers, and the military responded when the

participants declared their desire to separate from the military. Some participants experienced negative responses from commands, with supervisors even going so far as saying that would not help the servicemember with the transition that it was “like they wanted you to fall on your face.” Other participants noted a complete lack of care from their command that it felt like the priority was simply getting the paperwork done. Heidi noted that her command told her,

Well, you gotta get this work done, and you have to find a replacement, and I would counter that with, well, it's not my responsibility to find a replacement, for me, it's like the Army's responsible.

Other participants noted that command response was highly negative, with several participants expected to continue to work at a high level and maintain their previous level of effectiveness. Noting the military “expects you to be at 100% while you're making that transition and doesn't give you a lot of bandwidth or time to prioritize your transition to civilian life.” Participants stated they felt they were treated differently and even ranked lower than their peers, regardless of performance, simply because they were not staying in the military. Betty stated that “within leadership, as soon as you announce the fact that you're getting out, you do get pretty blackballed for both opportunities and special treatment.” She describes something consistently present across participants that leaving military service often had negative repercussions or perceptions from leaders.

Secondary Research Question Two, Theme One: Transition Programs and Services

Secondary research question number two sought to identify transition trajectories of those specific experiences of service members as they actively went through the process of transitioning out of the military. This component of military transition theory looks at the factors that impact the servicemember's transition from to civilian life (Castro

et al., 2014). Within this stage, the first theme identified was experiences with transition programs and services. A variety of transition programs exist for servicemembers, from prescribed military programs to voluntary civilian-based programs. Each of these different categories of programs or services provided different experiences for participants. Therefore, within this theme, the detail provided by participants breaks down into military transition programs, civilian transition programs, and coaching or mentoring services.

Military transition programs. The first sub-theme described in depth by participants was their perceptions and experiences going through military transition programs. Overall, all participants viewed these required programs as ineffective and outdated. Many participants felt the programs were not specific enough to the needs of individual service members. Many of the program's components were area-specific. For example, Heidi talked about how her program, based in Colorado, talked a lot about job opportunities in forestry in the Colorado area, which had no meaning since she did not intend to stay in the same area. Fiona went into great detail about how much of the information provided to her was someone reading off data. She felt she could have gotten the same or even better information just from searching on the internet. Angela felt the program was “fine” for something mandatory. However, she recognized she had to attend the series twice to get all the information she needed to complete her disability claim for the Veteran’s Administration. Nevertheless, even then, Angela had to seek out a non-profit to finalize the process effectively. Eve felt the program overall was a terrible use of resources stating that TGPS was a “waste of time and government money.”

Gretchen noted that the program was effective for crossing information off a checklist. However, it did not help adequately prepare her for the financial changes she would go through when she left military service. She noted that even though she excels at math and has a math teacher for a father, the financial information they provided her was confusing and unhelpful. Darcy noted that they were following prescribed advice that was not relevant, saying

I also felt like they were more tied to helping you translate what you did in the military into a cookie cutter civilian thing ... If you were trying to do something different, they weren't really about trying to help you map that.

Additionally, many of those running the program and providing advice had never undergone a military to civilian transition. Betty noted that the instructors who were responsible for Veteran Administration Transition programs were not helpful or specific, stating, “they would just spit out resumes at you that made no sense and help translate your resume to things that weren't actually helpful.” This commentary provides insight into what may be lacking in military transition programs. Unfortunately, many of the staff in these programs do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to help veterans be successful in career endeavors.

Civilian transition programs. Another area described by participants was civilian-based transition programs, such as Break Line, Cameron Brooks, or Lucas group. These types of programs have become more prevalent as more servicemembers leave the military and seek meaningful employment. Many of these programs were offered without any cost to veterans, making them a helpful tool for finding meaningful employment. Many participants noted that civilian-based transition programs helped to fill the gaps left by military-based programs. These civilian programs were specific to the area or industry

that one wanted to pursue. Some programs focus on helping veterans find employment in technology-based organizations. Others focus on finding employment in manufacturing or general management-based roles. Each had different, not necessarily equal, benefits. Betty stated that “the better experiences were grounded in reality and had ties to current civilian companies.” Many sought out services from as many civilian-based programs and resources as they could. Christine described using several, including through her graduate school, all with mixed results. As evidenced in a later theme, those who utilized multiple resources and put in a great deal of effort saw the most success in their transition.

Coach or mentor services. Another identified sub-theme was the use of coaching or mentor services to help with a successful military to civilian transition. Gretchen talked about her successful coaching experience saying she “signed up for the COMMIT Foundation. They are a non-profit, and you get a life coach assigned to you in the state that you're going to live in once you get out of the military.” She felt this coaching program provided a combination of training and one-on-one advice from someone successful in the civilian sector. Various participants discussed this topic several times, both from the perspective of the positive impact a coach had to the perspective that the participant wished they had sought out the services of a coach. Heidi stated, “I think every transitioning servicemember should have a coach and a mentor, really someone who's dedicated to their... To the success of their transition.” This perspective shows that, while recognizing the value of a coach, many participants did not realize the need for one or even had access to one until well after going through the transition process.

Secondary Research Question Two, Theme Two: Effort Required to Transition

The second theme identified under research question two was the effort participants put in to have a successful military to civilian transition. Amongst all participants, those seeking post-military careers all noted that they put a great deal of personal effort, outside of standard transition services, into their transition process. Darcy described feeling like the success or failure of her transition fell on her shoulders, stating that “I took ownership of my process. And so, as things worked or didn't work, it was like, ‘All right, I'm responsible for this.’” Angela felt that the success of her transition came primarily due to her successful networking while still on active duty. When it came time to find a role as a government contractor, she utilized that to find a local position. Heidi described the overall transition process as a “grind,” noting that perhaps some people find success easily or find the right roles without effort, but that was not the norm. She even noted that civilian transition programs were helpful. However, the level of helpfulness depended on how much effort you made, saying, “I feel like they helped us, but we had to do a lot for them to help us even get on their radar, sometimes become a pest and bug them.” This statement emphasized that while many find success in their transition, this was primarily due to personal effort, not based on any specific program or service utilized. Although this experience is not unique to women veterans, it is worth noting as an essential component of their military to civilian transition.

Secondary Central Research Question Two, Theme Three: Emotional Nature of Transition

The final theme identified by secondary research question two was the emotional nature of military to civilian transition. Emotions experienced and described by

participants varied and were broken down into sub-themes, including fear, feeling overwhelmed, and even happiness or joy at the transition.

Fear. The first sub-theme of emotions experienced by participants during the transition was fear. Christine described the feeling of terror that accompanied leaving a secure, predictable military lifestyle, stating, “I was terrified. I was leaving a very secure paycheck in the military to pursue a very secure family life.” Although she could recognize that ultimately it was a better path for her, she was terrified to leave behind what she knew and understood. Fiona also described fear and uncertainty about her transition, saying:

I was not only dealing with being isolated because of the pandemic, but I was dealing with this idea that I was losing community that I felt like I had worked really hard to build in the military. So that was something I was nervous about, and yeah, it just seemed bewildering at the time. And it's been fine since, but leading up to it was terrifying.

This fear was a prevalent theme, especially as participants faced the unknown and realized that leaving the military would change their entire life in significant ways.

Feeling overwhelmed. Another sub-theme under emotional responses described by participants was feeling overwhelmed. This feeling of overwhelming varied based on different contributing factors. Eve described feeling overwhelmed when working through the process of doing her Veterans Administration disability claim, saying it was “So overwhelming, it’s just an influx of information that I don't even know where to chip away at.” Heidi described the lack of knowledge initially around support programs contributing to her being overwhelmed, and she noted that,

I didn’t know I could go through some sort of military program to help me with the transition, so that’s why I felt overwhelmed in that initial phase, ‘cause I really

only knew a few people who had gotten out of the Army, and I was like, hey, how did you do it?

Christine described feeling overwhelmed by all the different career or job options available outside of the military. “There’s so many options in the private sector, and you don’t know what all of those jobs were or what they mean.” Being overwhelmed showed up consistently in participants’ descriptions, highlighting the problematic nature of transition.

Happiness. A final emotional sub-theme identified by participants was happiness. Participants reported overall feeling happy with their transition. Eve described this when she said, “So I did 22 years, and I finished my time. I just got out. I don’t regret any of it. I’m pretty happy that I got out ... I’m like, ‘Yes, I made it to 20-something years.’” Gretchen described feeling happy when passed over for promotion which would mean she would be separating from the military,

As soon as I was told that I was passed over for promotion the second time, I was excited. I’ve never been happier in my life, or at least in my career in the military, and I wasn’t even upset. I smiled when my supervisor told me.

Gretchen's happiness came from a sense of relief that she would have no further incentives to continue in the military. Although each participant had various noted emotions, emotional highs and lows were a consistent, prevalent part of the transition experience.

Secondary Research Question Three, Theme One: Career Outcomes.

The final component of military transition theory and the focus of secondary research question three was the overall outcomes associated with the military to civilian

transition. Participants noted three primary outcomes within this theme, including career outcomes, health outcomes, and overall changes in identity.

For all participants, career outcomes associated with the military to civilian transition were largely positive, especially in work-life balance. Betty described the overall positive career outcomes she experienced regarding pay, promotion opportunities, and work-life balance.

I make equivalent money to where I was, I got out, was it '03? Over lots of years, and I make pretty much maybe a couple of thousand dollars less than when I was in, but I'm on track for a promotion just like I would be in the Navy, and I work exactly 40 hours on the dot. I open my laptop at 7:30 every morning, and I close my laptop at 4:30 every night, and I don't think about work on the weekends, and I never get called in, and I have great benefits, and I generally like the people I work with. So, it's great.

Nevertheless, she also notes that she took a role well below her expertise or skill level. She did not realize how to equate her military experience to civilian employers.

Darcy described how her career outcomes, although in the early stages, were largely positive. Although it took her a great deal of effort and she did experience a gap in employment, overall, she feels like she ended up in a good role. She notes that her civilian job was “challenging, rewarding in the salary range that I was hoping for, growth opportunity, exciting industry, and seemingly, it will be something that's sustainable in terms of how they take care of their people.” Angela felt that the first role she took following her retirement was proper in terms of pay and schedule, but essentially did not challenge her. She felt the role was “boring” and dreaded doing that for any extended period. While she enjoyed the lack of stress she felt, Angela knew that she needed to keep looking for “something to do with my life.” Christine found a role that met her expectations and was a good fit for her experience. However, she also recognized that

there was another opportunity within her organization to learn new things and develop new skills. For that reason, she sought out an internal promotion that flexed different skill sets, a choice that was not an option for her in the military. She discussed this commenting,

I'm now going into a program manager role where I'm working with vendors and things like that and not managing a team. I want this different experience. I want to see this other side of the business to get an idea of where I wanna go in the future. In the military, you don't have those options.

Overall, career outcomes when comparing military to civilian life were largely positive for participants. Despite some struggles to find meaningful roles, the majority felt that the positive nature of civilian employment outweighed any future challenges they might experience once settled.

Secondary Research Question Three, Theme Two: Health Outcomes.

The second theme noted for secondary research question three deals with health-related outcomes. Several participants noted a marked improvement in physical or mental health-related outcomes due to separating from military service. Betty noted that military health care was sub-par, and the level of care she received did not result in positive physical health outcomes. She also noted that the transition process placed an additional stress level that, once complete, improved emotional and mental health. Several participants noted that their fitness level had decreased physically due to losing physical fitness job requirements. However, many noted that they remain happier and more emotionally stable despite this reduction in physical fitness.

Mental health was a common discussion amongst participants, mainly around the stigma they felt seeking services while on active duty. Several noted that they knew they were undergoing emotional or mental health challenges but were afraid to seek any sort

of services while on active duty due to fear it would impact their military career.

Gretchen discussed how she knew mental health services were available, but she was afraid to seek them out while on active duty stating,

There's still a strong stigma. I think the Army is doing a great job of marketing that they have these resources. I think the VA does a great job of marketing that we have these resources for veterans. But do I feel comfortable telling a supervisor that I'm going to see behavioral health? I don't.

Gretchen even went so far as to state that all military servicemembers should be assigned mental health counsel during the transition to deal with their military experiences and help improve their overall mental health outcomes.

Secondary Research Question Three, Theme Three: Change in Identity

A final theme for secondary research question three was the change in identity experienced by participants during the military to civilian transition. Eve described how she lost her sense of purpose and clarity when she retired from the military:

Sometimes I'm just like, What am I doing? What am I doing? What am I supposed to do? I don't know. There's a couple of times I have to talk to myself and be like, 'It's okay, you can just sit down, you don't have to check your emails, you don't have work.' It's weird.

Eve related how getting out of the military felt like getting out of prison or slamming into a brick wall, saying, "I've been in this organization for 22 years. It's like getting out of prison. Like, 'What am I gonna do now? It's like going 1,000 miles an hour and then you just come to a screeching halt. You just slam into a brick wall.'" Fiona expressed surprise at realizing just how much the military had changed her identity and persona,

I didn't think that I was going to be indoctrinated, so I have definitely realized ... there are certain ways that I think, there's certain ways that I communicate, and even in my mannerisms and the way that I hold and carry myself. I didn't think I was going to be different. I thought I was just gonna carry my college me through the military, not pick up anything new and be normal civilian Fiona again, because I never felt like when I was in the military, that I was like, "I am in the

military, I am a military person.” I never felt indoctrinated. I always felt like I was just the exact same way that I was when I was in college before I even joined.

Angela talked about the uncertainty that comes from this change in identity and purpose, something that had been an integral part of her life since she was a teenager,

The only intimidating part, I think, is the big what do you do next? Kind of thing, ‘cause I’ve been in the military since I was 17, and so I was 43, 44 when I, I’m 45 now. So yeah, so I retired in 2018. So that’s all pretty much all I had done since I was pretty young.

Heidi discussed how she still has not come to terms with her new identity, seeing herself as a nomad of sorts, saying, “Why did it take me two years to feel comfortable with being out of the army? I don’t know. I still feel like a nomad. I just keep bouncing around from place to place.” Within this theme, participant comments show that the military to civilian transition does have an enormous impact on one’s identity.

Discussion

Within this study, several themes emerged that provided insight into how women veterans describe their experiences going through the military to civilian transition phenomenon. The results captured from this study do not provide easily quantifiable data or numbers but rather provide a depth of understanding of the phenomenon for researchers and readers alike. The overall theoretical framework used for this study was feminist theory. This theory allows for women’s viewpoints and voices to have priority in the narrative. Feminist theory looks at the purpose of research and power relationships that may be evident to highlight women’s experiences (Ackerly & True, 2010b). This study meets the tenets of feminist theory by carefully separating the military to civilian transition experiences of veterans based on gender. This study solely focused on women veterans and how they described their experiences. The findings of this study also align

well with the concepts of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Military transition theory provided an effective construct for analyzing the phenomenon of the military to civilian transition. Within this theory, key components that correlated directly to findings in this current study included the challenges of adapting to civilian life, difficulty finding employment, especially as a newly separated veteran, financial challenges, and lack of effective transition programs (Castrol et al., 2014).

This study helps fill a gap in veteran scholarship by highlighting the specific experiences of women veterans rather than combining all veterans into one homogenous group (Eichler, 2017). Women veterans have very different experiences than their male counterparts, data buffered by the findings from this study. The military has historically been unwelcoming and more challenging for women. Women servicemembers experience familial expectations and trauma that, while also experienced by men, occurs at a higher rate for women (Dichter & True, 2017). During the literature review, themes identified in the existing literature on women veterans included Gender and Identity, Health Challenges, Reintegration, and Women in the Workplace. During the data analysis, gender and identity were especially prevalent when discussing why women veterans choose to separate. This theme was also evident when participants discussed the changes in identity they experienced due to leaving military service. The issue of health challenges in this current study occurs in terms of outcomes, specifically with improved access to health care, improved mental health state, and navigating the disability claim process. Reintegration was evident in the findings of this study. Some unique challenges arose because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants often took roles with little interaction with work colleagues, which impacted their ability to separate the military

from civilian experience. Being at home alone, without getting a chance to change workplace and environment, affected their reintegration. Another impact of COVID 19 occurred when participants went from being at work for long hours with high responsibility to be at home all day with family. This change impacted their ability to transition effectively and reintegrate into civilian life because there was no physical separation from family members.

Another finding of this study was the insights provided on the effectiveness of military-sponsored transition programs. As highlighted in military transition theory, many veterans feel unprepared to transition to civilian life (Castro et al., 2014). Even though all service members will transition out of the military, leaving early still carries a negative stigma, so command support through this process was often lacking. As a result, many participants felt lost on how to complete this process effectively.

Findings from participants in this study show that the current programs for transitioning servicemembers lack meaning and effectiveness. All service members must attend some version of Transition GPS, formerly known as TAPS (GAO, 2014). Each branch of service has a slightly different name for this program, but the content is the same across each. Participants in this study noted that both the content provided and the expertise of instructors were ineffective. In addition, much of the material presented was outdated. Often, those delivering the material were either hyper-focused on one specific career area or have never gone through the transition to civilian life themselves. Thus, transitioning servicemembers were getting advice on successfully transitioning from individuals who have never experienced the phenomena themselves. Certain portions of the transition program, such as submitting disability claims, were valuable to participants.

However, many of them still had to seek outside support to manage this process effectively.

The insights gathered also emphasize that a great deal of personal effort was required to effectively transition out of the military. Another insight gathered from the study was that many participants took roles beneath their capability or skillset due to the problematic nature of translating military to civilian experience. Many participants left the service at a high program and personnel management level but entered into roles that failed to effectively challenge them or provide meaning. In order to succeed, they had to work to try to promote themselves to a more appropriate level. Across society and organizations, you will often see posts or articles claiming to value veteran experience or committed to hiring veterans. However, sadly this does not appear to play out in reality. Research on military transition theory has shown that newly separated veterans do not feel that organizations genuinely value them or want to hire them (Castro et al., 2014). In this current study, participants noted not even hearing back from companies for jobs that they were highly qualified for, even when they had a referral and a carefully crafted resume.

Women leaving the service sometimes face an additional challenge of managing dual military relationships, as they remain married to spouses who continue to serve on active duty. In several subthemes, participants noted that this had a significant impact on their ability to find and accept meaningful employment. This finding coincides with research showing that women will take less prestigious careers or lower pay to balance family and work life (Konrad, 2003). On the converse side of this, the married participants had more financial support from their spouses, alleviating the stress of

finding employment quickly. For the single participants, the delays and barriers to finding employment caused emotional and financial stress. This study highlighted the literature reviewed on women in the workplace. Participants accepted less meaningful roles and did not capitalize on their experiences due to the need to find a role to support themselves and their families. The women who participated in this study were all highly experienced, educated, and capable of assuming leadership roles, but they faced the same employment barriers civilian women face.

Implications

The findings of this study and the thematic analysis conducted only begin to scratch the surface of available research topics on women veterans. Women veterans as a unique subgroup find themselves ignored in contemporary research. The Veteran's Administration has recently established a Center for Women Veteran's that focuses on women veterans' unique needs and experiences. Nevertheless, despite this, women veterans continue to be an unrecognized population. This study shared how women veterans describe their lived experiences when transitioning from military to civilian life. The themes identified can provide a starting point for more in-depth research on this topic. Future researchers can focus on the transition programs and services of the military and Veteran's Administration. Many organizations and non-profit civilian companies were founded over the last several years explicitly focused on helping veterans find meaningful employment. There is a great deal of opportunity to leverage their services and create more meaningful transition outcomes. Research into these specific programs to identify gaps and opportunities could have a meaningful impact on women veterans.

Another area highlighted by this research was the willingness of women veterans to accept employment that was less than meaningful due to familial constraints. This phenomenon was not unique to women veterans but provided an area that is conducive to future research. This study shows that women veterans are well-educated, experienced, and have a strong desire to achieve career success. However, there remains a gender gap in leadership. Future research could seek to identify ways to utilize experienced women veteran leaders to help bridge that gap.

A final concept that was identified by this research study was the potential to utilize the time when veterans are going through their military to civilian transition program to capture data relevant to their needs in real time. Transition programs are mandatory for all servicemembers, making them a captive audience who could potentially provide great insight to update and improve programs in a meaningful way. Several participants in this study also identified the desire for more of a seamless warm hand off between the military and veteran's administration. Many of the programs and services that veterans are eligible for could receive necessary information directly from the military without the difficulty of several pages of forms with various claims and appeal processes. The use of this time during transition programs more effectively could provide many benefits for all veterans.

Summary and Conclusion

This study describes the lived experiences of women veterans as they went through the military to civilian transition. Each participant's descriptions and viewpoints were unique and bounded by feminist theory, as the researcher sought to hear the participants' voices. Within this theoretical framework, military transition theory

provided a construct to analyze participants' experiences (Castro et al., 2014). Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method. Transcript review occurred several times, and descriptive coding highlighted vital points or elements. Grouping of these elements provided themes. As a result, eight relevant themes emerged from participants that highlighted their experiences and provided greater insight into how this phenomenon affects women veterans. In addition, sub-themes within several of the main themes provide an even greater depth of understanding.

The overall results from this study highlight the continued need for research on women veterans as unique from their male counterparts. The first key finding was that women need gender-specific services and programs to be successful during their transition. Often, women veterans are married to active-duty servicemembers and have specific requirements of where they can live or work. Transition programs should address this unique challenge. Women in this study also were unique as not all of them desired to find employment or seek an education immediately. Programs for veterans need to allow more tailoring to the individual's needs, rather than being generic and having requirements of participants that are not relevant or helpful. Finally, almost all the women in this study experienced some kind of trauma during their time in the military. Transition programs should consider the need for mental health services and provide information on how to access this at the start of the transition, not simply as an afterthought or something for them to seek out independently.

A second key finding of this study was that many women who participated accepted roles in the civilian sector far below their experience or capability. They found it challenging to translate their experience or even understand what they could expect to

do in a civilian job. All of the women in this study had advanced leadership experience, were highly educated, and operated in stressful, ever-changing work environments. However, they were given entry-level or lower qualified roles due to the variety of challenges they faced in finding employment. There was a known gender gap in leadership in civilian organizations, and this group of women can take leadership positions within those organizations. However, starting them out at lower levels can delay filling key leadership roles with qualified women.

A final key finding of this study was that the transition process requires a great deal of individual effort. All the women who participated in this study had to put in hours to find jobs, seek transition services, attend appointments, and take care of their families while still working a full-time job in the military. In addition, participants faced adverse reactions from coworkers and supervisors due to their desire to leave. This effort takes a toll both in terms of time and emotional health. The military should consider allowing more time off before separation to allow servicemembers to complete everything they need to do before separation. There is also a stigma about separating that needs to change.

Women who separate from military service face the same challenges as their male counterparts with additional responsibilities and challenges. However, the service these women gave to their country, and their sacrifices should not go unnoticed. It is time that women in the military get the recognition they deserve, and women veterans no longer remain invisible.

CHAPTER FIVE

Distribution of Findings

Executive Summary

This descriptive phenomenological study aimed to better understand the military to civilian transition experiences of women veterans. Since its inception, women have served in the military, and as of 2015, all military occupations are open to women (Pellerin, 2015). This increase of opportunities has led to a record number of women serving in the military (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense, 2017). With this increase in the number of women serving comes a correlating increase in women veterans, and this number continues to grow exponentially (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2019).

Women veterans are very different from their male counterparts. They are younger, more educated, more likely to have children, and more ethnically diverse. They have higher rates of military sexual trauma, service-connected disabilities, and homelessness (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2017; Mankowski & Everett, 2015). Despite these differences, the transition programs aimed at supporting veterans generally fail to address the specific needs of women (Government Accountability Office, 2014). Women veterans are often invisible to society, with most studies failing to differentiate veterans by gender (Eichler, 2017; Kamarck, 2018). This research sought to fill that gap by focusing on women's lived experiences transitioning from military to civilian life. This study was bounded by feminist theory, focusing on allowing women to describe their lived experiences in their own words. Feminist theory seeks to highlight women's

experiences as unique research subjects rather than in comparison to men. Existing research on veterans remains focused on the experiences of men. A thorough literature review identified that most research on women veterans focuses on health-related issues but does not identify practices or programs to help women successfully transition. This research sought to overcome the inherent gender bias present in veteran scholarship and give insight into what future research is needed (Demers, 2013; Eichler, 2017).

Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data for this descriptive phenomenological research was collected using semi-structured interview protocols. Interview questions were grouped in terms of the stages of military transition theory (Castrol et al., 2014) and developed using Bevan's (2014) interview question framework. Questions focused on providing an opportunity for the participants to share their own experiences, serving as a guide, but allowing for personal, in-depth descriptions. Eight women veterans participated in recorded video-based interviews. Each interview was transcribed for accuracy, and member-checking was utilized to allow participants to ensure the information gathered correctly described their experiences. Before collecting any data, the researcher participated in bracketing or setting aside preconceived notions about the topic. This practice allowed for participant experience to be the focus of the interviews. This bracketing and setting aside feelings occurred using ongoing journaling throughout the process.

Data collected from this study were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method. This analysis method and pertinent description information use the structure described by Morrow et al. (2015). The seven steps of this method are as follows:

1. Familiarization

2. Identifying significant statements
3. Formulating meanings
4. Clustering themes
5. Developing an exhaustive description
6. Producing the fundamental structure
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure

Throughout the entire data collection and analysis process, the researcher carefully followed the careful methodologies inherent to descriptive phenomenological research.

Summary of Key Findings

The thematic analysis centered around the research questions and the themes identified were grouped based on stages of military transition theory (Castro et al., 2014). Participant responses were summarized in participants' own words to allow for a detailed description. The central research question is, what are the lived experiences of women veterans during their military to civilian transition? Secondary research questions provide further structure for this study and include how do women veterans describe their experiences as they approached their transition out of the military, how do women veterans experience transition trajectories, and how do women veterans describe the outcomes of their overall transition experience?

Eight key themes were present in this study. They included reasons for separating, command response, transition programs and services, the effort required to transition, the emotional nature of transition, career outcomes, health outcomes, and change in identity. Each of these themes had several subthemes, and issues identified were specific to women's experiences, with participants describing their experiences as servicemembers,

mothers, and wives in detail. Many of them experienced military service-related trauma and faced discrimination before and during their transition out of the service. This finding highlighted the ongoing need to reduce the stigma around mental health services for service members. In addition, many participants felt their leadership mistreated them after indicating they were ready to separate from military service, both in opportunities and performance rankings. Finally, this research study indicated just how much effort was required to transition out of the military. Many participants faced challenges due to children, spousal career expectations, dealing with service-related trauma, and finding post-military jobs.

This research found several gaps in transition programs led by the Department of Veteran's Affairs. These programs are a required part of every transition yet remain woefully inadequate. Participants described outdated information, instructors who had never transitioned themselves or even required classes regardless of their unique needs or goals. These programs and several civilian-based transition programs can potentially improve veteran transition outcomes if reformatted and updated. While sharing unique perspectives, participants in this study provided insight into the more significant challenges many women face when separating from the military. Data collected from this study does not provide broad generalizations but gives women a chance to be heard while identifying topics for future research.

Informed Recommendations

There is a real need for further research on this topic. This study demonstrated that women veterans are very different from their male counterparts; their needs, barriers, and challenges are unique and gender specific. Women have different experiences as

wives, as mothers, and as servicemembers facing discrimination and even trauma. In order to provide transition programs that better meet their needs, more detailed research on this topic is essential. A large-scale research study could better identify specific topics and areas of interest for women veterans. The participants in this current study were only a tiny fraction of the more prominent women veteran population. Their experiences, while sharing some consistent themes, are not all-inclusive, and more detailed information is needed. Survey methodologies could capture data from current service members, transitioning veterans, and veterans who have already transitioned successfully to identify gaps, topics to focus on, and other areas of improvement for veteran transition programs that focus on the unique needs of women. This type of study would not be difficult if study measures were implemented while active-duty services members completed their required transition programs. All servicemembers attend mandatory transition programs sponsored by the Department of Veteran Affairs, this time could be used more effectively to gain information and focus on finding even better ways to engage veterans in the future to continue to update and improve transition support services.

Findings Distribution Proposal

To share the findings in this study, the researcher developed the following findings distribution methodology. The goal of sharing these findings is to provide insight and awareness to the target audience on the experiences of the participants through submission of a manuscript to the premier military and veteran affairs journal. The hope is that these findings will help to elucidate on their experiences and promote future research.

Target Audience

The target audience for these research findings is military personnel, veterans, veteran organizations (including the Department of Veteran Affairs), the congressional research office, and any scholars interested in veteran or military affairs. These groups have a vested interest in the successful military to civilian transition of all veterans, not just women. Military personnel can utilize information gathered to prepare themselves for the transition process. Veterans can gain better insight into their challenges to understand barriers they may have faced. Veteran organizations exist to help veterans succeed, whether a non-profit dedicated to veteran's issues or the Department of Veteran Affairs. The congressional research office focuses on providing data to Congress on issues of concern, and they have published information on the effectiveness of the Veteran's Administration transition program. Finally, any scholars interested in veteran or military affairs will gain new insights from the data collected by this study.

Proposed Distribution Method and Venue

The proposed distribution method for this study will be via submission to a professional journal, *Armed Forces and Society*. This peer-reviewed journal covers various military and veteran topics and focuses on policy discourse (Sage Publishing, n.d.). *Armed Forces and Society* is the official journal of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society. This organization focuses on objective research highlighting the military establishment and military-civilian relations. This organization feels that research on military issues should occur cross-functionally and that military research topics have a great deal of value for society. Their journal is generally considered the

leading source of research on military-related issues (Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, n.d.).

Submission requirements for this journal are precise. Manuscripts should be no longer than 26 pages or 8,000 words with a clear outline of requirements for sections. Manuscripts are turned in with anonymous author's information to allow for blind peer review. Armed Forces and Society comes out quarterly, so the submission would be sent in time for inclusion in the March 2022 Journal. Submission to this journal will imply that the submission is not currently submitted elsewhere and, if accepted, is ready for publishing and adheres to all copyright and APA 7 formatting expectations (Armed Forces and Society, n.d.).

Distribution Materials

Distribution materials for this will be a manuscript of no more than 26 pages or 8,000 words. Required formatting by the journal includes three main sections, a title page with the abstract, the main body including all text, tables, and figures, and finally a reference page, all listed in APA seven format (Armed Forces and Society, n.d.). This manuscript will summarize the information gathered in this research study. It will include detailed insights discovered during the study focused on describing the lived experiences of women veterans. This type of study is a good fit for Armed Forces and Society as this journal seeks to elucidate the intersectionality between the military and society. This journal is a quarterly journal, so the manuscript must be submitted promptly to meet submission timing requirements. Armed Forces and Society is a long-standing journal that is currently publishing volume 47, issue three. The primary military and armed forces related journal will provide the necessary avenue for disseminating findings.

Conclusion

Women have played an integral role in the United States Military since its inception. These women have served their country with honor and deserve recognition and effective services when they leave the military. Women veterans are growing exponentially, but services and programs are slow to catch up to their needs. This unique group of veterans requires additional support for various reasons, including experienced trauma, education level, ethnic diversity, and family obligations. This research provides unique insight into describing the lived experiences of women veterans as they transition from military to civilian life. By highlighting participants' thoughts and feelings about their transition experience, this research fills a critical gap in veteran scholarship that often fails to differentiate veterans based on gender. Focusing on researching this group of veterans provides insights into what women veterans experience and how society can better serve them.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Date _____	Time _____
Start Time _____	End Time _____
Zoom Link: _____	
Interviewer <u>Charity True Miller, Doctoral Candidate</u>	
Interviewee (Alias) _____	Release form signed? _____
Next Appointment: _____	

- I. Introductory information
 - A. Purpose of the Study
 - B. Researcher's Background
 - C. What to expect during interview sessions?

- II. Approaching Transition
 - A. Contextualization
 1. Tell me about your experience approaching your transition.
 2. Why did you want to leave the service?

 - B. Apprehending the phenomenon:
 1. How would you describe how you prepared for your transition?
 2. How would you describe your overall experience moving towards your Separation?
 3. Tell me about your experience during the transition process or programs.
 4. Did you attend any transition support programs?

 - C. Clarifying the phenomenon
 1. How might your transition have been different with more (or less) command support?
 2. How could TAP have been more meaningful for you?
 3. Is there anything you think that would have prepared you even more to transition?

III. Transition Trajectories

A. Contextualization

1. How would you describe your experience through the transition out of the military?
2. How would you describe your support systems?

B. Apprehending the phenomenon

1. What were resources available to you during your transition?
2. How did you utilize those resources?

C. Clarifying the phenomenon

1. How might your transition have been different if you had utilized more (or less) services?
2. What might you have done differently to improve your transition out of the service?

IV. Assessing the Transition

A. Contextualization

1. How would you describe your overall transition experience?
2. How would you describe the outcomes of your transition?
3. Describe how your transition impacted different areas of your life.

B. Apprehending the phenomenon

1. How would you describe your transition outcomes regarding work/family/health/well-being/community?
2. How would you describe your overall satisfaction with the military to civilian transition as a whole?

C. Clarifying the phenomenon

1. What could you have done differently to improve your outcomes in that area?
2. Did any part of your transition experience surprise or disappoint you?
3. If you could change anything about your transition experience, what would that be?

Researcher Notes:

APPENDIX B

Participant Consent Form

Baylor University
Curriculum & Instruction

Participant Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: **Military to Civilian Transition Experiences of Women Veterans: A Phenomenological Study**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: **Charity True Miller**

SUPPORTED BY: **Baylor University**

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether to participate in the study. If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

The person in charge of this study is Charity True Miller, under the supervision of Dr. Sandra Cooper.

Important Information about this Research Study

Purpose of the research: The goal of this research study is to describe the lived experiences of women veterans as they go through the military to civilian transition. Themes and insights gathered during this study have the potential to impact future transition support programs.

Eligibility to participate: To participate in this research study, you must

- Be a female military veteran
- Have served on Active Duty for a minimum of four years
- Have been discharged from military service within the last 36 months.

Study activities: If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed on your military to civilian transition experiences, before, during, and after being discharged. You will be interviewed 2 to 3 times for 60–90 minutes at a time, depending on the need for clarification of prior interview sessions.

Risk and confidentiality: A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to carefully protect your confidentiality.

You are required to be video recorded to participate in this study. A transcript of the interview will be provided to you for your review. We will keep the records of this study confidential by **using pseudonyms to replace your real name**. We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. However, there are times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of your records.

The following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:

- Representatives of Baylor University and the BU Institutional Review Board
- Federal and state agencies that oversee or review research

This study's results may also be used for teaching, publications, or presentations at professional meetings. If your results are discussed, your identity will be protected using a code number or pseudonym rather than your name or other identifying information.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you choose to withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept confidential. You cannot withdraw the information collected before your withdrawal.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Researcher: Charity True Miller

Phone: 757-575-8852

Email: charity_miller1@baylor.edu

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Baylor University Institutional Review Board

Office of the Vice Provost for Research

Phone: 254-710-3708

Email: irb@baylor.edu

Your Consent

SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT:

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Flyer

ARE YOU A FEMALE US MILITARY VETERAN?



Participants are needed for a research study into the military to civilian transition experience.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE

- Female US Military Veterans
- 4 years of continuous active duty service (minimum)
- Recently separated (within last 24 months or less)

WHAT TO EXPECT

- You will need to participate in two to three 60 to 90 minute interviews conducted via ZOOM video conference call.
- You will share your own experiences and stories in your own words.
- Confidentiality and personal information will be protected through use of aliases.
- You will be able to review all information and descriptions gathered by the researcher.

HOW DO I SIGN UP?

Fill out this quick [questionnaire](#) or contact the principal researcher:
Charity True Miller
charity_miller1@baylor.edu
757-575-8852

All participants who complete the study will receive a \$20 gift card.

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