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## Abstract

Over 280,000 female servicemembers have served in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, and a significant number of them are experiencing hidden and/or visible wounds of war. Recent reports indicate that female servicemembers have service-connected disability ratings higher than that of their male counterparts. Female servicemembers often find themselves negotiating roles that are at once 'inside' as well as 'outside' of a hierarchical, proscribed military institution whose rituals, norms, and hierarchies privilege males in positions of power. Their transition to adulthood as young veterans with service-related disabilities, within a present-day civilian society that can be more ambiguous and discontinuous than in the past decades can often be difficult; particularly during the early years after separation. Fifteen young, female veterans with service-related disabilities, who have left active duty within three years were interviewed for this study, of which 12 met the study criteria. The narratives of their pre-during-and post-military lives contribute to a grounded theory of female veteran transition to adulthood that validates the integration of the Life Course Perspective, Disability Theory, Role/Exit Theory, and theories of Identity and Belonging in ways heretofore unexplored. This study also validates the premise that the female veteran experience is sufficiently different from the male veteran experience in substantive ways. Finally, this research suggests that transition planning and post-military service supports should be customized specifically to address the needs of female servicemembers with disabilities, oriented towards preparing them to resume their civilian lives after exiting the military institution.

**How Military Service Influences the Transition to Adulthood Among Post-911 Young Adult Female Veterans with Service Related Disabilities**

by

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B.A., 1975, Binghamton University

M.P.A., 1986, Syracuse University

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Science

Syracuse University

**August 2018**

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## Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated with my love and gratitude to my dear wife Mary Ann Shaheen who supported my work throughout my life, wherever it has led, and to my daughters, Caitlin Morgan and Danita Shaheen. They inspired me as examples of how perseverance and hard work makes it possible to achieve the seemingly impossible

It is also dedicated to my Father-in-Law and Mother-in-Law Harmen and Henrietta DeVos, who were pleased that I demonstrated more aptitude as a scholar than I ever had as a farmer. They have all provided the constant, unwavering sources of strength I needed throughout this endeavor.

The impetus for this dissertation research emanated from a national symposium on Women Veteran Homelessness that I developed and helped lead while serving as Director for Community Based Technical Assistance at the Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF). Over two days in Chicago in 2013, women veterans with lived experience of homelessness, shared their compelling testimonies of the challenges they faced in transitioning from military to civilian life. Nationally recognized researchers, federal policy-makers and program managers also lent their insights into the causes and effects of homelessness, poverty and life-course disruption faced by an inordinate number of our nation's female servicemembers. Most of the female veterans attending the Summit were young, Post-911 veterans, but some had served during Gulf War I and in Vietnam.

In ways unique to the life experiences of these women, stories unfolded about feelings of exclusion while serving in a male dominated military to feelings of exclusion in a civilian society that often fails to acknowledge that they had served. But, throughout all the discussions emerged the themes of strength, resiliency and hopefulness with never any bitterness concerning either military service or the impacts of service-related disabilities that many still struggled with. After hearing so many testimonies, I became certain that it was important to explore how young, female veterans of the Post-911 era are coping with their return to civilian life and overcoming the adversities of service-related disabilities and other life challenges. My dissertation chair, Dr. Andrew London, with infinite patience and a Socratic approach to helping me in challenging and clarifying my rationale, intent and methods, guided me towards a realization that the life course perspective would be a valuable, and hitherto largely unexplored theoretical framework for framing my study. I drew knowledge and inspiration as well from my career working with total institutions for people with mental illnesses; and with programs serving individuals with disabilities, including veterans, and those who experience homelessness, to query how factors related to disability and leaving a hierarchal institution like the military and entering what may be termed 'mainstream civilian society' are experienced by young female veterans.

I am particularly fortunate to have enlisted the support of Syracuse University's leading experts on veteran issues as members of my core dissertation committee: Dr. Janet Wilmoth and Dr. Corrine Zoli. All along the way, they challenged me to think harder, and work more thoughtfully in constructing my research. The guidance of my

dissertation committee helped me to explore how core theoretical concepts associated with lifecourse trajectories, the intrinsic and extrinsic effects of disability, and the psychological dynamics of exiting and re-entering social, education and career roles need not be considered in isolation. In fact, a grounded theory underscoring their synergies began to emerge, as the recommendations of my committee, and literature review were informed and made real by the narratives of the 15 young, female veterans who were interviewed for this research and the analysis completed on the 12 women who met all of the recruitment criteria. Their stories lent a deeper richness of insight than I had originally hoped would be possible.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my readers, Dr. J. Michael Haynie and Dr. Dessa Bergen-Cico, for their added insights. Prior to serving as readers, both contributed tremendously in shaping my learning. Dr. Haynie directed my work at the Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) as its Founder and Director and endorsed the development of the Women Veteran Homelessness Summit that was so pivotal in shaping my study. Over the course of this endeavor, and through other projects, I have come to admire not only the intellect, but also the creativity and expansiveness of spirit that characterizes Dr. Dessa Bergen-Cico and her teaching and research. Her willingness to serve as a reader and offer her insights and recommendations are greatly appreciated.

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program, but never failed to offer anything but warm, gracious support to me on this long journey to my doctorate. I am grateful that they opened the door to my entry into the program.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the constant editing and shaping of my writing by my wife, Mary Ann Shaheen. Over the 10 years that I developed papers for classes, wrote proposals and created papers for my Comprehensive Examinations, Mary was my constant, most able editor and critic. I say again as I did when we first met 40 years ago, that she is much better at this work than I will ever be and without her assistance, I would never have made it to this point.

Finally, but certainly not least, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the young female veterans I met with over the course of my study. Your willingness to share the stories of your lives with me is a gift beyond imagining and a sacred possession that I will cherish throughout the remainder of my career and life. Your resilience in the face of sometimes overwhelming challenges and your ability to survive and thrive in your post-military lives, often with such confidence and optimism that belies the setbacks that many of you have experienced, should be an inspiration to all of us. Our country is ever stronger because of your contributions. I hope that this paper justifies the faith you have placed in me in re-telling and offering interpretations of your stories.



## Table of Contents

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Abstract.....</b>  | <b>i</b>   |
| <b>Title Page.....</b>  | <b>ii</b>  |
| <b>Copyright Notice .....</b>   | <b>iii</b> |
| <b>Acknowledgements.....</b>  | <b>iv</b>  |
| <b>1. Introduction .....</b>  | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>1.A. Overview .....</b>  | <b>1</b>   |
| <b>1.B. Statement of the Problem .....</b>  | <b>3</b>   |
| 1.B.1. Why is this research necessary?  |            |
| <b>1. C. Conceptual Framework.....</b>  | <b>9</b>   |
| <b>1.D. Purpose and Research Questions .....</b>                                      | <b>16</b>  |
| <b>1.E. Statement of Potential Significance .....</b>                                 | <b>18</b>  |
| <b>1.F. Summary of the Methodology .....</b>  | <b>18</b>  |
| 1.F.1 Human subjects and ethical issues. ....   | <b>20</b>  |
| <b>1.G. Research Limitations .....</b>  | <b>21</b>  |
| <b>1.H. Subjectivities Statement .....</b>  | <b>22</b>  |
| <b>1.I. Key Definitions .....</b>   | <b>24</b>  |
| <b>2: Literature Review .....</b>   | <b>26</b>  |
| <b>2.A. Introduction .....</b>  | <b>26</b>  |
| <b>2.B. Literature Review: Life Course Perspective .....</b>                          | <b>28</b>  |
| Relevance to the Research .....   | <b>37</b>  |
| <b>2.C. Literature Review: Disability Theory.....</b>                                 | <b>48</b>  |
| Relevance to the Research .....   | <b>51</b>  |
| <b>2.D. Literature Review: Role/Exit Theory .....</b>                                 | <b>51</b>  |
| Relevance to the Research .....   | <b>53</b>  |
| <b>2.E. Literature Review: Identity and Belonging Theories Relevant Concepts.....</b> | <b>55</b>  |
| <b>2.F. Literature Review: Demographics of Post-911 Veterans.....</b>                 | <b>63</b>  |
| <b>3: Methodology.....</b>  | <b>82</b>  |
| <b>3.A. Mixed Methods in Qualitative Research .....</b>                               | <b>82</b>  |
| Relevance to the Research .....   | <b>93</b>  |
| <b>3.B. Narratological Approach.....</b>  | <b>96</b>  |
| Relevance to the Research .....   | <b>100</b> |
| <b>3.C. Research Design.....</b>  | <b>101</b> |
| 3.C.1 Epistemological approach.....   | <b>103</b> |
| 3.C.2 Selection procedures. ....  | <b>106</b> |
| Recruitment Challenges and Implications .....   | <b>108</b> |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| 3.C.3 Data Collection Procedures.....  | 112        |
| 3.C.4 Interview Questions .....  | 114        |
| 3.C.5 Data Analysis Procedures.....  | 117        |
| 3.C.6 Explicability, Validity, and Reliability of the Data .....   | 118        |
| <b>4: Discussion.....</b>  | <b>119</b> |
| <b>4.A. Introduction .....</b>   | <b>119</b> |
| <b>4.B. Participant Demographics .....</b>   | <b>120</b> |
| <b>4.C. Research Questions: Summary and Themes .....</b>   | <b>123</b> |
| 4.C.1 Pre-Military Life Experiences. ....  | 123        |
| 4.C.2 Early Military Experiences.....  | 129        |
| 4.C.3 Military Life. ....  | 135        |
| 4.C.4 Military to Civilian Transition .....  | 143        |
| 4.C.5 Lifecourse Impacts of Service-Related Disabilities .....   | 155        |
| 4.C.4 Participant Recommendations.....   | 160        |
| <b>4.D. Presentation of Research Question One.....</b>   | <b>164</b> |
| Does Military Service Represent 'Off-Time' or 'On-Time' Transition to Adulthood among Female Veterans?                 |            |
| Rationale .....  | 164        |
| Statements and Themes.....   | 165        |
| Findings of Research Question One. ....  | 167        |
| <b>4.E. Presentation of Analysis Findings: Research Question Two .....</b>   | <b>168</b> |
| How does Military Service Affect Female Veteran Transition to Civilian Life?   |            |
| Rationale .....  | 168        |
| Statements and Themes.....   | 169        |
| Findings of Research Question Two. ....  | 173        |
| <b>4.F. Presentation of Analysis Findings: Research Question Three.....</b>  | <b>175</b> |
| How do Service-Related Disabilities Impact Female Veteran Transition to Adulthood and Military to Civilian Transition? |            |
| Rationale .....  | 175        |
| Statements and Themes.....   | 176        |
| Findings of Research Question Three.....   | 177        |
| <b>5: Conclusions and Implications .....</b>   | <b>178</b> |
| <b>5.A. Conclusions about the Research Problem .....</b>   | <b>179</b> |
| <b>5.B. How Do Findings Contribute To, and Go Beyond the Research .....</b>  | <b>183</b> |
| <b>5.C. Implications for Further Research.....</b>   | <b>188</b> |
| <b>List of Appendices .....</b>  | <b>191</b> |
| Appendix A: The Syracuse University IRB Approval Letter  |            |
| Appendix B: The Onondaga Community College IRB Approval  |            |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Appendix C: The Clear Path for Veterans Approval Letter</b>  |            |
| <b>Appendix D: The Student Veterans of America Approval Letter</b>                                      |            |
| <b>Appendix E: The Final Salute, Inc. Approval Letter</b>   |            |
| <b>Appendix F: The Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families Approval Letter</b> |            |
| <b>Appendix G: Recruitment Materials</b>  |            |
| <b>Appendix H: Informed Consent Form - Syracuse University</b>  |            |
| <b>Appendix I: Informed Consent Form - Onondaga Community College</b>                                   |            |
| <b>Appendix J: Recruitment Confirming E-mail and Introduction</b>                                       |            |
| <b>Appendix K: Interview Questions</b>  |            |
| <b>References.....</b>  | <b>192</b> |
| <b>CV .....</b>   | <b>208</b> |

## 1. Introduction

### 1.A. Overview

This research is an inductive study that explores how young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities characterize their experiences of transitioning into, and out of the military, and the continuities and discontinuities that military service has had on their lives. Literature review is important for establishing the context, but social sciences research is based upon the principle that research must be continually informed and made more relevant in order to address contemporary conditions by continually mining the narratives of individuals and groups. Personal narratives that are gathered are poured into an ever-percolating research dynamic to reveal new phenomena and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the human condition, that organically informs the development of new questions to be posed and addressed by future research.

Over the course of 8 months, 15 young, female veterans with service-related disabilities were interviewed for this study. Criteria for participation included that the female veterans could be no older than 32 years of age and that they would have been separated from active duty within the past 3 years. No requirement was established that their disability qualified them for a VA disability rating. This was in anticipation that some respondents may have a trauma-related and/or mental health disability that they ascribed to their military service, that they had not wished to disclose while in uniform. Or, some may have disabilities that only manifested themselves after they separated from service. Therefore, for purposes of this

research, the term 'disability' could be any hidden or visible disability that a veteran would disclose as related to their military service; whether or not those disabilities resulted in a rating.

Of the 15 veterans interviewed, the concluding analysis could not incorporate data obtained by 3 women whose ages were assumed to be outside of the 18-32 age study criteria from information they offered during the course of the interviews about the number of years that they served in the military. However, footnotes contained in the discussion corroborates that their military and post-military life experiences were thematically consistent with those who met study criteria. All those interviewed contributed to my understanding of ways that military service can affect females and males in significantly different ways. They all left homes, colleges, jobs, and friends, family and sometimes spouses, to answer their personal call of duty. While the term 'thank you for your sacrifice and service' has perhaps been overused in the present day, and in some respects has become the de facto greeting when a member of the 99% of Americans who do not wear the uniform meet the 1% who currently serve in the All-Volunteer Military. There is no denying that the women I talked with have indeed endured, and in many cases, still experience the emotional and physical sacrifices of their service. There is the irony to have served alongside their male counterparts; sometimes proving their heroism in combat and at other times demonstrating their excellence in non-combat assignments, often without being treated equally. They serve with honor and distinction but must try harder to be equal to males in a male-dominated military culture. After they leave military service, they often find that gender bias re-emerges when they do not get the same acknowledgement of their military service as do male veterans. Their stories portray the effects of being both 'inside and outside' of the military institution, whether or not they are physically in-or-out of uniform

should galvanize both the military and civilian sectors to do more to eliminate their barriers to inclusion in both worlds.

A significant percentage of those participating in the study talked honestly about promotions denied, gender bias and emotional and sexual assault by their comrades, but all of them refused to assume the role of victim. Despite serious service-related psychological and/or physical injuries that in many ways, continue to affect their civilian life trajectories, all of them easily related how the military provided them undeniable benefits compared to their age peers who did not enlist. They expressed their pride of service and of accomplishment, despite the challenges they have experienced.

Many of the young females who talked with me also had another thing to add after our formal interview concluded. They thanked me for conducting the study and stressed that it was important that their stories were heard, so that other young women who choose military service in the future have an easier time, not only of adjusting to military life, but also of surviving and thriving in their military roles, and afterwards, as civilians. Or, as one young veteran said: *“Being female is different and being a female veteran is different. (We need to) have it out there that there are broader categories than just that male veteran with a beard. There are those of us who aren’t male veterans and here’s my story.”*

## **1.B. Statement of the Problem**

### **1.B.1 Why is this Research Necessary?**

Increasing attention in both the popular press and among researchers is being focused on the military and post-military experiences of female veterans of the Post-911, and earlier

eras. Explorations and exposures of the gender discrepancies that many female servicemembers experience in the military, including the sexual victimization of female servicemembers and the prevalence of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and associated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), are occurring with increasing frequency (Disabled Veterans of America, 2014; Frayne, et. al., 2014). Members of Congress, notably Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) are publicly taking on both the Executive Leadership and the military establishment and demanding inquiries into allegations of unequal and exploitative treatment of female servicemembers (Office of Senator Gillibrand, 2017) Female veterans of the Vietnam and WWII eras are breaking decades of silence and expressing accounts of their personal struggles with not only sexual abuse during their time in service, but also sexual discrimination that affected their advancement in their military careers<sup>1</sup>. The Tailhook scandal and subsequent exposure of the psychological and physical abuse experienced by many female servicemembers contributes to the emerging dialogue about ways to protect, honor and support the safety and careers of serving female military personnel (Belkin, 2012).

Yet, amid the justified outrage and attention that these situations warrant, there are also increasing signs that the cracks are beginning to appear in the military career glass ceiling, as more and more female servicemembers rise to highest ranks, including Rear Admiral and Generalship ranks<sup>2</sup>. Prior to 2016, when the preclusion against female servicemembers being assigned to combat roles was lifted, the career-enhancing Combat Medal was not achievable for women warriors, although they may have served in combat zones and been involved in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/6299-military-sexual-abuse-a-greater-menace-than-combat>

<sup>2</sup> <http://iwf.rutgers.edu/documents/njwomenscount/Women%20in%20Military%202009%20Final.pdf>

direct combat situations. However, despite these encouraging signs that increased, justifiable attention is being given to women in the military and the conditions that affect their military success, there is much more that needs to be explored in order to better understand the multi-dimensionalities and complexities associated with military and post-military life, as experienced by many Post-911 female veterans, and on their lifecourse trajectories as young adults.

Although the majority of Post-911 female veterans are young adults, between the ages of 18-32 (Pew Research Center, 2011), more research on the transition experiences of young, female veterans is needed in order to understand the effects of military acculturation on their transition to adulthood and its effects upon the achievement of their post-military, civilian life goals and roles. While gender-related factors are important in understanding these dynamics, there may be other, less-well explored discrepancies and anomalies, and myths and realities associated with the military experience that are driven by the institutional culture of the military that affects these young, female veterans' life course trajectories into adulthood.

Few studies explore the fuller dimensions of loss that may be experienced by these young veterans when separation from service includes not only the dislocation of self-concept from a capable, skilled warrior imbued with the Warrior Ethos, to a young veteran learning how to live with, and manage the effects of a disability (Tick, 2005). Factors related to leaving the military institution where belonging and identity association is so pervasive and re-entering civilian life spheres with different standards and mores for belonging and identity, can create psychological disruptions that can have significantly challenging consequences for successful military to civilian transition (Smith and True, 2014; Junger, 2016; Tick, 2005). Negotiating post-military self-perceptions when the unit cohesion values associated with military service that



have been inculcated into female servicemembers from their enlistment are de-legitimized by gender bias and other forms of discrimination can create inordinately complex and conflictual identity struggles that many of them encounter.

Unpacking the psychological implications of military role exit and transition and the contradictions that can be inherent when veterans face the displacement of a military life role with that of a civilian, while negotiating the often dueling and always dual identity of servicemember and civilian is also an under-researched area (Smith & True, 2014; Junger, 2016). As one male veteran offered: *"You don't know who you are anymore and you're not back to who you were"* (Smith & True, 2014, pg. 156). Many studies have been conducted about the transition challenges faced by young (and primarily male) military veterans with service-related disabilities, and the challenges they often face in re-acclimating back into personally meaningful civilian life roles (Disabled American Veterans 2014; Hassija, et al, 2012; Ostovary & Dapprich, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011; Veterans Administration, 2011). Yet, very few studies attempt to understand the dynamics of military to civilian transition and their effects on the progression to adulthood, with a particular focus on the female veteran experience. This research seeks to fill those gaps by exploring how young female veterans negotiate their way through the early years of transition from military service; and in particular how they are adjusting to their civilian life roles after exiting a form of total institution and fulfilling their dreams and aspirations within and beyond the limitations of hidden and/or visible disabilities. Understanding the female veteran experience through these lenses has the potential for contributing a richness of data not yet generated in research on the veteran lifecourse.

More needs to be learned as well, about ways that young female veterans cope with the self-perceptual aspects of physical and psychological wounds that were not sustained in combat; but instead perpetrated by their comrades. Much has been written about the 'disability identity', and how difficult it can be to overcome the stigma of having a disability label, dating back to Goffman's seminal works on the topic (1959, 1961). However, the term 'disability' can be an especially laden one for veterans, and directly at odds with the training and acculturation valuing strength and the ability to persevere under all conditions that the military requires of its enlistees. Whether they or others characterize these as injuries or wounds of war or as disabilities, these female veterans enter a civilian society that still often defines disability as 'not being abled'. Emerging research suggests that the 'signature wounds' of the Middle East conflicts -Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) can be experienced differently by females and can have differing lifecourse severities since women experience traumas that are higher risk for PTSD, specifically sexual assault/abuse, they have longer duration of PTSD symptoms, and they have stronger reactions to traumatic events. (Resnick, Mallampalli, & Carter, 2012, pg. 896). These are in addition to health risks that many female servicemembers face related to urogenital issues that can derive from military service-related traumas (IBID). How female veterans deal with not only the physical or psychological consequences, but also the sociological consequences of having a disability; whether or not they perceive it as a label; and how they regard even their personal identification and association with that term; is another important and largely under-researched area that this study explores.

Timing and sequencing is a core concept in the life course perspective (Hogan, 1981; Settersten & Ray, 2010; Elder, 2003). Yet, more needs to be understood about the relative ease or difficulty faced by young, female veterans during their early post-separation years. There is little research on the interplay of exiting a rigid, hierarchically oriented military lifestyle experienced at a young age, and entering and acclimating to a more individually determined and ambiguous civilian world; often in environments where peers are much younger and less world-experienced. While much attention has been focused upon the value of military training in helping veterans, including those with disabilities, acquire jobs or succeed in post-secondary education (DiRamio, 2009, Pew Research Center, 2011), little research examines how post-military transition is either easier or harder during the first few months or years after separation from active duty, and why this is so. Role and Exit Theory privilege the timing and sequencing factors associated with moving from one job or career role into another, and the impacts upon a person's self-identity when transitions are either forced or voluntary (Schlossberg, 1981, 2004; Ebaugh, 1988). Temporal factors affecting how people negotiate their lifecourse trajectories also have prominence in lifecourse research. This study locates the importance of these timing, sequencing, and transition dynamics through the lens of experiences of young, female veterans, by collapsing the transition timeframe to within the first three years of separation from active duty that potentially add a new dimensionality to the paradigm.

In sum, this study travels in directions where few, if any, studies have gone before. Its focus is integrative; examining the composite effects of a number of variables affecting the life course transitions of young female veterans with service-related disabilities. It also seeks to

unpack the core premises of the Life Course Perspective, Role/Exit Theory and Disability Theory through the lenses provided by the personal narratives of study participants. Consequently, this study adheres to the methods and rich tradition of narratology to correlate the meaning and validity of these theoretical constructs according to the lived experience of participants. In essence, we allow the nuances and complexities that emerge from these young, female veterans' testimonies with generous quotations used throughout, that emerged from their interviews to potentially enrich our understanding of their military and post-military lives. From these insights, this study attempts to draw inferences and recommendations that others can build upon for future research, and to make improvements in policies and practices that help make the military to civilian transition of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities more seamless and easier.

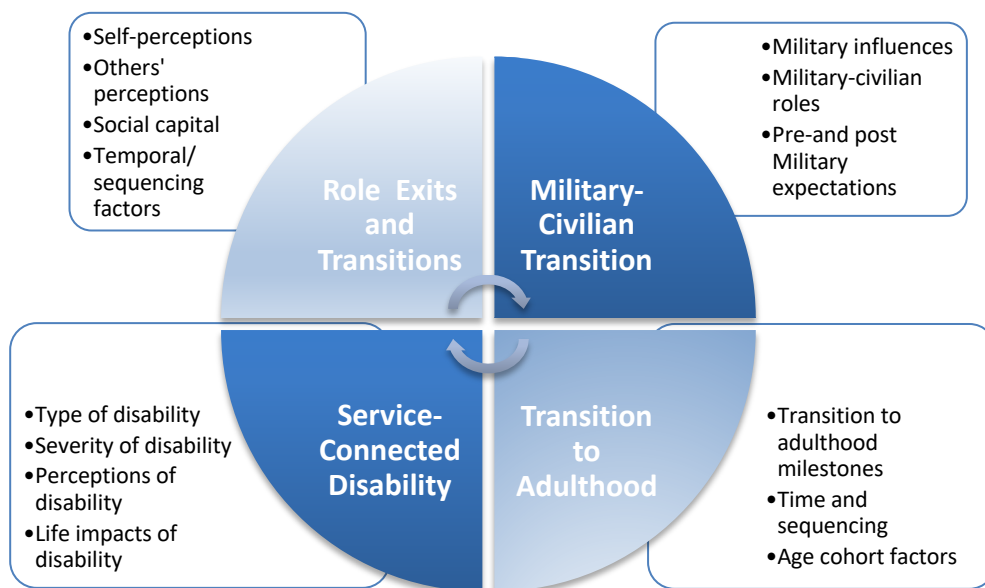
### **1. C. Conceptual Framework**

This study's implementation framework is foregrounded by a literature review focused upon three theoretical constructs, contextualized by the compilation and review of literature related to the demographic characteristics of the Post-911 female servicemember cohort and how they are faring in their transition from military to civilian life environments. Research on Life course perspective was gathered and synthesized to provide an age and environmentally-appropriate context for locating the transition to adulthood experiences of young females who chose to leave their civilian lives for military service. Literature examining the nature and consequences of Role Entries and Exits helped to understand how individuals negotiate role and lifestyle transitions, including exits from hierarchically structured environments. Research

on Disability Theory helped to provide a context for better understanding the ramifications of having a disability, including their effects upon self-conception, as well as their impacts upon a person's work, education, and social life roles. And, research and studies related to the particular transition experiences of servicemembers helped to provide a veteran-specific context for lifecourse, disability and role transition theories. Because these constructs had to be applied particularly to the life experiences of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities, literature review was also conducted on the demographics, challenges and characteristics of Post-911 female servicemembers. This literature review in answering the questions: "who are these individuals"? and "what do we know about their experiences both within; and transitioning from the military?" Literature on the Post-911 female demographic also helped to ground the research within the study respondents' age cohort and frame insights about their transition to adulthood.

The interrelationship of lifecourse, disability, and role/exit research, contextualized by their relevance to the military to civilian transition experiences of Post-911, young, female veterans with service-related disabilities is illustrated below.

**Figure 1.**  
**The interrelationship of lifecourse, disability, and role/exit research**



The narratives of young, female veterans participating in this study helped to clarify the challenges inherent in the transition from a military lifestyle, where daily activities were predominately proscribed, structured and hierarchical, back into civilian life situations where ambiguity and autonomy can be the norm (Furstenberg, 2010). Their narratives validate research by Goffman (1961), Ebaugh (1988), Junger (2016), Fouqualt (1979) and others about the difficulties that people leaving a total institution can have in acclimating to lives in open society. How service-related disabilities affect their transition and their success in attaining the major life-course markers associated with the transition to adulthood, including completion of education, first full-time job, marriage, and birth of children is another prominent component of this research. Their stories also shed light on the ambiguities that can be experienced relative to self-conceptions of 'who they were; who they are now; and where do they belong?' that Smith & True (2014) and others reference in their research. Questions like these are essentially rooted in theories of identity and belonging. Consequently, the literature review also explored how identity

and belonging theories can help to clarify how young, female veterans are negotiating post-military life role changes. The relationship of the literature review domains to the research is illustrated below.

**Table 1.**  
**Literature Review Relationships**

| Literature Review              | Relevance to the Research  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Life Course Perspective</b> | Frames the transition experiences of Post-911 female veterans with service-connected disability within the dynamics of familial, environmental, sociological, and economic conditions, and factors related to disability that are encountered by young people as they transition to adulthood. Helps to explore whether and how military service and disability are viewed in relation to expected life-course trajectories and the transition to adulthood. |
| <b>Role /Exit Theory</b>       | Provides the theoretical basis for understanding how people transition from environments and roles, and how exits shape expectations and the material aspects of transition. Gives attention to the experiences of young adult females making these transitions and  |

|                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
|                                       | the influences of the military institution upon their resumption of civilian life roles.  |
| <b>Post-911 Female Servicemembers</b> | Contextualizes the transition experiences of young adult female veterans with service-connected disabilities by helping to understand how their cohort experiences the military and the influences that it may have upon individual agency, self-perceptions, expectations, and goals. Provides information about veteran identity and its relationship to the transferability of skills.   |
| <b>Disability Theory</b>              | Explores how 'disability' is nuanced in both medical and social contexts with implications for how service-connected disabilities affect the transition to adulthood in the civilian sector among young adult female veterans. Explores how the negotiation of disabilities in civilian life roles is influenced by the military experience. Explores the potential disjuncture between theories of disability and their relevance to the needs of young female veterans with service-connected |



|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | disabilities and the sociological effects of having a disability label.   |
| <b>Theories of Identity and Belonging</b> | The process of military acculturation is intended to divest the recruit of their civilian identity and replace it with a military identity. That entails not only displacement of norms, associative factors and expectations, but instilling in recruits that they 'belong to' the military. The Military Ethos and the embedded veneration of its symbols and icons; its enforcement of codes and rules of behavior, and; its demands for unit cohesion and submission to hierarchical authority are well within the parameters exercised by other total institutions. It is important to understand how veterans negotiate their relationship with military identity and belonging in their return to civilian life. |

Three primary literature search engines were used for this study and are provided in Table 2, below.

**Table 2.**  
**Literature Search Engine Composite**

| Search Engine | Background |
|---------------|------------|
|---------------|------------|

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Journal Storage (JSTOR)</b>     | JSTOR contains more than 1,400 journal titles in more than 50 disciplines, providing digitized back issues, including books, primary sources, and current issues of journals. This has been my go-to resource for obtaining print copies of articles and publications in the management sciences.  |
| <b>Google Scholar</b>              | Google Scholar searches across many scholarly disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, and universities with non-scholarly results filtered out. Some of these scholarly results include free full text and many more are available for free to COM students, faculty and staff.  |
| <b>Syracuse University Library</b> | Online search tools generated publications, including journal articles, that were referenced for this study. Syracuse University also offers SURFACE (the Syracuse University Research Facility and Collaborative Environment). SURFACE is a full-text, multi-media online database that provides open access to the extensive and diverse array of scholarly, professional, scientific and creative output produced at Syracuse University. |

A constellation of key search terms was developed and utilized from across the theoretical constructs related to the lifecourse and transition to adulthood, disability, role exits and transitions, and identity and belonging to aid in conducting the literature review. Studies and reports were mined for information to ground the experiences of study participants within the context of female (and male) veterans who serve in the Post-911 era. The literature review was limited predominately to the last 30 years, although literature on the military as an institution and its norms and culture utilized historical sources. Representative key terms under these broad headings are provided in Table 3. These key terms were used individually as well as grouped together to form new search criteria and sub-searches were employed specific to female veterans.

**Table 3.**  
**Literature Search Criteria**

| Core Theoretical Foundations: Broad Categories and Key Terms   |   |  | Theoretical Augmentation  |
|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Life Course Perspective</i>   | <i>Role/Exit Theory</i>   | <i>Disability Theory</i>   | <i>Identity and Belonging Theories</i>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lifecourse</li> <li>- Transition to Adulthood</li> <li>- Turning Points</li> <li>- Timing and Sequencing</li> <li>- Lifecourse Milestones</li> <li>- Military Service and the Lifecourse</li> <li>- Linked lives</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Military-civilian transition</li> <li>- Role recovery</li> <li>- Total institutions</li> <li>- Social capital</li> <li>- Crisis and event resolution</li> <li>- Preparation for exit</li> <li>- Ambivalence about exits and entries</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disability identity</li> <li>- Stigma</li> <li>- Social determinants of disability</li> <li>- Recovery paradigm</li> <li>- Treatment seeking behaviors</li> <li>- Access and use of therapies and supports</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Warrior identity</li> <li>- Unit cohesion</li> <li>- Veteran peer-peer</li> <li>- Military family</li> <li>- Commitment to service</li> <li>- Loss of self</li> <li>- Military culture</li> <li>- Quality of life</li> <li>- Identity conflict</li> <li>- Military/civilian gap</li> </ul> |

The literature review was conducted prior to, and during the process of obtaining participant data. It includes empirical studies, reports and theoretical papers that provide a context for understanding the factors influencing successful military to civilian transition among young female veterans. Significant literature review was also conducted to understand the Post-911 veteran demographic, and in particular, challenges faced by these veterans, including females, in re-acclimating to civilian life. Establishing a base of knowledge about why female veterans enlist, their military and post-military life experiences, and the impacts of service-related disabilities, allows the creation of corroboratory or counterfactual information gleaned from individual narratives to analyze these factors using the lens of research on the life course.

#### **1.D. Purpose and Research Questions**

Several critical questions that are central to the life course perspective guided this inquiry: a) What do young adults experience as they transition to adulthood in contemporary society, and how might these experiences contrast with those of earlier generations? b) How

does the military experience, including its requirements for civilian deindividuation, prepare or inhibit women's successful transition into civilian life roles, where individuation is the norm? c) In what ways does having a disability affect the ability of women to re-assimilate successfully into civilian social, work and living roles? d) What can be learned about the way that some female veterans view their military experience with ambivalence, including military training that might prepare them emotionally, physically and intellectually for civilian life demands, while at the same time contributing to challenges in each of these areas that their civilian peers may not experience? These questions informed the development of the questions and probes that were used in the interviews. And, as often occurs in qualitative research, the synthesis of the theoretical literature and obtained testimony over the development of this study led to the formation of new questions that are important in understanding how the salient elements of each aforementioned theoretical construct correlate in a dynamic way when they are contextualized by lived experiences.

- **Research Question #1:** *'Does military service represent 'off-time' or 'on time' transition to adulthood among female veterans?'*
- **Research Question #2:** *'How does military service affect female veteran transition to civilian life?'*
- **Research Question #3:** *'How do service-related disabilities impact female veteran transition to adulthood and military to civilian transition?'*

Although these questions are discussed in greater detail in Section 4, they may also serve as 'markers' for future researchers to explore; that in some respects might add to the potential significance of this study.

### **1.E. Statement of Potential Significance**

While this study endeavors to fill gaps in the research related to life course transitions among young, female veterans with service-related disabilities, adding to the research canon is only one aspect of the purpose and significance of this study. As those participating in the study expressed, there are significant gaps and shortcomings in how female servicemembers are acknowledged and supported to achieve their military missions while in uniform and an equally strong need for military policymakers, employers, family members, educators and others to support their transition back into civilian life and help them achieve their post-military life goals. Participants were very vocal about what needs to be done in the future to address these gaps and needs. Consequently, the potential significance of this study is to engage more female veterans in dialogues about the services and supports they need in their military and post-military lives. Consistent with the slogan adopted worldwide by the mental health consumer movement – *“Nothing about us without us”* - the best sources of information for improving the lives of young, female veterans are those veterans, themselves, that this reflected in this study.

### **1.F. Summary of the Methodology**

The methodology used in this study is described in greater detail in Section 3. However, a brief summary describing the evolution of this study sets the stage for the descriptions contained in the sections to follow. This study privileges the narratives provided by female veterans who fit the research criteria and, as originally proposed, would include an initial focus

group to test and refine the interview questions, followed by semi-structured telephone interviews. From its inception, the study anticipated gathering data using a convenience sample that would generate responses from individuals who were female veterans, and:

1) Nationally dispersed, in order to provide representation from as many states as possible. The study methodology initially intended to recruit participants through VA hospitals located in New York, Florida, Texas, and California that were states with the highest VA – reported number of female veterans. When challenges in recruiting through the VA were encountered that were sufficiently significant and resulted in a change in recruitment methods, participants were reached through national veterans’ organizations and a Syracuse-area Community College. These revised methods were successful in recruiting a geographically diverse group of participants and fulfilled the minimum number of participants specified in the proposal.

2) Veterans who had separated from active duty in any branch of service within three years<sup>3</sup>. This selection criterion was intended to help answer the question about whether or not these veterans were having a harder or easier time of military to civilian transition during the earlier, or later months and years after separation from military service. By not designating a particular branch of service, the methodology intended to achieve a dispersion across the armed forces and elicit themes related to female servicemember experiences that might be

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<sup>3</sup> One veteran who did not meet the age criteria had served in the National Guard, however her unit was placed on active status and she had multiple deployments to the Middle East.

attributable specifically to the culture and structure of any particular branch. The study sample was nationally dispersed and representative of all branches, except the Marine Corps.

3. Young veterans, ages 18-32, with a service-related disability<sup>4</sup>. The use of the term 'service-related disability', rather than the more commonly used 'service-connected disability' was deliberate and intended to achieve two purposes. First-not all traumas experienced by female veterans, particularly those related to MST, or mental health disabilities may be disclosed, and result in a VA determination on the percent of disability compensation that they were granted. Second; some disabilities, including mental health-related, or substance-abuse disabilities; may manifest themselves over time. In these cases, the cause of these disabilities may be service-related, but only materialize and affect daily living in conjunction with other life circumstances that may exacerbate their symptoms (unemployment, divorce, etc.). Use of the 'service-related disability' term allowed for the potential that some respondents would provide more generous accounts of the effects of any disability that they deemed service-related, on their lives.

### **1.F.1 Human Subjects and Ethical issues.**

All participants were formally consented, and their signed consents were returned via scanned attachment and are filed securely on my password-protected computer. As a further protection, the consent form was reviewed before the start of each interview session and

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<sup>4</sup> Three of the veterans interviewed for this study were later determined to exceed the 18-32 age criteria based upon the number of years that they served in the military and their data could not be entered into the analysis.

participants were asked if they had any questions; if they still wanted to participate, and still agreed to be recorded.

Although no ethical challenges were encountered during the course of the study, one issue related to participants' discussion of their disabilities was considered and required sensitivity in the way that questions related to the topic were asked. Participants were never asked directly about their types of disability, nor the circumstances under which they were acquired. Instead, questions were asked related to the impacts that are related to their disabilities that they experience. They were also asked whether or not they felt that their disabilities resulted in new sources of strength, or if they interfered in any way with their life goals. Some were forthcoming about both their types of disabilities and the circumstances under which they were acquired. Others made allusions to mental-health-related disabilities, but never actually described them in detail. These narratives led the researcher to surmise that traumas related to MST and/or PTSD were the primary disabilities that they experienced, that was later confirmed by the interviews. This circumspect approach to the disability question was appreciated by respondents, and more than one participant expressed her appreciation that more direct questions about their disability were not used.

### **1.G. Research Limitations**

As discussed in greater detail in Section 3, recruitment of participants meeting all of the study criteria proved to be extremely challenging. The original plan was to convene an initial focus group of 4-6 participants to refine study questions and a discussion of the validity of focus



groups for qualitative research is contained in the Methodology Section. However, despite numerous attempts, the initial focus group recruitment yielded no respondents. The Institutional Review Board target for recruitment of semi-structured interviews was between 15-25 participants and recruitment through multiple sources resulted in responses from the minimum threshold of 15 participants, of which 12 were found to meet the criteria that allowed their data to be analyzed, after their interviews were conducted. Finally, although an attempt during the final push for study participants was made to conduct a confirmatory focus group, only one respondent indicated that she would agree to join a focus group but opted as well as to be interviewed. Consequently, although powerful narratives were collected and analyzed that support the conclusions of this study, the research might have benefitted by recruiting a larger number of interview participants.

Although not a study limitation per se since it represents a core focus of inquiry for this research, the criteria that participants had separated from active duty during the past three years potentially resulted in a smaller response rate. Since we hypothesize that veterans' experiences during the early months and years of separation from active duty are important considerations to explore, future studies, perhaps using national survey methodologies may yield greater numbers of respondents.

### **1.H. Subjectivities Statement**

I have over 38 years of experience in both the public and private sectors in the project's topical areas of focus. These experiences have provided me with an appreciation of the

transition challenges faced by veterans with service-related disabilities. Most of my career has focused upon the development of improved practices supporting community inclusion for people with diverse disabilities, especially those with mental illnesses and those who are/have been homeless, including veterans. My practical knowledge and commitment to ensuring the rights of people with disabilities helps me to better interpret the stories of military to civilian transition that female veterans with service-related disabilities provide through individual interviews. I have led state and national mental health, veterans, employment, and entrepreneurship development projects, and I have authored numerous publications and articles on these topics. These projects have provided experience using interviewing techniques and in working with veterans with service-related disabilities in community-based programs, the VA, homeless shelters, and elsewhere. I have a strong background in the effects of hidden disabilities upon life role conception and their effects upon individual identity, and in the correlates of recovery from mental health disabilities.

Understanding how to work with female veterans who have experienced psychological stressors and the ability to develop trust and create rapport is an emerging area of concern to practitioners and researchers (Ghahramanlou-Holloway, et. al., 2011). Female veterans often articulate their difficulties in establishing their comfort in seeking services from predominately male-dominated VA and private services systems (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Syracuse University, 2013). I am not a military veteran. However, my direct work with veterans with disabilities, including those experiencing homelessness, my contributions to the literature, and my family's strong record of military service in World Wars I and II and thereafter, contribute to my understanding of, and sensitivity to the military experience. My training as a researcher in

the social sciences tradition, with a focus on narrative techniques helps me to focus on listening as well as posing questions. Creating a foundation of trust and rapport and judiciously sharing my experiences working with female and male veterans helped to create as comfortable an environment as possible for them to share their stories.

### **1.1. Key Definitions**

Although most of the terms used in this study are introduced or explained in their contexts, there are a number of terms that require specific explanation to ground their use throughout the research.

1. Service-related disability: Any type of disability, either compensated through the VA, or otherwise that the participant states were acquired directly as a result of their military service. Using this generous definition of disability, study participants disclosed injuries that were both physical and psychological. Possession of a VA disability rating was not a requirement of participation and consequently, questions about per cent disability ratings were not asked during interviews.
2. Separation from active duty: A voluntary or forced separation from active duty in any branch of service, either at the end of their formal enlistment, or prior to the date at which their enlistment would end.
3. Post-911: Military service in the U.S. Armed Forces experienced subsequent to the attacks on the United States that occurred on September 11, 2001.

4. Lifecourse milestones: These are any or all of the milestones corroborated through research, whose (predominately sequential) achievement might constitute evidence of a transition to adulthood (completion of education; full-time job; marriage, and family).

5. Total institution: Goffman (1961) defined a total institution is a 'place in which people are cut off from the rest of society and where they come under almost total control of the officials who are in charge'<sup>5</sup>. Other social science researchers including Fouqualt and Smith and True (2014) include the military establishment within the definition of total institution.

6. Transition: In its more generous sense, meaning an *intrinsic* transition (e.g. change in mindset, self-conception, lifecourse decisions, psychologically accepting or denying a disability, etc. that can sometimes result in lifecourse turning points), and; *extrinsic* transition (e.g. change of environment, or situation that can include role exits and entries including exiting civilian life for the military; leaving active duty for civilian life; entering school or career environments and interacting with a predominately non-military peer cohort, etc.).

7. Life Role: These are the life endeavors related to worker, student, parent, sibling, friend, or other endeavor or interpersonal associations that individuals enter into, exit and fulfill or not fulfill, across their life course trajectory. Role and role recovery concepts are particularly prevalent in mental health/psychiatric rehabilitation research (Anthony, 1993; Anthony, Rogers & Farkas, 2003), where the effects of reclaiming independent, community-

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/socio-short-notes/total-institution.php>

based life roles after time spent in a total institution, or other segregated mental health programs are examined.

## **2: Literature Review**

### **2.A. Introduction**

This section frames the theoretical basis of this study with a discussion of the concepts of the Life Course Perspective, Disability Theory, and Role/Exit Theory. These theoretical frameworks and their interrelationships are relevant to examining and better understanding the factors influencing transition to adulthood and military to civilian transition among young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities. They are also important for understanding how participants navigate their way through social, educational and work environments within and beyond the limitations of their disabilities. Interrelating these theories lays the foundation for understanding both the personal and societal factors that impact upon the success of young female veterans with service-related disabilities in overcoming a range of physical, psychological and co-occurring disabilities in their civilian lives.

Correlating these three theoretical frameworks and drawing inferences about their combined relevance to the lives of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities also helps to create the basis for a new grounded theory emerging from the data that was collected during the research that is discussed in greater detail in Section 4. Framing the theoretical basis for the study in life course progression and the dynamics of role acquisition and exit; influenced by the experience of disability, helps to locate how veterans conceptualize and address the role

dichotomies that they may experience in their transition from military to civilian life. Identity and sense of belonging are factors that are components of lifecourse research. Data obtained during this study underscored the relevance of the intrinsic aspects of *identity negotiation* and the extrinsic/environmental factors of *belonging*, in establishing a better appreciation of the complexities associated with young, female veterans' transition to adulthood and military to civilian transition. Research corroborates that, as servicemembers leave military life and re-engage in civilian life, they must manage their dual military and civilian identities (Smith & True, 2014; Gade & Wilkins, 2013) and negotiate an often dichotomous and contradictory belonging to military as well as civilian environments and associations (Gade & Wilkins, 2013; Tick, 2005; Junger, 2016).

Viewing these theories through the lens of their interrelationships and synergies may help to better explain how these veterans are simultaneously dealing with their transition to adulthood, impacts of disability, and the anomalies and dichotomies associated with exiting their daily lives as serving military members and re-entering civilian life; while retaining strong associations with the military. The effects of these military to civilian life role transitions is further amplified by a discussion of the various turning points along the way that can enhance or disrupt their chosen life paths and affect their lives in either positive or negative ways. The discussion of transitions and turning points referenced in this paper also includes a draft theoretical model that illustrates how these factors can influence a young veteran's life experiences (Figure 2). Understanding the interrelatedness of transitions and turning points as important life course dynamics can also foreground an appreciation of the range of cumulative

factors that could contribute to later life disadvantage or inequality in the veteran life course (London, Heflin & Wilmoth, 2011; Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld, 1987; Dannefer, 2003).

In order to explore and articulate a synthesis of these three theoretical constructs and their importance to the grounded theory emerging from this research, and to better understand the life course experiences of participants interviewed for the study, it is first necessary to describe each theory's essential concepts, as below.

## **2.B. Literature Review: Life Course Perspective Essential Concepts**

This Section discusses what we know about the transition to adulthood in the United States and about how military service experiences might influence that transition. A brief recap of some of the major components of lifecourse perspective research provides a contextual framework to discuss what we know about the military experiences of young adults, and particularly those of young, female servicemembers, where that data exists. It proceeds from this general orientation to one that is more specific; the research relevant to transition to adulthood and factors to be considered that impact upon the life-course trajectories of young adults that have served in the United States Military. While referencing the extant literature on young veteran transition to adulthood, the purpose of this study is to mine data that specifically address the issue from the perspective of young, female veterans, to either confirm or provide counterfactual evidence that more research is needed on the military to civilian transition experiences of this veteran demographic.

For example, although transitions and turning points are considered as salient events across a person's life course trajectory (Elder, 1985), little has been established to date that contextualizes the life course of young, female veterans; particularly those with service-related disabilities, within this framework. Similarly, Cumulative Disadvantage across the veteran life course has been researched (Dannefer, 2003; London, Heflin & Wilmoth, 2011), including recent research that considers disability, sex differentiation and the short, and long-term consequences of military service (Wilmoth, London & Parker, 2011). However, researchers acknowledge that more life course analyses are needed to more fully comprehend how service-related disabilities may differentially affect female veterans over the lifecourse (IBID, pg. 333).

Examining the life course perspective as a focus of sociological research is a recent development (Elder et.al., 2003). The evolution of life course inquiry can be viewed as occurring in two phases (Elder, 1985). The first era prior to 1940 is characterized by the influences of the Chicago School of sociology as researchers began to use life records to study social change and individual trajectories (Elder, 1985. Pg. 24). Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century social sciences researchers did not address understanding the myriad societal, economic, historic and cultural influences on the life course of individuals. Nor did they consider the effects of time and place and how these forces affected individual decision-making and consequent life course trajectories over time. However, the pre-1940 era was important for establishing the robust life course research that would evolve during the 1960s, particularly the seminal study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920) by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. W.I. Thomas argued in the mid-1920s that it was necessary to study many types of individuals, across many years of their



lives to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how timing, sequencing of events and individual experiences affected their lives (IBID).

This research provided a foundation for life course researchers that followed to conduct studies that explored the interrelationships of these factors and their effects upon individuals' life course trajectories. Rather than isolated studies constricted by time and within certain study demographics, Thomas opened the way to research that extended across and within age cohorts conducted over time and events. Research on the life course provides a synthetic process for understanding social pathways of individuals and the normative sequence of salient life events (Hogan (1981). Hogan offered a model of the life course in his research on 20<sup>th</sup> Century men that described their life course trajectories as an orderly sequence of milestones; completion of education, first job, marriage and parenthood. Significant for the present study of young veterans and their life course trajectories, he also discussed how military service affected sequential life course milestone achievement. Hogan argued that completion of education and marriage among men who had experienced military service were both off-sequence and delayed when compared to non-military-serving males in the cohorts that he studied (pg.64). While Hogan did not examine normative and off-normative life role attainment among women, or even among women veterans, he did establish that military service could have a disruptive effect upon normative life role sequencing.

More recently, research on the life course has studied how normative progression and the timing of transitions is challenged by perceptions, social and economic circumstances, and that off-course milestone attainment among young adults over the past decade is more the rule rather than the exception (Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld, 1987). The major life-course

markers of completing school, obtaining full-time employment, marriage, and starting a family that in prior decades were sequential milestones to be achieved in order to be termed 'adult', are now being seen as life choices rather than requirements (Hogan, 1981; Settersen & Ray, 2010).

Five principles are at the core of the life course perspective and are important to consider in understanding how young veterans are experiencing their transition to adulthood after separation from active duty (Elder, 2003, pp. 11-13; Wilmoth & London, 2013, pp 4-6):

- 1) **Lifelong Development** represents how the process of the life course unfolds over time and is an extension of earlier researchers' interests in exploring the temporal factors affects life course trajectories;
- 2) **Human Agency** recognizes that while life events may be experienced with similarity within age cohorts, how individuals within those cohorts make choices in their lives affecting their reaction to, accommodation and/or resistance to life course events, also individualizes their life course experiences;
- 3) **Location in Time and Place** embeds lives in both a historical period and specific geographical locations characterized by the transitions, events, and value interpretations inherent to each domain;
- 4) **Timing** is a relevant factor when considering how age and transitions occur in relationship to other events and transitions experienced within an age cohort; and
- 5) **Linked Lives** underscores that lives are not generally lived in isolation and that life courses can be affected by social relationships and the interdependence of lives.

Timing and sequencing are essential features of the transition to adulthood and the life course perspective (Furstenberg, Jr., 2010; Hogan, 1981; Wilmoth & London, 2013). Timing is an important element in the process of recovery from the impact of disabilities, including mental health-related disabilities (Deegan, 1987). When role exits, and entries occur in a person's life and how timing of these transitions affect a person's success and acclimation to future roles is explored as well in discussions of Role/Exit Theory (Ebaugh, 1998, Schlossberg, 1981).

Transitions experienced by young adults include factors related to the generation of income and assets; that contribute to achievement of Hogan's life course markers of full-time employment and establishing a family. Understanding the complexities that young, female veterans with service-related disabilities may experience in resuming civilian life roles also means grounding the analysis in theories that explore how individuals acquire advantages and disadvantages over their lives. These factors that may contribute to lifecourse family economic disadvantages as a consequence of service-related disabilities is foregrounded by research on Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage (CAD) Theory (Dannefer, 2003; Wilmoth, London & Heflin, 2015), and Cumulative Inequality (CI) Theory (Ferraro, Pylypiv Shippee, 2009). CAD theory can be defined as *"the systemic tendency for interindividual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g., money, health, or status) with the passage of time"* (Dannefer, 2003, pg. S327). The relevance of CAD to the study of the effects of military service over the female veteran lifecourse is in hypothesizing the factors that either contribute to; or mitigate against the lifecourse advantages that servicemembers may have as a result of military training, and whether these are reduced or negated by the service-related disabilities they incur. CI theory *"specifies that social systems generate inequality, which is manifested over the life course via*

*demographic and developmental processes, and that personal trajectories are shaped by the accumulation of risk, available resources, perceived trajectories, and human agency*” (Ferraro, Shippee, & Schafer, 2008, pg. 334). CI privileges considerations of the availability or non-availability of social and economic supports in young veterans’ post-military lives, and the extent to which military service may have affected their ability to exercise individual agency in negotiating their way through a more discontinuous, and less orderly and predictable civilian world (Furstenberg Jr., 2010, Furstenberg Jr., Rumbaut & Settersten, 2005).

Although a longitudinal analysis of the economic and social effects of military service and whether or not they were consequential over the lives of female veterans with service-related disabilities is beyond the scope of this research, Ferraro, Shippee, & Schafer’s definition of CI, if considered generously, can be relevant in some respects to the testimonies offered by study participants, particularly to the principle that *“specifies that social systems generate inequality, which is manifested over the life course via demographic and developmental processes”*. The research sought to uncover, and participants confirmed, how the military can be an unequal form of society where females are often treated as less than their male comrades, no matter their accomplishments. Understanding whether or not female veterans experience inequalities in the civilian workplace and other environments after they experienced military service inequalities helps to frame questions about how well military service prepares them for success as young adults transitioning back into civilian life.

What we know about the transition to adulthood in the United States: Transition to adulthood ‘implies the existence of a social idea of what it means to be an adult’ (Arnett, 1997, pg.3). This definition helps to underscore that conceptions on what it means to be an adult are

not only based upon how it is interpreted by young adults in their personal experiences, but also the factors that society characterizes as necessary for adulthood. The traditional schedule for coming of age and the sequential milestones that individuals and societies have considered as necessary to be termed 'adult', have undergone consequential shifts over the past century (Berlin, Furstenberg Jr., & Waters, 2010). Today, young people are taking a longer time achieving social and psychological independence compared to previous generations (Settersen & Ray, 2010). The major life-course markers of completing school, obtaining full-time employment, marriage, and starting a family that in prior decades were sequential milestones to be achieved in order to be termed 'adult', are now being seen as life choices rather than requirements (Hogan, 1981; Settersen & Ray, 2010). The road to adulthood in the present era can be characterized as more discontinuous, more open to individual choice and decision-making, more protracted, and less orderly and predictable (Furstenberg Jr., 2010). Rather than sequential attainment of an orderly set of markers that were associated with adulthood (Hogan, 1981), young people regard their transition to adulthood as more of a process of personal growth, achievement, and discovery that extends across the life course in an ongoing, dynamic process (Hartmann & Toguchi Swartz, 2006). The questions arise: 'What has compelled the shifts that we are seeing in the schedule for coming of age in the modern era?'; and; 'What do we know about the transition to adulthood among young veterans, particularly among young female veterans?' A number of factors combine to prolong and skew the schedule of coming of age in the United States and in other industrialized countries. Furstenberg, Jr. (2010) and Berlin, Furstenberg Jr., & Waters (2010), among others notes these as below:

- The increased access to higher education has had a prolonging effect on young people leaving home and starting careers: With the boom in educational opportunities in the late 1950s, coupled with the decline in unskilled, semi-skilled, but well-paying jobs by the 1960s, young people found it more economically advantageous to continue in education, in hopes of increasing their ability to compete for jobs that increasingly required post-secondary degrees (Berlin, Furstenberg Jr., & Waters, 2010). A number of veterans interviewed for this study had either completed a college degree, or some years of college, when they decided to enlist in the military, and many study participants have re-enrolled since their separation from active duty.
- Increased gender equality has contributed to young peoples' decision about when to leave home and start families: For women, increased access to, and completion of education and subsequent growth in employment opportunities contributes to later-life decisions to start a family (Furstenberg, Jr., 2010). As gender equality across many life spheres has increased, both young men and women are waiting a longer time to marry and have children. Some veterans in this study were married and had children when they enlisted, and most offered that they were not living in their natal home when they chose to join. However, current statistics indicate that young, female veterans have higher unemployment rates than male veterans, and their non-veteran female peers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), suggesting that gender equality, at least in the workplace, is still not achieved by female veterans.

- Lengthening of the life span: As people live longer, the timetable for achieving the expected milestones associated with adulthood of education, first marriage, first full-time job, and first child (Hogan, 1981) can be lengthened based upon a person's personal choice. The protracted pace to achieve traditional milestones is also consonant with society's endorsement of continuous goal development and lifelong learning principles, that situate this dynamic within accepted societal norms. Yet, most participants in the study did not express that serving in the military was a disruption in the sequence of lifecourse milestones, making their achievement either 'on, or off-time'. They portrayed, in fact, that they are pursuing their life course trajectories 'on their own time schedule'.
- The effects of changes in the sequence of factors ascribed to coming of age is being experienced across social and economic classes: Although young people are generally leaving home at a later age, a number of socio-economic factors combine to compel young people from low-income households to remain at home for longer periods of time (Berlin, Furstenberg Jr., & Waters, 2010). Approximately half of all young women from lower-income households in their late teens and early twenties become pregnant (IBID) and cannot afford to leave the natal home, particularly if they are single parents, or marriages dissolve within a short time period. Among the consequences of early, single parenthood are reduced opportunities to continue in education and achieve a

more independent life. 'In short, young adults without resources find it difficult to attain independence on the traditional (early) schedule, while those with ample family support spend more time gaining the necessary credentials to become economically self-sufficient' (IBID, pg. 72). The experiences of study participants in this research generally conformed with these principles. A number of them decided to join the military for financial reasons, including getting a good paying job, and especially one that included the military's generous health insurance.

- Factors that lengthen the coming of age schedule are particularly felt by young people that are involved in social and judicial systems: Continued adult guidance along an increasingly complex pathway to adulthood is necessary to enhance life success (Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010). Deficiencies in the supportive services provided by social services agencies, including foster care, disability programs, and correctional institutions that serve young adults make it much more difficult for them to get a college education, well-paying job, and succeed in marriage (IBID, pg. 212). Consequently, these vulnerable populations experience particular problems associated with their lengthening transition to adulthood that may not be experienced by their peers in the general population who may have more ready access to family financial support for education, first homes, careers and families.

## **Relevance to the Research**



In his study of transitions and social change experienced by American men, Hogan (1981) discussed how military service can affect sequential life course milestone achievement. He argued that completion of education and marriage among men who had experienced military service were both off-sequence and delayed when compared to non-military-serving males in the cohorts that he studied (pg.64). While Hogan did not examine normative and off-normative life role attainment among women, or even among women veterans, he did establish that military service could have a disruptive effect upon normative life role sequencing. However, recent research that substantiates the variability in the sequence of attaining traditional lifecourse markers as a 'new normal' present an alternate view of the transition to adulthood dynamic (Settersen & Ray, 2010; Furstenberg, Jr., 2010) in considering the sequencing of lifecourse events among young adults who have served in the military.

Veteran life course trajectories are essentially social pathways that are impacted by the various transitions and turning points that they experience over the length of their lives (Elder, 1985). Transitions and turning points within a life sphere are not isolated events but are connected to other aspects of a person's family and non-family life (Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld, 1987). Life course transitions are linked to changes in life roles. Schlossberg offers that *"Transitions alter our lives—our roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. . . . It is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it changes one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. The bigger the change, the greater the potential impact and the longer it may take to incorporate the transition and move on"* (Schlossberg, 2004, pp. 3–4).

The impact of transitions and turning points, and female veterans' perspectives on their cumulative effects, correlate well with theories of Role Exits and Transitions discussed in the section below because they contextualize events within a progression of life roles that people can experience over the course of their lives. The point in their lives when military service was entered and exited becomes a life and role transition event that can produce advantages, disadvantages, or mixed benefits over the life course (McLean & Elder, 2007). However, the decision to enter military service could also reflect a turning point as well in a young female's life; when she made the decision to change her circumstances in potentially positive ways. These may include the decision to choose military service in order to escape economic disadvantage, abusive relationships, or if she experienced chronic underemployment or unemployment (Pew Research Center, 2011). Or, it may represent a decision based upon a person's intrinsic and family values, as expressed by many study participants who chose to enlist because they either valued what the military lifestyle offered; or had family members who had served.

Elder and colleagues offered insight into the relevance of trajectories, transitions and turning points to the life course perspective as below (Elder, pg. 8). Notes are included on the relevance of these perspectives to the lives of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities:

1. **Social pathways are trajectories of work, education, family and residences that are followed by individuals and groups through society.** Understanding how a young, female veteran's life course trajectory is linked to the lives of others in her age cohort who did or did not serve has implications for the range of social support and tangible

resources, and development of social capital needed to re-acclimate to civilian life roles. In this context, linked lives concepts bear relevance to the importance of veteran peer-to-peer support that has proven effective in helping veterans overcome their challenges, including those related to disability, education and work (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Borah & Manser, 2017; O'Brien-Mazza, White, & Harris, 2013). Although the value of veteran peer-peer relationships is well substantiated, the fact that so few females serve when compared to males, may limit the availability of female veteran peer mentors. Testimonies from a number of study participants also suggest that the female peer-male peer dynamic can be nuanced and problematic, particularly if she has experienced MST, and that not all chose to seek out other veterans of either gender when they need support.

## 2. **Trajectories or sequences of roles are made up of transitions that are changes**

**between roles.** Military service is an example of consequential role transition with potentially lifelong consequences for young adults (Elder, 2003, pg.8; MacLean & Elder, 2007; Call & Teachman, 1991; Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010; Heflin, Wilmoth & London, 2012). Enlistees experience the transition from a young, civilian adult who may not yet have left the natal home, to a servicemember whose 'home' is the military, and back (or back and forth again if they serve in the Guard or Reserves), to civilian life roles. Yet, some young veterans in the study left college for the military or enlisted after they were married or cohabitating. Their transitions were often characterized as more complex, especially if enlisting meant leaving a child at home with their spouse or

quitting a job. Their range of role transitions appears to substantiate the complexities of life course transitions that Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld (1987) offer.

3. **Turning points involve a substantial change in one's life that exerts either subjective or objective influences upon a person's life course.** Turning points are embedded in transitions and people can experience numerous events in their lives that are consequential turning points (Elder, 1985). After passing enlistment screening tests, and throughout a servicemember's active duty where they must perform to standards both physically and psychologically, a war wound that limits functionality and military career can be a significant life-altering turning point. Functional and disability effects upon the veteran lifecourse can result in future economic and personal hardship (Heflin, Wilmoth & London, 2012; Wilmoth, London & Parker, 2010) and can potentially alter veterans' identities and actions from those of able warrior to disabled person (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). Precipitous events, like homelessness or divorce are examples of potential turning points in a veteran's life and are experienced by female veterans of the present era in significant numbers (Washington, et. al., 2010; Gamache, Rosenheck, & Tessler, 2003; Disabled American Veterans, 2014, Tsai, et. al., 2012). A number of study participants described their challenges with identity and belonging, as they struggled with leaving the certainties of aspects of daily living that the military provides for the uncertainties that can characterize civilian life.

There are reasons to believe that veterans' transition back into civilian life roles are contextualized by historical time (including the eras in which they served), variation in military service experiences (including combat exposure and societal regard for the military), race, class,

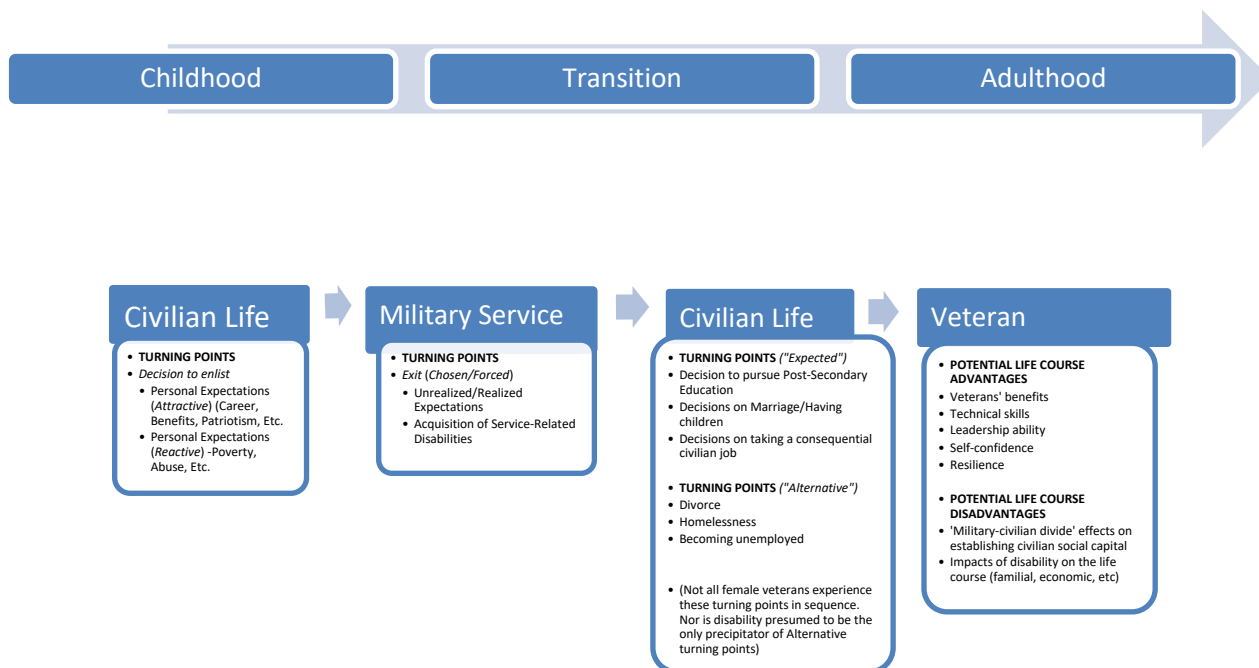
gender, and disability (Clemens & Milsom, 2008; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Green & Van Duesen, 2013). Each of these considerations are addressed within this discussion and presented within the context of considering the dynamics of military to civilian transition and transition to adulthood. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the importance of the study in filling gaps in the research that are particular to understanding the transition experiences of young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities, and the types of questions that this study considered when extracting narrative data based upon study participants' lived experiences.

Examining the cumulative life course advantages and disadvantages of military service was not a focus of this study. Among the 12 participants who met the study criteria, there were no consistent themes expressed related to post-military effects of childhood poverty, effects of living in a single parent family, or childhood sexual molestation as having negative effects upon participants' post-military life courses. They consistently referenced the advantages that military service provides related to positive personal qualities and skills and capabilities that they viewed as contributing to their educational and employment success.

However, a consistent theme did emerge about how difficult it was for them to establish deep associations with civilian peers and subsequently create the social capital needed when they wished to have someone to confide in and support them during the rough patches in their disability recovery. Their narratives suggest that CAD theory, when applied to life course research on military veterans, may also consider the advantages and disadvantages associated with their success, or challenges in establishing strong support for civilian re-acculturation. In

particular, successful social capital development with non-veteran peers as confidants, support networks and even as mentors for civilian re-acclimation might be considered as a factor to be considered in veterans' post military life course advantages and disadvantages, as below.

**Figure 2.**  
**Theoretical Continuum of Military-Related Transitions and Turning Points for Young, Post-911 Female Veterans with Service-Related Disabilities**



Burkhardt and Hogan's research (2012) further grounds this study in prior research on the effects of military service over the life course of female veterans. They conducted interviews with 20 Post-911 female veterans to conceptualize a theory capturing the process of entering into, serving, and leaving military service. Their study provides insights into how young, female veterans are negotiating these life role transitions, the stressors that they faced, and how they are living with the dual identity as veteran-civilian. The researchers offer that there are seven types of transitions that female veterans experience and must negotiate:

*Choosing the Military; Adapting to the Military; Being in the Military; Being a Female in the*

*Military; Departing the Military; Experiencing Stressors of Being a Civilian, and; Making Meaning of Being a Veteran-Civilian*, that are summarized below.

*Choosing the Military:* Reasons for enlistment included seeking opportunities (for education and health care), pursuing adventure (characterized as living life outside of their comfort zone), and seeking safety (either escaping poverty, domestic violence and sexual abuse). Each of these reasons were offered by participants in the present study, however some cited that their sense of duty and service compelled them to enlist, particularly if other family members were veterans.

*Adapting to the Military:* Three particular processes took place after they enlisted: 1) Culture shock at being forced into military regimens of obedience and conformity; 2) Coping with cultural change as they became numb to the experience and submitted to the military regimen in order to succeed, and 3) Becoming a member of the military as they ‘emerged on the other side’ with positive regard for their military instilled values and capabilities and with feelings that they are ‘something bigger than themselves’ (pg. 115). Interestingly, a number of present-study respondents felt that adapting to the military could be easier for females rather than males. Their explanations were diverse. Some offered that as females, they always needed to try harder than males to achieve success and they were accustomed to exerting the extra effort to succeed in the military. Others stated that males entered the military with the burden of needing to be ‘machos’ and ‘heroes’ that got in their way if they had to deal with significant obstacles leading to under-achievement.

*Being in the Military* involved fulfilling their military roles and adhering to the precepts of the Warrior Ethos (Sando, 2004). Being in the military also included a number of stressors

stemming from experiencing the violence of war, making rash decisions and, 'living in the moment' (that for some females meant becoming pregnant or getting married quickly). But other aspects of being in the military were viewed more positively, like acquiring the values of camaraderie and a strong work ethic.

Perhaps these values were among the most complex to sort out and characterize from testimonies in the present study. On the one hand, almost all took great pride in their accomplishments, although many felt that their careers were either ended abruptly and unsatisfactorily by injury, or by consequences of reporting MST. No matter what job they had in the military, or under what circumstances their injuries were sustained, or what significant blows they received to their Ethos-driven confidence in their male comrades when they were the perpetrators of their assaults, all present-study respondents stated that military training and approaching life tasks with a military-based determination and structure were distinct advantages in their civilian lives.

*Being a Female in the Military* was experienced differently among the Burkhardt and Hogan respondents based upon whether or not their assignment contributed to equality or inequality by male servicemembers. Perhaps this was one of the most significant findings of the present study. Gender does matter, and while most study participants stated that what was expected of them in combat and non-combat situations was the same as for male servicemembers, gender inequality was often encountered when they were passed up for promotion by less decorated or qualified males, or when superior officers treated them differently-either dismissively or condescendingly. Interestingly some, but not all, reported that it was actually harder to be commanded by a female rather than a male officer. That was



because they felt that the female officer had to continually show her toughness to be part of the officer community; be wary of competition from other female servicemembers for few positions of authority, or to instill by example that to get ahead in a 'man's military', females needed to be twice as tough.

*Departing the military* was a choice made purposely for most of the veterans in the Burkhardt and Hogan study, where addressing their personal and family needs were determined to be more important than continuing in a military career. After separation, the realization that military and civilian life have very separate mores, routines and values, led some to experience crises of identity. Female veterans offering their testimony for the present study often corroborated those findings. However, service-related disabling injuries, or the determination made by superior officers for forced separation when some respondents chose to litigate their allegations of rape or inappropriate sexual advances, were among the other reasons given for departing the military. More research is needed on the effects of involuntary separation upon the female veteran identity and life role achievement over the lifecourse.

*Making meaning of being a veteran-civilian* includes dealing with role changes, effects on self-perception, and the expectations of others when veterans belong to both a civilian and a veteran community. This is a fertile area for the development of new grounded theory examining the interrelated complexities associated with role change and sense of place in civilian life, that the present study explores. How identity and role dichotomy can be a powerful determinate in the ways that female veterans negotiate the lives that are linked across their civilian lifecourse trajectories is an important, but not well-researched area. This includes how best to understand veterans near unanimous and often unequivocal appreciation

for the training and values that the military instills-even when comparing themselves to their non-veteran peers. But it also means appreciating that military service, including exposure to combat sets them apart from civilians and may make it difficult to relate to them in social and other environments.

Burkhart and Hogan captured insights into the effects of service-related disabilities, particularly those related to MST and PTSD, from female veterans that they interviewed. As they and others note, sustaining a disability can also be an identity-shaping experience (Wendell, 1996; Linton, 1998; Schlossberg, 1995; Tick, 2005, Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011) that can influence a person's self-perceptions of who they are and their place in the world, and also how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1959; Goffman 1961; Pettie & Triolo, 1999; Anthony, 1993; Reicher, 2004; Wendell, 1996). Experiencing disability is therefore, not only a matter of overcoming functional impairments; it is also a struggle to reclaim a healthy identity and preferred life roles in mainstream society. 'The effects of military service also depend upon social ties, as underscored by the principle of linked lives (MacLean & Elder, 2007). Or, as Mezzina and his colleagues (2006) state: *"When asked to describe some of the social factors that aided recovery, many informants talked about the social arenas-work, family life, advocacy groups-in which they felt most welcome and supported"* (Pg. 40).

The next section provides an overview of Disability Theory in order to theoretically ground some of the transition challenges that many female veterans are facing in society and in their civilian life roles as a consequence of service-related disabilities.

## **2.C Literature Review: Disability Theory Essential Concepts**

Four theoretical models of disability frame the discussion of how disability can affect the life course of individuals (Kaplan, 2000). In order of their evolution, these are the Moral Model, the Medical Model, the Rehabilitation Model, and the Disability Model. The Moral Model is historically the oldest model used to explain disability, and while it is not as prevalent today in the United States as it was earlier, some cultures yet characterize disability as both an individual sin and a shame upon the family (Kaplan, 2000). Consequently, the perceptions of disability and the treatment of its conditions were grounded in frameworks that privileged segregation and incarceration in large asylums and sanitariums.

New scientific advancements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the emergence of psychotherapy presaged attempts to discover cures for disabilities, including mental illnesses and is characterized by the Medical Model. It is still in widespread use in the United States and internationally, and privileges medical interventions; delivered in both institutional and community-based settings; and is oriented towards curing the somatic effects of the disability and correcting problematic behaviors that often get in the way of an individual's ability to live in open society. With its emphasis on describing people based upon their diagnoses, the Medical Model contributes to labeling people in ways that also laden them with the stigmas and misconceptions that often characterize popular conceptions of what it means to have a disability (Linton, 2002).

The Rehabilitation Model emerged during the early-mid 1960s as a challenge to the Medical Model, that included a challenge to the historical construction of a disability identity as 'deviant' or 'stained' (Goffman, 1959; 1961). While acknowledging the need for medications, the Rehabilitation Model balances treatment with a stronger emphasis on skills development

and socialization to help individuals achieve as 'normal' a life as possible, in the least restrictive and most integrated settings possible (Anthony, 1993; Kaplan, 2000). The Rehabilitation model still privileges the central role of professionals in the treatment and remediation of skills-related barriers to success in community life, but its hierarchical orientation has been challenged over the past four decades by models; including the Disability Model, that regards disability as a universal attribute inherent in all individuals; and not limited to those carrying a disability label.

The Disability Model was developed in parallel with the Rehabilitation Model and owes much to the advocacy of people with disabilities for their efforts at achieving equality with their non-disabled peers. It is a socially constructed framework that is reflected by the language of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and as amended in 1998 (Wendell, 1996), and the Supreme Court Olmstead Decision (1999), that guaranteed the primacy of services for people with disabilities, preferably delivered in non-segregated settings. The Disability Model acknowledges that disability is a normal aspect of life and rejects the disempowering label of disability. Its precepts align well with the Rehabilitation Model, but it challenges the paradigm of disability privileging medical interventions by arguing that disability is a socially constructed condition. Disability Model proponents argue that people who are 'otherwise labeled' are constrained and constricted by socially-embedded ideologies and challenge the argument that disability is a condition that must be 'fixed' by the medically-oriented systems. The Disability Model recognizes the efficacy of social and environmental adjustments, elimination of discrimination, and increased accommodation, as well as treatment and rehabilitation when directed by the individual, with assistance by professionals when necessary, to overcome and remove barriers to meaningful societal life roles (Kaplan, 2000).

Emerging paradigms of disability like the Disability Model challenge what it means to be 'normal' and seek to counter the negative connotations associated with having a disability. However, in doing so, the underlying premise is that people without disabilities are the norm to which those with disabilities should aspire. Ableist Theory is an example of a theoretical framework that locates the preferred life course trajectories of people with disabilities as on a path towards functional parity with 'normal people': *"Ableism is the system from which forms of disablism, hetero/sexism and racism emanate and has in mind, a "species-typical" human being. This system promotes scientific, therapeutic, and medicalized interventions that maintain the ableist prerogative."* (Goodley, 2012, pg. 22). The foregoing disability theories are joined by others with a different orientation; by understanding disability through confronting the limits of the ways we understand human diversity, the materiality of the body, multiculturalism, and the social formations that interpret bodily differences (Linton, 2002) and feminist theorists who examine interpretations of what it means to be a woman who is deemed 'disabled' in contemporary society (Wendell, 1996). Goodley (pg. 43) also offers that concurrent theoretical orientations like 'Crip Theory', reject the notion out of hand, that disability is a condition to be cured, with the goal of restoring 'normalcy'. Crip theory includes disability as just another aspect of what it means to be normal and asserts that all bodies are destined to be 'crip' and are destined for failure in an ableist society.

Forced incarceration, segregation, and ostracism of people with disabilities still exists in the world and people with disabilities, characterized as the largest minority population in the United States (LaPlante, 1991), still face enormous challenges in living and working in their

communities. Theoretical models of disability can best be described as science and society's attempts to cope with the human and economic costs of disability while grappling with the best way to guarantee their civil, social and economic participation.

### **Relevance to the Research**

While Disability Theory provides a context for locating the disability experience generally, it does not adequately capture how young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities negotiate the transitions inherent in living their post-military lives with any number of physical and/or psychological wounds that can affect their identity and social relationships.

However, emerging theories that challenge the concept of normality may offer female veterans an alternative to the popularized 'dis-abled', or 'broken' self-conceptions that conflict with what military training imbues in recruits. The military-instilled values of overcoming physical or mental injuries are still strong in servicemembers, even when service-related disabilities may present significant challenges in their lives. As considerable research on veteran perceptions of disability corroborate (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Gade & Wilkins, 2012; Green & Van Duesen, 2013; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011), many veterans can acknowledge that, despite having a service-related disability, they resist being portrayed as members of 'the disabled' in society.

### **2.D. Literature Review: Role/Exit Theory Essential Concepts**

*'A crucial consideration of identity research is role centrality, the importance that an individual places on a specific role that he or she has'* (Smith & True, 2014, pg. 149).

Schlossberg describes the complex challenges that humans encounter when negotiating change in their lives based upon intrinsic as well as extrinsic characteristics (Schlossberg, 1981). She postulates that the transition and adaptation process require an understanding of the characteristics of the particular transition, the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and the characteristics of the person experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981, pg. 5). Schlossberg also offers that one aspect of role transition can be the feelings of powerlessness that people can experience, particularly when transitions are non-voluntary as they may be for veterans whose injuries have prematurely ended their military careers. Research has also examined how the nature and consequences of role exits and transitions and a person's ability to negotiate life changes can be influenced by the time in their lives when the changes occur (Ebaugh, 1988; Schlossberg, 1981).

Ebaugh (1988) describes the role and exit challenges faced by those leaving the police force, religious orders and other forms of isolated, total institutions, that are in many respects similar to the narratives that Smith and True (2014) obtained from military veterans. When describing how a nun felt after she left the cloister, she notes : "While before things had been secure and well defined for her, all of a sudden she found herself negotiating in a world where her role was not so clearly specified" (pg. 47). And, quoting an interview with a police officer expressing the difficulty he has in relating to non-officers closely mirrors what female veterans participating in the Burkhardt and Hogan study (2012), as well as those participating in this study research had to say: *"It is very difficult to adjust to new friends. It had been easy to relate*

*to other officers. Trying to have a conversation with someone who didn't know about police work was difficult and still is. I probably never got rid of the feeling of being an officer"* (pg.179).

Life course perspective offers that young adults can experience transitions that are out of sequence (or 'off-time') from the norm (Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld, 1987; Hartmann & Toguchi Swartz, 2006) in their traditional sequencing of life course milestones in the civilian world (education, a first job, marriage and birth of a first child). Fundamentally, the nature of role exits and transitions include opportunities and challenges in the 're-discoveries of self' (Ebaugh, 1988). As young, female and male veterans exchange their military for a civilian lifestyle; re-engage and socialize with their age cohort peers, and; enroll (or in some cases continue) in post-secondary academic institutions, where they can be older, and with more and varied life experiences than their civilian peers (Strickley, 2009), they may also face unexpected difficulties in civilian life roles in ways that are not encountered by their non-veteran peers. That can be because while in the military, their basic needs for shelter, food and medical care are met, as well as many of the tasks of daily civilian life. For example, one female veteran during the preliminary phases of this study offered from personal experience, "*many (veterans) get out (of military service) without learning about money because the military is so structured*" (Anonymous female veteran personal testimony).

### **Relevance to the Research**

Ebaugh and Schlossberg incorporate discussions of self-perceptions and identity as factors to consider when individuals change and re-acquire roles, and Goffman and others discuss how these factors can be influenced by disability-related stigma. In examining the



lifecourse transitions of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities, three aspects emerged from participant narratives that correlate well with three often overlapping conditions faced by most veterans who return to their communities: 1) The impact of 'veteran identity' on civilian life role success; 2) The impact of disability on their success in negotiating the demands of chosen academic, work, family, and social roles; and 3) Their experiences associated with belonging to two, often diametrically opposed, military and civilian cultures at the same time, and how they negotiate these paradigms.

Overlaying all of the above is how well they have been assisted by the military's Transitional Assistance programs (TAP) in preparing for their successful transition back into civilian life. These preparations include formal presentations on skills for translating their military training to civilian jobs; understanding educational opportunities using the GI Bill, and; accessing VA services and other topics. But TAP does not address how well they might need to be prepared psychologically in re-acclimating back into civilian roles and environment as a veteran and in environments where most of those they interact with are non-veterans. As some participants in this study offered, after all the investment made in 'bootcamping' young adults into the type of person the military needs to complete its mission, there is no 'reverse bootcamp' that teaches them how to be a success in the civilian world. Threading the intrinsic values and conceptions of what it means to become, and be a service-member, and what it means to be a young female associating with peers in academic or work environments after separation from active duty who may be younger and less world-experienced can be a difficult, and under-researched aspect of transition to adulthood.

A series of recent studies undertaken in the communities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Orange County, California validate the significant challenges that a large percentage of Post-911 veterans are experiencing in resuming civilian life. (Castro, Kintzle & Hassan, 2014; Castro & Kintzle, 2014; Castle, Kintzle & Hassan, 2014), collectively titled 'The State of the American Veteran'. In each community, veterans reported difficulties in transitioning to civilian life at rates of between 61%-75%. Across the communities, significant challenges were reported in obtaining work and housing, re-adjusting to the civilian lifestyle and culture, and addressing untreated mental health and other disabilities. It is clear from these studies, as well as other corroborating studies, that veterans are failing to receive the level of military to civilian transition preparation that prepares them with skills, attitudes, and expectations for success as they exit the military world for the civilian world.

## **2.E: Literature Review: Identity and Belonging Theories Relevant Concepts**

Negotiating Veteran Assimilation through the Paradigm of Identity: Identity is a dynamic process of self-categorization and social comparison providing relevance for how individuals not only conceptualize their identities, but also express them, socialize them and act upon them in civilian settings (Franke, 2000). Research on identity construction is a robust and strong component of the theoretical underpinnings in the fields of sociology, education, psychology and other life sciences and has been explored relative to individuals' success in work, education and social environments. DiRamio and Jarvis provide a useful synthesis of identity theory related to student veteran academic success by relating identity to concepts of 'goodness of fit' and 'belonging' (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). The authors reference extant researchers throughout

their study in describing how group allegiances and enculturation contributes to identity development which persist in their power to influence choices and motivations (pg. 53). While Anthony (1993) and Deegan (1997) and others explore identity construction, meaning-making and their effects on transition to life roles like student, worker, parent, etc. for people with labels of mental illness, DiRamio and Jarvis point towards the same target with similar tools by referencing Keegan's theory of self and the ways that people in general make meaning and define valued life roles (pg. 54). For example, using academic environments as a reference point, they note that *'For the student veteran, a number of relationships have been predetermined in a strict hierarchical environment, and the transition to a less programmed civilian world can present a challenge'* (pg. 56).

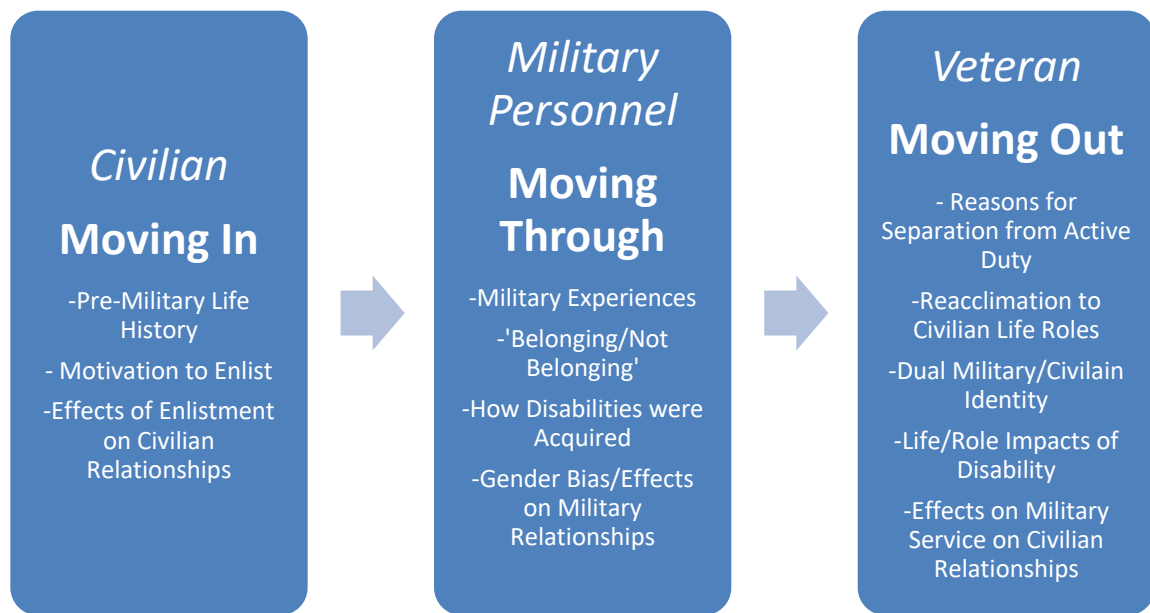
Although much has been written about the mental health challenges, employment challenges and physical injury challenges that many thousands of transitioning veterans of the current wars face (Pew Research Center, 2011), less has been written about the identity shaping influences that the military has upon those whose daily lives and routines they control and how these influences affect veterans' success in civilian life, including employment. The association between work and identity is a well-researched topic related to community inclusion of people with disabilities (Becker & Drake, 2003; United Nations, 2010). Goffman has written on the effects of total institutions on the identities, including the difficulties they encounter in reacclimating to post-institutional work and other role identities (Goffman, 1963). Ebaugh's research also documents the role exit process and the effects upon identity, self-efficacy and self-esteem among those that change their jobs or lose their jobs (Ebaugh, 1988).

And Smith and True (2014) break new ground by laying bare the dichotomies of being a well-prepared servicemember unprepared for a return to civilian life.

Examining the work/identity transitions of young, female veterans with service-related disabilities offers an opportunity to increase understanding of the causes and effects of the military institution on the formulation of their post-military work lives and identities. It also offers the potential for better understanding how role transition can be disrupted by a service-related disability. When considered together, understanding how veterans can be prepared better psychologically, and provided with the resources to better manage their transition from a warrior to a civilian identity might contribute to developing a new set of principles, policies and practices that can improve servicemembers' preparation for military to civilian transition.

A framework for exploring the nuanced aspects of role and identity transition is the 'Moving In/Moving Through/Moving Out model (Schlossberg, N.K.; Lynch, A. Q.; & Chickering, A. W., 1989). It offers a perspective on how the dynamics of identity and belonging can contribute to life course perspective and help frame the complexities of military to civilian transition for young adults. The figure below illustrates its application to veterans' pre, during, and post-military life experiences and associates a set of factors to be considered during each stage of the progression:

**Figure 3.**  
**Moving In/Moving Through/Moving Out of Military Service**



Veteran identity is forged in the crucible of military service that requires subordination to the physical, spiritual and emotional demands necessary for success in the roles required of military personnel (Huntington, 1957). Among the most cited components of military identity are the importance of structure, commitment to service, self-sacrifice, unit cohesion and mission fulfillment (Miller & Reinke, 2006). Research conducted by Haynie and others examine military-based relationships and military structure as a social group, impact upon relationships within and outside that group, impact on self-perceptions and identity and how a combat-related injury affects motivation to pursue civilian sector jobs and careers including entrepreneurship (Haynie & Shepherd, 2010). Throughout the study, the authors reference the strong influence that the military institution and its socialization tactics have upon a service member's conceptualization of self and the implications it has for career choice after discharge.

Understanding the influence of identity and its effects on a veteran's success in academic and other civilian roles includes not only examining the self-perceptions of the

individual ('I', 'me'), but the influences of collective identity association ('we') (Cerulo, 1997). Identifying with members of one's own group with which common attributes are shared is important to derive one's sense of self (Franke, 2000). Identity has the power to shape attitudes, values and behaviors (Franke, 2000). These can be disrupted when individuals separate from one environment where they felt that they belonged, to new environments that may have different norms for belonging. 'Separation from military service' is a term that can be laden with meaning, not only for the act of leaving the military's social, economic or environmental structure for other civilian world structures, but also for the loss of identity-attachment to the pre-existing system (Lighthall, 2012). During times of military to civilian role transition, their previously determined identity is bombarded by the new and differing relationships and the expectations, structural, social, cultural and other factors contained in a new environment (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011, Smith & True, 2014). Overlaying these personal aspects of identity and belonging are the implications for return and reintegration of the warrior back into society after her work is finished; and the obligation that societies should assume, and the rituals needed to be performed to contribute to her healing and healthy reintegration (Tick, 2005, 2014).

Some sources maintain that people in fact have not one, but multiple identities that are situational in their formation and subject to various articulations based upon their life experiences and expectations (Stryker & Serpe, 1994, Loseke, 2007). Young veterans re-enter civilian life environments with a level of maturity and life experiences that are not generally shared by their non-veteran peers. Lifecourse Perspectives substantiates completion of post-secondary education as a key milestone, yet most of the literature fails to address multiplicity

of factors that contribute to the sense of belonging of veterans enrolled in higher education or engaging in other life pursuits, of which veteran identity is only one (Hagerty et al., 1992). For example, they may be non-traditional post-secondary students who are older than their classmates, married and/or have children (Zoli, Maury & Fay, 2014). In this context, as they negotiate their lives as students, their identities as a spouse, parent and as an experienced military professional used to exercising command and authority can exert powerful influences on their ability to be comfortable in academic environments and forge friendships with non-veteran peers who are less life-experienced.

Identities can have salience, according to Stryker and others when it is a precipitator of actions in a given situation or situations (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). "Veteran identity" is defined as veterans' self-concept that derives from his/her military experience within a socio-historical context (Harada, et al, 2002). Identity is not only a matter of personal perception and the service member's experiences in the military ('intrinsic identity'). Sometimes identities are influenced by the assignments of traits and characteristics by others with whom those individuals interact (Loseke, 2007). This 'assigned identity' becomes potentially important to the discussion of veteran re-assimilation into civilian life as young adults by examining the factors that contributes to their feeling of belonging within their social, academic and occupational groups. 'Belonging' is also an important element in the ways that a person deals with its loss when they no longer belong to a group after exiting and creates expectations for success as they enter new life roles (Ebaugh, 1988, Tick, 2005).

Negotiating Veteran Assimilation through the Paradigm of Belonging: To better

understand how veteran identity and a sense of belonging are interacting and integral factors in successful veteran student assimilation, it is useful to understand how achieving a sense of belonging contributes to psychological and social well-being for veterans in civilian environments. Sense of belonging has received little systematic attention in the veteran-facing literature, although a growing research and knowledge base of the importance of belonging as a factor in veteran peer-peer programs contributes to the discussion (Chinman, Salzer & O'Brien-Mazza, 2012), and is substantiated as an important element in developing and managing one's relationship with others (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Sense of belonging is proposed to have two defining attributes: (1) the experience of being valued, needed, or important with respect to other people, groups, or environments, and (2) the experience of fitting in or being congruent with other people, groups, or environments through shared or complementary characteristics (Hagerty et al., 1992). Sense of belonging" is conceptualized as an aspect of interpersonal relatedness most dissimilar to loneliness and most closely associated with social support (Hagerty et al., 1996; Russell, Cutrona, Rose, & Yurdo, 1984). Loneliness is presumed to be a consequence of failing to connect with others (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995), whereas the perception of support is believed to arise from notions that one is structurally integrated into a social network and has adequate resources available (Cohen & Wills, 1985). (DiRamio).

A recent study (Lancaster, Kintzle & Castro, 2018) examined the psychometric properties of military identity in a large sample of male and female military members. Although the mean age of the 1151 participants in the study was 52.68, the study supported military



identity as a multi-dimensional construct, and an important indicator of psychosocial functioning. While the authors acknowledge that more work is necessary to test scales and to better factor in what assessment criteria should be included in future studies, they found that a military veteran's reintegration success is strongly correlated to their self-perceptions of belonging as a member of the veteran community in the civilian world, and how these identity factors affect life-related decisions and associations. Of particular relevance to the present study, their research found that *"feeling connected (lack of feeling like an outsider) and high private and public regard for the military was associated with better functioning, while identity exploration and viewing the military as a family were associated with relatively worse functioning"* (pg. 41).

Identity is a complex construct that can influence young veteran's success in re-integrating into personally valued civilian life roles. Negotiation of a dual, and at times potentially conflicting military/civilian identity can influence the success of individuals to 'belong' and become members of a chosen civilian environment. How to accomplish these goals without relinquishing their veteran identity can present challenges in jobs and careers, educational environments, and in managing family and social relationships (Pew Research Center, 2011; Clemens & Milsom, 2008; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Gade & Wilkins, 2012). Narratives of identity are informed not only by self-understandings, but also by the influences of the policies and practices of organizations, social policy, and culture that the individual interacts with, and experiences. (Loseke, 2014).

In summary, a young female veteran's success in her civilian life roles could be influenced (as one factor among others) by their ability to manage not only the transition from military to civilian life but also the factors that influence and shape her identity in the transition. It also means understanding the impacts upon their lifecourse when their sense of belonging is at the same time, a warrior and a civilian, living in a society where so few have had similar experiences (Tick, 2005, 2014).

For the young female veterans participating in this research, this also means negotiating what it means to be both 'inside and outside'; to be a member of the US Armed Forces, but very often treated unequally and often feeling themselves as unwanted in their military environment. Understanding the dynamic influences of identity and belonging as important to returning veterans' pathways to adulthood may very well be a missing element in Lifecourse Perspectives that this study explores.

## **2.F. Literature Review: The Demographics of Post-911 Veterans**

The role of the military in shaping the transition to adulthood among young females is best understood in historical perspective, because the composition of those serving and the consequences of service have changed markedly from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries' (Kelty and Segal 2013). Historically, women have served in the US Military, but during the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, women served mainly as spies or in nursing capacities, and those that served in combat roles had to cross-dress to do it (Browder & Pflaeging, 2010; Clever & Fisher, 2017). During the First World War, women assumed roles primarily in military-support

functions, and their involvement accelerated as manpower shortages required replacements of administrative positions (Clever & Fisher, 2017). Throughout the Second World War and through the Korean Conflict, the numbers of women serving in the active-duty military increased, although the Women Armed Services Act of 1948 capped women's enlistment at 2% (IBID).

The transition of the US Military into an All- Volunteer Force in 1973 reflects the preeminence of the views of Janowitz (1960) of the necessity of an open relationship between the military and society, in contrast with the views of Huntington (1957), who regarded the military as separate from society and distinct. Huntington's views are consonant with earlier military theorists including Clausewitz (1932) who defined the military as necessarily hierarchical, obedience-driven, and the soldier as distinct in thought and action from their civilian counterparts. However, despite the shift towards a more open military, the history of women's military service 'has been intricately linked to broader social trends of women's struggle for inclusion as full citizens of the nation' (Clever & Fisher, pg. 554), prefiguring the diminishment and inequality and reports of sexual assault that many present – day female servicemembers express (Belkin, 2012; Browder & Pflaeging, 2010; Clever & Fisher, 2017).

Concurrent with broader social trends favoring increased female involvement in education and in the workplace; by 1967 when the 2% cap was lifted, females serving in the military increased. Before 1973, women servicemembers comprised only 2% of the military, and that percentage has since grown to approximately 15% (VA, 2013). Although the 1988 Risk Rule opened up over 30,000 military occupations to women, preclusions on combat related

duty remained in place until the rule was rescinded in 1994 by the Ground Combat Exclusion Policy. That policy allowed female servicemembers to serve in most military occupations; increasing the likelihood that they could be exposed to combat situations, although they were still precluded from direct assignment to those situations below the brigade level (Clever & Fisher, 2017). The ban on combat roles enacted by the Combat Exclusion Policy was lifted in 2016. While, in many respects, opening up combat roles to female servicemembers represents a significant achievement in equality and status, the military remains a predominately male-oriented institution that ascribes a lower status to female servicemembers, and its norms and practices privilege the attributes of masculinity, while ridding recruits of all traces of femininity (Belkin, 2012). Consequently, the female servicemember experiences a series of contradictions between their expectations for equal treatment and the realities of significant inequalities that they must negotiate while in service that may affect their self-perception as veterans after they transition to civilian life (Browder & Pflaeging, 2010; Clever & Fisher, 2017).

Today's US Military in the Context of Transition to Adulthood in Civilian Society: As Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal (2010) note, the present-day military is demographically more diverse and is more likely to enlist a younger cohort of individuals. Female servicemembers are generally younger than males (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). Female and male enlistees represent neither the higher nor lowest economic strata of society, and over 55% of enlisted personnel and over 67% of officers are married (US Department of Defense, 2013). Today's United States Military can provide substantial material advantages that prepare young servicemembers for success in the civilian world as heads of households; as family members; in

jobs and careers, and; in educational attainment. The modern US military has also striven to be more family-friendly, recognizing that many citizen-soldiers are married when they enlist (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010). The extensive on-the-job and classroom education and training and credentials that servicemembers acquire in order to perform complex, often technologically driven military jobs can be an advantage in seeking civilian sector employment.

Servicemembers in today's U.S. military are better educated and better trained than at any time in the past (Watkins & Sherk, 2008).

Prior research has improved understanding of factors that support military service as a salient pathway to adulthood (Wilmoth & London, 2013) that can produce advantages, disadvantages, or mixed benefits over the life course (McLean & Elder, 2007). The advantages of military service can be framed by a person's advantaged or disadvantaged status upon entry, race and ethnicity and the racially-equalizing effects of military service, and the education, skills and credentials and health benefits that service-members acquire as well as the time periods when they enlisted (Bennett & McDonald, 2013; Teachman, 2013; Wilmoth & London, 2013). However, service-related disabilities can result in disruptions over the life course trajectories of servicemembers if military service adversely affects their attainment of marital, occupational or educational trajectories, or as life-limiting results of service-connected injuries (Wilmoth and London, 2013). For others, military service may be less of a hiatus or disruption in the transition to adulthood than one of many life experiences that prepares them to become adults when they return to their civilian lives (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010).

Despite their expectations upon enlistment, emerging evidence suggests that the benefits of military training and experience cannot always overcome the significant difficulties that young, female veterans are experiencing in re-entering civilian life. Although receiving extensive military training for military occupations, many female veterans (similar to many male veterans) are having difficulties translating those skills and experiences into well-paying jobs and careers in the civilian sector (Pew Research Center, 2011). For example, in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math careers where men are employed at twice the rate of women (Landivar, 2013), military STEM training may be insufficient to close that gap for young (age 18-40) female veterans. Consequently, in a significant occupational growth category, female servicemembers occupy only approximately 16% of civilian sector STEM occupations (Fay, Zoli & Maury, 2016). And, although the military provides material benefits that could assist veterans in securing economic independence and increasing family income stability (Berlin, Furstenberg, Jr., and Waters, 2010), many of them leave military service without the necessary knowledge required to manage their finances as civilians (Elbogan, et. al., 2012). Or as one female veteran offered from personal experience, *“many (veterans) get out without learning about money because the military is so structured”* (Anonymous female veteran personal testimony).

Veterans overall have higher median incomes than those in the general population (American Community Survey, 2010), however unemployment among the younger Post-911 veteran cohort remains higher than the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Many face challenges in re-acclimating to the civilian work culture when the ‘Battlemind’ skills

needed to survive in combat (for example hyper-vigilance) can be a barrier to succeeding in the civilian workplace (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, 2005). The transition from a military lifestyle back into a civilian lifestyle is difficult for many servicemembers, and over 40% of Post - 911 female and male veterans say that they are having difficulties in adjusting to civilian life (Pew Research Center, 2011). Approximately one-third of female veterans in the Pew survey also described a sense of hopelessness since they returned to civilian life indicating that: “they did not care about anything” (Pew Research Center, 2011, pg. 14).

More than 2.6 million Post-911 female and male veterans have returned from active-duty service in the Post-911 era, and the Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that this cohort will grow to nearly 3.5 million over the next 10 years (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). They are mostly young adults between the ages of 18 and 32 (American Community Survey, 2010) who joined the military for a host of reasons; to achieve both personal and professional expectations. Their reasons for enlisting include jobs that provide decent wages and offer health insurance; for adventure; out of patriotism, and; to be able to pay for college, among other factors (Browder & Pflaeging, 2010; Rozanova, et. al., 2015). One participant in a study by Browder offered: *“I decided I wanted to join the military when I was in second grade. Some of my cousins and then my brother joined the military, but mostly it was from watching the commercials-the “Be all you can be commercials”. I wanted to focus on making something of myself, and so I did”*. (Interview with First Sergeant Jennifer Love, U.S. Army), (Browder, 2013, pg. 18).

Who are young, female Post-911 veterans and what are the implications of military service for their life courses? Less than 1% of the military-eligible U.S. population is currently serving in the armed forces today. In contrast to Janowitz' perspectives on the military-civilian relationship as an open system (Janowitz, 1960), "*the U.S. Military is gradually becoming a separate warrior class, that is becoming increasingly distinct from the public it is charged with protecting*"<sup>6</sup>. The Post-911 veteran population is expected to increase from 2.6 million in 2014 to just under 3.6 million in 2019 (VA, 2015) and over 58 percent of the Post-911 population is age 34 or younger (IBID). Numerically, more female than male servicemembers are age 34 or younger (IBID). Over 1.8 million veterans are women (VA, 2017). Projections from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014) indicate that the number of women serving in the military will continue to increase, even as the size of the military overall is projected to decrease. By 2040, women are estimated to be 18 percent of the total veteran population (Figure 4).

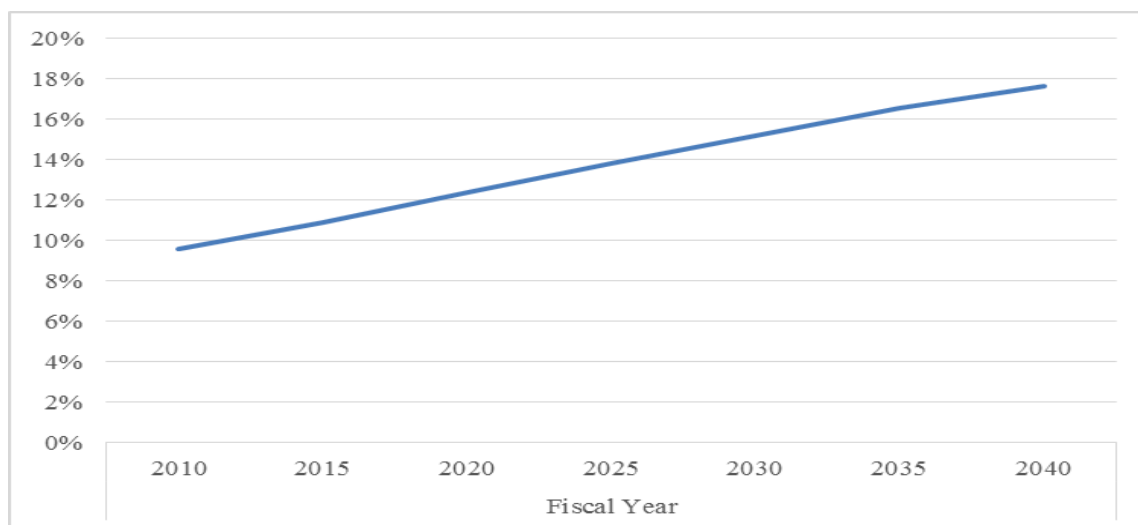
**Figure 4.**

**Projected Percentage of Female Veteran Population, 2010 to 2040**

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-warrior-main-20150524-story.html>





(Adapted from Table 1L from the “Veteran Population Projections: FY2010 to FY2040,” by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of the Actuary, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2013, retrieved from:

[http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/quickfacts/Population\\_slideshow.pdf](http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/quickfacts/Population_slideshow.pdf) )

Their transition back into civilian life as young adults can be made more complex by the presence of a service-connected disability (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Stewart et al., 2010) and the impact that having a disability can have on self-perceptions, identities, and relationships (Kaplan, 2000; Wendell, 1996). Enlistees enter the military in good health and meet the standards necessary to fulfill their military roles. Service-connected disabilities can alter their civilian life-course trajectories and can be a negative turning point in their lives (Kelty & Kleykamp, 2010; MacLean, 2013). Understanding the relationship of disability and life course trajectory is important for locating the veteran re-entry experience with greater dimensionality. This includes understanding how young, female veterans negotiate the physical and psychological impacts of disabilities upon their chosen civilian life roles, but also how their self-conceptions as persons with a ‘disability label’ are shaped in their post-military lives.

Over 280,000 female servicemembers have served in the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts (Disabled American Veterans 2014), and a significant number of them are experiencing hidden and/or visible wounds of war. As of 2009, over 243,632 female veterans have received compensation from the VA for a service-connected disability. That represents about 16 percent of the total population of female veterans. Forty-two percent of female veteran patients were 18–44 years old and they were substantially younger than male veterans (Frayne et al, 2014). Despite having been excluded until recently from assignment to combat units, female servicemembers experience combat first-hand in these Middle East conflicts where ‘front lines’ cannot be easily determined (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). A 2013 report indicated that 144 servicewomen lost their lives in the Middle East conflicts, killed primarily by IEDs (Center for Military Readiness, 2014).

Although they are less likely to have served in combat than male veterans (Patten & Parker, 2009), recent reports indicate that female servicemembers have service-connected disability ratings higher than that of their male counterparts (Veterans Administration, 2012). Female veterans are likely to report higher incidences of PTSD than their male veteran peers (Veterans Administration, 2012). They are also experiencing other traumas including Military Sexual Trauma (MST) that affects them psychologically and physically and can undermine their trust and confidence in the very system in which they chose to enlist (Himmelfarb, Yaeger & Mintz, 2006; Haaken & Palmer, 2012; Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Duhart, 2012). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been termed the ‘signature wound of present day conflicts’ (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). And, although there has been an increasing number of

research studies demonstrating the correlation between combat exposure and PTSD (Hassija, et al, 2012), little research has been done on the ways that female veterans are managing combat-related psychological traumas (Mattocks, et. al., 2012).

MST: A 'Signature Wound' Among Female Veterans: The U.S. military tradition is a male-oriented institution. Its rituals, norms, and hierarchies privilege males in positions of power (Belkin, 2012). Female servicemembers have often paid a high personal price while assimilating into the military. Among active duty women, the annual incidences of experiencing sexual assault are 3% and unwanted sexual attention (e.g., touching, fondling, or threatening attempts to initiate a sexual relationship) occurs at an annual rate of between 8% and 27%, (Kimmerling et al, 2007). The VA estimates that 1 in 5 female veterans seen by VA health care respond in the affirmative when screened for Military Sexual Assault (MST) (Veterans Administration, 2012). The compounding effects of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) can be felt physically, psychologically, and in the ways that it impacts their career trajectories.

Military Sexual Trauma is positively correlated to mental health disorders (Kimmerling et al, 2007), and is recognized as a diagnostic sub-category of PTSD (Haaken & Palmer, 2012), correlating these two signature wounds of present day conflicts. If female servicemembers experience MST during service, their military careers can be negatively affected if they press charges, particularly if the charges are brought against a ranking officer (Suris et.al., 2007). Service-acquired disabilities can also affect female veterans' self-perceptions. *"Service-connected disabilities can also impact how female veterans view themselves within the societal*

*norms of women. These include feelings pertaining to self-worth, dating, motherhood vs. infertility and other factors”* (Anonymous female veteran personal testimony).

Female servicemembers’ careers and upward mobility can be threatened by the privileges of superiors to access to their medical records, and otherwise attempt to refute any accusations against her assailant. Unlike the medical record confidentiality protections that are in place in the civilian world, servicemembers’ medical records do not enjoy physician’s privilege against divulgence. An officer (even one that has a vested interest in the incident), can review a servicemember’s medical records that can be used to their disadvantage in a hearing (Vogt, 2011). Perhaps most poignantly, the trust they place in American military personnel and the military institution itself can be shattered by sexual assault, contributing to another level of emotional trauma that can be long-lasting in their lives (Suris, et. al., 2007).

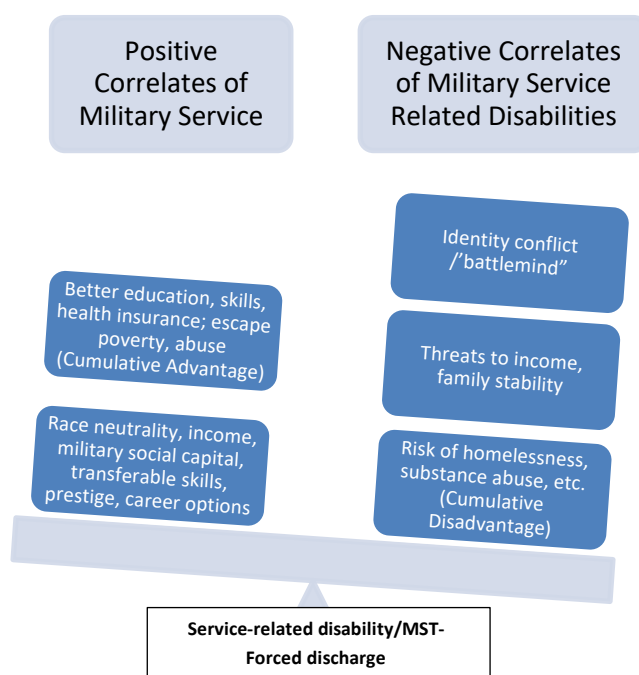
These, and other factors complicate female servicemembers’ transition back into the civilian world and can affect life course trajectories throughout their adult years. The long-term effects of disability make it more likely that households with a disabled veteran (not differentiated by gender) will experience economic hardship than those without a veteran family member with a disability (London, Heflin & Wilmoth, 2011; Wilmoth, London & Heflin, 2015). Additional factors that affect their success in civilian life are the residual effects of military cultural indoctrination. Military training and inculcated norms of behavior, as well as the associated stigma contribute to veterans’ reluctance to seek treatment for mental health-related disabilities (Vogt, 2011), and the culture of the military institution regards it unmilitary and a sign of weakness to exhibit the symptoms of psychological distress (Rozanova, et. al.,

2015; Burnham, et. al., 2009; Vogt et.al., 2011). Their decision to seek mental health services can be influenced by their fear that they will be labeled and stigmatized by society in ways that often accompany a psychiatric diagnosis (President's Commission on Care for Wounded Warriors, 2007).

Post-Military Advantages and Disadvantages: Recent studies indicate that female veterans are also experiencing disruptions in their family, social, and economic lives in ways that differ from those experienced by male veterans (Disabled American Veterans, 2014; Veterans Administration, 2012). In addition to higher divorce rate and unemployment (Disabled American Veterans 2014), female veterans are also experiencing homelessness in increasingly greater numbers, with the number of female veterans identified by the VA as homeless more than doubling, from 1,380 in fiscal year 2006, to 3,328 in fiscal year 2010 (GAO, 2011). They also express reluctance to seek VA health care services that are male-dominated “where there may be little acknowledgement, understanding or empathy of the new female veteran experience” (Ostovary & Dapprich, 2013, pg. 64). When factored into account, the combination of aversion to help-seeking and accretion of impacts of disability-related trauma can contribute to the later-life economic and social disadvantages that veteran households can face (Wilmoth, London & Heflin, 2015; Wilmoth, London & Parker, 2010; London, Heflin & Wilmoth, 2011; Maclean & Elder, 2007). The life-course consequences of service-related disabilities, mitigating against the advantages of military service are offered below.

### **Figure 5.**

#### **Theoretical Model of Life Course Consequences of Service-Related Disabilities**



Post-911 female veterans are comparatively poorer and more likely to be in a household receiving food stamps than male veterans (Veterans Administration, 2012). The youngest female veterans served by VA hospitals also had the highest percentage of having a service-connected disability (68 percent) (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2011). Female servicemembers are less likely to be married, more likely to be divorced and more likely to be unemployed (Disabled American Veterans 2014) than male veterans. These factors suggest that there is an accretion of stressors and challenges that young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities face in transitioning out of the military. These may not be entirely attributable to limits of disability-related functionalities but may also be attributable to the way that disabilities affect their civilian civic, social and economic reintegration. In essence, female veterans with service-related disabilities constitute a high-risk population for

experiencing significant challenges in transitioning back into civilian life and achieving success in social, civic and economic life roles, with implications over their lifecourse that are only recently being explored.

#### Life Course Implications of Service-Related Disabilities within the Female Veteran

Population: Service-related disabilities can have significant negative implications over the veteran life course. These include factors related to family economic security, as well as adverse effects on a person's own health and wellness (Wilmoth, London & Heflin, 2015; and Wilmoth, London, & Parker, 2010). Although veterans enjoy substantial advantages compared to non-veterans in access to health care, housing and daily living expenses, these advantages can be diminished when veterans have disabilities (Wilmoth, London, & Heflin, 2015). The effects of disability and the normal aging process also combine over the veteran lifespan and military service-related injuries and exposure to adverse environmental conditions can result in poorer immediate and long-term health (Wilmoth, London, & Parker, 2011).

Individual narratives gathered through this research revealed that some veterans had difficulty getting the VA health care that they needed in order to make progress on achieving their employment and life goals during their early years of separation. Many of those also talked about the effects of disability, and untreated PTSD in particular, upon their decision to return to work in the earlier months or years of resuming civilian life. Some also cited the difficulties they were having in obtaining jobs when there was often a mismatch between the occupations they had in the military and what employers were looking for, despite the value they placed upon their military skills training.

The negative lifecourse impacts of PTSD when it is untreated during the early years of onset, is corroborated by research that finds that mental health- related disabilities only begin to manifest themselves in ways that significantly affect daily living activities over time (MacLean & Elder, 2007). PTSD can contribute to the acquisition of other health problems, and to increased rates of mortality. Veterans with a PTSD diagnosis, even when provided 15 years previously, had higher mortality rates than veterans without the diagnosis (IBID). Although most studies of the impacts of disability have been conducted with male veterans, emerging evidence suggests that female veterans experience greater detrimental effects of military service-related disabilities over the lifecourse than either experienced by non-veteran women, or by male veterans (Wilmoth, London, & Parker, 2010). These included statistically significant higher incidences of functional limitation (inability to perform physical actions at normal levels), and disability (the inability to perform normal roles and their associated activities of daily living). The study sample was a cohort born between 1951 and 1960 and generated comparative data on the functional categories of vision impairments and blindness, deafness, physical limitations, and disability categories of memory disability, personal care disability, mobility disability and work disability (IBID). As the authors note, the sample constituted those who served during the Vietnam War era through the early part of the All-Volunteer Force era (pg. 345). However, they offer that even among the younger, ages 18-24 female veteran population, the trends appear to remain constant and that the general patterns of disability observed in the research is likely to be consistent across all age groups (pg. 350).

Appreciating the impacts of service-related disabilities upon the lives of young, female veterans is important in researching their lifecourse trajectories. However, understanding their



transition to adulthood must also be nuanced by what it means for a young adult to move from a warrior environment, where less than 1% of the United States population currently serve, to the civilian world, where the military culture and lifestyle are often not well understood.

“De-Institutionalizing” Veterans for Transition to Civilian Adulthood: As referenced earlier, the transition to adulthood in the civilian world is increasingly variable and discontinuous. Young veterans can experience identity and lifestyle challenges as they move from warrior to civilian life that can exacerbate their transition difficulties (Tick, 2005, 2014). These may result from the inherent distinctions and discrepancies between a military and a civilian lifestyle, where transition from a hierarchical, rigid institution to a more ambiguous, independent lifestyle requiring greater reliance on individual agency and initiative can be difficult for many exiting servicemembers (Smith & True, 2014). Acculturation into the military institution and its effects upon the attitudes, self-efficacy, sense of self, relationships and role transition have significant implications for veterans’ success in the civilian world, including in romantic and social relationships, as this male veteran offered:

*"I hadn't dated in a long while after I left the army and after my divorce. I found a woman that I planned to take out on a date and spent a long time planning it out. Just like a mission, I wanted it to go off flawlessly. So, I had a written schedule planned, places to go and what would happen at each time interval along the way. I wanted it to be a success and my military training gave me familiar ways and methods to accomplish my mission objective. But then I showed it to a woman friend who looked at me incredulously and said "But that's not the*

*way to plan a date. It's not a battle plan - It's a date!"* (Paraphrased transcribed interview, October 2012).

For servicemembers who enter the military at a young age, the process of defining and sorting out a sense of self can be a formidable challenge because the self-conceptualization process has a less established foundation upon which to build (Smith & True, 2014, pg. 152). For their peers who decided not to enlist, and depending upon factors related to class and economics, many had the advantages necessary for successful transition to adulthood through support of adult guidance (Osgood, Foster & Courtney, 2010). The military ensures unit cohesion by stressing the overwhelming importance of the military as their primary family unit (Sando, 2004). Consequently, young female and male veterans are leaving the military as a form of 'total institution' with high social integration, regimentation, structure, and with high social control under military adult guidance (Smith & True, 2014), and socialization skills. While these were developed to meet the necessities of military life (Bennett & McDonald, 2013), their return to civilian life occurs with often uncertain social supports to assist in their transition (Smith & True, 2014). They may often lack the skills in exercising independence and individual agency that young, civilian adults view as most valuable in meeting the milestones of adulthood, after their enlistment period ends (Hartmann & Toguchi Swartz, 2006). Or to quote one female veteran who said: *"You have to start all over again... the military life is very different from civilian life. A lot of people have been in the military since they were in high school, and they get out and they're lost. They are used to having someone tell them what to do, and now*

*they have to do it for themselves. You don't have a support system unless you have a family."*

(Smith & True, pg. 155).

What distinguishes the transition to adulthood among military personnel compared to their peers that have not served? Correlating what we know about Post-911 female veteran demographics and Lifecourse Perspectives is important in understanding how these veterans are challenged by or achieving success in their military to civilian transition. Two dynamics of the transition to adulthood have been established previously: 1) The 'normal' attainment of lifecourse milestones of education, employment, marriage and family, and 2) The 'off-course' sequencing of these lifecourse markers in the current era and in industrialized societies. Military service represents a break from the trajectories of civilian life, when identities are reshaped, and the pressures and timetables of age-graded careers are on hiatus (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991). However, although research substantiated that early entry into military service in the World War II and Korean War eras resulted in delayed entry into adult life roles (Elder, 1987), young adults in today's military are taking on (military) occupation, marriage and family roles in a different sequence of events. Military personnel serving in the All-Volunteer Force are more likely to be married than their civilian peers, although they predominately enter the service as singles, and marry young (Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010) and 75% of them have dependent children (IBID). Research conducted among white, male Vietnam – era servicemembers revealed a reduced probability of divorce (Call & Teachman, 1991). Divorce rates among active duty personnel remain low at 5.3% (US Department of Defense, 2013), however female servicemembers are more likely to be divorced than their civilian counterparts

(Kelty, Kleykamp, & Segal, 2010). And, the rate of divorce increases for veterans of both genders after their military service ends (IBID). Although non-veteran young adults are choosing to remain in school and entering into full-time, career employment and marriage and families at a later date (Settersen & Ray, 2010), military personnel can enter post-secondary education 'off-time' and as non-traditional students, and exercise their post-military educational benefits (Strickley, 2009) after separation. These factors suggest that Hogan's assertion that military service disrupts the timing and sequencing of normative life role events might be more nuanced for present-day young adult veterans.

This study explores whether or not military service is viewed by young, female veterans who participated in the research as detrimental to their hopes and expectations in civilian life. As the research corroborates (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991), and so many of the participants in this study have testified, the military can be a life-transforming turning point in their lives. But whether or not military service is disruptive to achieving their lifecourse milestones, or if military service is, for them a normal progression of their lifecourse experiences that contributes to their own interpretations of 'on-time' milestone attainment is an important lifecourse consideration that this research explores. One female veteran summed up the ambivalence about taking 'time away' from civilian life to serve in the military: *'At least it gave you something, so if you did come out of the uniform, you'd have some stability, education, something to further-whether for you or your family'* - Sgt. First Class Gwendolyn-Laurene Lawrence, U.S. Army, (Browder & Pflaeging, 2010, pg. 128). For Sgt. Lawrence, and for others who contributed to the present study, the experience of serving in the Armed Forces created

lasting and indelible impressions that helped shape who they are, and what they hope to achieve.

### 3: Methodology

#### 3.A. Mixed Methods in Qualitative Research

*“The qualitative researcher’s goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are”* (Bogden & Biklen, 2007. Pg. 43)

This Section begins by providing a brief overview of the purposes and practices associated with Qualitative Research. It includes a brief overview of its evolution and the goals and outcomes that each period of development attempted to address. It continues by summarizing mixed-method data collection techniques, including focus groups and individual interviews and their relevance to veteran-focused research. It then offers a brief discussion of how data obtained through mixed methods can be efficacious for understanding how post-9/11 women veterans experience their civilian-to-military transition, and for life-course analyses. This Section also introduces and describes the rationale for privileging narratology methods for collecting the personal stories of study participants as the primary and most relevant set of data for exploring the challenges and successes that they experience.

The Section includes a discussion of the sampling frame and methodology; particularly the factors involved in the choice of convenience (and snowball) sampling, compared to purposive (intent-based), selective sampling. It includes a detailed discussion of the process,

challenges and limitations encountered in recruiting participants meeting the present study criteria and offers insights into why the recruitment process was so difficult.

The Discipline of Qualitative Research: As Glazer (2007) notes, “*All is data*”. Qualitative Research locates the researcher in the world, employing a set of practices that make the world visible, interpret phenomenon of interest, and to develop an understanding of the relationship between and among meanings that people ascribe to their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell, 2008). It is concerned with generating descriptive data that is analyzed inductively and embodies a concern for process rather than solely focusing on outcomes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative Research is a relatively young discipline, evolving during the early years of the Twentieth Century and characterized by several historical phases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Reissman, 2008). It emanated from the work of the Chicago School social scientists who focused on realistic studies that collected and helped explain the life histories and early experiences of immigrants, urban children and women tenant farmers, and established the importance of narrative accounts as primary sources of data (Reissman, 2008).

The Importance of Mixed Methods to Qualitative Research: Mixed methods allow that Quantitative, as well as Qualitative data collection can be employed in conducting research, although each method has its distinctions (Bogden & Biklen, 2003; Harrell & Bradley, 2008). A number of key considerations validate the use of mixed methods, rather than relying exclusively on either Qualitative or Quantitative methods of data collection. Examples of these are summarized below (Creswell, 2003):

- Mixed methods researchers look to many approaches to collecting and analyzing data rather than subscribing to only one way (e.g., quantitative or qualitative).
- Truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a strict dualism between the mind and a reality completely independent of the mind. In mixed methods research, investigators use both quantitative and qualitative data because they work together in providing the best understanding of a research problem.
- Mixed methods researchers need to establish a purpose for their "mixing," a rationale for the reasons why quantitative and qualitative data need to be mixed in the first place.
- Research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts. In this way, mixed methods studies may include a theoretical lens that is reflexive of social justice and political aims.
- Recognizing that all methods have limitations; the biases inherent in any single method could neutralize or cancel the biases of other methods. Triangulating data sources-a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods address these limitations.

Creswell describes the features of Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods below (pg. 13):

**Table 4.**

**The Features of Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods**

| <b>Quantitative Methods</b>               | <b>Qualitative Methods</b> | <b>Mixed Methods</b> |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Experimental designs                      | Phenomenologies            | Sequential           |
| Non-experimental designs, such as surveys | Ethnographies              | Concurrent           |

|  |                 |                |
|--|-----------------|----------------|
|  | Grounded theory | Transformative |
|  |                 | Case studies   |

Each step in the research process has the potential to influence the outcomes of the research (Barribal & While, 1994). The choice of research methods depends upon the nature of the questions to be answered, and whether or not advantages can be realized if data is collected from people (individually, or in groups). But whatever method is chosen, it is important to ensure that qualitative data are collected in a scientific and consistent manner (Harrell & Bradley, 2008). ‘Validity’ (defined as ‘accuracy’) and ‘Reliability’ (defined as ‘replicability’) are key research concepts (Winter, 2000). However, as Winter notes, some qualitative researchers deny that validity or replicability are useful or possible in conducting research that involve the lives, thoughts and behaviors of people.

The rationale for the use of mixed methods often derives from the need to reference large, quantitative data sets and longitudinal studies to establish context, and individual narratives to contextualize data on a personal scale. Inductive research holds that each individual’s personal narratives are both reliable from their own perspectives, and replicable only in that themes and insights might be commonly expressed by a number of participants, while contradicted by others. *‘Qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data, and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across observations’* (Bogden & Biklen, 2003, pg. 40). For example, studies that quantify the number of Post-911 female veterans who were treated by VA hospitals for PTSD is important for understanding the prevalence of the disability across the study



demographic and patterns of medical services-seeking behavior. However, a veteran's personal account of their experiences with, and overcoming the impacts of PTSD, is relevant to understanding their motivation or reluctance to engage in VA treatment services. Obtaining personal testimony can reveal hidden fears and trepidations and call up significant experiences in ways that large surveys may not. These personal narratives, correlated with analyses derived from large data sets may serve to explain why so many veterans of both genders are reluctant to seek mental health treatment (Vogt, 2011).

Methods of data synthesis and analysis that result the creation of grounded theory are necessary in order to categorize diverse sets of data in ways that generate new hypotheses or insights and from which to draw conclusions. Grounded theory is an iterative process that begins with establishing a series of questions that guide the research, mining data that leads to the creation of core theoretical concepts and identifying linkages between data that are relevant to the concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Troachim, 2006). Throughout the process, in an almost 'funnel-like' way, the investigator uses a number of analytic strategies to sift through the information and draw analogies to the phenomenon of interest. Grounded theory privileges the organic development of insights drawn from data leading to the formation of new questions that in turn provide opportunities to develop other new insights.

Relevance of Grounded Theory to the Present Study: Adoption of grounded theory as the preferred data analysis method led to the emergence of three levels of insight that informed the present research. First, at the '*Macro*' level, data generated from interviews helped establish the premise that the three core theoretical foundations guiding the study (Life

Course Perspective, Disability Theory, and Role/Exit Theory) were more interrelated, concurrent, and mutually reinforcing when describing the lifecourse transition experiences of the study group. This led to the assumption that these three theoretical paradigms might best be viewed in an integrative, mutually reinforcing way for the sum of their combined influences. This was in addition to examining them for their distinct perspectives related to understanding what is going on with young adult female veterans with disabilities as they make their military to civilian transition.

At the '*Meso*' level, iterating the effects of the veterans' transition experience through the richness of personal testimonies led to the generation of insights into the environmental, societal and service systems factors that can be consequential to their lifecourse progressions. The lifecourse perspective, like theories related to roles and exits and disabilities, is a construct built not only from a person's own experiences, but from the socio-economic and political environments that they operate within, and that influence their life trajectories. Therefore, it is insufficient to discuss progression to adulthood specific as members of their age cohort without examining not only the direct effects of serving in the military on their maturation, but also how the military is regarded by society around them. Certainly, Vietnam-era veterans matured as a consequence of their service, but as maturing young adults, they often had to endure the negative attitudes that society had for the military institution and those who wore the uniform, that is different from the experiences of Post-911 veterans. And, it is also insufficient to discuss the impacts of service-related traumas like PTSD without considering the motivations that veterans have for accessing or avoiding treatment either through formal means (the VA, for

example), or informal means (either through veteran or non-veteran peer support), and how their choices are environmentally-affected (the influence of military culture, and popular misconceptions about mental illness, for example). These personal/environmental dynamics also holds true for Role/Exit Theory, as interview participants described how they struggled with, or succeeded in making the transition from a military lifestyle and structure to civilian life.

At the '*Micro*' level, the primary insights derived from narratives included how individuals are experiencing re-engagement in civilian society as young adults and as young adults with disabilities. And narratives also uncovered participants' challenges as young adults with both a military and civilian identity and worldview. Their personal narratives reinforce that their transition back into civilian life must be considered in light of interrelated factors affecting their resumption of civilian life roles that account for age and temporal considerations, the stresses associated with identity and role exit/entry, challenges in negotiating unfamiliar environments and cultures and relationships, and what it means for their young lives to have a service-related visible and/or hidden disability.

As interviews were conducted for this study, themes were sought related to timing and sequencing, disability identity and gender-specific military experiences that led to the formation of three core questions introduced and discussed in more detail in Section 4. By coding data, initially roughly; but as the work progressed, in more selective ways, data was categorized with respect to the core concepts, and to uncover hidden themes and associations. The process of recording data involves extensive memoing that is initially open-ended, but more focused as the study solidifies. Through use of diagrams and computer assisted coding

and analytic software (like MaxQDA<sup>7</sup>), relationships are revealed that integrates data where the concepts under study are fleshed out more completely.

Focus Groups are an important qualitative research method that can generate data in ways that are dissimilar in some respects from interviews. The proposed process for obtaining data for use in the study included conducting semi-structured, individual telephone interviews, and one focus group. Both methods of obtaining information are valid, and advantages in corroborating data can be achieved when both methods are used (Bogden and Biklen 2003). Each method is introduced below, with examples of how they have been used in the past in research on veterans' issues.

Focus Groups: Where it is impractical interview every individual in a study group, surveys, and/or selecting individuals for Focus Groups are other research methods that can be used to achieve the objectives of a study (Barribal & While, 1994). Research exploring the military to civilian transition among veterans have used both Focus Groups and other forms of group narrative generation methods in gathering data that includes both the information that individual participants provide, but also the observations and generation of data by group dynamics. Individual Interviews can be more open-ended and unstructured, or structured (with adherence to a proscribed set of questions with limited deviation) that can be considered based upon the particular situation and preference of the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Barribal and Wile, 1994). Group data collection, including Focus Groups, offer a number of features that can facilitate narrative production in ways that individual interviews may not, and can be

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.maxqda.com>

conceptualized as ‘large interviews’ (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Each approach has its advantages and limitations, but ultimately it is incumbent upon the investigator to select the approach most likely to produce valid data that advances the intent of the study, and reflects their own data gathering preferences.

Conducting a focus group necessarily means bringing together a small group of individuals, that are often unknown personally to each other, but with the potential to enrich the research by generating insights that are relevant to the questions that the researcher is attempting to answer (Kitzinger, 1994). *“One significant benefit of focus groups is that the interaction between group participants offers the potential for unmasking ideas, beliefs and opinions that may not come out in an in-depth interview or survey questionnaire”* (Skop 2006, Pg. 116). Another advantage of focus groups and other collective inquiry methods is the opportunity for investigators to observe and record group dynamics leading to consensus. Consensus among the group concerning shared insights and experiences can validate or challenge the researcher’s assumptions (Kitzinger, 1994). Group participatory methods can add value in understanding how representatives of an age or experiential cohort views particular topic areas by directly involving people who may have a direct interest in the outcomes, and whose life experiences have relevance to the questions that are posed (Slocum, 2005). Drawbacks of the group technique include the inability of the researcher to guarantee confidentiality when personal narratives are voiced in a group setting. The sensitivity of an issue could then discourage the use of focus groups, where discussing these types of issues in a group context might not be appropriate (Harrell & Bradley, 2008). Another disadvantage is that

discussions may be 'taken over' by a particularly vocal participant, limiting opportunities for others to contribute equally. While the facilitator can encourage the emergence of free-flowing narratives, some level of structure is necessary to keep the group on track and to ensure that the questions that are central to the research are addressed.

Individual Interviews: Conducting individual interviews is a primary Qualitative Research method for soliciting stories (Bogden and Biklen 2003; Harrell & Bradley, 2008) and was the primary means of collecting data for use in this study. Individual interviews provide particular advantages in qualitative research, including the potential to overcome the often-poor response rates common to survey methods (Barriball & Wile 1994), and the ability to develop close, one-one rapport between researcher and participant that could help uncover deeper levels of data than might be possible in group settings (Bogden and Biklen 2003). Unstructured interviews are a set of questions that evolve organically from an initially posed question that can travel wherever the researcher and participant permit, in a complex form of 'speech event' (Spradley, 1979). These conversational modes of inquiry are not entirely without structure, however. The investigator needs to rely on a general set of questions that need to be posed, but the unstructured format allows the narrative to emerge in ways that privilege the preferences of the narrator (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In participatory narrative development, the researcher contributes to the dialogue in ways that can engender a collaborative account of particular issues where the researcher as well as the participant become the subject of the interviewer (Stewart, 1997).

Semi-structured interviewing utilizes a guide, or protocol, with questions and topics that must be covered, but that are informed by a set of interview probes that can be used at the investigator's discretion to gather supplemental information (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Harrell also states that the *"interviewer has some discretion about the order in which questions are asked, but the questions are standardized, and probes may be provided to ensure that the researcher covers the correct material"* (page 35). The conversational aspects of semi-structured interviews can also facilitate collaborative relationships that can lead to generation of rich personal narratives (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Stewart, 1997). Structured interviews can be used when working with very large samples with data that can be generalized to a large population (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Locating the Researcher within the Research: The value of objective, structured and dispassionate research is that the likelihood of introducing bias and subjectivity that leads the respondent to answer questions that s/he feels the researcher is more likely to approve and/or use is reduced (Bogden and Biklen 2003). Adhering strictly to asking questions verbatim channels and focuses the discussion closely and helps the researcher to focus on obtaining information most appropriate to the intent of the study. It can reduce the potential for straying off topic or that the respondent and researcher develop an empathetic or sympathetic relationship that might influence responses yielding less than candid responses. (IBID). On the other hand, narratological inquiry allows that the researcher and participant are located in a symbiotic relationship, recognizing that each by virtue of engaging in conversation are both 'subject and object' of the research. Each, by interacting in the same physical or virtual space

and sharing language and physical nuances, contributes to the generation of data (Reissman, 2008). In such a design, actual or implied hierarchies are subsumed, and the researcher moderates their objective distance while yet avoiding, to the maximum extent possible, influencing the participant's responses in ways that compromise the validity of the data. This study utilized a design that sought to build researcher and participant collegiality and minimize hierarchical distinctions while yet adhering to the approved protocol for generating objective narratives.

### **Relevance to Veteran-Related Research**

Qualitative research, including veteran-related research, is often enriched by the use of mixed methods. For example, two studies commissioned by the Rand Corporation used mixed methods to explore the effects of gender integration on the military (Harrell & Miller, 1997) and the extent to which Army operations in Iraq were consistent with the assignment policy for Army women (Harrell, et. al., 2007). Two, more recent veterans research projects using mixed methods approaches were large, national studies focusing on the experiences of veterans of the present era. Their research incorporated use of large data sets and nationally-administered surveys as primary means of data collection.

The first example is the '*Million Records Project*', implemented by Student Veterans of America (SVA) which was a study using secondary data sets to report nationally distributed student veteran postsecondary completion rates based on initial school enrollment cohorts, student veterans' time-to-completion, their highest level of education, and their majors or



degree fields. A secondary purpose of this study was to explore differences in the primary outcomes of student veterans based on available demographic variables, such as branch of service and gender (Cate, 2012, Pg. 20). In addressing its intent to quantify and qualify the post-secondary academic lives of Post-911 servicemembers across all branches of service, the SVA obtained completion data for 1 million student veterans who initially used their GI Bill benefits between 2002 and 2010 by submitting Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the VA. The consequent analysis extrapolated postsecondary outcomes for the current generation of student veterans and described demographic factors related to educational enrollment and outcomes (Cate, 2012) that serves as a basis for future small and large-scale research studies that explore other intrinsic factors in veteran educational attainment.

The second, large-scale veteran research study was conducted by Syracuse University: *'Missing Perspectives: Servicemembers Transition from Service to Civilian Life'* (Zoli, Maury & Fay, 2015). It cast a wide net by exploring both educational and employment aspirations and outcomes among a large cohort of recent servicemembers (active-duty, reserves, National Guard, veterans, and their families). The Missing Perspectives study is an example of mixed methods research, using a national study sample along with the use of targeted surveys, interviews, and focus groups to contribute data for analysis. The survey was conducted with over 8,500 servicemembers and consequently, and distinct from the SVA study that used secondary data sets, 'built one of the few comprehensive, national datasets on recent servicemembers' (post-service transition) experiences (Zoli, Maury & Fay, Pg. 4). The national survey was augmented by targeted interviews and focus groups in an effort to deepen the data

collection by obtaining more intimate, personal testimony from servicemembers. Like the large, SVA study, the Missing Perspectives research provides a national dataset that can be used for future research combining smaller cohorts and using narrative methods.

Smith & True (2014) conducted a small-scale research project that explored the discontinuities associated with military to civilian transition using the framework of military and civilian identity distinctions and disparities. Their study utilized one-on-one interviews conducted with 26 U.S. combat veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in an effort to draw out personal testimony from which to create generalized assumptions of ‘warring identities’ that arise from inculcation of the military mindset and culture and their effects on servicemembers’ re-acclimation back into civilian life roles. Although the SVA and Syracuse University studies also reflect the individual experiences of transitioning servicemembers, the intent of the Smith & True research is to provide a more individualized, personally nuanced account of veterans’ transition experiences, with testimonies that underscore veterans’ feelings of dislocation and their struggle in resolving the dichotomies of the warrior training and skills and the skills and aptitudes needed to survive and thrive as civilians.

A small-scale, yet impactful study examining transition issues among female veterans relied only on facilitated focus groups convened in a ‘World Cafe’ style<sup>8</sup> as well as interviews to collect data, in a manner similar to this study. The study was focused on the experiences with homelessness and unemployment among female veterans and was conducted over a period of two consecutive days in the city of Chicago. It used small, 4-6 person focus groups, conducted

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

concurrently and consisting of a combination of veterans, service-providers, and employers. The groups were facilitated by conveners who asked their table of participants the same questions as other groups addressed. The questions were rotated to address issues of policy, services, and individual accounts about female veterans' experiences with homelessness and with job-seeking, and the perspectives of researchers and service providers also on those issues. By using these methods, the researchers were able to gather a diverse group of participants in one place and at one- time rotating group sessions to compare and contrast their views on the topics, while also spending concentrated time with individuals later in the program to delve more deeply into their insights and experiences. The resulting Summary Report contains recommendations for addressing female veteran homelessness and unemployment for use in other communities across the country (Shaheen, 2013). It was deemed a success by participants for a number of reasons that validated the use of small group techniques: 1) Participants appreciated interacting in groups with others having shared interests and experiences; 2) The questions posed were comprehensive across research, policy, services, and individual, lived experiences; but the rotational aspect of the groups as they addressed each domain allowed that they could take the approximately one hour per session to address an average of only three questions, and; 3) The group dynamic allowed the emergence of opinions that in turn, generated conversations with data of consequence that were not specifically contained in a particular question.

### **3.B. Narratological Approach**

*“Narrative inquiry should be guided by intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors, methodologically driven, but accountable and reflective to the perceptions of participant, researcher and external publics each with a role to play in enriching the research”* (Ely, et al, 1997). Humans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially, lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These narratives have the power to create new insights in a number of ways. First: personal autobiographies and narratives of experience can both corroborate and dispute findings in the literature. Every person’s history and mode and purpose of tale telling are unique (Rolling, 2004). ‘Truths’ are often subject to interpretation and their validity can be challenged legitimately by a person’s personal viewpoint (O’Brien, 2013). Second: Personal narratives offer opportunities to propose counter-narratives to those that may be generally established or acknowledged. Counter narratives drive insight more deeply and can excise and examine previously hidden factors, motivations, causes and effects (Rolling, 2013). A narrative inquiry should gather multiple viewpoints and analyze environments and relationships to better understand multi-dimensional factors that offer different types of interpretations. Third, a narrative is a personal story that can bear a wide range of forms of telling. This study hopes to obtain diverse narratives from female veterans across the country.

Narratology can be a useful framework for organizing and conducting participatory action-oriented research because it can help develop bonds and trust between participant and researcher. When conducting research with people that have experienced traumas or losses (including veterans with service-related disabilities), a collaborative-even mutually dependent relationship is preferable to one that reinforces the researcher/respondent hierarchy (Stewart,

1997). Being fully mindful that narrative is a collaborative process, that unfolds over time and incorporates biography and autobiography opens up possibilities to explore deeper meanings and address macro-level issues through a micro-lens (Stewart, 1997). It may also be a process that mitigates against ways that men and women differentially interpret and react to military service (Ghahramanlou-Holloway, et al., 2011) and challenges of creating trust and rapport in the interview process when the researcher and participant are not of the same gender (Reinharz & Chase, 2013).

As Bogden and Biklen (2007) note, *“When informants tell you their stories, they offer an account of their lives framed in a particular way.”* (pg.178). Narrative identities are formed by a deliberate process of telling that reveals how a person wishes to be perceived and/or perceives themselves (Spector-Mersel, 2011). Consequently, the telling will stress certain aspects of life and experience, downplay others, and minimize or avoid other aspects. The researcher must be attuned to these processes and treat the narrative as a whole unit.

Gathering narrative that reveals aspects of veteran identity with implications for life course trajectories and military to civilian transition is informed by Spector-Mersel's structure for the construction of identities (2011). This orientation facilitates an appreciation of how identities are claimed by the stories that participants share. The grounded theory that emerges from this study and enriches the life course perspective relevant to young, female veterans with service-related disabilities, underscores the importance of integrating theories of *identity* (intrinsically-oriented paradigms) and *belonging* (externally-oriented paradigms). Spector-

Mersel identifies six mechanisms that this study uses as framing devices for the collection of stories as data, as depicted in Table 5.

**Table 5.**  
**Framing Devices for the Collection of Stories as Data**

| <b>Mechanism</b>                          | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Relevance</b>   |
|---|---|--|
| <b>1) Inclusion</b>                       | Inclusion helps to frame ways to uncover meaning through a dialogue that reveals what aspects of their lives that veterans choose to include. Their choice of end point; that is, the intent that they wish their stories to convey, drives what is included as they relate their stories. Their end point may also be influenced by the environment and circumstances of the research partnership. | Participants may be influenced by their perceptions of what the researcher might like to hear. They may decide to include those facts, events and periods in their life history that are compatible and confirms their end point (Spector-Mersel, 2011, pg. 174).  |
| <b>2) Sharpening</b>                      | Sharpening involves elaborating and exaggerating parts of the story depending upon the importance that the narrator ascribes to story elements of particular importance.  | If respondents return from time to time to emphasize particular ideas or assertions that they conveyed earlier in the conversation it could signal that they view these statements as important. Sharpening is also important to note during transcript coding to identify where respondents' narratives may converge around themes of particular relevance. |
| <b>3) Appropriate Meaning Attribution</b> | Through appropriate meaning attribution, "proper" significance is conferred on facts, events, and periods in the respondent's life history. This mechanism grows out of the narrative's ability to imbue meanings to events that at the time of occurrence bore different meanings or perhaps had no meaning at all.  | This mechanism is relevant to consider within the context of the interview itself, as an organically constructed event with its own imbued meaning. As interviews unfold, they can become their own narrative, affecting and perhaps obfuscating recollection of   |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|   |  | prior events that have been perceived or told differently prior to the interview.  |
| <b>4) Omission and<br/>5) Silencing</b> | Omission and silencing refer to the non-reporting of life facts, events, and periods, either because they are irrelevant to the end point of the story to be told (omission) or they contradict it (silencing). Silencing is the more powerful of these two. It functions as the gatekeeper of the claimed identity, preventing “harmful” facts from filtering in.   | In an interview where potentially, sensitive topics like veteran disability and inability to meet life role expectations that contradict a veteran’s interest as being perceived as able, a respondent may either choose to omit or silence disability-related experiences.  |
| <b>6) Flattening</b>                    | Flattening expresses minimalization or condensation of facts, events, and periods in the life history. That is, these are reported but are markedly reduced. Flattening often resembles omission or silencing, differing from them only in intensity: in the former little is said, whereas in the latter two nothing is said. Yet at times, flattening fulfils a different function, allowing the teller to achieve two goals simultaneously: mentioning a fact while also asserting its insignificance. In these cases, flattening may offer an outlet from the “narrative difficulty” created when two themes in the narrative are culturally opposed | Flattening may occur, similar to omission and silencing when female veterans have difficulty rationalizing their inculcation with the Warrior Ethos with inabilities or difficulties in achieving civilian life goals. It may also occur if difficulties in narration arise from rationalizing the experience of being victimized by their peers or superiors when the military espouses the importance of unit cohesion and comrade protection. |

### Relevance of Narrative Methods to Veteran-Related Research

The present research generates stories related by young, female veterans who have experienced, or continue to experience the lifecourse impacts of one or more service-related disabilities. In addition to their perspectives, insights, and opinions about their lives prior to,

during and post- enlistment, the way that they constructed their stories and their choice of words and associations about the acquisition of their injuries and how they are dealing with them reveals much about their lives to date. The study design allowed that participants would not be asked directly about how they acquired their disabilities. They were free to include or omit disability-related details and circumstances as they wished. The intent of the study was to focus only on how having a disability might affect their transition back into, and success within civilian life as young women. In the narratological tradition, participants were free to construct their narratives of disability in whatever manner and in whatever detail they preferred. This procedure was also intended to allow for subjective analysis about whether participants were more or less comfortable in discussing physical, as contrasted with psychological injuries. For example, more than one veteran described her physical injuries in great detail, but only alluded to the mental anguish she endured that created psychological challenges as well. Their narratives in this regard could contribute to a better understanding of veteran service-seeking behaviors, when veterans may be more likely to seek care for an extremity wound and less likely to seek care for its mental health co-occurring factors. Barriers and facilitators to mental health treatment-seeking among Iraq/Afghanistan veterans are well-noted in the literature (VA, 2011; Congressional Budget Office, 2012; Sayer et. al. 2010).

### **3.C. Research Design**

This study obtained personal narratives from a convenience sample of 15 young, Post-911 female veterans with service-related disabilities, between the ages of 18-32, who participated in semi-structured interviews of between 1-1.5-hour duration. One initial focus



group was scheduled to be held with a convenience sample of between 4-6 veterans to further clarify the types of questions to be asked, however it did not meet its recruitment targets and interviews were well-along with questions and probes that yielded the data needed for the study. Challenges related to recruitment for this study are discussed in greater detail in Section 3.C.2. Generation of narrative data yielded a varied richness of their personal accounts of successes and challenges; realized and unrealized aspirations, and; expressions of their location within their age cohort and within civilian society after military service.

Half of the women serving in today's military are minority women (Kelty, Kleykamp & Segal, 2010). While 71% of active-duty men are white, only 53% of active-duty women are white (Patten & Parker, 2010). Participants were not asked to identify their racial or cultural backgrounds, however from inferences to race and culture emerged from a number of interviews, it could be surmised that approximately .7% were African-American and 1.4% were Latina.

I had concerns about the short amount of time allocated to each interview, and that they would not be conducted in-person where gestures and facial expressions contribute to the richness of narratives. However, all interviews were at least an hour and more than one continued for over an hour and a half. They had much to say. At some points, I allowed the conversation to stray from the particular question that was asked; especially when they were on a rich narrative trajectory. With sufficient probes available for each question and with an atmosphere of trusting, easy dialogue, the study collected rich narratives and a more holistic

appreciation of who these young veterans are, including personal reflections, discussions of family and work environmental circumstances, and other aspects of their lives.

### **3.C.1 Epistemological approach**

The military experiences and experiences in transitioning back into civilian life among Post-911 female veterans are increasingly the focus of research, news reports, social media and portrayals in the popular media. As evidence grows that substantiates sexual harassment and military sexual trauma with its corollaries of post-traumatic stress disorder, female servicemembers and veterans and their public and private sector allies are asking '*why is this happening?*' and '*what can be done about it?*'. Examinations of the role that the male-dominated military culture plays in allowing these psychological and physical injuries to occur and creating a climate where these occurrences; if not officially condoned; are nonetheless prevalent and often unreported or unpunished is a growing area of focus among researchers, policymakers, and the military establishment itself (Belkin, 2012). Recent major studies conducted by the Pew Research Center (2011) and Disabled Veterans of America (2014), and other policy groups portray stories of feelings of betrayal, career-ending circumstances, and the post-military life difficulties that female veterans who have been traumatized by their comrades often endure. Not all female veterans report MST/PTSD, however recent reports suggest that between 25%-50% of all of those who have served have experienced one or both of these conditions (Disabled Veterans of America, 2014).

As indicated earlier, this study did not probe for circumstances regarding the MST/PTSD traumas experienced by young, female veterans, but instead relied upon their inclination to

voluntarily offer their accounts and the effects it has had on their lives. This study also sought to generate new insights into their motivations to enlist, and how their expectations were either met or unmet during service, how they perceive that military service shaped their civilian life course roles and trajectories, and the challenges and successes they faced during the early years of separation from active duty. All of these, as well as how they perceive the value of military service (service-related disabilities and traumas notwithstanding), are important in understanding the variability and multiplicity of elements that Schlossberg and others offer are inherent in role entries and exits.

As fellow citizens, we can be justifiably outraged by the predatory acts perpetrated by female veterans' fellow servicemembers and the alleged culpability of their ranking officers as either perpetrators themselves, or in condemning the military's slow response in fully prosecuting and punishing violators and ensuring that military service is a 'sexual trauma – free zone'. We can also be incensed that female veterans who may have aspired to long-lasting military careers find their career prospects curtailed or ended after they have been victimized. However, my primary goal in conducting this study focuses upon how female veterans' post-military life courses as young adults are shaped by even their most traumatic experiences, and to what extent these events became turning points in their lives. And, for more than one veteran, a trauma-related turning point metamorphosed into a lifecourse transition as they embarked upon careers providing veteran peer support. While it is important to learn how service-related disabilities negatively impact their life course trajectories, it is equally important to learn how having a disability may result in new, positive self-perceptions and expressions of

confidence and strength derived from living beyond the limitations that disabilities have on their lives.

Inductive analysis of narrative content is foregrounded by the literature review of the life course perspective and transition to adulthood; research on the dynamics of role exit and entry and challenges associated with role change, and; how societal perceptions of disability and ways that disability treatment and support for recovery align or may not align with the experiences of female veterans with service related disabilities. The 12 respondents who met the interview criteria provide a counterfactual as well as a confirmatory perspective, in that they exited a total institution, predominately in possession of mental health-related disabilities, but re-enter civil society without the 'spoiled identity' and negative societal perceptions that others with mental health disabilities, or ex-prisoners often face after leaving institutions (Goffman, 1961). The research also sought to answer corollary questions including *"how does gender create influences on the military and post-military life experiences of young, female veterans?"*; and *"what insights into life course progression can be drawn from their experiences with having service related disabilities?"*.

The study generated inductive analyses of research questions that frame the correlates of transition to adulthood among female veterans with service related disabilities and their experiences re-entering civilian life roles. These include consideration of military experience for disruptive, or enhancing effects on a female veteran's attainment of lifecourse markers on her trajectory to adulthood, how immersion in the highly regulated military institution adversely or positively affects a young adult's ability to succeed in the more ambiguous, disorderly civilian

world, and whether or not having service-related disabilities has deleterious or strength-producing impacts upon these veterans achievement of life course goals. These questions are discussed in greater detail in Section 4.

### **3.C.2. Selection procedures**

Convenience sampling is one of the most commonly used sampling procedures in conducting qualitative research studies, although it is limited in its ability to control for initial differences between experimental and control groups (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). Convenience sampling is a non-random sampling technique characterized by its ease of use, and where all population members (in this case all female veterans within the study demographic) have an equal probability of recruitment and participation (IBID). It has been used in conducting prior veteran research, including a study examining the differential impact of military, civilian adult, and childhood sexual assault on the likelihood of developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the relationship between military sexual assault (MSA) and service utilization and health care costs among women using VA services (Suris, et. al., 2004).

Convenience sampling was chosen for this study in preference to other methods, including purposive (intent-based) selective sampling for a number of reasons. First, the cohort recruited for this study share some demographic characteristics, including age range, prior military service in the Post-911 era, service separation within three years, and a service-related disability that could be either rated or non-rated, but not others. For example, and as illustrated

in Tables 6 and 7, participants were not clustered in any one state, nor had they all served in the same branch of service. Using convenience sampling allowed the present study to cast the widest possible net; potentially offering the greatest possibilities for representation across all participant recruitment criteria. These include environmental factors that may be relevant to their military to civilian transition, including whether or not they returned to urban or rural areas, with greater or lesser access to VA health services; jobs, or proximity to post-secondary educational institutions. It can also capture data from participants across the age range of 18-32, anticipating potential differences in experiences between those at the youngest and the oldest limits of the demographic.

The choice of convenience sampling also allowed that variations in the experiences of those who separated from active duty for only a month or two may be different than those that separated near the 3-year limit that the study required. Finally, convenience sampling, compared to a purposive sampling method, also potentially presented variation in types and impacts of service-related disabilities that they sustained. For example, purposive recruitment of only veterans who experience MST would have skewed the study and would not have been congruent with its intent. These recruitment decisions helped to better explain the complex array of conditions that young, female veterans with service-related disabilities face in selecting, serving and transitioning from the military into the civilian world.

I also decided to consider convenience sampling over purposive sampling because I did not intend to limit my study to the experiences of female veterans from only one branch of service. Instead, understanding how the military acculturation process affects civic, social and

economic inclusion of young, female veterans without regard to branch of service or duty assignment, allowed the opportunity for insights into whether some service branches do a better job of assisting in servicemember transition than others, according to the opinions of study participants.

In addition to Convenience Sampling, and in order to increase the recruitment pool, I requested and received IRB approval to use snowball sampling as one of my methods. I asked participants at the end of each interview to reach out to other veterans they may know who met the study requirements, and who may be interested in participating in an interview and provide my contact information. This Snowball Sampling method yielded but one additional recruit but got me that much closer to my target. In implementing the study, I faced numerous challenges in securing study participants meeting the specific criteria I established, as briefly discussed below.

### **Recruitment Challenges and Implications for the Study:**

Few studies have collected data on female veterans between the ages of 18-32, with service-related disabilities, and no studies to date have added the criteria to include only those recently separated from active duty. My recruitment sources were intended to provide the study with a nationally and branch of service-representative sample of female veterans meeting the study criteria, in order to better describe the age, temporal, disability type, and other factors potentially affecting young, female veterans' pathways to adulthood in the civilian sector. However, the challenges that I experienced in securing a sufficient number of study

participants despite using 5 recruitment sources were significant. While this created implications for the present research, it may also provide cautions for future researchers, should they seek to explore life course trajectories among participants within a similar study demographic, using similar criteria.

First Recruitment Strategy (VA and Clear Path for Veterans): I initially proposed to recruit a national sample of up to 45 interview study participants drawn primarily from Veteran Administration Medical Centers (VAMCs) in 4 states and up to 6-8 participants for inclusion in 2 Focus Groups recruited through Clear Path for Veterans (<http://www.clearpath4vets.com>), a veteran services agency located in Chittenango, NY. Clear Path directly engages and supports veterans across all eras, service branches and genders and offer a range of in-house services focused on restoring, reconnecting and integrating veterans into their communities. I chose an interview recruitment demographic focusing upon female veterans who were being seen through VAMCs, residing in one of the four states (California, Florida, Texas, and New York). These states have the highest number of veteran residents as reported by the Veterans Administration (Veterans Administration, 2014). I also secured Without Compensation (WOC) student researcher status at the Syracuse VAMC, enabling me to conduct research within the VA, and more specifically at the Syracuse VAMC.

However, I found that having an IRB approval from one VAMC did not exempt me from obtaining separate IRB approvals from each VAMC recruitment site in any other state. In subsequent conversations with my Dissertation Chair, Syracuse VAMC mentor, and a VA researcher that had conducted a multi-VA site research study, we agreed that the obstacles



would be very significant in establishing the VA as a primary recruitments site. Moreover, the intent of the study is not to assess how female veterans receiving VA medical services are faring in their post-military lives, so locating recruitment primarily through VAMCs did not meet the framework of the study. Discussions with my VA sponsor and others at the VA confirmed that although they were serving female veterans with service-related disabilities, age and separation from active duty criteria were likely to result in a very small pool of participants. In the meantime, two focus group recruitment postings through Clear Path also yielded no responses. Consequently, alternative recruitment sources were established.

Second Recruitment Strategy-Final Salute, Inc. The addition of Final Salute, Inc. as a recruitment source opened up possibilities for participation by female veterans from across the country and from all branches of service who may or may not receive VA services. Final Salute (<http://www.finalsaluteinc.org>) is a national organization that focuses on serving and supporting the needs of female servicemembers and places a particular emphasis upon serving those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, or in transition from homelessness, including those with service-related disabilities. It maintains a website and social media platform that would be appropriate for posting recruitment materials. Recruitment of interview participants through Final Salute was successful and a total of 13 of their respondents volunteered to be interviewed. The decision was then made to establish two new recruitment sources for interviews and focus groups in order to meet and potentially exceed my minimum participation target.

Third Recruitment Strategy (Student Veterans of America and Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families): To achieve the goal of recruiting participants from across the country, I next turned to two of the nation's leading veteran-facing organizations that would be very likely to engage the young, female veterans I planned to interview. I received agreement from Student Veterans of America (SVA) and the Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) to recruit participants through their social media platforms. SVA (<http://studentveterans.org>) is a 501(c)(3) coalition of student-veteran groups on college campuses across the globe and supports a network of over 1,300 schools and over 500,000 student veterans, funds scholarships, conducts research and aids veterans in preparing for, and achieving academic success. IVMF (<https://ivmf.syracuse.edu>) is committed to advancing the post-service lives of America's service members, veterans and their families and delivers unique and innovative programs in career, vocations, and entrepreneurship education and training to post 9/11 veterans and active duty military spouses, as well as tailored programs to veterans of all eras. Both organizations reach hundreds of thousands of veterans and appeared to be extraordinary sources for study participant recruitment. Despite their extremely diligent efforts to recruit study participants, and through multiple postings on their social media platforms, neither recruitment site generated any respondents, so I sought out yet another source.

Fourth Recruitment Strategy (Onondaga Community College): Onondaga Community College (OCC) (<http://www.sunyocc.edu>) is located in Syracuse, NY and enrolls approximately 200 veteran students per year. It is in proximity to Fort Drumm, NY and is recognized as one of

New York State's most veteran-friendly campuses. Recruitment materials for both individual interviews and a focus group were posted, and individual veterans were directly contacted by OCC's Office of Veteran Services. Since the Student Veterans of America study (2012) found that a majority of Post-911 veterans are choosing to reenter, or re-enter post-secondary education at the community college level, I was reasonably confident that the addition of OCC would result in enough respondents to meet and exceed my recruitment targets. However, despite OCC's best efforts, the recruitment resulted in the addition of only 1 response. Staff offered that two factors might have limited the number of respondents. Some wished to participate but had separated from service for 3+ years; and others were interested, but just not ready yet to talk about their service-related disabilities.

A re-contact to three respondents generated through Final Salute yielded 1 more interview and my 15- person interview threshold was met and I was able to schedule interviews, even though the confirmatory focus group did not materialize. Despite these recruitment challenges, the narratives I obtained from my study group are both valid and consequential. They convey both richness of content and can serve as a baseline of narrative data for future researchers to build upon.

### **3.C.3 Data collection procedures**

As I note in the Subjectivities Statement (Section 1.H), I acknowledged that I might have difficulties as a non-veteran, 65- year old male; and without disabilities, in recruiting and developing an honest, conversational relationship with young, female veterans with service-related disabilities. Furthermore, I anticipated from my prior work with veterans and veteran-

serving organizations, and through research studies validating the veteran-veteran relationship as conducive for disability-related dialogue, that some respondents might be reticent in their disclosures without some assurance that I, as a non-veteran, still had sufficient credentials that provided me with a measure of validity. I determined that by presenting a brief personal profile early in the recruitment process, I could allow the opportunity for respondents to Google my name, or search for me on LinkedIn to validate my introductory statement and make the decision to participate in the discussion.

Participants were informed at the outset that I am not involved in training, technical assistance, or program development with veterans served by the VA and that I am conducting research as an independent researcher pursuing my Ph.D. By letting them know that I have done extensive work throughout my career on veteran and disability-related issues, my intent was to establish a level of comfort and trust that would positively influence their willingness to honestly share their stories with me.

A brief introduction of the researcher's qualifications, interest and intent were also provided in writing to each participant after they had responded with their interest in participating in the study (Appendix K). The introduction was provided with the expectation that it would assist in developing rapport and trust necessary for a participant's willingness to divulge potentially sensitive information and serve as a foundation for rapport and trust-building necessary for conducting a full and open dialogue and be willing to share their potentially private and sensitive aspects of their lives and experiences. The personal profile apparently achieved its intent. Many participants said during the interview that they were eager to share their stories with me, appreciated my interest in developing the study, and some

also thanked me for my service in addressing and supporting veterans' issues throughout my career.

During some interviews, where prompting and probing was necessary to explicate and deepen the line of inquiry, judicious use of phraseology that confirmed and correlated participant testimony with the researcher's own insights, prompted some to offer more information on a topic that they had not provided to that point, without leading their responses. On a number of occasions, participants stated that they appreciated the perspectives that the researcher offered that made the conversation easier and more collegial for them. Common themes concerning identity and belonging also began to emerge as semi-structured interview data was collected. Questions exploring these themes were implicitly, as well as explicitly posed during individual interviews, as each conversation evolved and turned in directions dictated by the narrator's inclinations.

#### **3.C.4. Interview Questions**

The selection of interview questions deliberately followed a trajectory congruent with lifecourse perspectives and were intended to tease out information about transitions and turning points emanating from their decision to enlist, and through their months and years after separation from service. The specific questions used for semi-structured interviews are provided in Appendix L and are also used to introduce the discussions presented in Section 4. To the extent possible, the research attempted to obtain a longitudinal perspective that described the lifecourse motivations and experiences of study participants and sought greater dimensionality that would yield data contextualizing their military service within their life

course trajectories. Interview questions were clustered within each of the following domains to attempt to draw out narrative accounts of their sequences of exposure to military life, experiences during active duty, and their transition experiences and aspects of their post-military lives.

**Domain #1: Pre-Military Life Circumstances:** A group of questions and probes to gather information about their younger years, family life and the communities where they lived helped to locate some of the influences contributing to their reasons for enlisting. Why people choose to enlist is important in understanding if their expectations of military service were or were not fulfilled, and also helps to understand how they are framing their present-day life goals in light of their expectations upon enlistment. Probing questions sought to gather information about how others (friends, family) perceived their decision to enlist, whether or not military service influenced continuation of their civilian friendships, and whether or not they were supported in their decision to enlist.

**Domain #2: Military Experiences:** A group of questions and probes were presented to gather information about their military careers, interactions with other service members, accomplishments and how they were perceived both within the military establishment and by their civilian-sector family and peers during their time in active duty. The questions were generally organized into early and later military experiences to help in understanding how they thought they adjusted to military life. Questions probed for information about their adjustment to military life, both physically and psychologically, and also whether or not they think that

adjustment is in some ways different for males than for females. Questions also probed for information about their deployments and, to the extent that they wished to disclose the circumstances about how their disability was acquired. Understanding the circumstances and impacts of gender bias and its relationship to female servicemember identity and belonging within a male-oriented military institution was important in framing the discussion of role inequality while serving and its implications for post-military life. Consequently, probes were used to gather information about ways that female and male veterans might be treated the same or differently during their military service.

**Domain 3: Military to Civilian Transition:** A group of questions and probes were used to gather information about how separation from active duty occurred, and whether or not they felt that the military either impeded or contributed to their transition to civilian life roles as young adults. Questions probed for information about how well they were prepared for that transition, the types of assistance and support they received, the barriers they faced, and more about how they are experiencing psychological, social, and physical adjustments to civilian life. Questions also probed for difficulties or ease in transition during earlier or later years from date of separation to explore the temporal aspects of their transition to adulthood as civilians.

**Domain 4: Impacts of Service-Related Disabilities (Service-Related Injuries):** Throughout the study, respondents were not asked about the specific circumstances resulting in their injuries and disabilities. Rather, a series of questions were focused upon the lifecourse impacts

of their disabilities and how they were affected psychologically, physically, and how relevant having a disability is for their civilian role success.

**Domain 5: Insights and Recommendations:** These questions engaged participants as advisors as well as respondents. While exploring their experience relative to the main theoretical concepts guiding this paper is important, it is as important to hear directly from them about how military to civilian transition for female servicemembers could be improved. Questions probed for their opinions about ways that the military, friends, family, employers and educators could do a better job in assisting veterans with disabilities in their military to civilian transition. This domain also opened up the possibility to obtain some unsolicited testimony on how they felt that studies like this one could hold value for them, and other female veterans.

### **3.C.5 Data analysis procedures**

#### **Coding Procedures**

Participant responses were coded using MaxQDA software and analyzed for themes, consistencies and incongruities. The coding structure mirrored the major domains of inquiry focusing upon pre-Military, Military and Post-Military life experiences with sub-categories related to each theoretical framework upon which this study is based: the Life Course Perspective, Disability Theory, and Role/Exit Theory, with codes established for identity and belonging, both within the military and in their pre-and post-military civilian lives. Raw data



extracted from transcripts were entered into the coding framework and responses to each question were subsequently grouped and individually analyzed. From this analysis, narrative themes emerged that led to the generation of three overarching Research Questions that are discussed in Section 4.

### **3.C.6. Explicability, validity and reliability of the data**

The narratives generated by this research are reliable in both content and meaning and accurately reflect the experiences, insights and conjectures that participants offered, to the extent that participant narratives reflected their honest and complete depiction of their life events. As Spencer-Merkel (2011) observed, validity is often nuanced by participants' deliberate or unintentional choices about what to emphasize, include, or omit from their discussion. Liberal use of verbatim quotes throughout this paper underscore how the conclusions of the study emanate directly from what participants said, informed by the insights added from correlation to the research. While the study sample was small, it does reflect a nationally dispersed group of participants, representative across all active duty service branches, other than the US Marine Corps, and may be reasonably construed as presenting a valid basis for the conclusions presented in this study.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.A. Introduction

The inductive analysis that follows is based upon over 20 hours of recorded testimony with 12 of the 15 female veterans who were interviewed<sup>9</sup>. While it is not possible to provide as many of the quotations as I wished, some that were especially relevant to the arguments being made were chosen to lend resonance to the discussion. When taken as a whole, the female veterans' stories corroborate much of what prior research has demonstrated as among the challenges and successes that Post-911 female veterans experience over the trajectory of their military and post-military lives, and provide many new insights, as well.

Their narratives refute the tendency to regard the psychological and physical traumas that many have experienced and continue to deal with, as defining the type of person who they are now and they will not assume a victim identity. Those whose injuries were not sustained in combat or were not directly related to sexual assault and/or the effects of PTSD, still deal with their impacts upon their lives. Some also described how they must deal with perceptions by some civilians that their particular injuries are 'not real' since they were not combat-related,

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<sup>9</sup> Over 25 hours of recorded testimony was obtained from 15 individual interviews. However, during transcript coding, it was discovered that data obtained from 3 respondents who had served in excess of 20 years each, including a woman who gave her age as older than the upper limit of the study criteria could not be included in the analysis. However, it is important to note that they met criteria of service-related disabilities and years of separation from active duty (allowing that one veteran had been in an activated Reserve Unit and deployed to the Middle East), their testimony was consistent thematically with the testimony of the study participants, and thereby corroborated the findings related to female veteran transition challenges experienced by younger female veterans.

even to the point of insinuating that they were being used to obtain (presumably unearned) VA disability benefits.

*“Being a female but also being a non-combat injury-it’s not something I commonly talk about with my family. It just doesn’t fit into that range of things that make sense to them so it’s not something we talk about”.*

But they also related that they are finding ways to overcome their challenges and get on with their civilian lives, even while still struggling to recover their sense of who they are and where they fit in within the civilian world. Although the narrative theme of their struggle to be acknowledged, no matter their accomplishments, emerged from the interviews, there was also strong agreement that the military provided them with undeniable personal and professional benefits that they use in civilian life. Every veteran I talked with acknowledged that it was a great challenge to both perform their jobs and try to fit into the male-oriented military culture.

*“I absolutely believe there are different adjustments for a female especially in a male dominated occupation. Even throughout your career, you’re adjusting all the way through because you’ve got to fit in with them”.*

And, some of them are also using their experiences to provide support and inspiration to other veterans recovering from disabilities by working as peer advocates, or within the VA health care system.

#### **4.B Participant Demographics**

Study participants from across the country responded to the recruitment flyers. They ranged in age from their early ‘twenties to early ‘thirties, although one veteran met all criteria for years of separation from service and service-related disability but offered during the

interview that she was 44 years of age. They live in small towns located in rural communities and in large metropolitan urban centers. One of them grew up on her family farm. Two veterans immigrated to this country as infants or children and became naturalized citizens. Often, I was told that their families had long histories of serving in the armed forces of the United States, dating back to the Civil War, but most frequently during World War II, Korea and the Vietnam War. While questions probing for race and ethnicity were not asked directly, narrative patterns among those whose data was analyzed suggest that at 2 were Latinas<sup>10</sup>.

Their contemporary family members and friends often saw or continue to see service in the Middle East, from the first Gulf War through present-day conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some related horrific experiences in dealing with a military spouse's or close military relative's death by suicide, due to untreated PTSD and other service-related traumas. A number of them were not deployed to present day zones of conflict and spent their military careers at installations across the United States; or on shore patrol in US or foreign country coastal waters, or; in assignments to military bases in Germany, Korea and other countries.

They represented almost all of the branches of service, predominated by service in the Army and the Air Force; but without any representation from the Marines. Service branches are represented below:

**Table 6.**<sup>11</sup>

**Participant Demographics: Branches of Service**

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Army      | 4 |
| Air Force | 4 |
| Navy      | 2 |

<sup>10</sup> One veteran interviewed for this study whose data could not be analyzed implied that she was African-American

<sup>11</sup> Two veterans interviewed for this study whose data could not be analyzed served in the Army and another served in the National Guard

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Coast Guard | 2 |
|-------------|---|

Both officers (N=5) and Enlisted Personnel (N=7) are represented in the analysis. All had separated from active duty within three years; some as recently a one- or two months, and others almost for the full three years. Their years of service ranged from 4-10 years, with a mean of 5.75 years. Ten states are represented by the 12 female veterans whose narratives were analyzed for this research as below:

**Table 7.**

**Participant Demographics: States of Residence**

| <b>State</b>   | <b>Number of Study Participants (N=12)<sup>12</sup></b> |
|----------------|---|
| Ohio           | 1   |
| Florida        | 1   |
| New York       | 2   |
| Texas          | 1   |
| Georgia        | 2   |
| Nevada         | 1   |
| North Carolina | 1   |
| Massachusetts  | 1   |
| Maryland       | 1   |
| Virginia       | 1   |

All had service-related disabilities, predominated by their disclosure of PTSD, often with co-occurring physical disabilities sustained either during combat situations, or while on non-combat assignments. Five veterans who fell within the study parameters admitted to forced sex during their enlistment, and almost all respondents alluded to inappropriate sexual advances. While questions regarding their VA disability compensation rating were not asked, most were currently receiving some medical assistance through a VA facility, or had done so in the past.

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<sup>12</sup> Respondents whose data could not be analyzed were from Louisiana, Illinois and Vermont

## 4.C Research Questions: Summary and Themes

This section summarizes themes that emerged from the questions posed during interviews according to each domain of inquiry. They are arranged sequentially in the order that they were asked, and their ordering was intended to approximate a sequence of pre-during-and post-military lifecourse experiences.

### 4.C.1. Pre-Military Life Experience

- *Describe your pre-military life including family, community circumstances*
- *What about your pre-military life motivated you to enlist?*
- *Why did you choose that branch of service?*
- *What was the reaction from family and friends to your enlistment?*
- *Do you think that your enlistment expectations were met?*

Summary: Gathering data about the reasons that young females choose to enlist, and how their expectations change over the course of their enlistment, allows opportunities to view how their life and career goals are formed, who they ‘think they were’ before they enlisted and afterwards, and how they might negotiate discrepancies between belonging to a military organization and also belonging to groups in civilian life. These questions also help to assist in understanding lifecourse trajectories of young, female veterans as a developmental process that begins with their choice to enlist, continues through a period of “capture and control” as enlistees are molded into the identities that the military requires for its mission, and evolves further after the individual is released back into civilian life, where they must renegotiate their

relationships with civilian society, and manage their lifecourse expectations in a much less regimented and proscribed world.

Themes: A number of themes emerged from questions focused upon pre-military experiences, decisions to enlist, and how initial expectations were met or unmet. Some talked about their interests in joining the military from their time of childhood as an early aspiration. Most study respondents thought that their decision to enlist in the military was a significant turning point in their lives. Some offered that at the time, they were floundering in civilian life and searching for a change of direction that offered new opportunities for personal and career growth. Some were attending college and decided to withdraw in favor of enlisting as a way of obtaining income and benefits they could use to continue to afford college. One woman talked about her decision to re-enlist after finances became so strained that she and her family would soon be at risk of homelessness. Another theme that emerged related to their motivations to enlist was how their decision was made easier because of family military associations.

Nine of these veterans replied that the military tradition was so strong in their families because of family members who had served, and that military service just seemed like a right and natural course for them to pursue at the time, as this veteran shared:

*“Well, I grew up hearing about both of my grandfathers who served in World War II, and I think it was more ... So, I read *The Long Gray Line*, which is a book about West Point, when I was in 8th grade. And I think I was really drawn to being a part of something that was bigger than yourself”.*

Others offered that their decision to enlist was a natural outcome of who they felt they were, and what they liked to do (e.g. competitiveness, sense of adventure, sports and conditioning interests, etc.). A number of respondents talked about their decision to enlist as a way of giving back. One veteran quoted here was born in Mexico and said that serving in the military was her way of showing appreciation for the advantages that living in the US afforded her and her family:

*"I think it was more than anything just all of the opportunities that the US had given to not just me, but my family. It was kind of a way of giving back. It was really just we were living the American dream".*

Another offered that joining the military reflected her values of commitment to service that she developed as a volunteer firefighter. Similar motivations were expressed by another veteran who was enrolled in a college-level criminal justice major who thought that her occupational field shared many characteristics with military service and substantiated her decision to leave college to join the military. Yet another acknowledged that joining the military was such a spur-of-the-moment decision when her civilian life seemed unsettled, that she didn't even tell her family about it before she was ready to leave. Despite their various reasons for joining the military, these female veterans viewed their reasons as part of a natural progression in their lives; either to fulfill unmet expectations; for financial reasons; or for seeking an escape from their current situations and enter a different life-track that they viewed with greater optimism.



The reactions that they received from friends and family varied considerably. One person offered that their friends were surprised and couldn't understand why she had decided to enlist; while another described that her friends congratulated her and provided support for her decision. One veteran indicated that the gulf between her and her friends widened after they were told of the enlistment, that she thought was in some part due to their disdain for the military and current US military involvement in the Middle East. Parent and sibling reactions were similar.

*"My college friends thought it unusual because I'm pacifist, non-aggressive but I explained that service will help me pay back student loans and they got that".*

All but two said that their parents, while expressing shock, surprise, or concern, gave their support to their decision to enlist. Some parents and siblings who were aware of the potential dangers of Middle East deployment, either through direct experience or through news accounts, offered that perhaps choosing a service branch with less likelihood of being exposed to direct combat would be advisable. Most parents were worried, and in at least one person's experience, opposed her enlistment. At least four of the young women were advised by family members that they should 'watch out for themselves', or that serving in the military was 'not all that it seemed for a woman'. It appeared that those parents and siblings who were most supportive of a veteran's decision were those who had served in the military, and/or whose parents had served.

Participant narratives also revealed how they now feel that their military experiences met or did not meet the expectations that they had when they enlisted. Some themes that

emerged at this stage of the interview were corroborated and expanded upon later in the interview when they were asked if the military prepared them for success in civilian life. For example, one veteran offered that she excelled in whatever she had done prior to enlistment, and that her expectations of military service would provide even more opportunities to continue to succeed, but in even more challenging environments. While she was prepared physically for military service, she did not expect how strongly issues of gender – related bias would affect both her psychological adjustment to military service, as well as her career opportunities. The themes of gender bias and male-oriented military culture emerged as two of the most salient challenges that respondents associated with their military service. These themes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections. Also noted among many of the responses given, were unfulfilled expectations about the types of duty assignments they were given; that were in many cases different than those they expected when they met with recruiters. All service branches shared this aspect; however, it was more prevalent among participants who served in the Army.

For some, specific military experiences were sufficiently salient or traumatic enough to upend their original expectations of enlistment and become, themselves important lifecourse - turning events. One veteran described how her forced sexual encounter perpetrated by a superior officer affected not only her military career, but also how she now negotiates interpersonal relationships with men in authority in different ways than she had done previously.

*“To this day, I'm still searching for the answers, I guess you'd say, on what to do or how to treat it or anything”.*

How military service represents either a disruption in the timing and sequencing of lifecourse events associated with the transition to adulthood is nuanced by the number of women who were well on their way towards achieving civilian adulthood milestones, and were either married, divorced, and/or had children at the time that they enlisted. Five of the 12 women were married at, or during their enlistment (4 of them to a military spouse), and 4 had children. The Lifecourse Perspectives research corroborates that completing post-secondary education is another salient lifecourse marker. A number of veterans were already on a path towards completing post-secondary education or had completed their degree programs, including 3 who graduated from military academies. Five were enrolled in college and left post-secondary education for the military (2 had graduated from military academies). And, as regards establishing good jobs and careers, 2 of the veterans left full-time jobs when they enlisted, in expectation that the military could provide them with better careers.

In summary, almost 100% of the veterans viewed their decision to enter military service as a deliberate choice at that time in their lives. Most of this group of respondents offered that they viewed military service as a means to better themselves financially; learn marketable skills; and obtain health and educational benefits that they may have otherwise been unable to afford. No matter their motivations or the timing of their decisions, all veterans in the study made the decision to belong to the military for what it promised to provide them; and their intention was to excel in their military missions. To paraphrase the often-used slogan: “be all that they could be”, they expected that the military would be a life-enhancing experience, notwithstanding the risks of injury or death.

*“I felt like I had a lot of opportunities in my life and I felt like I really wanted to serve the country and you know kind of pay back the country for the opportunities that it had given me. And I was really attracted to the idea of serving, the honor of the armed forces and things of that nature”.*

Their reasons for enlisting out of a sense of duty and service to their country are similar to why male veterans choose to enlist. What many did not expect, was that being in the military often meant that they would have to fight a war to belong, as well as whatever wars they had to fight as warriors. How their adjustment to military life, and how their expectations were, or were not realized is discussed in the next section.

#### **4.C.2. Early Military Experiences**

- *What was it like adjusting to a military lifestyle, and what was easy or hard about that?*
- *Were you prepared mentally and physically for military life?*
- *Do you think adjustment to military life is different for females than for males, and in what ways?*
- *In what ways do you think that you succeeded or didn't succeed in adjusting to military life?*

Summary: After understanding why respondents chose to enter the military, a number of questions were posed to clarify how well they thought they did in transitioning from civilian to military life. Questions probing for information about the early parts of their military experiences were intended to set the stage for the next series of questions that would provide a more in-depth, longitudinal view of their military careers. Their responses to questions about

how, or if they thought that their experiences differed from the males that they served with were intended to uncover the extent of gender bias in the military, and what it meant to them.

Themes: Although most participants thought that they were well prepared physically for military life, the majority described how they were often challenged to adjust to the military in other ways. These included shifting their civilian attitudes and perceptions to a military mindset; adhering to military rules; dealing with a diversity of individuals from all over the country and with backgrounds and habits that they had not encountered previously; being away from loved ones, including their children; and for almost all-adapting to a male-oriented military culture. The theme of being a minority in a traditionally male occupation and the references to gender bias emerged as consistent themes throughout the narratives. Most of them referenced in a number of ways, how they felt that they were living both 'inside and outside' the military environment and described its effects on their senses of self, as well as how their struggles to be regarded equally affected their military careers.

For one respondent, just noting that military uniforms are designed for males, and can be ill-fitting and uncomfortable for women, was an ever-present reminder to her that women have yet to fit in to the military at even the most basic levels. Most talked about how hard it was to fit in to military life, as related by this veteran:

*"It was an assimilate-or-perish mindset, right from the beginning. You know, assimilate to everything from you're going to be treated like one of the guys, to you're going to be treated like a sexual object, to we demand offensive pictures of women in the briefings that you give us and if you don't give us those, we'll make fun of you for not assimilating to the culture".*

Being acknowledged as an equal to males was a challenge for many when they were in a great minority within their units. They offered that usually the ratio of females to males was extremely small, although it could vary by branch of service, assignment, and/or specialty. One veteran's Army platoon had a ratio of 3:60 females to males, but another offered that in her Navy specialized unit, the ratio of females to males was 3:5. Some described how difficult it was to develop associations with male servicemembers and noted the competition among a small group of females to vie for recognition and promotions.

*"Yeah, I think as woman in the military there's a lot of pressure for you to be like exceptional, I think that a lot of women need to deal with it by "hyper-masculinizing" themselves so that they can sit at the table with all the men around them and have that respect and credibility. I think that the way that I chose to deal with it was by having super competent in my career field but I think that there's very much a pressure to find some way whatever it is to distinguish yourself so that you have the credibility to be around all the men".*

Others said that when a woman secured better assignments or had male friends, she was assumed to be trading the perks for sexual favors. Conversely, if a woman tried to distance herself from male contact, often as a means of protecting herself either from unwanted attention or from the gossip of others, or to resist being sexually stereotyped, she could be singled out for criticism.

*"It was hard to have friends because everyone who was my friend- I guess I was sleeping with. Like if I got laid as often as they all rumored, I would be in a much better mood".*

Respondents had both male and female commanding officers. Some of them noted that the female officers were harder on them than the males, but others had different experiences, offering that female as well as male superiors could treat them respectfully and with the same regard as their male counterparts, as long as they did what was expected of them. A recurrent theme was that, as duty stations changed, and superior officers changed; they had either greater or less difficulty in fitting into their units.

*"I had both male and female superiors. One female superior that I had, the first one, in my first command, she was really nice, she took me under wing and helped me out as much as she could. The second female I had that was a supervisor in my second command, she was actually really mean and it's almost like she tried to make my life more impossible".*

And, just trying to do their job with team members who were male could lead to misperceptions that could have negative effects on their performance. Accounts like the one below indicates how challenging being a woman in the military could be:

*"I dealt with a lot of sexism. It was okay for men to be flirtatious, but not for women to be flirtatious. Like for me, at least I wasn't, but any time I talked to another man, it was considered flirting. I never understood why, especially from my first command. I had a chief who would make me clean the toilets whenever I pissed him off. I remember there was one time there was someone who came to fix my computer and he said I was flirting".*

Regarding their perceptions of being successful in adjusting to military life, most offered that the physical demands, while often grueling, were easier to overcome than the psychological demands of trying to assimilate as an equal to their male peers. A number of them talked about being physically fit and excelling in sports prior to enlistment. However, as a number of veteran shared, it often took determination 'above and beyond the call of duty' to achieve a sense of 'fit' within the military establishment.

The study participants generally thought that males had a relatively easier time assimilating, if for no other reason but that there were more of them to support each other.

*"I think men have less mental adjustment and you're going to have the typical rigors of presenting yourself, standing at attention, especially the physical. More accepting of the structure as it were, and the expectation is that they look at you and say you're capable and then look at a girl and say are you sure you're capable"?*

And, overriding these challenges of fitting into the military culture, was the sentiment expressed by many of the participants that women were often presumed to be less capable than men.

*"We worked a lot with combat units, and so especially when we were deployed, we worked in addition to combat engineers or infantrymen and we'd go on the same assignments as them, and I think when they saw women out in the field it was always kind of a shock for them. They didn't want them to be there, so there was kind of that feeling of "What are you doing?" So you really had to go above and beyond to prove yourself".*



Some respondents were quick to add that those gender- biased perceptions could change if they were assigned to specialties within units that had higher female-male ratios, or during deployment to combat areas, where the playing field was considerably leveled. Most of the veterans who had been deployed to the Middle East offered variations on how combat experience was a great equalizer. They related that, when called upon to act as a member of their units in the field, the gender biases that they may have experienced in other assignments dissipated. During combat situations, servicemembers are thrust into life or death circumstances that depend on the expertise of their battle buddies and their adherence to proscribed military situational training, rather than their gender. And those situations offered female veterans to demonstrate what they could do:

*"My leadership trusted me, and my unit trusted me, and so by proxy I was put in a lot of positions where I was the only support that these infantry or the others in my unit were gonna get so they had to just deal with it, and so they realized halfway through the mission that "Oh, okay I don't have to worry she can take care of herself and this isn't an issue." After that initial stage of proving yourself and proving they don't have to worry about you, everything came pretty easily".*

Other veterans offered that trust borne from the need for mutual reliance under fire accorded female servicemembers the respect and equal regard that they could find difficult to obtain under other circumstances.

*“When we hit the ground, I had it in my mind that I would be stronger than the weaker infantry man. So as long as I stayed ahead of them, and made myself an asset, it was almost never an issue”.*

In summary, the female veterans interviewed for this study had high expectations of being successful in the military, and if they tried hard, would be accorded the types of recognition that they could get for succeeding in civilian sector occupations. Yet, many found that they were facing an uphill struggle from the beginning. Or, as one person noted: *“You have to work twice as hard to be seen as equal”*. The stories they shared about the early years of their military careers were filled with many examples of their strength and determination as they strove to do the best jobs that they could; become one with their units and earn an equivalent amount of respect and opportunities for advancement as their male colleagues.

#### **4.C.3. Military Life**

- *Describe the highlights of your military career*
- *Are female and male servicemembers treated any differently during military service?*
- *How were you regarded by friends and family when you were in the military?*
- *Are those types of reactions different for female rather than male servicemembers?*
- *How does the military train you for success in the military and are those skills helpful in the civilian world?*
- *Describe your deployment experiences.*
- *During deployment, and particularly if you served in combat-exposed situations, what was there about military training that got you through those times?*
- *Are female and male servicemembers treated any differently in those situations and in what ways?*

Summary: The next series of questions were intended to probe more deeply for information about the history of their military careers. These included particulars about their deployments and experiences in combat, whether or not they were able to achieve tenure and rank, if they encountered and how they dealt with gender bias, and to the extent that participants chose to offer, the circumstances under which their service-related disabilities were sustained and the effects that they had on their military careers. I was particularly interested in learning if participants thought that the males were treated any differently, and their perceptions about military power hierarchies and how they were able to negotiate them. I was also interested in how and why they exited from the military when they did. By understanding if their separation was planned or forced allowed the opportunity to ascertain how well they may have prepared themselves for a return to civilian life.

Themes: These young women performed a variety of military occupations, from scrubbing deck paint as a seaman, to military intelligence; and from being a helicopter service technician in Afghanistan under combat conditions to performing complicated data gathering and analysis using sophisticated computer technology, and many others. Some experienced single or multiple deployments to the Middle East, while others were stationed at U.S. bases, or patrolled the inter-coastal or international waterways. Four of them not only met their military missions, but struggled with being an absentee mother, and 5 of them with trying to have a successful marriage; sometimes to a spouse who also served and was deployed to different duty stations and at different times. Over the course of their careers, 50% attained officer rank and had opportunities to command predominately male units. Some described how they had to

overcome gender bias as an officer and to be seen as an equal among other officers, even as they had to deal with those issues when they were in enlisted ranks. The presence of a female officer among males sometimes elicited a humorous situation as this young woman described:

*“So- we're given our briefing, telling them what we can do to help there, and it's their leadership, it's their squad leader, their team leader, their platoon leader. So- it's not the privates. The leadership. By the time I get done telling them everything we do, which is a lot especially overseas in the Middle East because the men can't interact with women. And from the intelligence side that's huge. So- by the end of things, I looked at all of them and this is going to be a little crude, I was like you know, let's address the elephant in the room. I am in fact female. And they all stared at me. I was like and if that's going to be a problem, my penis is on back order. They were all silent. I was like oh damn. I screwed this up. They all started laughing and I had no issues with that unit going forward, but that story got back to my leadership. So- it got back all the way to my sergeant major who walks up to me like three months later and it's at a training before we're leaving, and he goes did you ever get your package? And I had forgotten all about it. I was like what are you talking about major? He was like I heard you had something on back order.*

*I was like -oh my goodness”!*

Incidences of gender bias and sexism, including times where lewd and demeaning comments were made, were related by almost all of the respondents. Four of the 12 women disclosed the circumstances under which they had been sexually assaulted during their enlistment by male servicemembers who sometimes outranked them, and others related that

other female servicemembers told them that they had been raped while serving. One veteran described their difficulties and lack of satisfactory options in reporting the incidents, and the consequences to careers if they did:

*"To press charges means you can be branded as a troublemaker, have your truthfulness or motives questioned and it's a certain career-ender".*

One woman who had been sexually assaulted described how the military's procedures for reporting rape and filing the appropriate paperwork at the right time and in the right order made it extremely difficult for her to follow through on obtaining PTSD and telemental health services after she separated from active duty. She talked about how the VA required a form that didn't even exist until a year after she was assaulted and only succeeded through her persistence and with the help of a Congresswoman; but offered that many other veterans in the same situation aren't so fortunate.

Their fears of sexual assault required them to be always on guard and aware of circumstances where they could potentially be victimized; and more than one of them shared that the traumas associated with sexual assault and subsequent PTSD and other mental health issues still lingers on in ways that affects their daily lives.

*"Well, a lot of that is me putting up like five cement walls and a lock box between me and you. And, never let anyone in.". And, the military helps with being able to put up those walls in such quick order, but they also helped break me down mentally to the point where I deal with this on an everyday basis".*

Military training demands the same level of expertise and dedication to mission by all its personnel, with an espousal of equal opportunity for career growth, yet many female servicemembers felt that they were routinely disadvantaged when compared to their male peers. On numerous occasions, the veterans participating in this study offered their own versions of these circumstances:

*"It was just, I've been there for so long and somebody comes in and was there for two days, and they're doing a job that took me months to get there. They were amazing and they were like, oh, well let's throw them on there. I'm like, are you kidding me? I've been trying to do this for months"?*

And, although racial prejudice did not arise in any of the conversations, the implications of being one of a minority group was expressed in terms of their need to work extra hard just to be regarded as equal:

*"I had a section classmate, he was sergeant first class and he says to me, you have to work twice as hard for half the acknowledgement of these other guys, and so do I. I said, what do you mean? He said, you because you're a woman and me- because I'm black".*

Another veteran offered her perspective on how difficult it could be for female servicemembers to attain recognition and status. She had served before the 2016 lifting of the ban on assigning women to combat units and referenced the ban as yet another indication of how hard it can be to be a woman in a 'man's army':

*“If you deploy you have more points towards promotion and less likely a female would volunteer because most of us had children. So- most of us wouldn’t volunteer because our families couldn’t afford for us to be gone. So- you could test better but if you didn’t deploy, you wouldn’t have higher points”.*

Yet, even under these conditions, these female veterans expressed how they found ways to meet the mission challenges that they were given and adapt themselves in ways that the military requires of them. One young woman described how she had to overcome her own rebellious nature at enlistment; saw her upward mobility curtailed when she went too far out of line and was punished for her insubordinations and had to work her way back up through the ranks to achieve the rating that she could have attained earlier. The realization that she had to achieve to survive if she wanted to stay in the military incentivized her to greater efforts, and she was quite proud of her success when she attained the rank she aspired to.

Another talked about how she and others in her unit were hit by ground fire during a sandstorm during without support and during which they lost a colonel, and how important military training and discipline was to their survival. Another talked about how, as a translator she strove to treat the people she had to question with respect -even without knowing for sure if they would be the next IED detonator-and that they, just like her, were after all, ‘just people’. More than one of these veterans also described their times being deployed in the Middle East with a measure of nostalgia; as times when they were truly on par with their male comrades in the field and given the chance at excelling at the jobs that they were sent there to do.

As the narratives obtained in this study corroborate, these young veterans did not discount the skills they acquired as service members and the value of their military training in their personal lives, or later, as students or employees. They talked about how they received training, education, and developed the skills and aptitudes needed to perform their missions.

Indeed, in one way or another; and in various contexts, all of them talked about the importance of completing their missions and how civilians often just did not share the same duty ethic. They felt that their ability to dissect problems and organize and implement responses gave them advantages in situations where civilians they worked with, or who were their classmates seemed not to have. They also talked about their ability to take on responsibilities and to lead diverse individuals; forging them into a team that could get the job done. As some related later in the interviews, during their discussion of transition challenges and re-assimilation back into civilian life roles, these were among the discrepant characteristics that often contributed to their feelings of disassociation from their civilian peers who, in their opinions, lacked these skills. Almost all veterans had positive things to say about their military training, and how they could apply them in the environments that they experience in their civilian lives; particularly their leadership skills. These included helping them to succeed in educational environments:

*“I learned so much in the military, that I feel like now that I’m out, I’m able to take a lot of those skills and take to the classroom and be a more efficient person”.*

And, many talked about the ways that military training gave them advantages in work environments, including the often-referenced leadership skills that they received:



*“That was really developmental for me because it taught me, like I mentioned, how to learn, how to teach, how to lead people. But it also taught me how to keep your head in really scary situations. It's like, I know the procedures, I know what my job is, go do it. And then we'll get it done, we'll get the work done and if I need to freak out later, I can freak out later. But being able to respond to it in the minute definitely something I learned to defend”.*

Others described how their military training provided them with personal skills and capacities that they use in dealing with challenging situations in their personal lives:

*“I've learned how to make decisions under pressure all from the military training. Learned how to lead teams under pressure, how to make decisions, how to support your team, how to support the people that work for you. All those kinds of things have been invaluable to me since I've left”.*

Another young woman described how even the traumas she endured psychologically and physically during her enlistment can now be seen as a demonstration of her survival skills and as a basis for developing new personal insights that can be of value in her civilian life:

*“I view every negative experience as a self-improvement process. So those difficulties in the unit, they really only were terrible while it was going on. Afterwards, it helped me to relate to people that I wouldn't have been able to relate to, it helped me to see things going on in civilian workplaces that I might have been oblivious to otherwise. And it made me a better person, it made me a more self-aware and more aware of my surroundings and how they impact others”.*

Despite their in-service challenges, these young veterans stated that they returned to the more chaotic, less proscribed and more 'messy' civilian world armed with a plethora of skills, life experiences and knowledge that they felt other people around them just did not have:

*"I think that my military service sets me well above my peers in terms of what I can handle, the ability to lead people is something that ... I've never met someone who is my age, who hasn't been in the military, I've never met someone who has anything near the experience that I am my peers got in terms of leading people. I think that in the large majority of my experience, that my military experience has been profoundly beneficial to my life as a whole and certainly to my civilian career".*

Some returned to spouses and some to school and work. Others were still trying to find where they could belong. Almost all described how difficult it was to resume their civilian lives. The next series of questions were posed in order to uncover some of the reasons that contribute to those transition and lifecourse challenges.

#### **4.C.4. Military to Civilian Transition**

- *How does military service affect achievement of any or all of your life goals?*
- *Did military service affect the friendships that you had before you entered the military and since you separated from service?*
- *Does serving in the military make it harder to move forward in civilian life?*
- *Does the military help men and women transition back into civilian life the same or differently?"*
- *Does life get easier or harder during the first few years after you left the military?*

Summary: A requirement for participation in the research was that separation from active duty must have been within the past 3 years. The veterans I talked with were separated from active duty for varying lengths of time; 5 were relatively newly separated (1-2 years) and the other 7, between 2-3 years. Not all respondents offered if separation from active duty was voluntary or involuntary, however 3 stated or implied that they had been medically separated and one was separated on a Family Care Planning Chapter. Others indicated that they decided not to re-enlist after the end of their term of service. Whatever the circumstances leading to their transition from the military, there was almost unanimous agreement that the early months and years of their return to civilian life was very difficult. Three characteristics contextualizes their re-acclimation:

1) Individual characteristics (*intrinsic*); 2) Environmental characteristics (*extrinsic*); and 3) Time and sequence characteristics (*temporal*). These characteristics are also commensurate with Lifecourse Perspectives that seek to understand individuals' location in time, place, and their associations within their age cohort (Furstenberg, Jr., 2010; Hogan, 1981; Wilmoth & London, 2013).

**Intrinsic:** These include whether or not they were psychologically as well as physically prepared to leave military life and what that meant for their pursuit of civilian life goals. It is also important to factor in how their self-perceptions were changed by their military experience, so questions sought to explore 'who they are now' as a veteran compared to who they were as a civilian before enlistment. (Smith & True, 2014, pg. 156).

**Extrinsic:** Leaving a type of total institution like the military, with its culture, norms and hierarchies, and entering civilian environments once again, that have different rules and expectations, can create environmental as well as psychological challenges. Just the experience of moving from one environment where so much is provided, from the provision of food, shelter, medical care and other life necessities, to environments where accessing these fundamentals are often complex, and with different rules, conditions and consequences, can be very confusing. As Schlossberg, Ebaugh, and Smith and True and others offer, people including veterans, can find themselves adrift in negotiating environments that have new role demands. And, for most respondents, after separation from active duty, the challenges of interacting with people who have no military frame of reference can be more difficult to manage.

**Temporal:** An important feature of this study is to better understand if exit and re-entry into civilian life is somehow easier or harder during the early, or later months and years after separation from active duty. The inquiry sought to uncover the persistence or waning of military influences upon thought and action during early transition; the ability to seamlessly move from a military career into a civilian work environment shortly after separation from active duty, to what extent civilian social capital was harder or easier to develop over time, and, if holding on to a military association offered some protection and affirmation of self in a world where she had difficulty belonging.

Themes: Questions that were posed on their transition experiences gathered perceptions about the difficulties and successes that young, female veterans have in re-entering civilian life with a service-related disability. In many respects, their stories help to

unpack aspects of what might be termed 'becoming an adult' in the civilian world after they fulfilled adult roles in military service. These aspects are not only status-attainment specific (acquiring education, marriage, job, family, etc.), but also innate skills and capacities-specific (dealing in a mature way with challenges, making reasoned decisions, acting decisively, leading others, etc.). That so many veterans commented on the discrepancies between how military training prepared them to think and act, and how that was so different from their non-veteran peers, is an indication that understanding the military-civilian divide must include also understanding the complexities of identity and belonging disparities, both in civilian life roles and in social, professional, and family relationships.

Almost all respondents provided that the early months and years of separation were the hardest, and for similar reasons: 1) Dealing with the consequences of their disabilities (8 of the 12 women disclosed that they had PTSD or mental health issues<sup>13</sup>) that for many, was untreated for months after separation; 2) Feeling unprepared for transition due to shortcomings in the military's transition programs; 3) Financial stresses resulting from unemployment; and 4) Transition from the hierarchical, planned military life to the chaotic civilian world.

*"When you first get out, you just feel completely, for the most part, you feel lost. You may have big plans before getting out of what you're going to do or this, that or the other, but*

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<sup>13</sup> Two of the 3 female veterans whose data could not be analyzed for this study disclosed that they have both mental health and military sexual trauma.

*jobs will fall through, and plans will fall through, and you may have to move back in with parents or do this or that”.*

They talked about the early months and years of separation as a time when they had to adapt from living in a closed society where so much was provided on their behalf, and needing to learn, or re-learn the skills of ‘foraging’ for themselves among often disjointed, fragmented, and bureaucratically complex service systems.

*“It was difficult because the dynamics of work was changed and the flexibility if we had a kid sick and the other things that the military kind of takes care of. And when you’re living in the civilian world you realize how good that system worked. Yeah- they did a little bit of mothering for you and now it’s all on me”.*

For those with undiagnosed or untreated PTSD or MST, (except for one respondent who deemed herself fortunate that she was given continuation of care, unlike others she knew), not having a seamless handoff from whatever medical and therapeutic care they may have received in service, or at least counseling that helped them to deal with their symptoms and associated impacts in order to prepare them to access services, meant that the early years of separation could be a distressful and uncertain time in their lives.

*“The military, in general, they still say that you can go and get help, and they’ll help you and get you back to your job. But a lot of times, when a lot of the active duty ... don’t go get help because they don’t want to get kicked out or medically retired, which happens a lot. And you know they say that they’re working on that stigma, but it’s not true. At least not in my*

*opinion and other people that I talk to. And I think that's why there's a lot of active duty and veterans committing suicide because the veterans they get out of the military, and they have such a difficult time".*

Many of the veterans' conversations usually contained variations on the theme of having difficulties fitting back into civilian life easily, cherishing their veteran identities, and trying to find ways to be acknowledged for their accomplishments in social situations where people had limited conceptions of what they had done or experienced.

*"I think the most difficult part for me right now is my identity. For so long, for four years, my identity was Specialist (Name), EOD Technician. That defined who I was. So now to move from that to, "I'm a student" has been difficult. People can't just automatically look at your chest and see your awards and your prestige and everything you worked for, right? So now you come to an environment where no one knows who you are or what you've done, or what you've accomplished, and you're just another face in the crowd. So that's kind of ... I think that's kind of difficult, just readjusting and re-defining who I am after all is said and done".*

And, veterans said that they were not only having difficulty re-assimilating into education or the workplace in the early years after separation, but that they also faced challenges in relating again to friends and family:

*"I don't talk to any of the friends I had before I joined the military. The only friends I really talk to are the friends I had in the military now, I don't talk to any of the ones I had before that".*

And; as related by another veteran:

*“I guess I kind of felt like an alien going home. All the things that I had done and opportunities that I had had and the leadership positions that I had undertaken and the growth I had experienced because of those, just kind of put me in a different category. All the people that, my friends and stuff from high school, if I would go back and see them they just had just drastically different experiences that it felt very different”.*

Some also found it difficult to share their experiences, including how serving in the military resulted in visible and invisible war wounds; and even with family members, out of concern that they just could not understand:

*“My parents are so proud and just so thankful that I joined the service and did what I did. I wish my parents had taken my lead and stopped talking about it when I didn't want to talk about it anymore. And, as I was going through that identity shift, this need to kind of just put it to rest, and especially when I was home, because me at home was pre-service. And just put that away, and let me just, decompress and not talk about it”.*

Narratives like these elicit the question: *“If these young veterans are so seemingly prepared with life experiences, education and occupational skills that should help them succeed in social, academic and work situations compared to their civilian age-peers, why are they having such difficulties readjusting to civilian life?”*. Perhaps, a significant, and unexpected barrier to transition may be the veteran identity ambiguities that Lancaster, Kintzle and Castro (2018) describe. Some talked about the ways that they were holding onto their veteran identity



in civilian life as a way of corroborating for themselves and others about who they are, and what they have accomplished:

*"You know, I wanted to pick my son up from school every day, and you're standing with these beautiful, educated women, and sometimes dads.....but I just felt it was important for me to put myself out there and try. But I don't know if I was being passive aggressive about it, but I'd wear a lot of my military, like an Army sweatshirt, or a camouflage top, or something like that. And I think when people do that, when people wear Vietnam Veteran's hats, I think there is a part of us that wants to be acknowledged for that".*

They also talked about the persistence of the military to civilian divide that includes a lack of understanding among civilian peers who had little conception about what it means to serve in the military and how profoundly military service can affect individuals' sense of self.

*"I also think it just ... There's a lot of veterans who kind of hold on to their identity, because it is so hard to just connect with someone who doesn't have those same shared experiences. So, on a personal level, you're constantly asking, like, "Can this person ever understand me? Will I ever be able to understand them, because they don't have the same experiences that I do?" And there's this constant, just like, questioning".*

A common theme from the interviews was countering perceptions of people they meet in civilian life who have difficulty comprehending that a female could be the military veteran in the family and may have served in combat, as this young woman offered:

*“People always thought that I was the spouse. They didn't think that I was the active duty member. And then I was at medical, or at the store and I would ask for military discount, like at the doctors, they always thought that I was the spouse, until I pulled out my ID card and I had the active duty ID card. They'd say, “Oh wow, you're the one who is active duty?” Often, I just let them think whatever they thought, unless they actually saw my ID card, because to me, it didn't really matter. I knew that I was the active duty service member and that was what was important to me”.*

Most talked about the chasm between veterans and non-veterans in understanding their military experiences, but also in understanding military terminology, as in this humorous exchange:

*“I had to tell my civilian doctor about the IED explosion because I had been having migraines again and some back pain. I was explaining it to him- and this is while I'm on duty, so I'm still on active duty. He was like an IUD explosion? I was like no. A bomb. A bomb went off”.*

Almost all of the veterans I spoke with offered their versions of a gulf that can exist, not only between themselves and their peers; but also, between themselves and others who may, or may not have served when they could not comprehend that a female could also be a warrior:

*“There was one occasion when I was out with my boyfriend, and he had some shirt on talking about representing his time in Iraq during the first round. And, some older gentleman came up to him, and they started yacking about their shared experiences, his in Vietnam, my boyfriend's in Iraq. And he's like, “Oh. Well thank you for your service. Thank you this and that.”*

*And, I'm just standing there. And I'm like, "Hello? I'm in the military, too!" I'd be looking at my boyfriend and waiting, and he'd be like, "Oh, by the way, my girlfriend's in, too." And the guy would be like, "Wait, what?"*

The persistence of stereotypical attitudes towards female servicemembers was not only confined to those who had not served in the military. Some also talked about veteran-serving organizations that fail to acknowledge the military service of females:

*"Because when you contact the VA, I've heard in a lot of different female veteran support groups that I'm involved in, a lot of them complaining about being asked for their husband's social or like that they automatically assume that the female that's there or on the phone isn't the veteran. And that's an irritation and a turn off and then a lot of them don't even want to deal with it. I've also heard similar from female veterans in some of those same groups about being turned off from getting involved in American Legion or the VFW for the same reason, that they walk in and that they're not accepted or treated in the way that makes them feel accepted, so they just get away from it altogether".*

As themes related to belonging and identity began to emerge from the study, they helped to strengthen the assumption that veterans' success in transitioning back into civilian life depends at least as much on how well society is prepared and capable of addressing their disassociation from civilian life, as it tries to be through job hiring initiatives, parades, and other forms of appreciation for their service.

Perhaps, as Tick (2005, 2014), Junger (2016) and others offer, it may be that civilian society is itself to blame for not embracing the rituals of warrior return that is engrained in other cultures. As he explains, perhaps in our culture we have abrogated the social contract that other cultures retain, that obligate those that have not served to help heal those who have. *“Traditional cultures performed rituals that lifted responsibility off the warrior and transferred it to the people as a whole”* (Tick, 2005, pg. 241). As Smith & True, (2014), Belkin (2012), Lancaster, Kintzle & Castro (2018), and others have found, the persistence of the inculcated warrior identity shapes young adults in ways that can be difficult to ameliorate, after they return to civilian life. In one way or another, most of the veterans shared their perspectives that the military changes people in significant ways that can present formidable challenges in helping them to regain aspects of their pre-enlistment selves:

*“I did notice that the unit would take people who would come there and kind of be nice, good individuals and turn them into just not really resembling the person they were when they arrived or prior to getting there. And I saw them change from who they were before they came, who they were when they got here, and who they became later”.*

Returning to an often, chaotic civilian world after their lives were ruled by structure and routine ways of acting and doing were referenced as among the factors that made the transition to civilian life difficult for many of them:

*“I didn't have someone to say, “You've got to do this, and this, and this. You've got to go workout. You've got to do this. You need to get this document signed. You need to be logged*

*onto your email constantly to be able to grab anything that comes through." That kind of thing. And, I had a very difficult time and kind of still kind of do, to adjusting to a lack of structure".*

The influences of the Warrior Ethos remained after they left service, and although these important skills and mindsets are necessary for battlefield survival, they are not always those that fit well in a non-military world. Many felt that military training exhorting strength under adverse conditions, and where admitting pain was a sign of weakness, could be a disadvantage after they separated, when it made it harder for them to acknowledge that they needed help for addressing PTSD and other mental health challenges. These traits-so important when serving on military missions- can be much less useful when it is time to seek help and admit that they were not as strong as they needed to be under the circumstances.

*"Being unable to have and show and display a lot of emotion ... I think that's a very common trait in the military where you just bottle it up".*

In summary, participants' answers to questions about their military to civilian transition experiences often generated stories of unequal treatment; of personal loss-whether to psyche or physically; and heart-wrenching stories of the loss of comrades in battle. They talked about how, as young adults, they were not the same person upon their return as when they entered. Their narratives help to confirm the appropriateness of using the lifecourse perspective and theories that help explain the dynamics of role change and exits in synergy to better contextualize their complexities of their transition experiences. But, their stories also open the door to asking how we as a society, help them to restore the skills needed for survival as civilians, with the same intensity as the military inculcated into them the skills needed to

survive as warriors. The next series of questions were intended to uncover how their service-related disabilities affects their present-day lives.

#### **4.C.5. Life Course Impacts of Service-Related Disabilities**

- *How does having a service-related disability affect your success in civilian life?*
- *How does your disability affect achievement of any of your life goals like starting and growing a family, pursuing education and starting civilian careers?*
- *In what ways does military service prepare or not prepare you to deal with your disability?*
- *Where or who do you turn to help you get over the disability-related rough spots?*
- *Are other veterans more or less able to help you through those times compared to civilian friends and family?*
- *Are the VA or other veteran's programs helpful or not helpful?*

Summary: The questions posed during this stage of the interviews were intended to focus on how they managed the impact of service-related disabilities while still on active duty, or after separation, what effects their disabilities may have had during the early years of separation from service, and how their post-service life courses including future aspirations may be influenced by their service-connected disabilities. Questions were also intended to probe for how well the military does or does not prepare servicemembers with disabilities to understand and create a plan of post-military care as they transition out of service. This includes exploring the factors that might influence young veterans' decision to seek out, or avoid medical care, particularly through the VA, and their concerns of either being stigmatized by their mental health disabilities or viewed as weak, contrary to their military training.

The military also privileges reliance on one's 'battle buddies' as vitally critical to unit and individual survival; and peer support as a fundamental tenet of the VA's veteran PTSD recovery initiative (O'Brien-Mazza, White, & Harris, 2013). Veterans were asked if they were establishing civilian as well as veteran circles of support in their communities; and what was easy or hard about developing supportive relationships. Most of them admitted that they were having difficulties relating to non-veterans; even their families, and sharing stories related to their injuries.

Themes: While not all veterans directly commented on the circumstances or types of service-related injuries they sustained, all more freely discussed how their injuries affect their lives after military service. Although they were also not asked if they had a VA-rated service disability, only one woman offered that she had a rating, without stating the percentage of compensation. Based upon the narrative analysis, approximately 8 (67%) sustained wounds that can be considered mental health-related, including PTSD. Four (33%) related the physical and psychological consequences of MST. Seven (58%) described physical injuries, of which 2 were received under combat conditions. Their injuries affect them in their civilian lives in distinctly personal ways, from being unable to perform certain physical tasks, to difficulties in relating to others. Difficulties in trusting others enough to share their mental health challenges and build a stronger network of support were also mentioned. These could include both dealing with the direct, functional limitations that these types of disabilities can produce, as well as struggling with the effects on self-perceptions that having a mental health diagnosis can also produce as this veteran offered:

*"I also received my diagnosis just as I was getting out, so there was that whole dynamic of now identifying, now having a name for what I had been experiencing, and it took me a long time to even talk about the diagnosis with anybody. Besides a therapist".*

Although they acknowledged that their disabilities could have significant impacts upon their lives and created limitations in achieving their personal and professional goals, some also shared that having a disability and living each day by facing up to, and overcoming the challenges that they create, was in itself, a source of pride and an acknowledgement of their strength and determination to succeed. And one veteran talked about transferring her personal knowledge of recovery into skills that they she could use to teach others:

*"I view them as strengths. I do. It definitely prepared me for the work I did as a corporate life coach for employees, which my job was, I bridged the gap between employees and management and HR, make sure individuals have the resources and got what they needed, so like ADA accommodations. And that they had what they needed".*

They implied that military service linked their lives together with others who served in ways that are different than the associations they established or re-established in civilian life. Most young women talked about reaching out to other veterans when they hit a rough spot in their post-military lives, because they felt that they were less likely to be understood by non-veterans. Their lives remain strongly linked because of their shared military experiences:

*"I felt like most of the people that I was meeting, unless I happened upon other veterans, the majority of them just didn't have any perspective of service and what I did and all these*



*things that were so, such major parts of my life and my development. It wasn't that they didn't appreciate it, they just didn't know what to say. They didn't understand, so consequently we didn't talk about it. So - I didn't talk about something that was so important to me for so long. And as much as people tried to understand it's just the immediate understanding that you have with another veteran is totally different".*

Some of the veterans have military spouses as well and offered that their spouses were important in helping them to cope with challenges, and another veteran emphasized how important it was to connect with other military families; because they were more likely to understand what she was experiencing, than another person who did not serve.

*"A good network of friends to keep in touch with and has been good to keeping grounded. They're in the military themselves or have since gotten out and stayed in the area. Some connections have been like becoming our family and most have been in the military. You know you don't have to be strong all the time -we knew you when you were different and it's ok -we're here to help you".*

They were also asked whether or not they thought the military was doing enough in their transition programs to help them understand the impacts of their disabilities and help them to address them as they transitioned from active duty. And, they were asked about their experiences in requesting and receiving help from the VA, once they re-entered civilian life. These questions were intended to provide another perspective on whether or not a continuum of care exists from the time female veterans make the decision or are forced to exit the military for medical reasons. All respondents related that the military transition programs do not

prepare veterans to develop the recovery skills needed to overcome their disability in civilian life, including as this young woman related who had to deal with the sadness that she did not exit from the military with the same fit and healthy body that she had at enlistment:

*“Well, actually, I had pretty much my last enlistment to mentally prepare myself to get out. It was very difficult because I didn't want to get out, but I knew I couldn't stay in. I was in therapy, and I was going to therapy about once a week. And then, eventually, it got to every other week. And it just kind of changed as I needed it, but the last two years were more about ... accepting the fact that I was leaving the military and grieving the loss of my healthy body”.*

As they talked more about the military transition programs they attended, there was a general consensus that it addresses some aspects of re-entering civilian life fairly well, including workshops on resume writing and transferring their MOS to civilian jobs; and about how to get access to VA services. But many of the veterans were in agreement that what is lacking is some way of ‘de-militarizing’ them psychologically so that they could re-explore and potentially re-understand what it means to be living again in the civilian world.

*“They more focus in on your medical, getting your resume done, making sure your health care, and making sure you get your disability. But they don't tell you, and they don't go into the psychological part of transitioning from military to civilian”.*

As might be expected, some veterans had success in using VA services, and having VA counselors who were available and knowledgeable, and able to assist them. In fact, two veterans were employed by, or preparing to be employed by the VA. Others talked of long waiting periods for services that was discouraging and delayed their treatment and recovery

process. And, when asked about the military's effectiveness in helping veterans like her to understand the services that they would be eligible to receive from the VA, as well as what they should expect when searching for a job, one veteran appeared to place the responsibility on the veteran as well as on the military for achieving successful transition.

*"I think that the military offers a lot of great tools already. The problem is actually getting people or allowing people to use them".*

In summary, these veterans were challenged in numerous ways to transition back into civilian life by impacts of their disabilities, but also how well they were prepared prior to separation to deal with them; and how well equipped they were after they exited the military to access and use VA and other treatment and recovery programs. Identifying as a veteran in the civilian world also meant for most of them that they would be most likely to rely on other veterans for their understanding and support when times were rough.

#### **4.C.6. Participant Recommendations**

- *How could the military, or those around you in civilian life, do better at making the military to civilian transition easier for female veterans?"*
- *In what ways can the military's transition assistance programs better prepare servicemembers as they transition back into civilian life?*
- *In what ways can educators or employers better help female veterans with service-related disabilities to achieve education and employment success?*
- *In what ways can your friends and family better support you in civilian life?*

Summary: The last group of interview questions asked the veterans for their advice on what the military, employers, educators, friends and family might do better to improve military

to civilian transition for female veterans like themselves. They were also encouraged to comment upon the changes that should be made in the ways that the military institution supports its female servicemembers and accords them equality not only in promotional opportunities, but also in their day-to-day military lives and interactions with fellow enlisted personnel and officers. Additional questions were intended to tease out what the civilian sector might do better to help transitioning young veterans to 're-belong' in the civilian world.

Themes: Almost all participants offered that the military, employers, educators, friends and family could do more in helping young, female veterans transition successfully into civilian life. The common response was that the civilian sector needs to improve understanding of what it means to be a veteran; and particularly, what it means to be a female veteran who also has a service-related disability. The earlier-expressed inferences that they were living as 'insiders/outside' while in the military, only to find themselves in a similar situation when trying to re-assimilate back into their civilian lives.

As powerful as their portrayals of their own lives and experiences were, their opinions and recommendations are also potentially powerful in understanding the types of improvements in veteran services that could benefit the next generation of female servicemembers. What also began to emerge from these questions was that; although civilian society needs to improve how it welcomes and supports transitioning veterans, the military should also acknowledge its role in preparing servicemembers to understand what civilian life is like, and what they might expect; with the same emphasis that they gave to inculcating enlistees into the structure and culture of the military institution. While they thought that

males and females could both benefit from 'de-institutionalizing types of services'; the particular re-assimilation challenges that females face must also become part of that training:

*"I think there should be a female veteran 101 -that at first people are going to discount you at first-like- "You were a veteran"? And be prepared for that and to handle the questions like- oh, you're a military spouse. 'No, I was a military person'".*

And, another veteran offered that such training should not wait until near the end of separation, but instead should be introduced earlier to help transitioning veterans appreciate and absorb the next, and possibly formidable changes that could occur in their lives when they are no longer subsumed by the military organization:

*"I think more education while you're in, right from the beginning about what's out there and what's available post-transition".*

Another finding was that women veterans thought that the military could do a much better job in policing its own institution and eliminating gender bias and sexual harassment and violence against female servicemembers. In effect, they thought that protections should be established where there is zero tolerance for these actions. None of the women I talked with ever asked for more than that they should be treated equally and accorded the same opportunities and be given the same expectations that male servicemembers are given. But they offered that, for that to happen, the culture of the military needs to change significantly:

*"I also think ... The leadership that's needed to change the culture, so that the experiences of some women aren't so negative, in regards to the kind of the sexist behavior that women can encounter. It just needs to have a zero tolerance, and it doesn't".*

More than just a change in culture and in regulations, one veteran suggested that female veterans, particularly those that sustained MST, needed a reliable, trustworthy counselor who understands how to advise female veterans to access VA and other health and mental health services after they transition, and would be able to advocate for them and guide them through the bureaucratic maze that some encountered when filing their MST claims.

*"I think there should be a special advocate, somebody who explains those processes with those claims, especially your MST type claims".*

They were also asked what employers and educators might do to help more female veterans like themselves succeed in college and in their jobs and careers. Again, the theme was repeated that understanding the military experience was critical to understanding how to support them in the classroom and on the job. And one veteran noted that employers, particularly need to know more about how returning servicemembers can contribute to their workplaces by bringing with them the skills and aptitudes that they learned while in service, even if their MOS's did not easily match up with an employer's hiring needs:

*"I think that just a willingness to take a risk on hiring a veteran who doesn't have any experience in the industry that they're looking for is ... I don't know if it could be incentivized or somehow rewarded or something like that, but that's really, for me, inside, now, the reason that*

*my boss is not hiring veterans is because they don't feel like they have the experience in the industry that is needed. You know, retrospectively, I think that they would do extremely well in the positions that we're hiring for".*

Overall, these young veterans spoke for themselves, but their narratives reinforced the impression that they often see themselves as a specifically affected veteran demographic and their hope was that improvements could be made for those who follow, so that the lessons they have learned from addressing their challenges even if, for some are not yet resolved, can contribute to making other female veterans' lives easier.

#### **4.D. Presentation of Analysis Findings: Research Question One: "Does Military Service Represent 'Off-Time' or 'On-Time' Transition to Adulthood"?**

*"I had a friend who transitioned and didn't have such an amazing time when they transitioned and I think if someone had been there for them, it would have been better".*

Rationale: The life course perspective, including the work of Hogan (1981) and Elder (2003), contextualized by the works of Furstenberg, Jr. (2010) Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld (1987), Settersen and Ray (2010); and Wilmoth & London, (2013) provide the parameters for the discussion on military service as either disruptive to transition to adulthood, or a positive experience in a young adult's life that better enables them to achieve traditional life course markers. Narratives provided by participants in this study suggest that the effects of military service on civilian life role development are more nuanced and complex than previously explored in the literature.

Consistent with the life course perspective, their narratives provided new insights and information relative to characterizing the achievement of traditional lifecourse markers as either “on-or off-time”. In fact, a substantial number of participants had already achieved some of the milestones that accord individuals with an adult status, including marriage (and divorce) and having children. The study cohort appears to mirror national statistics indicating that a substantial percentage (46%) of female servicemembers are married (Patten & Parker, 2009). Since female veterans are more likely to be single parents, divorced, or unemployed when compared to their male counterparts (Disabled American Veterans, 2014), the experiences of the study group, appear to generally conform to national norms. Seven were employed, and 7 were enrolled into, or had re-entered post-secondary education (some while working), indicating that most were on their way to achieving the lifecourse adulthood markers, even after their military service.

Statements and Themes: Time and sequencing are discussed in Section 2.B.1 as among the essential features of the transition to adulthood and the life course perspective (Furstenberg, Jr., 2010; Hogan, 1981; Wilmoth & London, 2013). However, personal narratives offered by study participants revealed that the distinctions may not be as clear cut as the research would suggest. As most participants stated, the military can exert its influences on a person’s self-perceptions and relationships for many months or years after separation. Even among those whose military service was viewed negatively for the physical and/or emotional traumas they experienced, the rigorous adherence to military rules, expectations and methods were often seen as life course advantages when compared to the experiences of their non-



veteran peers. And more than one veteran interviewed in this study thought that their civilian peers who expressed that they faced adversities in their lives didn't realize 'how good they had it' compared to those who served in the military.

But, ambivalent feelings were also expressed by some that leads to the impression that military service took time away from what they might have accomplished in civilian life. This veteran admitted thinking about these 'off-time' effects and indicated that they had some ground to make up in order to be at the same career and financial level of some of their non-military-serving peers who continued their education, obtained good-paying jobs and careers, and married and had children:

*"Friends of mine who finished college when I went into the military have been in their careers long enough to have built nest eggs and we're playing catch up. Some things are out of order, but I don't necessarily feel held back".*

And, from another veteran, who also felt that she had to work hard to catch up with friends who had decided not to enlist:

*"The only way I would say it makes it harder is, a, I kind of feel, a, as a woman and b, just as my age, I'm behind the ball. Everybody else has got kids already in kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and I'm just now doing college. I'm just now doing all this stuff. I do feel like it is harder because I'm so far behind the ball on everything".*

In effect, despite the benefits of serving, some respondents offered that military service can make it harder to move forward in civilian life:

*"Regarding my personal life, I don't see any benefit from being in the military, with the exception of maybe having learned some lessons that I otherwise might not have learned".*

Findings of Research Question One: Their narratives argue for an appreciation of the complexities that female veterans can face as they return to civilian life as young adults with disabilities. They suggest that the precepts of the life course perspective and theories related to disability and role and exit transitions mutually interact in dynamic ways. Participant narratives suggest that theories of identity and belonging should be incorporated into this mix.

Transitions, disability, identity, and belonging are associated as elements to consider when researching transition to adulthood within the life course perspective framework. However, viewing these dynamics for their synergistic relationships as they specifically apply to the young, female lifecourse may better clarify the multiplicity of personal and environmental factors that contribute to the complexities of their life course trajectories.

Regarding the core question, the narratives suggest that transition to adulthood for female veterans is neither 'on-or-off-time', but rather 'on their time'. This research suggests that taking time away from regular young adult pursuits to enlist in the military may not be disruptive, per se, on the achievement of their sequential lifecourse milestones. Many participating in this study had already achieved a number of those lifecourse markers and had already married; completed college; had families, and; worked at full-time jobs, although some felt that they had some catching up to do.

However, it may be that the potential *impacts* associated with the female servicemember's military experience could be the source of potential lifecourse disruption as they try to translate their experiences to civilian life roles. And, it could include struggling to adapt to the way that the military taught them to deal with life and occupational issues, that is often just not the way it's done in civilian environments, as this young veteran suggests:

*"Yeah, well, there's this quote, I think it's Roosevelt that said it, "You don't lead people by hitting them over the head, that's assault, not leadership." So, what I would think would be "leading" people in the military may seem like "hitting them over the head" in civilian sector. I think my leadership skills needed to be kind of more tuned into the person and less into the mission or the outcome? You know, in the military we're just so mission driven. Whatever it takes to get the mission done. And, I really needed to take a step back and slow my pace and pay more attention to each individual in order to get the group to function".*

These also may include negotiating the 'inside/outside' experiences of serving in the military where they often struggled to belong, only to return to the civilian world where they often struggle with re-belonging among civilians who do not fully comprehend the totality of military experience. If there is one consistent theme that emerged from these interviews, it is that despite the undeniable benefits that military service has had in their lives, ambiguities about who they are within the places they occupy as civilians can be a significant challenge for many young, female veterans. Consequently, the research found that military service was a normal pathway for them to pursue at the time and despite the challenges they had to overcome, almost all confirmed that being in the military was a timely, valuable life experience.

#### **4.E. Presentation of Analysis Findings: Research Question Two: "How Does Military Service Affect Female Veteran Transition to Civilian Life"?**

##### Rationale:

As Schlossberg (1981) and Ebaugh (1988) offer, role entries and exits and their timing and sequencing are important considerations in understanding how individuals transition from

role to role across their life course. For young people who have served in the military, transition from its institutional and hierarchical environment where military identities are imposed over their civilian identities can present extraordinary challenges for many veterans (Smith & True, 2014; Junger, 2016; & Belkin 2012). However, the narratives provided by study participants suggest that negotiating their transition from military to civilian life is a much more complex and nuanced process that the current literature does not adequately capture. As Foreman and Whetten (2002) describe; how members identify with multiple organization identities (in this regard construing 'organization' generally to mean both the military and the civilian society as organizations of culture, expectations and associations), can contribute to feelings of being, at the same time, part of, and not a part of an environment. Narratives appear to substantiate that the earlier referenced 'inside/outside' paradigm might better explain the dynamics of female veteran military and post-military identity and provide an individual as well as environmental context for understanding their military to civilian challenges. As this woman related, female veterans must deal with pervasive societal attitudes that fail to appreciate their contributions:

*"I was going to say that males are at least usually easily recognizable if they're in the military, especially in a town. But, there's a lot of women who don't get a lot of credit that they deserve for doing the same job, and sometimes better".*

#### Statements and Themes:

For female veterans, particularly those recently separated from active duty, the personal, as well as organizational and associational identities can be a multilevel construct that they must negotiate in order to resume their place within their age cohort in the civilian world.

*“I mean it's definitely both easier and harder, I think probably harder. You're no longer as secure as you were. There's not somebody out there who is planning your next assignment for you or writing your next review for you”.*

But, in addition to these types of challenges, some of these veterans found themselves thrust into a virtual maelstrom of family, economic, and social changes in their lives. They talked about overcoming their fears and challenges associated with their return to civilian life by relying upon the determination and skills and the military training that they used to overcome other challenges they faced during their enlistment. But they also referenced how difficult their transition experiences were during the early months and years of their separation, when their exit from the military and re-entry into civilian life was very new. Many offered that because their military training was so focused on implementing strategies according to set plan and procedures, they were daunted by re-entering a more ambiguous and disjointed civilian world where “no battle plan survives the first encounter”. This research found that the earlier referenced characteristics of transition can converge in often powerful ways during the early months of separation that affect them psychologically, and in their social and environmental spheres. Veterans also corroborated that the military transition programs are largely inadequate in preparing young, female veterans for these aspects of transition.

When using the lifecourse perspective to better understand how young adult veterans negotiate their re-assimilation back into civilian life role environments, it may also be important

to consider the effects of military service on the intrinsic markers associated with behaving as an adult in a non-military environment, as well as measuring adulthood by attainment of their particular lifecourse markers. That includes making sense of their perceptions of how well, or not well they used their skills at adaptation to fit into civilian life roles, particularly when the experience of serving in the military was so recent.

*“So hard. My first year was so, so hard. It wasn't just adapting to being out but also then I completely changed gears and started a new career, and grad school, with just in a couple months after I got out, so it was a really significant life change. And I think I really struggled that first year”.*

A recurrent theme was how the military had changed them in ways that sometimes made it more difficult to relate to their non-military peers. Some talked about significant feelings of disassociation that made it difficult to develop friendships and relationships with peers that had not served.

*“I miss the family of it. I miss having so many people there to support your back through everything. While I did have a family here and I live near my family, it's a very different mindset and there's just people that tend to understand more of your habits and why you have those habits. Just the support and the friendship that came with it. I very much still miss that”.*

And another woman described how the military can change a person in ways that make it difficult to communicate with those who are not veterans:

*“Once you're in the military, and you go into civilian life, it's never the same. I remember my uncle telling me that because he's Army and he's just now retiring, but when I came in, he told me, once you go into the military, your personality, everything is going to change. You're*

*going to be a different person, and you're gonna get out, and you're gonna talk to civilians, and you're gonna be like, "What are they saying?"*

Research by Tick (2005), Junger (2016), Belkin (2012), and Lancaster, Kintzle, & Castro (2018), and others support the conclusion that military to civilian transition is a complex process, and is not only influenced by an individual's preparedness, but also how well society is prepared to welcome back, re-integrate, and support veterans and their families. While theory related to roles and exits is a useful framework for describing the dynamics of leaving a role and entering another, particularly concerning expectations for successful adoption of, and functioning within the new role, they do not address the unpreparedness of society to understand the complexities of and take on more responsibility for facilitating the military to civilian re-acclimation of young veterans. The narratives of the 12 young veterans whose data could be analyzed confirm that a more comprehensive and integrative framework needs to be considered in order to improve programs that facilitate their transition<sup>14</sup>.

Notwithstanding their challenges, participants confirmed that the military's investment in its servicemembers to prepare them physically, mentally and with the technical skills required by their occupational specialties, provides undeniable benefits compared to many in their civilian age cohort. And, while they may have entered, or re-entered college at an older age than their student peers or are having difficulties translating their military skills to the civilian workplace, their worldliness, ability to deal with complex situations and exert strong

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<sup>14</sup> Although this paper contextualizes the transition experiences of young, female veterans within the framework of transition to adulthood, it is worth noting for future research that the 3 women who were older than the study permitted and had served for two decades or more, related similar perceptions of inadequate military transition and societal support for their return.

decision-making and team leadership qualities are or should be, distinct advantages in resuming their civilian lives. But, although many female veterans attested to the skills they learned in the military, these advantages did not often extend to identifying with and belonging to civilian environments and social groups.

*“I find myself a little disconnected from the actual college life, even though we have a very wonderful student veteran center on campus that does so very much for us. There's still the big difference between your average 18 to 20- year old college student versus a lot of the veterans that go there that are 28 to 35 ish age range. And we tend to stick together and not really branch out much. It's definitely been good and bad, but I think the majority of my experience has definitely helped me. I find myself doing way better in school this time around for sure”.*

#### Findings of Research Question Two:

Military bootcamps are intense, physically and psychologically demanding experiences that are designed to subsume the civilian identity and inculcate enlistees with the role and response expectations that the military requires (Belkin, 2012). Upon impending separation from active duty, the military's transition programs are intended and designed to prepare servicemembers for successful reentry into civilian life. They offer classes to help veterans think about and prepare to obtain civilian jobs. They acquaint them with resources like Disabled Veterans Outreach staff at Department of Labor Career Centers and help them understand the process of filing for VA disability benefits. But, whether specifically or implicitly a number of



respondents regretted that there are no 'reverse bootcamps' to ease their return to civilian life including helping them to acknowledge that the warrior survival skills so important in military life, may actually get in the way of a successful life as a civilian.

*"I feel in civilian life it's much more chaotic in the fact that something that you could get in trouble for in civilian sector is so different than what you would get in trouble for in military, and then dealing with people who just don't have much pride in their work necessarily outside of the military, they just don't have the same bond or connection to what they're doing. They're just doing it to do it".*

The veterans participating in this study also confirmed that more needs to be done by the military to help in the psychological aspects of warrior to civilian transition. And more than one offered that those classes should be as intensive as basic training-maybe even a 'basic-retraining' and taught by other female veterans who have experienced those types of transition challenges. And, as one veteran acknowledged, it may even be a challenge in dealing with the 'new normal' of being a civilian again, that may require a considerable amount of adjustment:

*"If you do retire, I think that it is harder the first two years, because you're still looking for that structure. You're still looking for, "I have to wear the same uniform every single day, so this is what I'm doing." Now you've got to find your outfit to wear to work today. Now you have to pay to go ... I can let my beard grow. I can wear this hairstyle. I can get my nails done. It's a shock, because you didn't realize how much you were into that military lifestyle. Now you get out and it's like, "Hunh? I don't have to say yes sir and yes ma'am anymore? I can let my nails*

*grow as long as I want so I can wear whatever color fingernail polish? Yeah business casual so I gotta go buy me some suits now. Some nice dresses."*

**4.F. Presentation of Analysis Findings: Research Question Three: "How Do Service-Related Disabilities Impact Female Veteran Transition to Adulthood and Military to Civilian Transition"?**

Rationale: The ways that respondents are negotiating the consequences of their war injuries on their civilian lives, and also their transition to adulthood in the civilian world has implications for the use-appropriateness of the term 'disabled' when applied, or self-applied to veterans. Their stories about how they perceive their success in civilian roles, given the impact of their service-sustained injuries, helps to uncover and explain whether or not they view military service as still a positive development in their lives.

As respondents discussed the impacts of psychological and/or physical traumas on their lives, deeper insights were gained into the significance of having a disability on the timing and sequencing of their major life course events. Particularly, some veterans offered that their physical and/or emotional traumas made it difficult to achieve their goals in work and in education; as well as in family and social situations. However, as regards their adoption of the term 'disability' to describe the consequences of traumas that they received either during combat or through non-combat related incidents, the veterans that I talked with rarely thought of themselves as 'disabled'. 'Disability' is a term that is laden with meaning, depending upon the location of the individual, both personally and within their social, economic and environmental contexts (Goffman, 1961). Its meaning can shift according to the circumstances

in which the condition of disability occurs, that can be either honorable or dishonorable, or congenital or acquired, and framed by how the person with the disability and the society in which they live regard the condition. Stigma is a powerful force in negotiating the personal and environmental aspects of disability (Goffman, 1961; Wendell (1996); and Tick (2005).

Studies have found that many veterans challenge the term 'disabled', unless it is used within the context of defining eligibility for VA benefits (Disabled American Veterans, 2014). The present study found that female veterans allowed use of the term for framing the physical and psychological injuries they sustained while in the military but resisted the use of the term when it contextualized their experiences as being 'not abled', or dysfunctional. That does not negate the seriousness or debilitating effects of their injuries, but it does suggest that many veterans reject the popularly prevalent disability label. Mining narrative data provides insight into the ways that military acculturation affects participants role identities, and whether or not they have incorporated a 'disability identity' as referenced by Goffman (1959) and others.

Statements and Themes: Study participants were never asked specifically about the types of disabilities that they have, nor the circumstances concerning how they were sustained. One participant offered that she appreciated that disability-related questions only addressed their effects on her life, in ways that helped overcome her obvious reluctance to talk about personally painful events. Some offered accounts of the psychological and physical wounds they sustained in great detail, but others were more circumspect in their accounts. A number of participants described the deaths of comrades in combat in significant detail and also how they were personally affected by them. Corroborating the literature on the prevalence of MST and

PTSD, and either by directly speaking of their experiences or through implication, the majority of the study sample had experienced, and in many cases, are still recovering from the impacts of these traumas. By probing for the impacts of disability rather than the types of disabilities they possess, they offered rich portrayals of their effects upon their self-perceptions; how they are viewed by family, friends and others; and their effects upon their life goals and hopes and dreams.

### **Findings of Research Question Three:**

As Wendell and others note, the concept of 'disability' is as much a social construction as it is a condition that individuals live with. Yet, referenced throughout the narratives offered by study participants, the assignment of the term 'disability' to service related injuries appears inadequate in capturing the complexities of their experience. No one I spoke with talked about being 'dis-abled', although their psychological and/or physical injuries interfered with some of their normal life functioning. While the VA adheres to the medical model term 'disabilities' and assigns benefit ratings according to clinical measures of their severity and functional limitations, a truer designation for what they have acquired while in service might be 'service-related injuries'. That is because by using the term disabilities, it is assumed that individuals are unable to function, when in fact these veterans are demonstrating that they are functioning, and even heroically so, in recovering from their mental health and physical wounds.

Without discounting the often- debilitating effects of PTSD that requires clinical as well as therapeutic responses, this research suggests that at the least, as Dr. Tick has researched, we

should acknowledge that PTSD is not only a wound affecting cognition, social interaction, and physical capabilities. PTSD is also a ‘wound of the soul’ that dislocates individuals from individuals and environments surrounding them. In order to assist young, female veterans to reduce or eliminate the effects of their injuries upon their transition and success in the next chapters of their civilian lives, acknowledging that medication and counseling, while often needed, must be combined with therapies that help them to negotiate their sense of ‘who they are now’, in relation to ‘where they were’, and in conjunction of ‘who they hope to be’, as an essential factor in successful military to civilian transition.

## **5. Conclusions and Implications**

### **5.A. Conclusions about the Research Problem**

Consistent with the theoretical constructs guiding this study, the interviews sought to unpack the complexities associated with transition among young females who served in the nation’s military and to better understand the lifecourse impacts of military service. As referenced earlier, the research found that transition can occur not only in changes to environments and roles, but intrinsically as well as young females negotiate their way from civilian to military and back again to civilian identities. The themes that emerged from their personal narratives underscore that these veterans have the resilience, stamina and aptitudes to survive and thrive in civilian life, but often struggle with resolving the discrepancies of being military and non-military at the same time. The study also produced data that offers new

insights into the ways that young, female veterans re-acclimate to civilian life during the early years of separation from active duty and the effects of military service and service-related disabilities upon their transition to adulthood.

In exploring their dynamics of life and role transition, I anticipated that acculturation in the military as a form of total institution, might make it more difficult for young, female veterans to re-assimilate back into a less hierarchical and more ambiguous civilian world. I also anticipated that service-related disabilities could prove to be formidable obstacles to civilian life role attainment. By probing for not only the nature of the transitions they faced, but also how their decisions along the way influenced how they address life and role transition, I was able to capture a more nuanced and richer appreciation of military to civilian transition experiences than I had originally anticipated.

The research also sought to explore what is meant by 'becoming an adult' and whether or not maturation and attainment of generally recognized markers in civilian role achievement are sufficient, or even relevant when describing the life course experiences of young, female veterans. Their narratives provide evidence that sequential attainment of lifecourse markers that Hogan et al. postulate have dubious relevance when applied to young adults who enlist and leave the military. Respondents offered that the military lifestyle and its requirements combined with the physical and psychological resources required to meet its expectations often made them feel more mature than their civilian peers. But some described how their civilian goal attainment felt as if it was off-time, particularly in education and employment, compared to that of their civilian peers, and that they needed to play 'catch-up'. Most offered that their military experience helped them to better focus on their post-military goals, compared to

civilian peers who they felt were still 'drifting and not very well focused'. But most offered that they were having a hard time fitting back into civilian life. These are discrepancies and anomalies that bear further exploration but begin to reveal the lifecourse complexities that military service might precipitate.

The study also sought to explore how study participants described their lives as living with, and beyond the limits that having a service-related disability may create. Drawing from the rich testimony of those who had experienced mental health challenges and other types of disabilities in the civilian population, and who spoke of the stigma and societal misconceptions that they had to overcome, I anticipated that participants might reveal their struggles with similar issues of acceptance, and perhaps stigma. However, I did not find a strong correlation between popular societal conceptions of mental illness and how these young veterans were stigmatized in their civilian lives. Most who confessed to a mental health disability (primarily PTSD) framed it as personally stigmatizing, and most frequently described their feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness that distressed them because it stood in stark contrast to their military training. None mentioned that they felt stigmatized by society, friends and family-just that more often than not, they hid their mental health disabilities away from those that they felt would not understand them. They often spoke to being so deeply wounded that they took refuge in alcohol or engaged in other dangerous behavior to mask painful memories and the physical and psychological pains that they felt. These observations reinforce that stronger healing and supportive networks must be developed – not only within the VA treatment system, but also throughout all civilian environments and civilian society itself, that these

veterans experience, in order to assist them in overcoming the consequences of their disabilities.

These veterans could admit to being traumatized, betrayed and angry. But, they did not self-identify as a member of a disabled population living within generally 'abled' communities. In fact, many offered that the military teaches one to endure and overcome these circumstances in ways that they felt their civilian peers did not learn. Their stories suggest that the skills and intellectual requirements of military service merge in very powerful ways to create a new, distinct, and otherwise not yet adequately understood paradigm for the life course perspective that could be valuable in better appreciating how young veterans, and more specifically, young female veterans with disabilities, negotiate their life course pathways.

The lifecourse perspective privileges the importance of transitions and turning points in peoples' lives, but lives are also linked within their environmental and temporal dimensions. To better understand how young female (and male) veterans are re-acclimating to the civilian world after release from a military total institution, it is also necessary to address the ways that society itself must change and adapt to ease their homecoming. In whatever ways that they may have described their returns to the civilian world, each veteran alluded to what might be termed a 'military dissociative effect'. Simply stated, they belong at once two worlds that do not well understand each other and the skills one learns in order to survive in one, can often not be the skills required to survive in the other.

They did acquire the technical skills, attitudes, and discipline needed to perform their tasks in support of the mission that militaries are created to fulfill, as Huntington (1957), Janowitz (1960/1971), Krebs (2004) and others discuss. But, while they were away, their age



peers were developing their own set of skills; often characterized by false starts and stops; incremental or fast-paced progress; insecurities and periods of self-doubt that are often regarded as just the 'process of growing up'. They also experience a multitude of changes to personal associations along their way as they try to make personal meaning while living in an often disordered, ambiguous and usually non-regimented American society.

This is just the type of society that Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld (1987) and others describe that contributes to making the transition to adulthood more 'off-time' and chaotic than experienced by previous generations. Added to this dynamic is the fact that less than 1% of society currently serves in the military and only 15% of that 1% in uniform are women. When these young women left civilian society for military life, they did so as individuals and without the ritualization of their departure that other cultures adhere to (Tick, 2005). Their service commitment was in effect, disassociated from the norms of society where most fail to view military service as integral for the survival of the community. And, when they returned, there was no society – at – large ritual of return and healing.

They may have received a few classes on resume writing or managing their benefits through their military GPS programs, but no one welcomed them back by guiding them in ways that help them to reintegrate and heal spiritually as well as psychologically and physically. They may have been prescribed drugs and therapy for PTSD, but no one taught them that PTSD can be, as Dr. Tick offers, fundamentally a 'soul wound' that requires personal and spiritual reconciliation as well as medications. Perhaps there were hometown parades, or signs at the grocery store that read 'We Support Our Troops'. And to be sure, (perhaps more so when they are in uniform or wearing their service badges), they will receive the standard "*Thank you for*

*your sacrifice and service*". But that phrase also implies the existence of two 'others'; one who served and returns to reconcile their warrior selves and attempts to pursue their individual path towards re-belonging as still-young adults; and the other that did not serve and has no societally-given responsibility to help ease their reintegration and help them reconcile and make peace at the same time with their warrior and their civilian identities.

Perhaps a better understanding of why young female (and male) veterans are having a tough time resuming their life paths needs to include a better understanding of the powerful identity-shaping forces that work upon them from the time that they immerse themselves in the military, and work upon them again as they try to re-immers themselves in civilian life. Then, perhaps as Dr. Tick describes, it may be possible to reconcile belonging to a warrior and a civilian culture simultaneously and help them to make their pathway to adulthood easier and more natural. And these realizations may help our society to truly honor their service and find better ways to support for our nation's young, female veterans to 'be all they can be' after they return to civilian life.

## **5.B How do Findings Contribute To, and Go Beyond the Literature?**

This research postulates that we are essentially at the leading edge of understanding the female servicemember experience, and that the complexities associated with their 'insider/outsider' status; the prevalence of MST/PTSD, and the challenges they face in re-entering civilian life as young adults require both additional research and new theoretical correlations. It validates the importance, not just in preparing young, female veterans with

transferable skills for success in civilian life, but also preparing them to better negotiate their place in a society that often may not appreciate, nor understand their military service.

*“Although, I can very proudly say that I was in the military, and I served my time. And, I’m very, very pleased about that. I wouldn’t trade for the world, but seeing it as a whole, women, female veterans are not really regarding as highly as male veterans because there’s just ... We’re just not, for the most part, stand there and boast about our experiences”.*

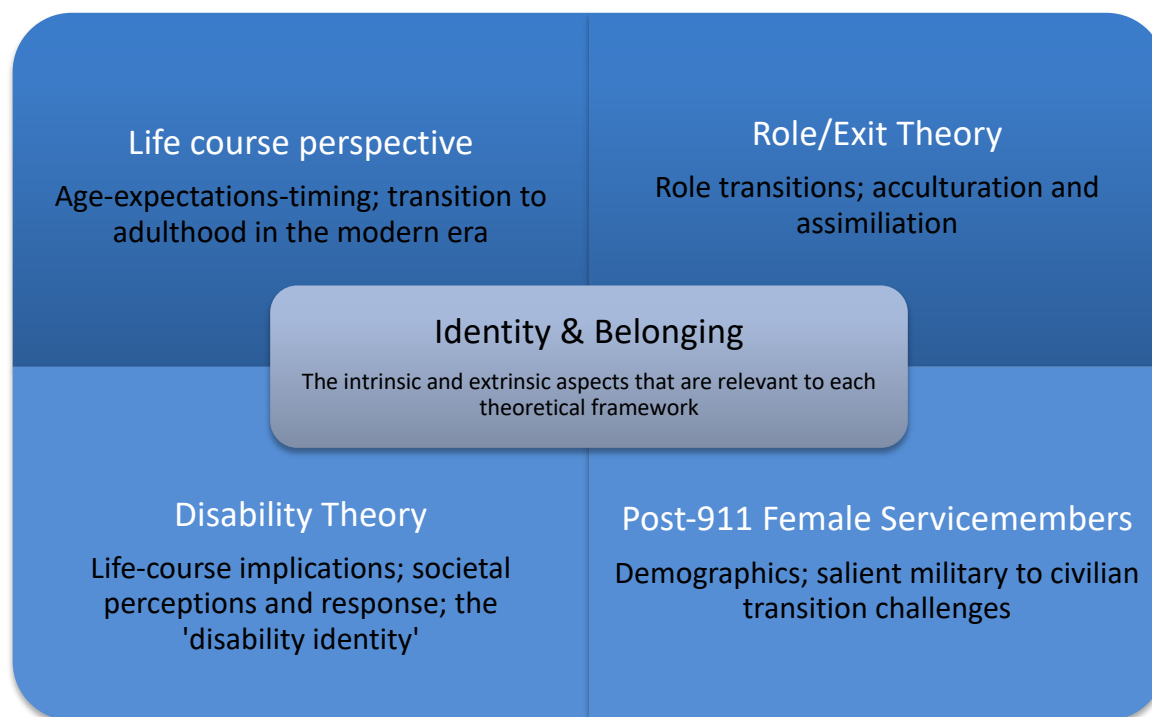
This study is an effort to untangle the complexities of transition and civilian role resumption after young, female veterans with service-related disabilities separate from active duty. It argues that research on the lifecourse, while located centrally for understanding how young adults shape their decisions, address challenges, and work towards achieving the lifecourse markers associated with adulthood, should be nuanced by other factors that affect their life courses. These include exiting and entry into roles and the impacts of living with acquired disabilities. A strong and consistent theme emerged from the narratives that contributed to a new, grounded theory that underscores the salience of identity construction as intrinsically important to their lifelong development, and how well they manage the often-dichotomous nature of belonging to both the military and civilian worlds, even after their enlistment ends.

Although the life course perspective incorporates the effects of disability, role changes and identity formulations and disruptions, narrative data emerging from this research suggests how important theories related to identity and belonging are, in order to better understand the complexities of female veteran transition to adulthood and military to civilian transition.

Participants offered almost unanimously, that their conceptions of self-identity, were influenced significantly by their military experiences. The entry and exit influences on the creation of identity, overlain by the influences of acquired disability on identity, emerged as a core theoretical concept and was incorporated into the literature review. The grounded theory that subsequently emerged privileges the need to view the transition experiences of these young veterans, not solely through either the lens of lifecourse-related theory, disability-related theory, or role/exit-related theory, contextualized by veteran-specific factors as depicted in Figure 1.

As the Figure below depicts, narrative data emerging from this research suggests that theories of identity and belonging are not only intrinsic to understanding veteran transition, but they can occupy a central, and integrating function together with the other theories. In effect, narratives confirmed that identity associations and belonging at once to a military and civilian world can create complexities for transition to adulthood, success in new roles, and living with a disability. Narrative data obtained through this research contributes to creating a grounded theory that validates the importance of these associations in understanding how young women veterans negotiate their return to civilian life.

**Figure 6.**  
**Theoretical Correlation**



Although these theoretical inter-twinings should be further explored and validated through research, other research is needed that lends greater resonance to, and leads to a better appreciation of the life experiences of young, female veterans. In particular, this study uncovered evidence of a 'military dissociative effect'. This is where female veterans lifecourse progressions can be affected by dichotomous conceptions of thinking and acting that may be appropriate for one or the other environment. But these concepts might need to be reconciled once military service has ended in ways that do not diminish or disrespect their time in service but ensures the appropriate transferability of those perceptions and actions towards success in civilian life.

The study also suggests that the military-civilian divide is both real and particularly formidable for young, female veterans to traverse. Although studies, including those conducted by the Pew Research Center and Disabled Veterans of America strongly indicate that the military must do more -and quickly-to support females while in service; during transition, and; after they return to civilian life, neither study places a burden on society to do more as well in understanding how the daughters and sons who entered military institutions might exit as fundamentally changed in ways that both advantage them and disadvantage them in relation to their age peers. Without tackling the issues of identity and belonging in new, creative ways, this generation of young, female veterans may face more economic, health and social challenges as the accretions of either untreated psychological injuries and/or the discouragements arising from un-or under-employment, divorce, family disruptions or homelessness take their toll on their chances of being successful in their transition to adulthood. But, it is also important to hear them and understand when they say that they don't see themselves as victims. They may have experienced wounds of war and injuries to the psyche and soul, but their training and resilience will ensure that they will be able to get on with their civilian lives and achieve success in their life goals, even though for some of them, it may take some time

*"I don't want people to enter victim phase. And, I don't want them to take disability and move it to a 'woe is me', please make accommodations for me because that goes against their reintegration. I think when you look at the way World War II veterans reintegrated, they just came back into civilian life. It may have taken time, but it will happen".*

In summary, this research reveals that there is much to be optimistic about in the ways that young, female veterans with service-related injuries are reintegrating back into civilian life. The narratives of the young, female veterans who participated in this research can help to better understand how society can better appreciate the complexities associated with their return to civilian life, and therefore be better able to support them and their peers as they continue their transition to adulthood.

### **5.C. Implications for Further Research**

The following research topics are among those that this study suggests could be addressed in the future:

- 1) 'Inside/Outside':** A common theme emerged from the interviews that led to the finding that female servicemembers live their military lives within, but also outside of the military culture. Despite their efforts to be seen as equal to males while in the military, their gender often led to their 'outsider status'. And after they returned to civilian life, they still often struggle with feeling apart from the mainstream. More needs to be learned about the way young, female veterans are/are not included as equals within the military institution and what the implications are for their successful reintegration into civilian life roles.
- 2) Study Recruitment:** The criteria used for recruitment was deliberately narrow in order to explore some particularly useful themes, including the challenges faced in the early years of separation. What factors might make it difficult to connect with, and involve the participation

of young, female veterans in research and how might they be overcome by use of other methods?

**3) Temporal Aspects of Transition:** This is an area of study not well explored in the literature and could be a significant timeframe for transitioning veterans with disabilities to re-establish their civilian lives. Narratives obtained in this study confirmed that the early months and years of separation are often difficult for female veterans. During these critical early years of re-acclimation, so much needs to be re-established or developed related to disability recovery, social networks, economic and employment factors, and other aspects of resuming civilian life that military transition programs do not adequately address.

**4) Warrior Reintegration as a Societal Obligation:** Helping young female veterans return to civilian life is, in some measure a responsibility of the military institution as well as a personal task that each individual veteran must undertake in their own way and in their own time. Yet, more needs to be researched specific to how (and perhaps even if) American society itself can create new rituals of leaving and homecoming for warriors, similar to other cultures that helps make their passage into and back again from their warrior roles less discontinuous. And, this research should be undertaken specifically for female veterans since they have demonstrated that their military experiences can be decidedly different than for males.

**5) Comparative, Longitudinal Life Course Analyses:** This study did not compare and contrast the transition experiences of young adult female and male veterans with disabilities, although evidence emerged from the narratives that their military experiences and military to civilian transition experiences could be significantly different. Understanding how these differences are



generated and also their gender-based impacts is an under-researched area. This research should also explore factors related to the post-military effects of disability and formation of civilian social networks. While the effects of service-related disabilities on the lifecourse has been researched, more longitudinal research is required to understand how developing civilian as well as military support networks that can mitigate against cumulative disadvantage over the life course may be necessary; particularly how they may be different for women and men.

## List of Appendices

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Appendix A: The Syracuse University IRB Approval Letter.....</b>   |  |
| <b>Appendix B: The Onondaga Community College IRB Approval.....</b>   |  |
| <b>Appendix C: The Clear Path for Veterans Approval Letter .....</b>  |  |
| <b>Appendix D: The Student Veterans of America Approval Letter .....</b>                                      |  |
| <b>Appendix E: The Final Salute, Inc. Approval Letter .....</b>   |  |
| <b>Appendix F: The Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families Approval Letter .....</b> |  |
| <b>Appendix G: Recruitment Materials.....</b>   |  |
| <b>Appendix H: Informed Consent Form - Syracuse University .....</b>  |  |
| <b>Appendix I: Informed Consent Form - Onondaga Community College.....</b>                                    |  |
| <b>Appendix J: Recruitment Confirming E-mail and Introduction.....</b>  |  |
| <b>Appendix K: Interview Questions.....</b>   |  |

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## *CV: Gary E. Shaheen, MPA, ABD*

### **SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTISE**

For over thirty-five years in the public, private and academic sectors, Gary Shaheen has provided leadership and expertise to improving policies, programs and academic curricula that promote social, civic and economic inclusion of people with disabilities and/or disadvantages. He has contributed to numerous publications, developed teaching and training curricula, conducted training and teaching nationally and internationally and has written toolkits and guidebooks that are widely used in the field to address these issues. Gary is also an experienced grants writer and has led the development numerous successful proposals that generated many millions of dollars for academic institutions and public and private agencies in which he has worked. He is a subject matter expert in the following areas:

- Economic, Civic and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities
- Social and Individual Entrepreneurship
- Supported Employment
- Customized Employment
- Mental Health Rehabilitation and Recovery
- Veterans Issues; Particularly Veteran Homelessness and Mental Health
- Community Collaborations and Systems Change

### **TEACHING AND TRAINING CREDENTIALS**

- Adjunct Faculty: Syracuse University Whitman School of Management teaching Emerging Enterprise Consulting (“Inclusive Entrepreneurship”) for seniors and graduate students working as student consultants to enterprises owned by veterans and other entrepreneurs with disabilities. 2010 Recipient of the Chancellor’s Award for Academic Excellence. (2009-2014)
- Trainer/Business Advisor: Syracuse University Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities. Developed modules and trained veteran entrepreneurs on principles and practices of social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship for people with disabilities. (2007-2014)
- Trainer/Curriculum Developer: El Lilly ‘Community Conversations’ Program. Co-developer and trainer of the Supported Employment for People with Psychiatric Disabilities curricula and for state-

level public and private mental health and workforce development agencies as a member of the El Lilly national cadre of training experts. (2009-Present)

- Trainer/Curriculum Developer: New York City Small Business Services. Led the development of materials and resources for use by Veteran Employment Specialists located at American Job Centers located in Metropolitan New York City, Staten Island and Brooklyn (2013-2014)
- Trainer/Facilitator: VetNET Social Entrepreneurship Training Series: <http://www.youtube.com/user/VetNetEntrepreneur> (2014)
- Instructor: Emerging Enterprises Consulting course at Stellenbosch University, South Africa as a component of the Syracuse University Whitman School 'SU Abroad Program' (2011)
- Trainer/Curriculum Developer-National: Developed and conducted on on-site and distance learning homelessness and employment, supported employment evidence based practice; entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and mental health recovery for public and private agencies across the United States in support of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration Projects to Assist in the Transition from Homelessness (PATH) Program, US Department of Labor (VETS) National Veterans Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC) and other state and national public and private agencies. (1987-2014)
- Trainer/Curriculum Developer-National International: Developed and conducted on on-site and distance learning programs on homelessness and employment, supported employment evidence-based practice; entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and mental health recovery. Training conducted internationally in the countries of Ireland, Israel, St. Maarten's, Bermuda, Netherlands and Ghana and others (1996-2012)

## PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE

- Project Director: Customized Employment Strategies research and training project. US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (2006-2010) (\$350,000)
- Principal/Co-Principal Investigator: Employment First Research and Evaluation Initiative. US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (2015-Present) (\$300,000)
- Senior Evaluation Liaison: Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) Research and Evaluation Initiative. US Department of Labor/Employment and Training Administration (2016-Present) (\$300,000)

- Senior Evaluation Liaison Pathways to Careers Research and Evaluation Initiative. Westat/US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (2006-2010) (\$200,000)
- Principal Investigator: Homeless Veterans Reintegration Project National Training and Technical Assistance Center US Department of Labor/Veterans (2010-2013) (\$1.5 million)
- Co-Principal Investigator: “New York Makes Work Pay” Comprehensive Services Medicaid Infrastructure Grant/ Research Foundation for Mental Hygiene, Inc. /Center for Medicaid Services (2009-2011) (\$5.9 million)
- Project Director: “Taking Care of the New Homefront”. New York State Health Institute/Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families (2012-2013) (\$500,000)
- Project Director: “Start-UP NY” National Technical Assistance Center on Self-Employment for People with Disabilities: US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (2006-2010) (\$900,000)
- Co-Director: “Projects to Assist in the Transition from Homeless” Substance Abuse and Mental Health/Center for Mental Health Services/Advocates for Human Potential 2005-2006) (\$1 million)
- Co-Principal Investigator: Chronic Homelessness Technical Assistance Center” US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (2003-2006) (\$1.2 million)
- Principal Investigator: “The Jobs Project” /Substance Abuse and Mental Health/Center for Mental Health Services (2001-2003) (\$250,000)
- Director: “Buy OMH Economic and Workforce Development Initiative” New York State Office of Mental Health: (1987-1996) (\$2 million)

## SELECTED RESEARCH AND PROGRAM EVALUATION EXPERTISE

### Disability Employment Initiative: (2016-Present)

- A member of the Senior Research team charged with conducting/supervising data collection in four states on the successes and challenges of people with disabilities accessing and using American Job Center employment services.

### Employment First Initiative: (2015-Present)

- Principal or Co-Principal Investigator for implementing a research project with a sample of 8-9 states each year implementing their state’s ‘Employment First’ policy and program strategies to improve competitive employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

### Google Global Impact Award: “From Battlefield to Classroom” (2014):

- Assisted in the design of survey instruments distributed to over 8000 Post – 911 veterans and over 2000 post-secondary academic institutions to study factors influencing service members educational experiences, challenges, and pathways to post-service success and perspectives of academic leaders on facilitating veteran’s academic success. Conducted literature reviews; developed summary reports.

**Center for Medicaid Services/NYS Office of Mental Health: “New York Makes Work Pay” (2009):**

- Assisted in the development of a research design measuring the effectiveness of employment programs serving people with intellectual disabilities. Conducted focus groups, co-developed summary reports
- Conducted site visits and semi-structured interviews with New York State mental health agencies operating sheltered workshops as a component of a statewide sheltered workshop transformation project. Developed summary reports; co-authored research paper: *“Transformation of Center Based Work into Integrated Opportunities into Integrated Opportunities for People with Disabilities in New York State”* (2011)  
<http://www.nymakesworkpay.org/docs/Transformation%20White%20Paper.pdf>

**US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy: “Start-Up NY” (2007-2010):**

- Assisted in the development of a research design measuring the effectiveness of self-employment programs serving people with diverse disabilities. Conducted focus groups, semi-structured interviews, co-developed summary report.

## PRODUCTS AND PUBLICATIONS

- Shaheen, G.; Nibbelink, L. & Gonzalez, A. (2016). *Provider Transformation*. Washington, DC. US Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy.
- Shaheen, G. (2016) “Inclusive Entrepreneurship”. (2016). *Journal of Policy Practice*. (March). New York. Routledge
- Shaheen, G & Rio, J. (2013) *“Exploring how Downtown Employers Can Hire Homeless Veterans”* Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse, NY.
- Shaheen, G., LaCorte-Klein, N. & Rio, J. (2013) *“Collaborations to Prevent and End Veteran Homelessness: Preliminary Report on Connecting HVRP and SSVF Programs”* Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families., Syracuse, NY.
- Shaheen, G. & Rio, J. (2013) *“Lessons Learned from Department of Labor Grantees: Homeless Female Veterans and Veterans with Families”*. Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families. Syracuse, NY.
- Shaheen, G. (2011) *“Inclusive Entrepreneurship”* in Academic Entrepreneurship and Community Engagement-Scholarship in Action and the Syracuse Miracle. Kingma, B., Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. Cheltenham, UK.

- Haynie, James M. & Shaheen, G. (2011) *"Bridging a Traumatic Past to an Envisioned Future: A Case Study of Social Entrepreneurship"* in Academic Entrepreneurship and Community Engagement- Scholarship in Action and the Syracuse Miracle. Kingma, B., Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. Cheltenham, UK.
- Shaheen, G., Golden, T., Dowse, P., Myhill, W., Hill, E., Hoff, D., Thomas, C., & Kenny, C. (2011). *Transformation of Center Based Work into Integrated Opportunities into Integrated Opportunities for People with Disabilities in New York State*. Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute/Syracuse University Burton Blatt Institute. Ithaca, NY.
- Shaheen, G., & Rio, J. (2011) *"Community Conversations: Supported Employment for People with Psychiatric Disabilities Curriculum"* El Lilly, Inc. Indianapolis, IN.
- Ansteth, N., Shaheen, G. & Higgins, P. (2011). *"Simply Speaking": Inclusive Entrepreneurship Guidelines for SBDC Advisors*. Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute/Syracuse University Burton Blatt Institute. Ithaca, NY.
- Shaheen, G & Myhill, W. (2009) *"Entrepreneurship for Veterans with Disabilities: Lessons Learned from the Field"*. Rutgers University NTAR Center. Piscataway Township, NJ.
- Shaheen, G., Rio, J. (2007) *"Recognizing Work as a Priority in Preventing or Ending Homelessness"* Journal of Primary Prevention; June.
- Shaheen, G., Dennis, D. & Williams, F. (2000) *"Work as a Priority: A Resource for Employing People with Psychiatric Disabilities who are Homeless"*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Rockville, MD.
- Shaheen, G., Golden, T. & Bianco, C. (1998) *"Business Planning for Self-Employment"* in Orientation to Vocational Rehabilitation, Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute. Ithaca, NY.
- Shaheen, G., Golden, T. & Bianco, C. (1997) *"Integrated Employment for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities"*, Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute. Ithaca, NY.

## EDUCATION

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 1975         | State University of NY (SUNY) at Binghamton, NY<br>Bachelor of Arts  |
| 1975         | Royal University of Malta<br>Bourguiba Institute, Tunisia<br>Certificate of Study Completion-Arabic Language |
| 1987         | Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University<br>Master's in Public Administration   |
| 2010-present | ABD Doctoral Candidate: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs -School of Social Sciences          |

## POSITIONS HELD

### May 2015-Present: Social Dynamics, LLC. Gaithersburg, MD.

#### Director for Policy and Practice

- As Director for Policy and Practice, Gary Shaheen manages national training and technical assistance projects and conducts empirical research on civic, social and workforce inclusion for people with disabilities and/or disadvantages. Over the 2015-2016 period, Gary has led a national cadre of subject matter experts (SMEs) in producing new training materials and resources on Customized Employment for staff of American Job Centers and USDOL-ODEP and ETA funded Disability Employment Initiatives (DEIs). He also co-directs, conducts research and creates issues briefs in support of a national evaluation of ODEP's Employment First initiative, now underway in over 20 states. Gary is also a member of Social Dynamics' research team that conducts research on the efforts of 12 states implementing DEIs with the goal of improving access and use of American Job Center services for people with disabilities. He is lead evaluator of an ODEP sponsored community college-based project to test and demonstrate new methods for improving post-secondary education and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. He also continues his work on entrepreneurship and as mentor and consultant to Syracuse University Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities social entrepreneurs, and as a thought leader, consultant and instructor on social entrepreneurship, veteran homelessness and the use of Customized and Supported Employment evidence-based practice.

### October 2009-Present: Gary Shaheen Consulting/Adjunct Faculty/PhD. Candidate, Syracuse, NY

- PhD. Candidate (2009-Present):** Social Sciences from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, with expected completion date of Fall 2015. **Adjunct Faculty (2009-2014):** Syracuse University Whitman School of Management, Department of Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises. **Owner: (2009-Present)** Gary Shaheen Consulting. Delivers training, teaching and technical assistance and participates in research on social and individual entrepreneurship, Supported and Customized Employment and policy and program development to public and private sector agencies serving people with disabilities, disadvantages and those who are homeless, including veterans.

### July 2012-September 2014: Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF), Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

#### Director of Community Based Technical Support Initiatives

- Member of the Leadership Team of the Institute responsible for strategic planning, partnership development, grants and contract development and design and implementation of programs and services. Helped secure approximately \$400,000 in grants and contracts revenue during my tenure. Conducted research and wrote research reports, white papers and toolkits in support of the IVMF's research projects on Post 911 veteran education, employment and community transition. Designed and delivered training and technical assistance to agencies addressing veteran homelessness, employment and military-civilian transition. Developed and facilitated a national symposium on veterans' issues: The IVMF National Summit on Women Veteran Homelessness (Chicago, 2013) and developed supporting materials and reports. Directed the "Taking Care of the New Homefront" initiative providing training and technical assistance to 23 NYS based VA Supportive Services for Veterans and Families (SSVF) projects using a Community of Practice model and funded by a grant from the NYS Health Foundation (2012-2013). Director of the National Vets Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC) for USDOL-VETS providing training and TA to approximately 150 Homeless Veterans Reintegration programs (HVRPs) nationwide and supervised the work of training staff and project consultants.



## **May 2007-July 2012: Burton-Blatt Institute (BBI), Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY**

### **Senior Vice-President**

- Member of the Senior Leadership team of the Institute responsible for strategic planning, partnership development grants and contract development and design and implementation of programs and services. Helped secure approximately \$12 million in grants and contracts revenue during my tenure. Provided specialized expertise in Supported and Customized Employment program development, collaboration development and services for people with disabilities, especially those with mental illnesses, co-occurring disorders and those who are homeless. Assisted BBI senior leadership with policy recommendations supporting community civic, social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities. Provided expert advice and materials development to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) on entrepreneurship for people with mental illnesses and to the National Association of Governors on supported employment. Directed a \$300,000 per year/3 - year US Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) 'StartUP NY' initiative to develop innovative partnerships and practices for self-employment for people with disabilities. Co-Principal Investigator-'NY Makes Work Pay' Center for Medicaid Services funded Medicaid Infrastructure Grant responsible for supervising staff and co-directing the activities of this \$5.9 million/3 year project

## **December 1999 –May 2007 Advocates for Human Potential, Inc., Albany, NY**

### **Managing Director**

- Member of the Senior Leadership team of the agency responsible for strategic planning, partnership development grants and contract development and design and implementation of programs and services. Helped secure approximately \$3.5 million in grants and contracts revenue during my tenure. Responsible for managing the company's employment program training and technical assistance sector and for supervising expert staff focused on recovery and rehabilitation-based employment for people with disabilities and those who are homeless. Co-Director of the Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP)/HUD-funded Ending Chronic Homelessness national demonstration project providing training and technical assistance to five cities and policy support to ODEP and HUD leadership on ending chronic homelessness through employment and housing. Trainer on mental health rehabilitation and Supported Employment evidence based practices for community mental health and substance abuse organizations, state and local governments, and behavioral health networks across the United States and internationally. Provided training and technical assistance to all 53 New York State Department of Labor Disability Program Navigator staff located at One Stop career centers for the NYS Department of Labor. Trainer and co-developer of curricula for the Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute for Social Security Administration Employment Support Representatives and behavioral health providers on "Strategic Business Planning for People with Disabilities". Wrote and directed a US Department of Health and Human Services project to improve employment for people with mental illnesses in American Samoa, Marshall Islands, Guam and Palau. Directed a 3-year US Substance Abuse and Mental Administration/Community Mental Health Services 'Community Action Grant' for implementing Supported Employment in New York City. Advisor to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Administration: Toolkit on Supported Employment Evidence Based Practices.

## **November 1996–November 1999 - Rehabilitation Support Services, Inc. Albany, NY**

### **Director for Social Economic Development**

- Member of the Senior Staff member of large community mental health and rehabilitation agency. Co-founder of 'Job Builders, Inc.', a corporate subsidiary offering psychiatric rehabilitation management consulting, curriculum development, training, and grant writing under contract with other not-for-profit

agencies, government, and universities. Co-author of curricula on 'Integrated Employment for People with Psychiatric Disabilities' for the Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute. Developed training manuals and curricula and provided employment training and technical assistance in New York State and nationally under federal Center for Mental Health Services contract. Assisted in the creation of a one-stop career center in partnership with community agencies and the Albany Public Housing Authority. Member of the statewide education committee of the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services (NYAPRS) and helped develop rehabilitation and recovery learning institutes for NYS public and private sector staff. Project Director of a 3 year HUD Supportive Housing Program grant to develop employment and recovery services for people who were homeless in Albany County, NY and participated as a member of the local HUD Continuum of Care Committee.

## **October 1987- November 1996 New York State Office of Mental Health Central Office, Albany, NY**

### **Director of Vocational Rehabilitation Services/"BUY OMH" Program**

- Member of the Bureau of Psychiatric Rehabilitation leadership team assisting in the transformation of NYS Office of Mental Health policies and programs from institution to community based, rehabilitation and recovery- oriented systems. Provided training and technical assistance to NYS public and private mental health agencies on psychiatric rehabilitation and recovery- based employment services. Responsible for a \$14 million budget by end of tenure to implement supported and entrepreneurial employment programs. Directed a statewide social entrepreneurship initiative establishing 15 business enterprise programs that created employment for over 1000 people with psychiatric disabilities per year and had budget responsibility for approximately \$5 million per year. This "BUY OMH" initiative was cited as a best practice approach in the report: *"Care of the Seriously Mentally Ill – A Rating of State Programs"* (1990) (Torrey, E.F., et.al). Served as a member on various Governors' Interagency Committees for Employment to help identify and reduce program and systems barriers to supported employment. Managed the statewide "Artspace" program that enabled mental health consumers to produce, exhibit and sell their artwork at public and private galleries. Works with other departments of NYSOMH (Capital Operations, Housing Bureau, Human Resources, etc) and with other state departments/agencies (Governor's Office, Senate and Assembly Mental Health Committees, Office of General Services, etc) and community advocates and providers (Mental Health Association of NYS, NY Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, community rehabilitation providers, etc.) to promote policies and programs supporting a community based mental health recovery vision. Worked with the Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (VESID) and other state agencies on interagency projects supporting rehabilitation, recovery and employment for people with disabilities.

## **February 1979- October 1987 New York State Office of Mental Health Binghamton Psychiatric Center, Binghamton, NY**

### **Coordinator of Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

- Managed vocational training and employment programs serving approximately 1,000 inpatients and outpatients of the psychiatric hospital. Supervised 14 full time staff assigned to the Vocational Department. Developed marketing plans and business strategies to support enterprise programs providing training for people with psychiatric disabilities.

## **SELECTED TRAINING PROGRAMS, PRESENTATIONS AND WORKSHOPS**

- Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE) Conference *"Employment First"*, Cincinnati, OH (2016)
- Pacific Rim Conference, *"Employment First"* Honolulu, HI (2016).
- National Coalition of Homeless Veterans Teleconference Training Series: *"Employment Best Practices for Homeless VETS"* (2007-2014)
- Syracuse University Whitman School of Management Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities: *"Self-Employment for Veterans with Disabilities"* and *"The Business Case for Giving Back"* (2007-2014)
- Syracuse University Institute for Veterans and Military Families: *"National Summit on Women Veteran Homelessness"* (2013)
- Keynote Presentation: *"The Entrepreneurship Vision"*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration Conference on Recovery; Omaha, NE (2009)
- International Self-Determination Conference: *"The Work Imperative"* Detroit, MI (2008)
- Keynote Presentation: *"Work as a Priority"*, Keren Vocational Rehabilitation Conference, Tel Aviv, Israel (2007)
- US Department of Labor/Civil Rights Center/National Association of State Workforce Agencies, 7<sup>th</sup> Annual National Equal Opportunity Conference. *"Work as a Priority for People with Mental Illnesses who are Homeless"* Arlington, VA, (2006)
- US Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, *"Ending Chronic Homelessness through Employment and Housing-A Leadership Dialogue"*. (2006)
- Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE) Conference, New York City, NY *"Customized Employment"* New York, NY, (2006)
- Tennessee's 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Employment Conference- *"Accessing Community Employment Services"*, Knoxville, TN, (2006)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/SAMHSA/CMHS/National Governors Association /National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors *"Transforming State Mental Health Systems Regional Meeting"* *"Financing Supported Employment"* New Orleans, LA, June 15-16, 2005 & Boston, MA (2006)
- University of Tennessee/Southeast RCEP: *"Best Practices in the Employment of People with Psychiatric Disabilities"*, Nashville, TN, (2005)
- Presenter: *"The Jobs Project"* Second World Conference on the Promotion of Mental Health and Prevention of Mental and Behavioural Disorders", World Health Organization/Carter Center/Clifford Beers Foundation. London, England 2002

## SYNERGISTIC ACTIVITIES

- Advisor: Rapid Re-Housing Standards Committee. Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) (2014)
- Board Member. Global Applied Disability Research and Information Network Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute (2011-2013)
- Chancellor's Award for Public Engagement and Scholarship Syracuse University *"Inclusive Entrepreneurship Consulting Course"* (2010)

- Director's Excellence in Entrepreneurship Award - Syracuse University Whitman School of Management/Falcone Center on Entrepreneurship and Emerging Enterprises (2010)
- Recognition Award: Florida State University College of Business-"Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities" (2008)
- Elected to Switzer Scholar Class of 2003 Mary Switzer Memorial Fund National Rehabilitation Association (2003)
- Expert Advisor: Think Tank on Customized Employment for People with Disabilities, Washington, DC. US Department of Labor. (2002, 2011)
- Board Member. InCube, Inc. (1995-1997)
- Founder and Director. Studio School and Art Gallery, Binghamton, NY (1980-1987, 2002-2013)